



Christian Meditation in Schools



Interim Project Report: Teacher Interviews & Student Focus Groups 2015

This report presents data from the second year of a longitudinal study investigating the impact of Christian Meditation in schools upon children's religious and spiritual development.

The research was led by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University in partnership with Catholic Schools Office in the Lismore Diocese and Sydney Catholic Schools, along with the World Community for Christian Meditation.

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The views expressed in this publication do not represent any official position on the part of Southern Cross University or the partner organisations, but the views of the individual authors based on the research findings.

Centre for Children and Young People Southern Cross University
PO Box 157 Lismore NSW 2480 AUSTRALIA Telephone: +61 (0)2 6620 3613
Fax: +61 (0)2 6620 3243
Email: ccyp@scu.edu.au



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Introduction

There is growing international interest in the potential of meditation type programs for improving student wellbeing in schools, including the use of Christian Meditation in Australian Catholic schools (Campion & Rocco, 2009). Christian Meditation is similar to the spiritual wisdom and practice at the core of other forms of meditation. It involves sitting still, with eyes closed, and focusing the mind by silently repeating the ancient Christian prayer word, Maranatha (Come Lord), gently returning the consciousness to the word when the mind drifts. Christian Meditation is described as offering the opportunity to simply sit in God's presence, through the stillness and silence of body and mind; to discover the true self through 'real participation in the reality of God' (WCCM, 2013). In contrast with the tendency for young people to drift away from religion in adolescence (Büssing, Föller-Mancini, Gidley, & Heusser, 2010; Engebretson, 2006; Fisher, 2006; Rymarz & Graham, 2006), the small body of research on Christian Meditation to date suggests that this form of personal, silent prayer is popular with children and young people (Campion & Rocco, 2009).

The Catholic School Offices of Lismore Diocese and the Archdiocese of Sydney (now Sydney Catholic Schools) approached the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University to undertake longitudinal research on the Christian Meditation program in schools in their Dioceses. The research aimed to identify the impact, over time, of Christian Meditation on the religious and spiritual development of children and young people in the context of Catholic education. The Director of the World Community for Christian Meditation provided advice on the project and confirmed the need for such a study. The research was conducted over three school years from 2014-16.

The final, full project report is now available entitled, 'Christian Meditation in Schools Consolidated Research Findings 2014 – 2016.' In addition, throughout the study, interim progress reports were prepared. Collectively, these form a suite of documents, as listed below. These can be located from the CCYP website (www.scu.edu.au/research-centres/centre-for-children-and-young-people/).

- 2014 Baseline Student Survey Report
- 2014 Report of Interview Findings from Year 4 Teachers

- 2015 Report of Interview Findings from Year 5 Teachers and Year 5 Student Focus Groups
- 2016 Final Student Survey Report

This document is the third interim report. It presents the data and findings from the teacher interviews and student focus groups conducted in 2015, towards the end of the second year of the study.



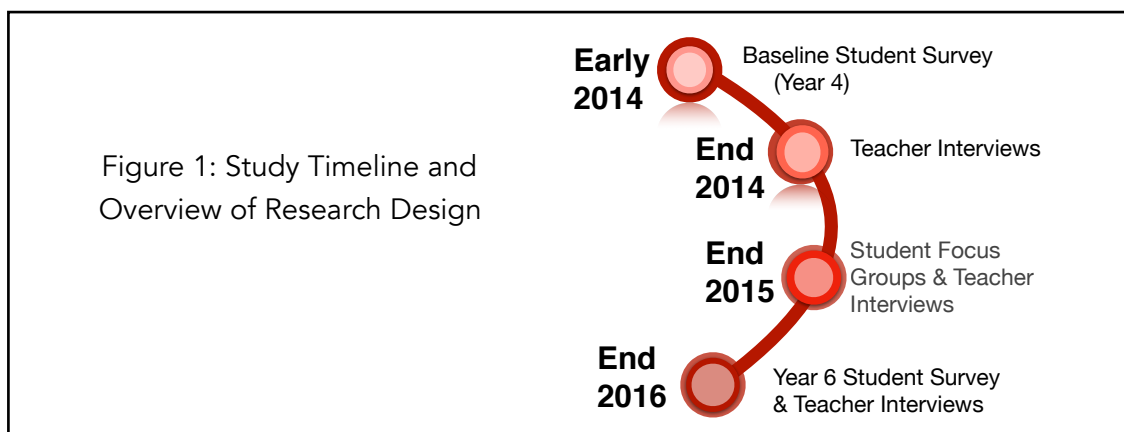


Research Design

The aim of the research was to identify the impact, over time, of Christian meditation on the religious and spiritual development of children and young people in the context of Catholic education. Religious and spiritual development in this study was understood broadly, in line with contemporary notions of children's spirituality. This was reflected in the framework of four overarching research questions that guided the study. These were:

1. In what ways does Christian meditation shape children and young people's relationship with, and understanding of, God?
2. In what ways does Christian meditation shape children and young people's understanding of, and relationship with, self?
3. In what ways does Christian meditation shape children and young people's understanding of, and relationships with, others?
4. In what ways does Christian meditation shape children and young people's understanding of, and relationship with, the Catholic Church?

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to investigate the research questions. This comprised a pre- and post-program student survey, mid-way student focus groups and annual teacher interviews. The research began in 2014 with a cohort of Year 4 students (mean age 9 years) from 12 Catholic schools from across the Dioceses. The study then followed a substantial proportion of these students until the end of Year 6 (December 2016). The research design involved data collection at key milestones over the three school years, as indicated in Figure 1, below.



For further details on the overall research design please see the final report. This document focuses only on the interviews with the students' Year 5 and the Year 5 student focus groups conducted during the second year of the study. The interviews and focus groups were conducted at the end of the Australian school year (November - December 2015).

Participants

Eleven of the original 12 schools were available to participate in the teacher interviews and student focus groups in 2015, six schools in the Lismore region and five schools in the Sydney region. Across these schools, 19 Year 5 teachers, 10 from Lismore and 9 from Sydney agreed to participate in the interviews. In Lismore, three teachers were male, and seven were female, while in Sydney 2 teachers were male and seven were female. A total of 16 focus groups were conducted across the schools in 11 schools. There were ten focus groups conducted in Lismore schools and six focus groups conducted in Sydney schools. The number of participants in focus group each ranged from 4 to 10 students, with 114 students participating overall.

Materials

The 30 minute interviews with the Year 5 teachers were semi-structured and covered the same three key areas as the Year 4 teacher interviews the previous year: 1) the teachers' perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on the children; 2) their perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on themselves; and 3) the issues involved in implementing Christian Meditation in schools and classrooms. The interview questions are shown in Appendix A.

The focus groups with the Year 5 students lasted approximately 40 minutes each and the questions covered the children's experiences with Christian Meditation in their classes. They began by asking the students to explain their understandings of Christian Meditation to the researcher and then what they enjoyed and disliked (or found most difficult) about the practice. The students were then given small cards inviting them to consider how they feel during and after practising Christian Meditation, with the opportunity to note or draw their thoughts on the cards. This activity aimed to help students contribute who may be more reticent to share their opinions verbally in a group setting, and to go some way towards mitigating the risks that in groups certain voices can be privileged and others silenced (Mazzei and Jackson 2012).

Following these early stages, which were designed to help the students feel at ease with the research process and comfortable that their opinions were valid, the focus groups then explored six open-ended questions focusing on the spiritual and religious nature of students' experiences of Christian Meditation and linked to the research questions outlined above. Lastly, before the focus group drew to a close, students were asked if there was anything further they would like to add, especially in terms of what they felt was the most important thing they would like others to know about Christian Meditation. The full focus group questions are shown in Appendix B.

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The research project was approved by the Southern Cross University's human research ethics committee (ECN 14-133; ECN- 15-303). Principals from all schools who participated in the project the previous year were contacted by telephone, followed by emails (see Appendix C), to invite their Year 5 teachers and students to take part in teacher interviews and student focus groups. Principals nominated a suitable date for the researchers to visit their schools to collect data. Once the invitation was accepted by the Principal, all Year 5 teachers were sent an invitation to participate by email (see Appendix D). Whenever possible, each teacher was also contacted by telephone to discuss their participation and their facilitation of recruitment for the student focus groups. Teachers were sent electronic copies of parent (Appendix E) and student (Appendix F) information sheets and consent forms and were given instructions on how to facilitate the consent process with their students (Appendix G).

All students in Year 5 were invited to participate and the total number of focus groups conducted was dependent on class sizes and the number of students within each class with consent to participate. Students whose parents gave consent then received the student information sheet and consent form. Students took part only if both they and their parent consented. However, students retained the right to leave the focus group at any point if they became uncomfortable or no longer wished to continue their participation for whatever reason. Those students who did not have parental consent, or did not want to take part, did some of their own work in the classroom.

As shown in Appendix D, the teachers were assured that, despite their Principal's consent to the study, and even though they were being asked to help facilitate the recruitment of the students, their own participation in the teacher interviews remained voluntary. Teachers' were advised that their reply emails were considered confirmation of their consent to participate in the interview, while parents and

students consented by submitting their signed consent forms. As shown in Appendices D-F, the teachers, parents and students were informed that all participation was voluntary, anonymous, confidential and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequence.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted by three researchers in accordance with teacher and researcher availability. All 19 teachers were interviewed individually. Each interview and focus group was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Each focus group was assigned a code, and each teacher was ascribed a pseudonym to protect their identity.

The data is presented here in two parts. First, the data from the teacher interviews is presented, collated under the headings and sub-headings from the interview schedule. Second, the data from the student focus groups is presented, and again this is collated largely under the headings and sub-headings from the focus group interview schedule. For further analysis and exploration of the findings see the final project report.





Results: Teacher Interviews

The results are presented under the key headings guiding the teacher interviews: Teachers' perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on students, on themselves, and exploration of any issues involved in implementing Christian Meditation in the classroom setting. Under each of these overarching headings, the data is largely collated under the interview sub-questions.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of Christian Meditation on Students

Students' Responses to Christian Meditation

This was the second year of the study so the vast majority of the students had already been practising Christian Meditation for at least a year and a half. As such, teachers responses to this first question pertain to their observations of the children's responses at the start of Year 5 rather than their first time learning to meditate. It should be noted this was the first year that some of the teachers had encountered the practice and/or facilitated it in their classroom. The teachers were often surprised how much the children enjoyed it, with one teacher describing being emotionally moved to witness how well the children were responding to the meditation, and at how well they accepted the practice:

Surprisingly, they were very positive ... and I have a five/six class so the 6s weren't actually part of the program last year. They actually even stand out to me as being even more looking forward to it. So generally it's very positive... (Kylie)

I was just blown away by it. I was nearly in tears after the first session, because I was just so blown away by the experience and by these kids just getting in to it.... So, for me it's been a fabulous journey and, as I said, because these kids aren't Christian or Catholic anyway – we don't have many Catholics in Year 5/6; to watch them just do it and not question – it was just amazing. (Nicole)

Generally, all teachers reported favourable responses from the children. However, in some schools the children had come from more than one Year 4 class, and as such there could be mixed responses or routines at the start of the year:

They came from two different classes last year, so there was a mixture...Some children I noted from one particular class were in quite a great space with it. And another group of children in the class knew what they were doing but perhaps didn't do it as well; perhaps not as settled during that time, not as focused... (Rachel)

When I first started, they were high as a kite, they just... the whole change of teacher really affected them and the way that I do things is different to the way that their previous teacher did things... (Sarah)

The teachers generally found that the students became more settled as a class over time and as they gained further experience with Christian Meditation over the course of Year 5. In particular, many noted a positive change in the students' ability to meditate for a longer period of time and in their attitudes towards it: 'Just recently – maybe two weeks ago – we reached our target of 11 minutes' (Daniel). Despite this, many teachers commented that there were still some students who struggled with the process of being still and silent for any length of time:

I think it's varied. The ones that are normally I guess you'd say more settled in class, they'd probably be a lot more accepting and open to the process – they're the ones that really focus in and calm themselves down fully when they're meditating but some of those more fidgety people in the class they still sort of have the fidgets and I need to kind of balance between reprimanding them and reminding them what's appropriate in meditation and also not disrupting the rest of the class and ruining that meditation... (Tim)

I have about 10 kids out of my 32 that have a lot of difficulty with it and they're students I consider not to come from a very...religious background and I think they're a bit at that age where they don't really want to pray at the moment. I really have to encourage them and we've had the discussion, "I can't force you to pray but, you know, we need to remain reverent and mindful of everybody else". (Beth)

Despite such issues during meditation, the teachers felt that most children enjoyed when it was their turn to take responsibility for setting up the meditation space and to generally enjoy the routine of preparing for the practice:

We make the room as dark as we can; I think that helps them as well ... and I give them a role – each week someone leads meditation. It's their responsibility to set up the prayer space, they get the matches, they light the candles, say the words, have a timer... (Mark)

It was evident, then, that although the students had been engaged in the practice the previous year, there was a period of resettling for some classes, with some students testing the boundaries of the practice with their new teacher, or, for some, perhaps particularly the non-religious students, continuing to find the practice difficult or feeling a level of disengagement with it as they moved towards the end of their primary school years.

What Do Students Like the Most About Christian Meditation?

In response to this question some teachers reiterated the above point about students enjoying getting to set up and lead the meditation. They felt the students' enjoyed this process as it provided them with a sense of empowerment:

Definitely the setting it up part. They just love that. I think it's that ownership that they're, you know, they're kind of running this, it's their kind of prayer for the day. (Kim)

Teachers also commented that the children enjoyed the opportunity to calm down after being in the playground and get ready for their school work:

I think they would see it as a settler, as a bridge so to speak, from the playground to the learning space. (Daniel)

I think for a lot of these kids in this particular class, it's a calming thing...it gives them that moment of "stop." (Nicole)

Many teachers commented that the children enjoyed the stillness of the meditation practice and that they were not being assessed or asked to produce something:

I think they like the stillness. They struggle to sit still, but when they are still, you can just feel them all calm completely down. So I think the stillness, and just that fact of silence, sitting in silence, not

talking or fussing about anything that happened at lunch time, just letting go of everything... So that's probably their favourite bit; it's my favourite bit [laughing]! (Sarah)

I think they probably just like the chance to sit still, in silence, and not have to do any work – just that chance to relax and wind down. I often use it after recess so it's just a bit of a time, just a five or 10 minutes just to kind of calm them down after the running ... (Tim)

I think the majority like that there's quiet, that the teacher's not talking, that nothing much is asked of them. (Christina)

Other teachers acknowledged that although the children enjoyed the stillness and silence of the meditation practice, a deeper appreciation was also evident:

I think they enjoy the fact that it's their time... "This is my time to listen to God and just take a deep, big breath in and out and know that, yeah, we're not going to be judged." (Todd)

I think it's just that time to stop, but I do think that some of them do feel that God's talking... I often talk about how we're so busy and we don't often hear what God has to say and God talks to us in our thoughts sometimes and if we're so busy and there's so much around us we don't give him the chance to be heard and I think that, you know, there's been a few comments made through the year... (Kylie)

I think they like the two aspects; I think they love the calming part because children are in such a busy, busy world and they very rarely get given any time to just be silent or given the discipline to just be silent and to be at one and to be on their own... I think they love that peacefulness. And I think the other thing is that they do understand that it is a time to talk to God... but I would admit I think it's the peace they like... (Miriam)

As these comments show, the teachers perceived that the students were valuing the silence and stillness along with the opportunity this gave them to listen and be receptive to God. This process was not without its challenges however, as shown in the teachers' responses to the next question.

What Do Students Find Difficult about Christian Meditation?

As already indicated above, the teachers reported here that even though students were enjoying the stillness and silence of meditation, many continued to struggle with being still, maintaining the correct posture and resisting the urge to open their eyes to see what their classmates were doing:

I don't know if it's because they just have got that little bit older, a bit worried about what someone else may think of them if they're sitting there with their eyes closed. You know, just that little bit of, "I'm too... a little bit too cool for this" maybe – not on a great scale but there's you know, the little cool group, the little rebel group. I think that may have crept in a little bit. I don't know if that just is with the age. (Rachel)

Some can't close their eyes successfully – even some of those Year 5s who did it last year intensively. They just find that really difficult... (Christina)

Some children I don't think are comfortable closing their eyes. I say to children just to put their head down; some of them like to look at the candle flickering and I think I can empathise with that as adult...so I try not to force them to do anything that they're not comfortable to do and to give them a few different options. When I spoke to the children about meditation in general and things that were happening when other teachers were in the room, they would say that as soon as one or two people start to be silly then it loses the specialness of it and it loses the focus on why they're doing it. And some of the children actually feel quite angry about that and they feel quite indignant towards the students who upset them. (Shana)

In order to assist the children who were struggling with closing their eyes some teachers gave the children the option of casting their eyes downwards to the floor, desk or their laps, or to look at a focus point, such as a candle. This option appears to be helpful for the students.

Yeah, I give them a choice. I myself close my eyes and perhaps three-quarters of them close their eyes but they don't have to... I do say that if they're not closing their eyes to focus on the candle

or the prayer space just to give them a... well, minimise the distraction factor. (Daniel)

Many teachers spoke of how difficult the children found it to keep physically still, especially for children who are usually very active and outgoing:

Those kids that are really hyperactive – you know, the sporty kids, they find it hard to sit still... (Kim)

Sitting still and just letting everything go. You often see when they're not completely calm their eyes will be open, they'll be looking around the room, their legs will be fidgeting; just sitting still is the hardest for them, but when they can do it, it has a great calming effect on them. (Sarah)

One teacher spoke of the difficulty the children have keeping their focus on the mantra:

I think they all do it and then you'll notice as soon as they'll lose it and so you'd say "You got distracted, remember our mantra" and then the majority of the time, once they've lost it, they're lost it, they can't get it back. (Mark)

Teachers also commented that distractions – both inside the classroom and outside – caused the children to lose focus:

There's constant announcements or there's all this construction work, especially where my classroom is...and the fans, I have to make sure the fan's off and the air-con's off. Just little things, if there's one fly or something, it's just little distractions; they're very easily distracted so that's probably the most challenging part of it... (Marilyn)

The sitting still, the silence, outside distractions – we don't do it as a whole school yet. We take the phone off the hook and we've got a sign on the door and things like that but... (Jacinta)

These difficulties are largely the same as those reported by teachers in Year 4, suggesting they have persisted for some students for well over a year.

Students' Relationships with Other People

Most teachers' felt it was very difficult to attribute any casual links between Christian Meditation and students' relationships with other people:

I think that's difficult to measure. (Daniel)

I couldn't specifically say that that's what it was. (Christina)

I don't know if I could accurately answer that question confidently. I definitely know that them in themselves, it has a calming influence so it would definitely pass on to how they interact with people, people around them. (Todd)

Building upon Todd's comment, other teachers explained that although it was difficult to make causal links, the meditation practice had a settling effect on the children and this in turn helped them to resolve conflicts that may have occurred in the playground by assisting the children to reflect on what had happened and to consider other people's viewpoints:

They would come in, there would inevitably have been issues on the playground so they came in, they would meditate first and that would calm everyone down and take some of the initial anger and fury out of the situation...and then once that had finished, it very naturally led into that arena for talking about your feelings, you know, "I didn't like it when this person did that," and how we were going to move forward as a community and I think Christian Meditation has helped in that respect. (Shana)

One teacher recalled how a couple of her students taught their family members to do Christian Meditation at home, and that this was an example of how the Christian Meditation had impacted on their relationships with others:

I had a couple who started doing it at home and they taught their family and their little brothers and sisters and they'd set up a little prayer space... (Mark)

One teacher disagreed that the Christian Meditation practice had any impact on the students' relationship with others, because the emphasis on the practice was personal time with God, rather than encouraging the children to think about other people while they were meditating:

No, because... not that I stress that it's "you time" but in one respect I am, "This is you and God. This is your time. It's not you and your friends". So I think it helps with their own personal faith journey but yeah, not so much impacting their relationship with their peers. (Beth)

Students' Relationships with Themselves

The teachers were generally also cautious in making causal attributions regarding whether Christian Meditation was impacting on students' relationships with themselves. The comments below are indicative of those made by almost all of the teachers and show that it is difficult to make any firm associations:

... I'm not sure about the impact from the actual meditation. There's so many variables... (Jacinta)

Perhaps. To be honest, I don't know, because I haven't sort of suggested a conversation with any of the children along that line and perhaps I should. (Rachel)

A couple of teachers suggested that some of the children felt proud of their achievements when they could sit still and meditate for a certain length of time, and that this experience might boost their self-esteem:

Some kids who might normally struggle, doing it really well one day and being proud of it, "Oh sir, I did really well. I got through the 11 minutes without any distractions" – that would be probably the limit of it. (Daniel)

Yeah, and especially when it comes around to leading it as well. I've got a lot of quiet students...who then once they've done it once, they then go, "I can do this." (Mark)

Another teacher commented that the meditation practice helped the children to be settled and ready to listen in class, and that on days when the class did not meditate, there was a noticeable difference in the children's behaviour and attentiveness:

I don't know if it's me too, being able just to cope with the day... if we put that as a priority and do it first then, "Okay, open your eyes now" and all of a sudden they're all like, they're ready to listen. It's not every single day or anything but I do notice when we haven't

done it, I think, "Why is everything so...? Oh, right, we haven't stopped to be still!" So I don't know if that's me or them or both.
(Jacinta)

Another teacher thought that practising Christian Meditation at school offered children a valuable wellbeing tool they could appropriate at other times:

I think that it gives them the skill then to take meditation not with the teacher directing but when they're on their own, sitting on the beach or ready for sleep at home, it may give them that time to just release some tension and then, again, that more of a positive feeling inside themselves and that only comes with taking time to stop and think... (Christina)

Students' Relationship with God

When asked whether the Christian Meditation had any impact on their students' relationship with God, again the teachers commented that it was difficult to tell because they had often not asked the children and they not been forthcoming in articulating anything:

Yeah, they haven't really said anything. A lot of them are just like "I just feel calmer, I feel centred as well" ... (Kim)

It's hard because you don't know what's going on in their minds ... students in Year 5; they don't verbalise as much about their own belief in God, only what we teach them. (Mark)

Once again, I think difficult to measure because we don't know what the group would have been like prior to that. I would say not dramatically because other than calling it "Christian Meditation" and having the symbols there, I don't see that they... because it's so simple and there's no talk from me or no front-loading about what it's necessarily about, I think that they more see it as quiet reflection time rather than so much focused on faith. (Daniel)

However, some teachers did feel that for at least some of the students, the Christian Meditation, with its mantra and symbols, was an opportunity for them to build their faith and experience the presence of God:

I do think it is and I think it allows them time then or later, to say, "This is a time, if God's going to speak to you, this is a time it'll happen." (Christina)

You know, I'm thinking of a couple of children in my class that are just amazing kids and their belief is... one of them became a Christian a couple of years ago and she's just, you know, just continued in her journey and this was another thing that kind of helped her. (Nicole)

Teachers also commented that they had a lot of children in their class from secular backgrounds, and that these children find the meditation practice relaxing, but they may not connect it with prayer and God. Therefore, some described the students' connection to God in more mixed terms:

I think some of them engage and you can see some of them really trying to engage and using the mantra and then there's others that just look as if they could not care less; they just sit there and do it because everyone else is doing it but to them it means nothing. (Sarah)

Students' Relationship with the Catholic Church

In the interviews with the Year 4 teachers, the question enquiring about any connection between Christian Meditation and the Catholic Church was very difficult for teachers to answer. This year this question was modified a little. Instead of asking directly as to whether the experience of Christian Meditation had affected the children's relationship with the Catholic Church, the question was phrased more along the lines of whether the meditation practice has had any impact on the children's understanding of the Catholic community. Similar to the previous year though, most teachers felt unable to comment, or struggled to comment, because they had not had any explicit discussion with the students about the link between Christian Meditation and the Catholic church/ community:

It is hard to say... I mean when we do go to church, they have their quiet time, but it's not spoken about as a meditation time where in fact maybe we could sort of say, "It's just like your meditation time that quiet time at church where you're praying but maybe you're not doing the mantra, you're doing a prayer, talking about your problems, asking for help," you know, that sort of thing... (Rachel)

The Way Students Think About Prayer

Similarly to the previous year's findings, a strong theme emerging from the question about whether doing Christian Meditation at school impacted on the way the students think about prayer was that it has given them another avenue for prayer that does not involve words, speaking, or asking for something. The following comments are representative of all of the teachers' comments:

Yeah, I think that they are aware that it's a form of prayer...I definitely think that they've probably realised that there's other ways to pray and...you don't have to just pray kneeling beside your bed or in a church... (Tim)

I think it does offer a different, more contemporary way for some of them to think about their relationship with God. A lot of the children, prior to Christian Meditation, their only experience of prayer is the rote learning ones, which are important, they are part of our tradition, or prayers that they might say at mass...Christian Meditation gives them a completely different way of doing this; most of them have heard of meditation before and they associate it with relaxation so I think together that does give them a nice contemporary way of praying. (Shana)

Yeah, they certainly are. I'll be interested to hear their responses on that, but I suppose it's exposed them to another way of praying. I mean we're telling them all the time about the different avenues, whether it be singing or dancing or more traditional prayer so I think it's giving them another avenue and you know, telling them that they can do it whenever and wherever they like and that it's a skill for life is hopefully what they're taking away from it. (Daniel)

The teachers' comments did suggest there might be some variation between the children as to whether they view the meditation practice as a form of prayer:

I think the Christian children, the Catholic children understand it as a form of prayer. I don't think the others may. I don't know that they can make that connection. They might just see it as a quiet time. As much as we talk about prayer and say prayer can be, you know, reflecting and sitting and being quiet with God, I don't know that they've made that connection and I think that's probably something more we need to do. (Nicole)

I think some of them do. I wouldn't say all of them. I think some of them still would think if we're not saying "Our Father" or "Hail Mary" or making the sign of the cross, we're not praying. I think they still have that immature thought process around prayer.
(Rachel)

Teachers' perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on themselves

Teachers' Initial Responses

The teachers were asked to share their initial responses to doing Christian Meditation with their class. Like the previous year, some teachers recalled their concerns about fitting it into the busy schedule. This year, not all teachers attended a training day and as such there were some teachers who described that their initial response was to question why they hadn't heard of Christian Meditation before and they wondered why the Catholic schools were introducing it now, and where it had come from:

My first reaction was, "What's Christian Meditation?" pretty much. I was kind of the same as the others; I'd done meditation in high school and things like that but it was never really Christian-focused.
(Tim)

Well, we'd done a bit in staff prayer and then I guess when it was staff prayer, I thought "Oh gee, I've been a Catholic or a Christian forever; how come we haven't done this before? Where's this coming from? Are we just getting on the bandwagon?" Just my sceptic head coming out..."Are we just trying to keep up with Steiner?"...I mean I could see the benefits; I just wanted to know why now, why... (Christina)

Other teachers focused on the trepidation they felt in implementing the practice in the classroom. For some this was heightened due to a lack of training:

I had done it as a casual [teacher] and when I first did it, I had no idea what [it was] like ... and the kids actually had to talk me through it ... I was really nervous because I was like, "I've had no

training in this. I'm not exactly sure what we're supposed to be doing." (Sarah)

Other teachers felt anxious about implementing Christian Meditation in their classes given the behavioural needs of their students:

I was really nervous about implementing it because this class is an extremely high needs class. There are a lot of behaviour difficulties and sitting still was – is – a real issue. (Sarah)

I was very anxious about introducing it especially... well, last year it was okay; this year it's more of a challenge with this particular cohort. From a teacher point of view, I get worried because I want to set a good example and it's not a time to, "You stop talking, sit up straight, do this properly." I've got to sort of stop all that during our Christian Meditation time. (Beth)

Some teachers commented that due to their own personal struggles with sitting still and meditating, they were daunted by the prospect of teaching Christian Meditation to their classes.

I loved the idea of it but for me, on the [training] day, I really struggled to stay still for that moment. It was like, "How am I going to get the kids to do this?" (Kim)

Oh my gosh, I was just like, "No". I resisted it because...I just cannot sit still; I've never sat still in my life so you know, it was something that I absolutely resisted and I thought "How am I going to get these kids to do this if I can't even do it?" That's why it was baby steps for me as well as them... (Nicole)

It was definitely a challenge because I struggle with personal prayer. I'm very good at the outward prayer, participating, but when it comes to internal – and that has a lot to do with my own personal I suppose struggles with my relationship with God. (Bronwyn)

Generally, those teachers who had the opportunity to attend the training day seemed to feel a little more confident about implementing Christian Meditation in their classrooms:

When I went to the information day, the training day, I absolutely loved it...once the ladies spoke about like the process of it and what you do during the meditation, I thought, "Wow, this is amazing." (Melanie)

In sum, at the outset there was a delicate tension between the potential that teachers could see for Christian Meditation, versus the barriers that they perceived and/ or experienced.

Teachers' Later Responses

The teachers expressed generally very positive responses to doing Christian Meditation once they had been doing it with their class for several months. For instance, above Kim had recalled initially wondering, 'How am I going to get the kids to do this?' However, she described that it had become routine and fairly easy to implement:

I guess it's like a routine now. As soon as the lunch bell goes, it finishes and we walk up to our classroom quietly. The kids usually are at the door, silent, and they know okay, once they're silent they can all move in, sit in a circle...I really enjoy it. I'll be moving to Year 4 next year and I'll probably do it there as well because I think it's beneficial for the kids... (Kim)

Some teachers had become particularly convinced of Christian Meditation and were enthusiastic about the benefits for themselves and well as the children:

I really, really like it. As a teacher especially, it's my only five minutes of peace I get all day pretty much...and I've actually found it really, really peaceful just having that five minutes just to sit there and go, "Wow, this is nice". (Tim)

Oh, I'll continue. I'll definitely continue. It's a beautiful process for them and I think it benefits them so much. (Miriam)

Personal Change

Some teachers found it difficult to answer whether they had experienced any personal change as a result of practising Christian Meditation with their class. Like the teachers last year, they reported not being able to meditate due to needing to remain in 'teacher mode' and monitor the behaviour in the classroom. While the teachers talked about how they couldn't meditate in class due to their caretaker

role, upon deeper reflection they said that the process of teaching Christian Meditation, including participating in the training day (for those who had done so), had impacted them personally. Those teachers who had incorporated it into their life beyond school described that practising Christian Meditation was improving their reactions to stress, and that they felt calmer, and sometimes even assisted in coping with anxiety:

I have high anxiety so when I will be having an anxiety attack I would actually start meditating and I would focus on Maranatha... And, through that, it was a very slow process – like I said, like three years – last year was probably the most profound where I found peace in the silence and I was able to make that connection [with God] whereas I hadn't made it before. (Bronwyn)

Focused and I'm trying to think of, like a word that's opposite to chaotic. It's like normally it's organised chaos but it's just I feel, I don't know, "lighter" within myself as I approach the day. I feel like I'm calmer with the children, I talk to them a little bit more slowly and calmer and I remember things a bit better... (Jacinta)

Even teachers who were not practising Christian Meditation reported changes to their behaviours outside of school – it seems the knowledge of Christian Meditation and their role in facilitating it at school with their class, had a flow-on effect in that it increased their awareness of having silence in their lives:

Yeah. I think for me, just doing some meditation has really allowed me to go, "Oh, it's okay to stop and it's important to stop"... (Mark)

I suppose just for me just that importance of taking time out and realising how there is such little time in our day that is like that. It really stands out when you start to do it... (Kylie)

I think, for me, because I'm a mother as well so I'm extremely busy plus I come here to school so, for me, it's just to realise that it's okay to stop, it's okay and it's okay for kids to be able to just stop as well. I think it's really important... (Kim)

The following quote further builds upon this theme:

I've tried to meditate at home myself and I still find that quite difficult, having the time for it, setting the time aside. One thing

that I now do that I didn't do beforehand was whenever I used to walk or run, I would always have music playing. I tend not to do that anymore because I do appreciate the importance of...you know, sometimes I try and switch everything off. And, so I suppose for me it's linked a little bit into mindfulness rather than the meditation. Perhaps the meditation will come through time and maybe I'm just not quite ready to be there yet but I'm definitely more aware of being mindful and trying to be in the space and I think that's come from my understanding of Christian Meditation and the effect that it can have. (Shana)

Teachers' Relationships with Other People

Teachers found it difficult to answer the question as to whether their practice of Christian Meditation impacted on their relationships with other people. Some teachers commented that they felt calmer after meditating, and therefore were more likely to respond to tensions and problems with others in a more considered and reflective way.

When I do it I find I'm calmer and I'm not as quick to react. (Nicole)

I think the importance of stopping is so vital rather than just going straight in there...if I've dealt with issues at lunch time or if there's problems with parents or whatnot, you just need to stop and think about nothing in particular. (Daniel)

It gives me...a chance to reflect and to think about those interactions I have and maybe ways that I could have dealt with things differently... (Tim)

Teachers' Relationships with Themselves

Echoing earlier thoughts, a theme emerging from the question of whether the Christian Meditation impacted on the teachers' relationships with themselves was that the skill of meditating was viewed as a tool to help them relax and as a way to cope in times of stress, as demonstrated by the following comments:

Yeah, I suppose it's another tool, another avenue that I can use for myself. (Mark)

And I think for me personally just because I've got an over-active mind that it's actually a really powerful thing to just manage stress

and...the thoughts that are constantly in my mind sort of just get put away, you know, into their place and they're not bothering me as much... (Kylie)

Other teachers commented that the practice of Christian Meditation helped them to be in the present moment:

The sort of seeing the bigger picture thing and just not getting too caught up in the real minute details but just enjoying the silence and enjoying being present if you know what I mean. (Tim)

Teachers also commented that practicing Christian Meditation also improved their self-awareness of emotions, actions and links between them:

...Say in the morning if there is something that is happening in my life, that it has less of an impact on the kids ...I guess that, doing it of a morning, I guess it's easier to decipher or distinguish between my frustration or my emotions. (Todd)

Teachers' Relationship with God

When asked whether Christian Meditation had any impact on their relationship with God one teacher initially said they perceived no change as they already had established ways of connecting with God:

I would probably disagree. I'd probably say, "No". Once again, I'm that type of person through prayer or through song and music – that's where I feel most connected. (Kim)

However, upon deeper consideration, this teacher came to reflect upon an implicit connection between the meditation practice and her relationship with God:

I guess, you know, meditation allows me to feel a lot more calm and I think the calmer you are, the more you feel connected with God which I think is quite important so, I guess in a way, yes, it kind of does. (Kim)

Other teachers agreed that Christian Meditation did make them feel closer to God and to begin to find an inner peace:

I think it's important to add some stillness and silence into your life and it's just simple...I feel closer to God when I do it. (Sarah)

Well, I have found since doing it, for me, my relationship with God has been better. I've found this year there's been more of a connection, you know...I've found an inner peace. It's still going. There's still a long way to go... (Nicole)

Like everyone is on their faith journey that's different to other people ...working here has made my faith so much stronger. Having the time to sit...like that I feel more connected. Yeah, so that's changed me... (Jacinta)

Other teachers commented that through practising Christian Meditation they had realised that God is available to them at any time:

I guess it's just allowed me to see that I can be with God at any time if I just take that little bit of silent time and just kind of chill out a bit. I can get a bit spiritual... (Tim)

I guess it opens the channels of communication so it's a way to not just be asking for something or thanking God for something but in stillness, you don't really know what's going to pop in so I guess knowing that that's available... (Christina)

Teachers' Relationship with the Catholic Church

This year not all teachers were asked this question due to the previous cohort of teachers finding it a difficult question to respond to. If the conversation naturally led towards it, then teachers were asked the question. However, the following example of a teacher's response demonstrates how challenging this question was for teachers to answer:

It's a different experience, totally different, Christian Meditation, to how I feel at church... I don't know really know how to answer that one sorry. (Jacinta)

The Way Teachers Think About Prayer

Teachers were asked whether doing Christian Meditation had changed the way they think about prayer. While teachers said they could not really meditate fully while facilitating the children's meditation practice, they did generally agree that their experiences with the meditation had raised their awareness of meditation as a new avenue for prayer:

...it's another way for me to pray... (Mark)

...everything doesn't have to be formalised. I came through 13 years of Catholic schooling and then I went to a Catholic university as well. I think the fact that it's just not everything has to be formalised; it can be just you sitting down and reflecting. (David)

Some teachers had experienced a deep awareness and felt excitement in the new opportunity they felt to be with God through Christian Meditation:

Absolutely. Absolutely...I've enjoyed the opportunity to practice my faith so if you're asked to pray, straight away my thinking was, "What do I tell God?" but now ... he's here. That's all that matters. (Todd)

Yeah, it has...I mean it just makes you think a little bit more about what you're doing when you pray and how prayer doesn't always have to be a recited text; that it can be...just being peaceful and being peaceful in itself is talking to God, you know, like bringing yourself out of it. (Miriam)

One teacher described that they had not felt such a connection and, although they had given it consideration, felt they did not consider Christian Meditation a form of prayer:

I've been privileged enough to have a wide experience of prayer life so not just in the Catholic faith... and freed up to feel comfortable with prayer in different styles and appreciate that we all have a favourite way to pray...and that's helped me honour and value the Christian Meditation within the school which is why I stopped myself saying, "I think that's the wrong time," but I thought, "You can't comment until you've done it" but now we've done it I've realised, no, [it's not prayer] it is a calming moment. (Sue)

Other teachers, such as those who had not attended the training, had not made the link between meditation and prayer before, as shown by the following statement:

I would never have thought of it as a form of prayer... and I think that's sometimes why the kids struggle a bit to see it as a prayer because originally I just thought meditation, well that's just a time to be still and relax but I've never actually thought of it as a time to be with God. (Sarah)

What Teachers Like Most about Practising Christian Meditation

Reiterating thoughts mentioned above, teachers commented that what they liked best about Christian Meditation was that it offered an opportunity for silence and that it had a calming impact on the students. They also liked the potential benefits

the practice provided for the students and the way the students engaged with the practice:

I think I like that it's a still time, a quiet time for everybody. Everybody – no As, Bs, C marks, there's no judgments; it's just "be who you are". You're not asked to say what's happening in your mind. I think that must be quite freeing for a lot of children. (Christina)

Just the way the rest of the day flows on. It's a ripple effect. (Jacinta)

I think my favourite part is watching them connect; the ones who have struggled from the beginning...and seeing that they finally find that peace and it might take all year to get there but then them being able to recognise that that's how they got there. (Bronwyn)

Some teachers responded to this question from a more personal perspective, noting that they enjoyed the time to stop and feel refreshed:

It's a time to rejuvenate. You come back from it a bit more refreshed than what you were before. (Mark)

I think it's the opportunity to be silent and to be with God I guess and to...just relax and let it go and say, "This is nice. I'm doing the job I love in a really great school in a beautiful part of the world..." (Tim)

Teacher Challenges

Teachers described a range of challenges to practising Christian Meditation in their classrooms, including timing and distractions:

You've got to find the right time for the kids. You've got to be in it yourself...If you're not in it the kids aren't going to be in it. (Nicole)

I think definitely time is an issue, environment is a huge issue, announcements over the speakers, phone always ringing – it always tends to be just as I get them settled...Like it got to the point where I had to put signs on the door and call the office and tell them "Don't call me, don't make any announcements" but that's frustrating to have to do that all the time. (Bronwyn)

Getting to do it as much as I'd like to. Sometimes, there can be weeks where we don't do it because there's this scheduled or that scheduled or something else and things get changed and then sometimes, you know, you'll fall out of the pattern a little bit. (Miriam)

Another key issue, which emerged strongly last year as well, was the tension between meditating and supervising the children, along with the need to keep the students focused on the meditation practice without causing further disruption:

...what I find the most difficult when I'm meditating is when I'm trying to meditate and I know that little Johnny up in the back corner is pulling faces across the classroom and how I can stop him and still keep everybody else focused on their meditation and also sort of leaving my meditation to guide everybody else is a bit of a thing. So that's a bit of a challenge I find is to keep everybody focused on the meditation... (Tim)

Other teachers responded to this question from a more personal perspective – noting the personal struggles they have when trying to meditate outside of school hours:

For me it's stopping... and I'm a fidgeter so I actually when I meditate I'll actually, you know, be moving my fingers in some fashion because otherwise my body will be moving...and the kids have noticed in class that I will twirl my fingers or do something. (Mark)

You have all this stuff going through your head...that it's hard to block it all out and completely focus on God for that 10-or so minutes. Yeah, that's the hardest bit is just to have a blank mind. (Sarah)

Does the Way Teachers Engage with Christian Meditation Influence How the Children in their Class Approach or Experience It?

The teachers' responses to this question showed unmitigated consensus that the way in which teachers engage with Christian Meditation does influence how the children approach and experience it. The following suite of quotes express teachers' views and emphasise how critically important they believe it is for teachers to be authentically engaged with Christian Meditation and to act as a role model for the children they teach:

Yeah, I think if you didn't do that it would be hard to do it authentically... and I've talked to them about how I found it really hard at first too...so I think all of that helped them to think, "Oh, it's okay if I can't do that either..." (Kylie)

I think it's very, very important that you show authentically what you think and feel and believe. I think children, even very young children, very quickly will sense whether or not you as an adult, are genuinely buying into something and I think that's the challenge for educators

and for schools trying to lead something like this. It's very dependent on the class teacher and whether or not the class teacher is truly buying into this process... (Shana)

I feel like if I didn't set an example, they wouldn't take it seriously. I think it's so important that if they do start to open their eyes or they're losing their train of thought, they know I'm not making them do it; we're doing it together. I think it would be a bit hypocritical if I didn't participate in it with them and just force it on them. (Beth)

A male teacher commented that it was especially important for the boys in his class to see him as a role model in doing Christian Meditation:

They do look up to you as their class teacher and I guess I model the fact that I'm doing it and I think that's helped I guess make, especially the boys, probably be a bit more comfortable in doing it. (Todd)

The quote demonstrates how important it is for teachers to set the scene and create an environment that fosters the children's engagement with the Christian Meditation process.

I think that's all very important with how you start the meditation. If you just walk into class and say, "All right, guys, we're meditating, sit down, five minutes silence," but if you actually say, "Okay, guys, start concentrating on your breathing, feet flat on the ground, ...start thinking about your breath...hang your arms by your side..." and just those sort of things, setting them up and then ringing the bell at the start, ringing the bell at the end. If you're doing all those things...just not expecting them to get there on their own really; pushing them towards it. (Tim)

Another strong theme emerged in relation to the issue of teachers being in a caretaker role while facilitating the students' meditation, and therefore being unable to fully meditate themselves. However, as the quote below shows, this doesn't necessarily detract from a teacher conveying to the students that they value and practice meditation themselves:

I think, yeah, it's very important for the kids to see us actually participating in the meditation when they do, but then, as a teacher, you still have to be very mindful of what's going on around...but I always tell my kids, you know...whenever I feel stressed or I just need to calm down or give myself a little bit of time then usually I will participate in meditation. (Kim)

Issues Involved in Implementing Christian Meditation in Schools and Classrooms

This section of the interview began by asking teachers about the process of meditation in their class before exploring the issues involved with implementing the practice in the classroom setting (some of which had already been raised by teachers). Some teachers proffered solutions they had found were working well to overcome some of the barriers they had encountered.

What Word Does Your Class Use When Meditating?

The majority of teachers said their class used the word 'Maranatha' when meditating, with some classes, like last year, preferring 'Come, Lord Jesus', because the students preferred to use familiar words. A few teachers commented that they advised individual students who were from other religious backgrounds or non-religious backgrounds to choose a word relevant to them to use when meditating.

How Long Does Your Class Meditate For?

Teachers reported their classes meditating between two minutes and eleven minutes, with most classes averaging between three and five minutes.

How Frequently Does Your Class Meditate?

Some classes were meditating daily, usually at certain times during the day, such as first thing in the morning or after lunch. Most classes were meditating less often, though, ranging from four to two times per week. Compared to the previous year, there were some classes that were meditating quite infrequently.

Parents' or Other Teachers' Interest in Christian Meditation

Teachers generally reported very few questions or feedback from parents:

I've had nothing. Yes, I've had nothing about the meditation from the parent community. (Rachel)

One teacher offered a pragmatic explanation for this apparent lack of parental interest. They explained that the school had provided information about Christian Meditation earlier in the year, and also that the school had practised meditation previously, so it was not a new program this year, the parents had not asked any questions about it:

I know we spoke to our parents about it at the parent information night at the beginning of the year and just explained to them why we

do it and the benefits of it and how it works so maybe that helped I suppose. (Kylie)

Another teacher offered a more philosophical explanation:

I think there's something strange about the largely secular society or community that we live in – they send their child to a Catholic school and I think they want their child to have these faith experiences; they don't necessarily want to know too much about it or actively engage in it themselves which is interesting. (Daniel)

However, another teacher explained how some parents had expressed unfavourable attitudes, and suggested that this may be because these parents had more conservative understandings of Christian prayer:

I know a few parents don't like it and I think that's trickled down to attitudes with their kids...they're convinced that it's not a Christian thing to do; meditation is not Christian, no matter how many times you try to explain that... (Beth)

These comments suggest that some parents may require more information about Christian Meditation, its history, purpose and traditions to feel comfortable with their child doing it at school.

Barriers to Implementing Effective and Consistent Practice of Christian Meditation in Primary Classrooms

Teacher raised a number of barriers to implementing effective and consistent practice of Christian Meditation in their Year 5 classrooms. Lack of time was a commonly perceived barrier:

I think other barriers are just how time poor we are. I mean to eat 11 minutes out of my two hour session, I'm not sure with compliance and all the people watching us whether that actually works. (Daniel)

We've really struggled in that sense to find a time where we can all – the three of us – implement it at the same time and do it well across the classes. (Melanie)

At this stage of the research project most schools had not yet implemented Christian Meditation throughout the whole school and, as indicated previously, teachers working in these schools commented that noise and other distractions from other classrooms was a barrier to effective implementation of the meditation in their class:

The barriers are interruptions, people not doing it at the same time so that there's noise ... the phone, knocking at the door. (Christina)

The bell, the intercom, the interruptions, the noise... I'll just quietly remind them that we're not worrying about the noise around us and we're talking to God, it doesn't matter. So that happens – that noise is fairly constant in the school and so they're really good at not getting distracted but it takes a while. (Miriam)

Needs to be across the school, phone off hook. If it is across the school it means there's people not walking around. (Todd)

Some teachers commented that student characteristics also presented barriers to conducting Christian Meditation successfully. For example, as some teachers have indicated earlier, they felt that by Year 5 the children are beginning to question what they are learning and the type of activities they are doing at school:

Well, barriers to overcome, I suppose would be, you know, these kids are in Year 5 so they're 11 and 12 years old and they're making their own minds up about what's worthwhile and whatnot...There's an element in my class I'm sure that think it's a waste of time so that's certainly a barrier but, to their credit, they still participate...most of the time, won't spoil the person's experience who's taking it very seriously and who enjoys it. (Daniel)

On the other hand, another teacher commented that primary school aged children tend to find it difficult to sit still and this meant that the length of time each session of Christian Meditation takes needs to be kept flexible and relatively short:

And I guess with primary school children, they're a bit young – that can be good because of course they can be trained into it but also it's that they're always a bit fidgety anyway... (Christina)

Another teacher commented that children with diverse learning needs may take some extra time to settle when coming into the classroom from the playground to practice Christian Meditation, thus teachers need to accommodate these children's needs:

I find my children often bring a lot up from the playground – "This person did this, this person did this, this person kicked to this person" – so it's about before we begin meditation we let everything that happened at lunch time go so that none of that can be mentioned during Christian Meditation. That frees their mind to begin with; often if some of my children have a lot of emotional needs – I have 10

students on IPs so 10 of 18 – so when I say “high needs” I mean high needs... (Sarah)

Another teacher emphasised the need for teachers to monitor the needs of the children on any one day and to keep the practice of Christian Meditation flexible and responsive to the children’s abilities, needs and moods:

...you’ve got to use professional judgement too. If they’re not going to settle and do it properly we won’t do it. I’d rather leave it and not do it than force them to... (Beth)

What Has Helped Most in Getting Christian Meditation Under Way?

Teachers who had attended the training day explained that it had been indispensable in helping guide them in facilitating the meditation in their school and classroom. The following quote attests to this endorsement of the training program:

I think the good thing about the day was there was a little bit of it that was about you as a person which I think is so important...And then the other part of it was practical ... and hearing people’s stories of how they started off their journey with their class. (Shana)

Teachers also commented that experiencing the meditation themselves, as part of the training or in another setting, was really helpful in preparing them to facilitate Christian Meditation with the children:

I think doing it myself to start with. So just knowing the procedure, the benefits, the difficulties... (Christina)

I’d probably say the most helpful thing has been doing it myself; in the staff room I think that that has really been the biggest thing because it’s allowed me to see the benefits of it with myself and then also it’s allowed me to see it modelled by someone who’s quite good at it - I enjoy it in the staff room so I wanted to bring this into the classroom. (Tim)

Teachers believed that having a routine and schedule in which to practice Christian Meditation within the classroom context was helpful:

I think that just the consistency of doing it every day and the expectations of what it is has remained the same throughout the whole year and other teachers coming in, I leave a clear guideline as to how meditation looks in Year 5. (Sarah)

In some schools the practice was established across the whole school and this was helpful in creating the routine for Christian Meditation:

I think it's that constant; the bell – a buzzer...I think it's that constant because your day does slip away. (Rachel)

The practical resources were also reported to be helpful in running and maintaining the Christian Meditation program in schools:

Well, certainly the one thing that's been a big positive is the kit... equipment that is only used for meditation time – a candle, the chime ... (Daniel)

One teacher explained how the roster for taking turns to set up the room for the class' meditation time helped make the practice run smoothly:

I'm the last person to walk into my classroom and when I walk in, the place is silent, the meditation space is set up, ready to go and all they need is my phone to start it. (Mark)

Other teachers commented that it was important for others in the school to value and respect the Christian Meditation program, as demonstrated by the following comment:

It has to be seen to be important from everyone so there is no-one walking around past your window at that time no matter if you are in the leadership role or if you're a kindergarten child; it has to be seen that in our school, we stop... You know, I don't think there's too many things that really can't wait that three minutes. (Rachel)

Advice for Other Teachers and Principals

The teachers reiterated the above into practical and philosophical advice to teachers and principals who may wish to implement Christian Meditation in their classrooms and schools. They reinforced the benefits of having ready access to the resources needed for facilitating Christian Meditation in their classrooms:

I think investing in the kits is important. (Daniel)

... resource your teachers, train your teachers, show that you value it too by speaking about it, by doing it in assemblies, especially at crisis times. I would say give them some resources, some special posters or cloths or candles or chimes... (Christina)

Teachers also reiterated that a whole school approach would work best, as this provided structure and collegial support and also conveys to students and others that Christian Meditation is valued in the school:

It has to be a whole-school approach...and the kids need to see that it's not just their classroom that's doing it. So, if you get together as a grade or if you have an assembly or if you do it at mass – I think we did it at mass once and it was actually really nice because they were out of control and it really centred them – but it needs to be a whole-school perspective. (Bronwyn)

You'd need to make sure the classes or the whole school would be doing it at a similar time...depending on the situation of the classrooms. (Kim)

A whole-school approach also has the added benefit of conveying to staff that it is important and that they are supported in facilitating it with their students:

There are people that may not want to do it or don't believe in it. That's a huge barrier...so they've got to see the importance and the relevance in it and the importance and relevance for kids – spiritually and mentally and physically and it has all those elements to it...If everyone was doing it at the same time that would be fabulous because then they would not only see that it's important in the class but it's important in the school. (Nicole)

Other teachers pointed out that even though a whole school approach would be helpful for maintaining consistency of practice, it is important to cater to each class' needs. Therefore, some advocated for a flexible approach, as indicated by the following comment:

I think they need to consider all classes are different and what works in one room won't work in another. I think, like for example, my class, it'd be unfair for me to try and make them sit for 10 minutes... Teachers know their kids really well and so they'll understand what they are capable of. I also think that having that flexibility each day if the kids are struggling then you can cut it short; still do it but cut it short so that you give them the opportunity for success. You don't set them up to fail. (Sarah)

Teachers also emphasised how important it is for teachers to be well trained before attempting Christian Meditation with their class:

...so that's where I think my recommendation would be is that it has to be training like the whole staff and even the casual teachers... (Kylie)

I think training for anything is a priority...and I'm saying "training" but really it's an experience isn't it? (Sue)

...And, negative attitudes from teachers, I think like they need to experience it themselves. I think if they can experience meditation I think that they'll understand what the benefit could be for the kids. (Sarah)

As alluded to in the quotes above, one key advantage of training is that it provides teachers with first-hand experience of meditation and the benefits and challenges it brings. Other types of experience, such as observing an experienced class in their meditation practice, can also provide insight and motivation that would otherwise not be available:

I would say come and visit a class who meditates, talk to the children, talk to the teachers but actually come and join in one of the sessions... because I think once you feel the atmosphere in the room and you feel that calmness that I think it would definitely encourage teachers and principals....It really is something special and you can't articulate it; you have to see it and you have to experience it to really know what the benefits are. (Shana)

Picking up on earlier points, teachers also commented that it is important for parents to be well informed about the history, relevance and benefits of Christian Meditation:

Start it early, be consistent and I would make the expectations and the history and all the information on it really explicitly clear from the beginning... I would be highly recommending making sure parents are educated as to why it's occurring. (Beth)

One teacher emphasised an additional important closing point. That is, that it is critical for the success of Christian Meditation to be clear about its purpose. This teacher was concerned that if meditation is emphasised as only a method to calm the children down and to relax, it's deeper, more spiritual and faith-building purpose may overlooked:

I was a little bit concerned at first with the implementation of it... because it was mentioned, "This will calm the kids down after lunch" and I was a little bit concerned that we were using it as a calming

activity and not for what it is, because I think if I had Christian Meditation at the beginning of the day, I think it would be a whole different ball game. So, I'm not necessarily a fan of having it as a calm down after lunch; I think it is a calm down after lunch but I think it becomes a calm down after lunch, not Christian Meditation. So, from my point of view, we're implementing it in the wrong way but I've never expressed that to anyone. (Sue)

Advice for the CEO/CSO

Teachers were asked if they had any feedback or advice for the Catholic Schools Office (CSO) or Catholic Education Office (CEO) in relation to implementing Christian Meditation in their schools. Generally, the teachers wanted to inform the CSO/CEO that Christian Meditation had been a valuable addition to their classroom, for Catholic schools, and for the Catholic community more broadly:

There's a lot of different ways to pray so I think this is a fantastic initiative and I would like to see more time and effort and money put into it. (Sue)

I think it's a really important contemporary way to introduce children to a different form of prayer with God and I think young children really respond very, very well to it...And one of the, I think, important messages for teachers is that there will always be children who will find that difficult, there'll be adults who find that difficult to begin with but it's perseverance and it's just being able to find different ways to try and make the experience a positive one for them. (Shana)

I think it's a good idea. I think it really has a good effect on the kids... it's a great way to introduce kids to a form of relaxation that is centred around God. And it's something that... it's a skill that once they pick up in school, they can continue at home and whenever things get tough or anything like that. I think it's a great initiative. I can see the benefits in my kids. (Sarah)

Seeing the benefits for their Year 5 students, some teachers advised the CEO/CSO to start teaching younger children to practice Christian Meditation, with these teachers suggesting that the program be implemented from kindergarten onwards:

...it would be a lot better if they started in those younger years. ... and then moving it up and then the kids would know it's part of routine, it's just how it is. (Kim)

There was also some discussion around who the appropriate person is to lead the implementation of Christian Meditation in schools. The following conversation demonstrated this point, then moved on to argue that provision of a strong evidence-base would support the implementation of Christian Meditation across Catholic schools:

Well, it's got to come down to the principal but I don't want them to say, "Oh principals you have to do this now" because they've got so much to do...so maybe it could go through the RACs, the religious coordinators...I think having data to back it up...that's what everything else is based on that we've done, you know, you're going to teach maths like this because look at this. You're going to do reading comprehension like this because this is the data and I love to see things like, "Yes, this makes them sleep better, their blood pressure goes down. There's not as many fights with siblings" - all that. (Christina)

Overall then, the teachers seemed keen to advocate, whether to other teachers, schools or the CEO/CSO for the benefits of Christian Meditation, and had some useful ideas for improving the practice further in schools.

Discussion of Teacher Interview Data

The findings from the Year 5 teacher interviews were in many respects similar to those from the interviews with the Year 4 teachers last year. Both cohorts felt that many students enjoy the practice and identified a range of benefits, particularly in relation to calming and concentration. Both cohorts also described the difficulties some students found with sitting still, being silent and closing their eyes – suggesting these had persisted over the year. However, in both cohorts, the teachers felt most students had made progress in these aspects. Across both cohorts the teachers expressed similar uncertainty about commenting upon changes in students' relationships with others or themselves, and on students' relationships with God and the Catholic Church. It was evident that, like last year, most classes were not having these conversations and as such the teachers were reluctant to suggest that there were changes resulting directly from students' engagement with Christian Meditation. This was possibly compounded by an impression some teachers may have had from the training day that they were not to ask students too many questions about their experience of Christian Meditation, but rather just allow them to experience it. Having said that, a significant proportion of this year's cohort of teachers had not attended any formal training and they too had not discussed the practice with their students. Yet, they too were reluctant to make

assumptions about the students' experiences or attribute any changes solely to Christian Meditation. Instead, some of the Year 5 teachers described observable changes they had noticed, such as the calming influence of Christian Meditation and its potential, for example, to diffuse tensions after playground disputes. Not all teachers felt comfortable making such observations though, with one teacher emphasising that the practice was mainly about one-on-one time with God.

One notable difference between the two teacher cohorts was in regard to the student-teacher relationship. The Year 4 teachers described a somewhat reciprocal process between themselves and the students regarding learning to become engaged in meditation. While a sense of wonder towards some students' engagement in the process was evident from the Year 5 teachers, the idea that the practice was bringing the teachers and students closer was not specifically voiced or evident. The child-led nature of the practice was also less emphasised, perhaps because the meditation had become more routine over the longer period of time. In fact, teachers' appreciation of the children's competence was, in some respects, less apparent this year, with a number of teachers suggesting the age of Year 5 students meant inevitable disengagement from the practice.

A further difference between the two years was in regard to notions of inclusivity. In 2014, the Year 4 teachers emphasised the benefits of the practice for extending a sense of inclusivity to all students, regardless of religious background. In 2015, while the accessibility of Christian Meditation to students from different religious backgrounds was discussed, there seemed to be a greater level of tension over whether to more strongly promote or pare back the religious connections to engage more students. The challenges around extricating the spiritual from the religious echoes teachers' perceptions in other studies (Davies, 2001; Fisher, 2007; Jacobs, 2012; Kennedy & Duncan, 2006; Trousdale, 2014), and may warrant further exploration in the 2016 interviews.

In terms of the implications of the practice upon the teachers themselves, again the findings from the Year 5 teachers were very similar to the thoughts shared by the Year 4 teachers last year. This is perhaps not surprising as the practice was new to many Year 5 teachers and as such they recalled similar uncertainty and trepidation, concern over the time to fit it in and worries about how to maintain stillness and silence with their class. They also shared similar ideas of the practice being a learning curve, and one that they highly valued. It was notable this year that not all teachers had undertaken the training, and it was evident that some teachers felt less confident in, for example, the connection between the practice and prayer. In

addition to this, it was evident that the teachers who undertook the training perceived it to be enormously beneficial, leaving them feeling personally motivated towards the practice and with a greater level of reassurance and confidence about implementing it with their class.

Nevertheless, and again similar to the previous year, a level of professional-personal tension remained with teachers feeling that they had to monitor the class and as such could not fully engage in the practice themselves. This had some implications for the potential benefits that teachers might gain from engaging fully in Christian Meditation, although many Year 5 teachers felt that the sense of peace and quiet in the classroom offered a calming and reflective space that they still found personally beneficial. Some still felt unsure of the best way to handle situations in which students were distracting others, without causing further distraction. Hence, the findings in 2015 affirm those from 2014 in pointing out that clear consideration of the teachers' professional role in the practice needs to be addressed during the training sessions.

Overall, the teachers advocated for the practice and indicated their intention to implement it in subsequent years with their future classes. They wanted the CSO/CEO (school systems) to be aware of their enthusiasm and the benefits for their students and themselves and to consider how best to continue to support and grow the practice in schools. One emerging tension was around introducing the practice as a whole school approach at a set time of day. Some teachers, like many last year, advocated for this, as they felt it would help cement the importance of the practice and also, on a practical level, reduce distractions throughout the school. Other teachers were wary of this idea though. They felt that professional judgement was critical and the flexibility to cut the meditation short if students were unable to concentrate or settle on a particular day was important in ensuring the longevity of the practice with students.





Results: Student Focus Groups

The data are presented under the key questions and activities guiding the student focus group sessions.

What Christian Meditation Involves

The focus groups began by asking the student to explain Christian Meditation. This aimed to help the students to feel comfortable and ease them into the focus group process. The students explained the routines for meditation in their class or school, including the chimes and candles that were often used, as well as the practice of sitting up straight, closing your eyes and repeating the word Maranatha. Most students agreed that the word Maranatha helped them to focus, especially when they felt they were becoming distracted:

If you start to get distracted you keep on saying it. (Lismore, School 4)

You can just say the word "Maranatha" in your head but that might not work for everyone. (Sydney, School 5)

Reiterating the teachers' explanations above, the students explained that it wasn't always necessary to repeat the word or close your eyes (something many found particularly difficult). Instead, they explained the most important aspect is to focus upon being still and silent. Many students seemed compelled to justify this stillness and silence by way of explanation:

It's a time to relax and let all of your worries off your shoulders. (Lismore, School 1)

It's like a way to express yourself spiritually and mentally. (Lismore, School 5, Group B)

It's when you block out all the bad things and you just calm down. (Lismore, School 6, Group A)

You won't feel as crazy as before - we do it after recess. (Sydney, School 1)

Given the focus of this study, it was notable that in almost every focus group some students explained the practice in terms of time with God. This included 'being' with God as well as speaking and listening to Him - the difference between these was evidently something the students were giving some thought to:

It's like a time to let the Holy Spirit in and chat with God. (Lismore, School 1)

It's about connecting to God and sort of letting him talk to you. (Lismore, School 4)

It's mainly a time to just be with God. (Sydney, School 3, Group B)

In the teachers narratives they described uncertainty over whether the students would connect Christian Meditation with prayer or the Catholic Church. However, right from the outset a few students did explain it in these terms:

It's like a silent prayer. (Sydney, School 5)

Sometimes I do it when we go to church. (Sydney, School 2)

All of the students were well voiced in what Christian Meditation involved, although the frequency of the practice varied between classes. In some instances, the practice seemed to have dropped off of the agenda:

We did it like first term and then we didn't really do it...second and third. (Lismore, School 6, Group A)

We mainly did it in Year 3 and Year 4. Our class has only done it once because we're really busy. (Sydney, School 2)

Initial Thoughts

Students were asked if they could recall how they felt or what they were thinking when they first started Christian Meditation. This seemed a little difficult for some students to answer because they had been practising Christian Meditation for well over a year and some schools had been practising for longer than the period of the study. Others had also previously been exposed to other forms of meditation at school, such as guided meditation. However, many students remembered thinking 'it was going to be boring' and a few others were uncertain if they'd like it, or didn't approach it seriously:

I remember I thought, "I won't like it. It'll be like a waste of time." (Lismore, School 5, Group A)

*I kind of half thought it was a way we get out of class [laughing]...
(Lismore, School 5, Group B)*

It was evident that some students had had some uncertainty about what Christian Meditation might involve:

I thought that it was something like to do with sport but then when she explained to us what it actually was it was actually settling down into your mind (Sydney, School 2)

Generally though, students recalled that they had been familiar with the word meditation (although not necessarily in the Christian context) and so many remembered making an initial positive connection with relaxation.

When I first came to this school I really liked it. I thought it was a really good idea because my old school didn't do it. (Lismore, School 2)

I was amazed that I thought it was just a normal meditation but it was actually Christian Meditation. (Sydney, School 2)

Most recalled that they found their first few experiences 'different' but relaxing:

Well we didn't really know what it was first and then when the first time we did it, like it was a bit strange, but then when we kept on doing it. (Lismore, School 6, Group A)

Before like when we first started, it felt like ages and I was like "When's it going to end?" And now it's like it goes really quickly. (Lismore, School 4)

Okay, so when I first did meditation, I felt – after we did it – I felt like a lot less stressed...it really cleared my mind so if I was really upset and we have meditation I just feel a lot more light and fluffy...(Sydney, School 5, Group B)

One student summarised their shift in thinking and their experience particularly well:

Like any other kid would do, they haven't really matured yet – they would think like sitting down and being quiet and closing your eyes and focusing on one thing would be kind of boring or pretty hard for them. It actually felt [that way] for me the first and second times I did that, but then...the third time we did the meditation, the teacher explained why we did it when I asked...and then I started to

understand the true meaning of Christian Meditation and then I started to enjoy it after that. (Sydney, School 2)

Overall, most students thought meditation would be either boring or relaxing, and although students had often heard of meditation they had usually not specifically heard of Christian Meditation. A positive shift was evident or pointed towards as the students expressed their thoughts and this flowed well into the next question about what the students liked best, or what they most enjoyed about practising Christian Meditation.

What Students Like About Christian Meditation

Students described a range of reasons why they liked Christian Meditation. Most commonly they cited the peace, relaxation and quiet. Part of this seemed to be the opportunity to rest amongst the busy rush of schooling and for some students this included a bit of quiet time from the social intensity of schools:

I also like not talking to anyone else and just resting for a little bit. (Sydney, School 4)

It's just like you're always with your friends and it's always really busy and you can just calm down and be by yourself for a while. I just like the "me" time. (Sydney, School 5, Group A)

I like just like how the whole room is quiet and usually it's not like that; there's always people talking and that and it's a lot different. (Sydney, School 5, Group A)

Just feeling good, like it's my own time to just get away from everything, all the fuss that's going on in this world. (Sydney, School 2)

There's no work involved, there's no thinking; you just sit and relax. (Lismore, School 6, Group B)

Given the Australian context, many described enjoying the relaxation Christian Meditation offers when it is hot, or specifically when they are hot (or sometimes hot-headed) after being in the playground. It is worth considering, though, whether the many references to the heat may have arisen because the focus groups occurred just prior to the school summer holidays.

You're all sweaty and puffed and when you're done [meditating] you're just calm. (Lismore, School 1)

I like how you come off the yard and if you have like maybe a fight or you've just had a big sweaty run around, you can just come in and just rest and then just close your eyes and just open your mind and then just get rid of all the bad thoughts you're thinking and just go and just relax. (Lismore, School 3)

Regardless of the heat, it was evident that the students valued the opportunity Christian Meditation offered to help them calm down and to make the transition from break times to learning:

I just like the peace and calmness and it doesn't feel like you're at school and it takes all the drama away like what happened at lunch time. You can just calm down. (Sydney, School 3, Group A)

It lets me cool down from myself after lunch time [when] I've been all like silly and having fun. It gets me calmed down so I can be ready to work. (Sydney, School 3, Group B)

At my old school we all used to play soccer...and like there was sometimes a fight and some boys would have come in yelling and stuff and I really didn't like that because then I couldn't concentrate on my work so now I come in and now it's like all relaxed. (Lismore, School 3)

One student whose class practiced Christian Meditation in the mornings described how they liked to use the time to set goals:

It's good because in the morning you sort of set goals for yourself like say, "I want to be nice to such-and-such, like especially nice to them today" and you just set goals for yourself. (Lismore, School 6, Group A)

Other students said they liked the opportunity the practice offered to cope with difficulties in their lives:

Lately I've been thinking about my grandma because she passed away on Tuesday. (Lismore, School 2)

It just like calms you down from something that you might be worried about. (Lismore, School 6, Group B)

It's a time where you don't stress; you can't stress about anything. (Sydney, School 3, Group B)

Given how readily some students explained Christian Meditation in relation to God at the beginning of the focus groups, it was not surprisingly that the opportunity to talk or to be with God was also reiterated when they described what they liked best about the practice:

What I really liked about Christian Meditation is that it gave me a chance to connect with God. (Sydney, School 2)

Some people say you only get to see God in Heaven after you pass away, but sometimes when you just take a moment to yourself you can actually reach to God and like, call him. (Sydney, School 4)

What the students seemed to particularly value about Christian Meditation was that the opportunity to connect with God was very private:

I like meditation better than other prayers because with meditation I can say stuff to myself; I don't have to say it to other people and I can just say stuff about anything in my head...(Lismore, School 2)

At this stage, across all of the focus groups, there was only one student who explicitly articulated that they didn't like Christian Meditation at all, although as one of the teachers indicated, it is possible that they have been influenced by parental attitudes:

I don't like Christian Meditation at all because I just want to get straight into my learning and not spend 5 to 10 minutes just sitting around on the floor and wasting my learning time. (Sydney, School 3, Group A)

This one student aside, the students in the focus groups were overwhelmingly positive about Christian Meditation. In particular they valued the quiet space and time, the way the practice helps to calm them down and the opportunity to connect privately with God.

What Students Dislike about Christian Meditation

Whilst the students were generally highly positive about the benefits Christian Meditation offered them, some negative aspects did emerge when they were asked what they disliked most about the practice. In response to this question, it became evident that there were a handful of other students across the focus groups who did not particularly like Christian Meditation either:

I don't like it...It's boring... [I] start getting distracted and a bit bored by it and then whenever I put my shoulders down, most of the times

the teacher when I open my eyes, she just goes... and looks at me with this face (Lismore, School 5, Group B)

I don't know why we should sit there for 10 minutes. I don't like it. (Lismore, School 6, Group C)

Most students, though, just pointed to aspects of the practice that they found difficult or did not particularly like. Resonating with the teachers comments, a lot of students admitted they found it difficult to 'close their eyes' and a few students said they did not like saying the word, 'Maranatha.' Other difficulties included staying still, focusing, and not becoming distracted by noise or others fidgeting around them:

For me it's hard to sit still and just concentrate on that one thing because I always get distracted by things around me. (Lismore, School 2)

Well sometimes it's hard because sometimes when you do come off the yard, it's hard to just focus on just clearing your mind because you just got all these other thoughts surrounding your head ...(Lismore, School 3)

I mostly just don't like it how sometimes it drags on. (Lismore, School 5, Group A)

Some students who had experienced meditation lying down in previous classes (sometimes through different forms of relaxation or guided meditation) felt they preferred this position:

Last year...you used to lie down on the ground and that helped you a bit because sometimes when you sit up for a long time you don't really like it so it feels nice to lie down. (Lismore, School 5, Group A)

A few students explicitly identified the inherent tension between staying focused (but without their mind racing) and yet not relaxing too much (to the point of slouching or even sleeping):

Like sort of trying to focus and just keep relaxed. (Sydney, School 3, Group B)

Most commonly though, it was the classroom context that was described as making concentrating particularly difficult. Students could find themselves not only distracted but also annoyed at their classmates who would not or could not take the

practice seriously. Interestingly, given the research interests of this study, this annoyance was often framed in relation to disrespect or a lack of reverence:

Sometimes I have my eyes closed and I'm meditating properly and then all of a sudden, like maybe someone beside me...and I'm just like, "What are they laughing about?" and so you have to look. (Lismore, School 3)

I find it sometimes difficult because some people don't like doing it and they chatter too much and it really annoys me and I just think, "Why aren't they doing this? It's more a reverent experience; you should be talking to God." (Sydney, School 3, Group B)

Some of the people don't really get into it in our class, like some of them open their eyes which is cancelling the connection towards God. (Sydney, School 4)

A practical aspect that emerged in one focus group was where there wasn't an established roster to ring the gong at the end. In these classes, students described clock watching and running forward to be the one to get to ding the gong on time. This contrasted with those classes in which a set roster was established, with the students enjoying when it was their turn to be the leader. Some students mentioned the 'Meditation in Progress' signs developed for the classroom doors, but echoing the teachers wishes, the students advocated for a time of day when the whole school would be meditating to reduce external noise and distractions.

One final thing, was that some students felt they would like more encouragement and information about meditation to help overcome the difficulties:

Personally I think that we should have encouragement to do it. We need to learn more about what it is rather than just do it and like how it can help us. (Lismore, School 5, Group B)

Overall, despite a few students completely disliking the practice, most students reported not liking the things they found difficult including keeping their eyes closed, sitting still or ignoring distractions.

Feelings During Christian Meditation

The middle part of the focus group involved an activity in which students explored how they feel when they are meditating and then after the practice. To describe how they felt during meditation students most commonly used words such as happy, calm, great and relaxed. These were overwhelming across all focus groups.

Some students added that they felt free, focused, safe, light and de-stressed, with one student describing, *'I feel all of the anger in my head going out'* (Sydney, School 2). Some students described feeling sleepy, restless or close to lost loved ones. For others they felt it *'depends what mood you're in...'* (Lismore, School 6, Group D) – sometimes feeling relaxed and sometimes feeling restless and bored.

In every focus group a substantial number of students voiced the connection to God they felt through the practice using words or phrases such as *'I feel'* respectful, close to God, like I'm talking to God, like *'I just drifted away in Heaven'* (Sydney, School 1) or *'like God is just wrapping his arms around me'* (Sydney, School 2).

For one of the students who really did not like the practice, they described, *'Most of the time I don't really bother but I feel angry when I do it'* (Lismore, School 5, Group B).

Feelings After Meditating

To describe their feelings after meditating students used many of the same words or sentiments as they described during meditation – happy, calm, peaceful and relaxed. In addition, many students used different ways to describe feeling refreshed, such as *'I feel like I just got out of the ocean on a hot day'* (Lismore, School 1). Most students also articulated the way it helped them to feel focused, and ready to learn or ready for the day. Some also added feelings that link to relational benefits, including caring, forgiving, patient, controlled and solved.

Some students described some less positive feelings, mainly feeling more tired or feeling that they do not want to speak aloud. Again though, they pointed to the inherent tension of meditation with some students who described feeling sleepy indicated it was a *'good tired'* connected to a feeling of being calm but focused that could help them concentrate on their work.

Changes Connected to Christian Meditation

It is evident from the students' comments above that Christian Meditation is a very subjective and personal experience. Perhaps because of this, teachers felt it was difficult to reliably say whether Christian Meditation had brought about any changes in the students. The students were asked for their thoughts on whether they had changed through the practice. There was discussion about practical improvements the students had made in relation to meditation directly, such as being able to sit still for longer, remain focused for longer during the practice and the increase in the length of time they spent meditating as a class. This evolved into students sharing their thoughts on how engaging in the practice over time may have changed them:

Physically no but mentally yes. (Sydney, School 3, Group A)

I've become a lot more patient with things...[with] myself and taking time to do other things. (Lismore, School 1)

I think because it made me a better kid. (Lismore, School 2)

It's been really hard for me to concentrate and focus on what we were going to... so it really helped me focus. (Sydney, School 5)

I feel safer in a sense and all my worries have left. (Lismore, School 4)

A few students mentioned taking the technique, including the mantra Maranatha to situations at home, such as using it when trying to go to sleep.

Some students mentioned that practicing Christian Meditation had enhanced their connection to God:

I think I've become more responsible after meditating and respectful of God. (Lismore, School 1)

I think that God has just taken over my mind, just focus on this, on Christian Meditation, to be more closer to God. (Sydney, School 2)

It changes me in a way that my relationship with God is much stronger. (Sydney, School 3, Group B)

However, other students were a little less sure about any changes arising from Christian Meditation, or indicated that any benefits were only temporary:

Well you do feel like a new person after it, but then once you go back to bed you don't feel like you're a new person anymore. (Lismore, School 6, Group A)

And, in line with the few students throughout who did not like Christian Meditation, some felt they had not changed 'at all' (Lismore, School 5, Group B), 'no effect...' (Lismore, School 6, Group C).

Relational Benefits

The students were then asked to consider whether they felt Christian Meditation had changed the way they act towards other people. Such notions have been pointed to so far; particularly as an extension from the changes they felt within themselves – feeling more calm, patient and relaxed. Having already mentioned changes in their relationship with God, most of their thoughts here related to improvements in dealing with fights or difficult situations with others, particularly friends and peers:

Well I wasn't always at this school but I was at my other school up in Queensland and we never did meditating and so if anyone was upset or something it would stay for the whole day until they went home... but like here, if someone's upset, after meditation's over they're not upset anymore. (Lismore, School 3)

I think it brings the class together. (Lismore, School 3)

I think that when you do Christian Meditation with people, since they've done it for the same amount of time, they've done the same thing as you it kind of makes everyone... it's like a puzzle – like they all go together. t's a lot easier to talk to everyone. (Sydney, School 4)

As mentioned above, some students described using Christian Meditation techniques when in other situations, such as at home, something they perceived helped relationships with parents and siblings:

I do Christian Meditation at home and when I'm angry at people I usually do it in my room... And then I come back and say "sorry." (Lismore, School 1)

Some students attributed changes in their relationships with others to their increased connection to God and Christian values:

I think it's made me feel closer to God so I've been kind of nicer. (Lismore, School 6, Group D)

There were a number of students who did not feel Christian Meditation affected their relationships with other people, particularly those students who did not like Christian Meditation. However, another student explained:

Not necessarily because it's ways to make you calm yourself and with God, not with people around you. (Sydney, School 3, Group A)

Although it was evident that the question was causing some students to consider a potential connection:

Sometimes I guess... it sort of does because you're calm and relaxed. (Lismore, School 5, Group A)

Yeah, I guess so because you feel more patient with your friends. (Lismore, School 6, Group B)

Last of all, one student described that students who didn't want to do Christian Meditation might feel angry or resentful about the practice and this could negatively affect their relationships:

Not me but other people this could be possible – if like someone might not like meditation and then they have to do it and then they get angry...and like aggro and like full of energy...(Lismore, School 3)

Changes in How You Feel About Yourself

Although students readily identified changes *in* themselves brought about by Christian Meditation, they found it difficult to answer whether Christian Meditation brought about changes in the way they *felt* about themselves. There was just one tentative response:

I feel like I've been encouraging myself like more because after meditation... I'm not sure but after I did meditation, I feel like my mind's clear and I forget all the negative things about myself and just focus on the positive things. (Sydney, School 5)

However, in response to how the practice had changed them generally, a couple of students did describe:

It changes how I feel about myself. I am much more cared for. (Sydney, School3, Group B)

Just after lunch or recess I don't have the courage to say sorry. {Meditation} makes me feel relaxed and in the zone and it makes me feel like more confident about myself. (Sydney, School 1)

Indeed, it was evident in their responses to earlier questions that some students did experience changes that might influence how they feel about themselves, such as increased patience and reduced worries.

It was also evident that the students challenged themselves through the practice of Christian Meditation, leading to deeper learnings about themselves and their abilities:

Like all this happened on the yard and then...it can be really hard to concentrate sometimes, so you're just like, "I give up." So you've just got to like have your best go. (Lismore, School 3)

Christian Meditation has helped me be more with God and Jesus because they've helped me with more things while I needed help

so...I could complete this thing and that thing and I can do this and that. (Sydney, School 2)

Overall, it is evident that students felt fairly conversant in the ways Christian Meditation had changed them. They could extend connections between changes in how they felt during or following the practice to improved relationships with others, although they found it a little more difficult to directly articulate how the practice had influenced how they feel about themselves.

Christian Meditation and Prayer

Although the teachers raised uncertainty about whether the students connected Christian Meditation to prayer, it is evident in the responses so far that many of them did. When asked directly whether it had changed the way they thought about prayer, there were some mixed responses.

Some students preferred Christian Meditation to 'normal' prayers. The personal and private aspect seemed to be particularly valued:

Because it's like you're not sitting with anybody else because some children want to just be by themselves with God. (Sydney, School 1)

Before we started doing Christian Meditation, I would think it's not a prayer but it's definitely a prayer even though you don't speak out loud and people can't hear you. (Sydney, School 3, Group A)

There's many different types of prayer but I never knew there was really like this Christian Meditation because normally you'd go to church and you would say it as a community but with Christian Meditation you get just to spend some time with God and it's just between you and God. (Sydney, School 3, Group B)

And it's also good to do in meditation instead of prayer because sometimes kids don't want to say things out loud because they think other kids might judge them. (Lismore, School 4)

Linked to this last comment, one student seemed to indicate that because everyone was doing it together there was less of a stigma about being seen to pray:

When they came up with the idea of doing Christian Meditation at our school, maybe some students would have felt good because then they got a time to actually pray and no-one can judge you because

they have to do it as well and you got a time to do it. (Lismore, School 3)

Occasionally the fact that Christian Meditation was not about 'asking' was valued:

I like Christian Meditation because when we do prayer I sometimes feel greedy because, you know, like you ask for all these things but in Christian Meditation you just like ...You just thank him. (Lismore, School 1)

Some students though seemed to just accept Christian Meditation as a form of prayer and so found it difficult to articulate why:

P It's a prayer.

I Okay, why is it a form of prayer or how?

...

P It's... I can't answer that. (Sydney, School 3, Group A)

Other were not sure if they did see it as a form of prayer:

I think it's, yeah, just like Christian Meditation relaxing time; I don't really think of it as a prayer. (Sydney, School 4)

Well I guess it's kind of like a prayer, but like our teacher says some people in like the class have different beliefs as well so it can be for any like belief. (Lismore, School4)

In response to this question about prayer, quite a number of students again mentioned using it to help them with sleeping or falling asleep more quickly. The connection here wasn't entirely clear but perhaps could be interpreted as finding it to be a prayer without a defined end, something they could use during the transition to sleep to find a relaxing but reverent space.

Overall, as with some of the earlier questions, it seemed that through the process of the focus group the students were given the opportunity to think more deeply about Christian Meditation. In general, across the group discussions, it seems that the students did connect Christian Meditation to prayer, and that engaging in the practice had influenced how they conceived of prayer – learning that prayer can encompass spending time with God, rather than necessarily speaking directly to God.

Connection to God

By this point in the focus group then, many students had already described how

Christian Meditation had enhanced or strengthened their connection to God. Therefore, when students were asked this directly many of the students strongly agreed. Some students pointed to the meaning of the word Maranatha and offered this by way of explanation for why they felt closer to God through the practice. Other students tried their best to convey their experiences in a more personal way:

I used to not really believe in God as much as other people did but now that we do Christian Meditation I've felt like he's around me now and I've come closer. (Lismore, School 1)

...you can feel that he's talking to you, you can just feel it in your heart. (Sydney, School 5)

During Christian Meditation sessions I go closer and closer to God and I can feel him around me. (Lismore, School 1)

Some students went beyond this to reflect upon why they felt closer to God through the practice:

I used to think that you just had to believe in God, it was like an order but now it's like when you do Christian Meditation, it's not an order and it just happens. No-one's making you do it...(Lismore, School 4)

When I first started doing meditation, all I thought about God was that he was just someone that we used to talk to through prayer, but then when we started doing it, I started to realise that he was more important because if we were quiet and listened hard enough, we could hear what he was saying to us. (Lismore, School 1)

It changes my understanding of God because now I know that there's so many ways to communicate with God... (Sydney, School 3, Group B)

One student seemed to like the gentle way by which the practice encouraged a connection to God:

It's not like an extremist view of that religion. (Lismore, School 4)

It is important to note though that there were a significant number of students who did not feel the practice had brought them closer to God. This encompassed students who did view the practice favourably, but also those who felt more strongly about the relaxation or mindfulness benefits of the practice and the way it helped them to feel focused and ready to learn.

Thinking About the Catholic Church

The way in which Christian Meditation might influence how students feel about the Catholic Church was one of the questions teachers found most difficult to answer. They perceived that the students would think of the church as a physical building not so much as a community. When the students were asked whether they felt Christian Meditation had influenced their relationship with the Catholic Church, their responses mostly supported the teacher's views that they conceived of the church as a physical place:

It does because in church we have a silent moment and in meditation we have a silent moment and it kind of makes me feel like when I'm in church. (Sydney, School 5)

Most students answered the question with a clear, 'No,' and a few reiterated the teachers' beliefs that it was something they hadn't really considered, 'That's a hard question' (Sydney, School 5).

Some students did seem to think about the Catholic Church more broadly though, again linking to meditation as a more personal and private conduit to God:

I feel like I know more about religion because I do meditation. (Sydney, School 1)

When I was doing Christian Meditation, I pictured a picture of Jesus in my mind and then decided to think about it more. (Sydney, School 2)

Overall, while it has been evident from the outset that many students felt Christian Meditation had enhanced their connection to God. By and large though, it wasn't clear whether this extended to the Catholic Church directly.

Final Thoughts

At the end of the focus groups, the students were asked if there was anything else that hadn't been covered that they felt they would like others to know about Christian Meditation. The students offered a range of comments to encourage others:

That it's not weird and it's not just boring. It relaxes you. (Lismore, School 6, Group D)

That meditation is very important for those who face difficulties in their everyday life. (Sydney, School 1)

It's worth doing even if you're not Catholic; it's worth to be able to relax. And to tell the teachers that they should do it with their class. (Sydney, School 3, Group A)

Christian Meditation is one of the best ways to keep your relationship with God strong. (Sydney, School 3, Group B)

Mainly they reiterated the key points about the positive benefits they felt it brought about in terms of a focused, settled classroom, feeling more calm and patient within themselves, improving their connection with God and the privacy of the practice.

Some students chose to offer advice to other students or schools about to start the practice:

When everybody's talking or someone's fiddling, just try and block them out as much as you can and focus on talking to God. (Lismore, School 1)

It's a different prayer to all the others. If you don't like doing any prayers [you might like it] because it's like relaxing and you don't have to talk to anyone. (Lismore, School 2)

Well I would say to them it's not the easiest thing to do but if you try hard you will get it. (Lismore, School 2)

The students' advice included encouraging others to realise that it is a technique they can take to other parts of their life when they feel stressed or tense, and can share the practice with their families:

And also to add that you can do it out of school...(Sydney, School 3, Group A)

I want to encourage people to do meditation at home because we, in Year 5, we do bring a meditation bag home so we can do it with our family and it brings... like because sometimes families have fights, mum and dads separate or something like that and it brings your family closer to each other so I want to encourage people to do meditation at home. (Sydney, School 1)

Some students offered some deeper final comments, some of which had seemed to have arisen through the reflective discussion process within the focus group:

I think that Christian Meditation has helped me find my way to speak to God through my heart and soul and find my true way of working because it's helped me relax. (Lismore, School 1)

It helps people to understand that they're not alone; they've got God to talk to. (Lismore, School 4)

It's one-on-one time with God, so if you're doing it don't think of it as a chore, think of it as a privilege to do Christian Meditation because it's five minutes out of your day that you get to spend with God. (Lismore, School 6, Group B)

I just feel like life's always a rush and it's good to be able to spend that time with God and not think about the world around me. (Lismore, School 6, Group B)

This also led to some comments that drew out further insight about the Christian Meditation-Catholic Church connection discussed previously. It seemed that some students advocated the connection to spirituality over focusing specifically on the Catholic religion, whilst others felt the Catholic connection should be strengthened:

Some people think it's all about God and Jesus when it's like not... a little bit of it is but not all of it and that's why people don't do it... because some people aren't Catholic and don't believe in God; it's more about like relaxing and a little bit of connecting to God... (Lismore, School 5, Group A)

To explain the difference between normal meditation and Christian Meditation because all of us know there's a big difference because you're not only just relaxing your mind, you're coming closer to God and then your –you're connecting with the Christian community. (Sydney, School 2)

There's more than one type of meditation...in public schools that really meditate as well...But they don't do it in God's name; they just do it for the sake of relaxing the students after lunch. (Sydney, School 3, Group A)

Whilst overall there was overwhelming support for Christian Meditation, one of the few who didn't like the practice wished to ensure his views were heard and thus reiterated these as his 'take home' message for the researchers:

Some people would agree with me, some people don't. I think we should just leave Christian Meditation and get on with our learning and... (Sydney, School 3, Group A)

Overall, some subtle tensions between notions of spirituality and religiosity emerge across different students' views and experiences of practising Christian Meditation.

Discussion of Student Focus Group Data

The data from the student focus groups offer powerful and vivid insight into students' experiences and beliefs about Christian Meditation that enrich the findings from the teacher interviews and offer insight in areas where they felt a level of uncertainty. Echoing other studies on Christian Meditation in schools (Campion & Rocco, 2009; de Souza et al., 2014; de Souza & Kehoe, 2014; Keating 2013), almost all students described enjoying the practice and felt it benefited them positively. To add to this existing body of literature, several key themes stand out from the findings above that warrant further discussion here. The most substantial of these is closer consideration of students' spiritual experiences through Christian Meditation, and what this signals in relation to tensions between religiosity and spirituality. Additional themes to touch briefly upon are the relational influence of the practice and the implications of on-going practice for students who strongly dislike it.

Christian Meditation is promoted as offering individuals a direct experience of God (Keating, 2013), and providing an opportunity to simply sit in God's presence, through the stillness and silence of body and mind (Catholic Education Diocese of Townsville, n.d.). While many students continued to struggle with remaining still and silent, the concept of 'being' with God resonated strongly with many of the students' descriptions of their Christian Meditation. This was something many students were quite forthcoming about, even from the outset of the focus groups. Indeed, it was evident from the findings that many students are having significant spiritual experiences through Christian Meditation. What most students particularly value about Christian Meditation, as reiterated several times, is the privacy and personal nature of the practice, something some felt more attracted to than 'normal' prayers. They also pointed towards a sense of agency and freedom in building their connection with God and seemed to value the non-prescriptive process offered through Christian Meditation.

In addition to the students who described an enhanced connection to God, there was a significant group of students who enjoyed and even advocated for the practice, but who felt it might be better to de-emphasise the religious aspect. These students may have been non-Catholic students, although they often framed their views in terms of inclusivity for other students in the class, or encouraging reluctant peers. This group of students seemed to preface the relaxation, centring and concentration benefits – essentially the mindfulness benefits – of the practice over the religious connections. Mindfulness, understood as the focusing of one's attention on the emotions, sensations and thoughts of the present moment, is considered to be a spiritual, but not explicitly religious, practice (Trousedale, 2014).

Of course, mindfulness can have religious dimensions, such as for the students who reported strong connections to God through Christian Meditation. Therefore, overall, it seems evident from the data that Christian Meditation was enhancing the *spirituality* of most of the students, although not always their religiosity.

The implication of this depends upon the aims of the Christian Meditation program in Catholic schools. If the aim is to increase the *religiosity* of the students and their connection to the Catholic Church, then it would seem more needs to be explored around this. If the aim is to help the students experience stillness so as to foster their *spirituality*, then it would seem the practice has the potential to achieve its objective for most students. It appears from the data above that by locating the practice of Christian Meditation as part of the religious practice in Catholic schools, some students readily reflected beyond the relaxation factor to make connections to God, reverence and spirituality. For other students, this religious connection was perhaps limiting their understanding of spirituality to a religious context, creating confusion over the benefits they were enjoying or, for others, whether they might wish to engage in the practice at all.

This tension between the development of spirituality and religiosity echoes current academic discourse (Bosacki & Ota, 2000; Boynton, 2011; Holder, Coleman, & Wallace, 2010; King & Boyatzis, 2004; Mercer, 2006). In a sense, Christian Meditation is potentially well positioned to bridge this tension, because it offers the privacy and freedom to engage on a religious level, or instead to enjoy the non-prescriptive spiritual experience that emerges in/through the stillness. The challenge for Catholic schools is how best to support different students in these parallel aims – that is not to dilute the religious significance for those students who experience this aspect, and not to devalue the stillness and/or mindfulness benefits that may provide the seeds of spiritual growth for others. However, these two experiences need not be considered to be entirely separate, since the findings indicate that while Christian Meditation enhances the connection to God for many students, it is the personal, private and non-prescriptive nature of this connection that is particularly valued. At the same time, through centring and calming themselves the students described relational benefits that resonate with being a good and conscious Christian (for example, through how they act towards others). Therefore, even for students who at present may not engage with the religious aspects of the experience, it may be that without forcing the issue, “the development of faith is made possible” (Catholic Education Diocese of Townsville, n.d.), offering students the opportunity to find their own pathway to their faith.

These ideas resonate with recent scholarship exploring children's spirituality and religiosity. The two concepts have often been used inter-changeably, but growing interest in spirituality, particularly as an integral component of wellbeing, has sparked wider scholarship seeking to make sense of how best to distinguish between the two (Fisher, 2007; Gearon, 2001; Hyde, Ota, & Yust, 2012; Mason, Singleton, & Webber, 2007). In Büssing et al.'s (2010) study of German adolescents, the teenagers related their spirituality most strongly to 'conscious interactions,' and least of all to prayer, trust in God or 'transcendence conviction.' Therefore, understandings of spirituality have moved beyond the domain of organised religion or connection with a God (Bosacki & Ota, 2000; Boynton, 2011; Holder et al., 2010; King & Boyatzis, 2004; Mercer, 2006). For instance, Ubani and Tirri (2006) note that "religion is usually defined as the organizational, the ritual and the ideological. The spiritual then refers to the personal, the affective, the experiential and the thoughtful" (p.358).

While there may be differences between spirituality and religiosity, there are calls within the literature not to over-emphasise a dichotomy between the two (King & Boyatzis, 2004). Certainly, the findings from this study point to areas of overlap for some, although perhaps not all, students. Despite hesitancy over generating a dichotomy, it may be a fruitful way forward to focus upon nurturing students' *spirituality* rather than specifically student religiosity when considering the potential of Christian Meditation in schools. This resonates with ideas raised in the literature regarding a mismatch between how spirituality is presented to and experienced by young people (Bosacki & Ota, 2000; Büssing et al., 2010; Engebretson, 2006; King & Boyatzis, 2004; Ubani & Tirri, 2006) and the emergent view that by confining spiritual development solely to religious education and the routines of religious practice, children can become disengaged.

In the discussion of the teacher data it was signaled that some teachers had been advised when undertaking their training for Christian Meditation not to ask students about their experiences of the practice. However, the process of involving children in such discussion within the focus groups undertaken as part of this study indicate there may be considerable benefit in engaging the students in such discussion. Having practiced Christian Meditation for some time, the students seemed to benefit from discussing their experiences in an open and non-prescriptive way, which led them to reflect upon some of the internal and external changes they perceived were occurring, and to consider new connections. This was particularly evident in the questions about prayer. While some students readily connected

Christian Meditation with prayer, it was clear that for other students such a connection was new, but something they were open to considering further. In other words, the opportunity for discussion about what they were experiencing in Christian Meditation gently encouraged and 'held' their evolving understandings so that they were able to make some important connections in their own words. This was evident in statements such as, *"more about like relaxing and a little bit of connecting to God."* Embedded in such discussion is an invitation/opportunity to help children make sense of the interplay between their experiences during Christian Meditation and their religious faith.

In this way, helping students to engage with notions of spirituality as well as religiosity (in the context of Catholic education) might open up further potential for strengthening the practice of Christian Meditation, particularly for students who feel a level of uncertainty about it, as well as enhancing the spiritual experiences many already enjoy. The connection to the Catholic Church could also be explored further through open class discussion by encouraging students to consider what the 'Church' is. It was evident that there were a few students who did conceive of the Church beyond a physical building, and these students might help initiate wider thinking amongst their peers. However, broaching spirituality and the Church in this way requires care. Following research exploring teenage boys' experiences of the 'sacred Other', Engebretson (2006) cautions, "We need to support spiritual experience without destroying it by too much discussion" (p.336). Hence, research of the nature we are currently undertaking requires a delicate balance.

Nevertheless, the benefits of discussion do seem apparent in the findings regarding relationships. Many students readily expanded their thinking to connect the changes they felt within themselves to inter-personal relational benefits. This was perhaps an area of discussion that may have been more comfortable or accessible for students, particularly those who felt less certain about discussing the religious or spiritual aspects. It was particularly evident that break times were periods of considerable social intensity for students. Therefore, the potential relational benefits of the practice could be significant for schools, in terms of time, behaviour and particularly student wellbeing.

Beyond these more 'practical' benefits, relational benefits also connect to spirituality. The most prominent conceptual approach to emerge from recent research into children's spirituality is to situate spirituality within a relational dimension (De Souza & Hyde, 2007; Flanagan, Loveall, & Carter, 2012; Moriarty, 2011; Sewell, 2009). This stems from Hay and Nye's (1998) notion of 'relational

consciousness' and Fisher's (2006) model of spiritual wellbeing, which encompasses the quality of relationships that young people "have with self, others, nature and/or with God" (p.347). Therefore, researchers investigating children's spirituality tend to define spirituality in terms of belonging and connectedness, and "a sense of meaning, purpose and contribution that is embedded in relationships" (Flanagan et al., 2012, p. 7). These are useful ideas in considering what 'nurturing student spirituality' might involve.

It seems important to flag that for the few students who disliked Christian Meditation, the practice could have a negative impact upon their relationships. One student hypothetically described the sense of frustration that a student could be left with through being forced to practice Christian Meditation – presumably through ruminating and focusing on their annoyance during the meditation period. Another student personally indicated the negative impact his inability to engage in the practice was having upon his relationship with his teacher – at least during meditation times. These students (and their parents) might benefit from the kind of 'meaning making' discussion flagged above. Indeed, by the end of the focus groups, even the one student who was most vehemently against the practice, had come to frame his ideas in less confrontational terms, *"Some people would agree with me, some people don't..."*.

Overall then, the student findings offer a rich insight into the students' experiences and perceptions of the practice of Christian Meditation. While the practice offers the potential to enhance students' spirituality, including bridging the dichotomy between spirituality and religiosity, it may not be achieving this at the present time for all students. This may be due to a number of factors including the 'uneven' way in which Christian Meditation is being implemented in some of the participating schools. Nevertheless, the majority of the students enjoy the practice and readily identify benefits in terms of improving relationships, concentration, relaxation and connection to God. The challenge now for the schools in this study is to find a way to affirm, support and nurture the spiritual development of all students through the practice, including those who find the practice challenging or who have not had the opportunity to engage at all.

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Appendix A: Schedule for Teacher Interviews

The following provides an outline for the 30-minute (approx.) semi-structured interviews with Year 4 teachers participating in the Christian Meditation in Schools research project.

Suggested introductory comments:

Thank you for meeting with me/us today. As you know, we are doing some research about the impact, over time, of Christian Meditation on the religious and spiritual development of children. Specifically, this research is interested in whether and how Christian Meditation shapes children's understanding of, and relationship with God, with themselves, with others and with the Catholic Church. We are also interested in hearing about how teachers experience Christian Meditation and whether they perceive this influences how students engage with it. Finally, we're wanting to learn from you about any issues you've encountered in implementing Christian Meditation in your classrooms so that others can learn from your experience.

So, there are three parts to our conversation today:

1. Your perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on the children
2. Your perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on you
3. The issues involved in implementing Christian Meditation in schools/classrooms
- 4.

1. Your perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on the children

(Can you tell me a little about how you perceive children's experience of Christian Meditation?)

- a) How did the children respond when you first introduced the idea of Christian Meditation? How do you think they were feeling about it? What did they ask about? What did they do?
- b) How do the children respond to Christian Meditation now that you've been doing it a while? What have you noticed about the way they approach it? Has anything changed?
- c) What do you think the children like the most about Christian Meditation?
- d) What do you think they find difficult?
- e) Do you think Christian Meditation changes the way students think about prayer?

- f) Do you think Christian Meditation changes the way the children act towards / think about /feel about other people? If so, how? [Prompt: what have you noticed about this]
- g) Do you think Christian Meditation changes the way students act towards / think about /feel about/ themselves? If so, how? [Prompt: what have you noticed about this]
- h) Do you think Christian Meditation changes the way students act towards / think about /feel about/ God? If so, how? [Prompt: what have you noticed about this]
- i) Do you think Christian Meditation changes the way students act towards / think about /feel about/ the Catholic Church? If so, how? [Prompt: what have you noticed about this]
- j)

2. Your perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on you

(Can you tell me a little about your own experience of Christian Meditation?)

- a) How did you react when first introduced to the idea of doing Christian Meditation with your class?
- b) Now that you've been doing it a while how do you feel about meditating with the children?
- c) Has anything changed for you personally as a result of practising Christian Meditation with your children?
- d) Has Christian Meditation changed the way you understand or relate to others? If so, how?
- e) Has Christian Meditation changed the way you understand or relate to yourself? If so, how?
- f) Has Christian Meditation changed the way you understand or relate God? If so, how?
- g) Has Christian Meditation changed the way you understand or relate to the Catholic Church? If so, how?
- h) Has Christian Meditation changed the way you understand prayer? If so, how?
- i) What do you like most about practising Christian Meditation?
- j) What do you find most difficult or challenging? (on a personal level)
- k) Do you think the way you engage with Christian Meditation influences how the children in your class approach or experience it?
- l)

3. Issues involved in implementing Christian Meditation in schools/classrooms

(Can you tell me a little about your approach to implementing Christian Meditation in your classroom?)

- a) What word does your class use when meditating?
- b) How long does your class meditate for?
- c) How frequently does your class meditate?
- d) Have parents or other teachers asked any questions or provided any feedback about implementing Christian Meditation in your class?
- e) What do you think are the barriers to implementing effective and consistent practice of Christian Meditation in primary classrooms?
- f) What do you think has helped most in getting Christian Meditation under way in your class/school?
- g) What advice would you give to other teachers /principals who wish to implement Christian Meditation in their classrooms/schools?
- h) What do you think the CEO/CSO needs to know about the use of Christian Meditation in their schools?

Appendix B: Student Focus Group Content

Introduction:

Introduce self: My name is and I work at a university...

I've been told that you are doing Christian Meditation in your class. I'm here to talk about how you are finding it. I'm visiting ten other schools too, and I'm going to write a report about what all the students tell me so that the people who run the schools can know how to teach Christian Meditation to other children.

I've got a recorder here to help me remember what we all say (show the recorder). Only myself and one other lady will listen to the recording and she will write down what we say so that I can write report on it. When I write the report I won't use anyone's name or any school's name. Is it OK if I turn the recorder on?

To get us underway I want you to pretend that I've never heard about Christian Meditation and I want to learn about it.

1. Can you tell me what you do when you meditate? Prompts:
 - Who'd like to have a go first?
 - Do you sit down or lay down?
 - Do you close your eyes?
 - Do you use a gong? Or music? Candles? Anything else?
 - How often do you do it?
 - What time of day do you do it?
2. Can you remember how you felt or what you were thinking when you first started Christian Meditation at school?
3. What have you enjoyed/liked most about Christian Meditation?
 - a. What does it provide that you especially like? (probe: Stillness/silence)
4. What have you not liked/ found difficult about doing Christian Meditation?

I've got a little activity to do now. On the piece of paper you've got two statements:

I want you to think for a little bit about the way you might finish these statements:

(put 4 and 5 on A4 paper)

5. While I am meditating I feel
6. When I am finished meditating I feel....?

Share with person next to you

Share with big group what you drew....

7. Do you feel you have changed at all since doing Christian Meditation? If so, how?
8. Does Christian Meditation change the way you act towards other people? If so, how?
9. Does Christian Meditation change the way you feel about yourself? If so, how?
10. Does Christian Meditation change the way you think about prayer?
11. Does Christian Meditation help you to feel closer to God? Prompt: (If "yes": Can you tell me a little bit about why or how it helps you to feel closer?)
12. Does Christian Meditation change the way you feel about the Catholic Church? If so, how?
13. After all the things we've talked about today, what is the most important thing that you would like others to know about Christian Meditation?

Appendix C: E-mail to Principals 2015

Dear [Principal's first name]

I am writing in relation to your school's involvement in the Christian Meditation research project conducted by the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University in partnership with the CSO, Lismore and the CEO, Sydney.

You might recall that last year we conducted an online survey with the Year 4 students who have been doing Christian Meditation in their classes, and we also interviewed the Year 4 teacher in Term 4 last year.

We would now like to invite your **Year 5** teacher, [teacher's name] to take part in separate 30 minute interviews and also to invite your participating **Year 5 students** to take part in 40 minute focus groups (with 6-8 students in each group).

We are hoping to visit your school to conduct this interview and focus groups between [dates]. We would like to talk with [teacher's name] about his/her experience of implementing Christian Meditation with his/her class. Once we have your permission to do so, we will email [teacher's name] to invite him/her to participate in the interview and to assist with arranging the student focus groups.

I would be grateful if you could let Sue Moffat know a date that best suits your school for the researchers to conduct the interviews and focus groups. Sue will be in touch with you soon in relation to relief arrangements.

Thanks so much for your assistance with this. We are aware that this is a busy time of the year for schools and therefore very grateful for your support in this next important step.

We are learning a great deal about the impact of Christian Meditation which we will continue to make available to you as the project progresses.

Kind regards,

Anne

Professor Anne Graham
Director, Centre for Children & Young People
Southern Cross University
PO Box 157
Lismore NSW Australia

Appendix D: Email Invitation to Year 5 Teachers 2015

Dear [insert teacher's name]

We are writing to you in relation to your participation in the research on Christian Meditation in schools. Your assistance with this research is very much appreciated!

Last year, some of your students took part in an online survey about their experiences with Christian Meditation and their Year 4 teachers also participated in an interview.

So that we can continue to gain important insights into the religious and spiritual development of the children, this year we'd like to **interview you about your experience of implementing Christian Meditation with your Year 5 class** and also conduct **focus groups with children from your class**.

- **The interview** will be quite informal and take about 30 minutes. If you agree, we would like to learn about:
 - Your perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on the children
 - Your perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on you
 - The issues involved in implementing Christian Meditation in schools/classrooms
- **The focus groups with students** will involve 6-8 students in each group and will take about 40 minutes for each group.

All participation is voluntary and all information gathered from the interviews and focus groups is anonymous and confidential. Participants may withdraw from the interview or focus groups at any time without negative consequences. We will collate the information and write the findings in a report and publications, which you can access. No teachers' names, school names or students' names will be reported.

Our preferred period to undertake the interviews and focus groups is **between November 16 and December 4, 2015**. If you agree to take part in the interview and to assist in arranging the focus groups, please respond to this email and nominate a preferred date.

Your reply email will be considered confirmation of your consent to participate. However, we will need your help to facilitate the parental consent process for the children. *Once you have confirmed a date that suits for the focus groups to take place, we will send you a*

parental consent form that you will need to send home with each child in the week prior to the focus group.

Donnah Anderson from the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) will be in touch with you soon by phone to confirm that you have received this email invitation and to discuss any questions that you may have about the interview process.

Thank you again for your involvement in this important project.

Best wishes

Professor Anne Graham and Dr Donnah Anderson

Appendix E: Information Letter and Consent Form - Parents

Dear Parent

Student engagement with Christian Meditation

Your child's school has been implementing Christian Meditation in some of our classes as it gives students and teachers a short period of quiet time each day to sit in silence and focus on a prayer word or 'mantra'. Children in schools all over the world practise Christian Meditation and studies have found it improves their mental health and wellbeing.

Your child's school is participating in a new study that is looking at whether and how Christian Meditation helps with children's spiritual wellbeing over time. This research is being conducted by the Centre for Children & Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University, in conjunction with the Catholic Schools Office, Lismore and the Catholic Education Office, Sydney.

In 2014, Year 4 students took part in an online survey about their experiences of Christian Meditation. Now, in 2015, we would appreciate your consent for us to invite your son/daughter in Year 5 to participate in a focus group discussion on the same topic. If you agree, your child will be invited to join 6 to 8 other Year 5 students to talk with a researcher about their experiences of doing Christian Meditation at school. Each focus group will take about 30 minutes. The focus group asks the children what they think about doing meditation at school, their views on sitting still and being silent, and their views on whether this helps them live a Christian way of life.

Information gathered from the focus group will be private and confidential. If your child agrees to be part of the focus group, s/he may withdraw from it at any time.

The findings from the study will inform Catholic schools about whether Christian Meditation helps children's religious and spiritual development. No individual children, teachers, families or schools will be identified in any publication. All information will be stored securely at the University - in password-protected computer files, which only relevant CCYP staff will be able to access.

The ethical aspects and evaluation of this study have been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: ECN-14-133). If you have complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Ethics Complaints Officer by email: ethics@scu.edu.au. Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and you will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree for your child to participate in the study, please complete the attached consent form.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Anne Graham
Centre for Children & Young People
Southern Cross University
Tel: 02 66203613 **Email:** anne.graham@scu.edu.au

Consent Form for Christian Meditation Research

I have read and understood the attached information and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to my child's participation in this research, which I understand involves a focus group discussion with other students that will take approximately 30 minutes. I am also aware my child can withdraw from the study at any time.

I understand my child's privacy and confidentiality are ensured.

I know that the aim of the research project is to explore the impact of Christian Meditation on children and young people's spiritual development in the school context. I know that I can contact Donnah Anderson on 02 66 203802 during work hours with any queries that I have.

I understand that the project is funded by Catholic Schools Office, Lismore and the Catholic Education Office, Sydney.

Your child's name:.....

Your name:.....

Your signature:.....

Date:.....

Could you please ensure your child promptly returns this form to his/her teacher – thank you!

Appendix F: Information Letter and Consent Form - Students

Christian Meditation at school: Have your say!

Dear Year 5 student,

My name is Anne Graham and I am working with your school to do some research.

Your class is doing a type of prayer at school called 'Christian Meditation'. We want to know if you like doing Christian Meditation and whether you think it is helpful.

We are inviting you to take part in a group discussion with some other students in your class to hear your views. It will take about 30 minutes.

If you don't want to take part in the group, that is OK! Even if you say 'yes' now, you can change your mind later.

If you would like to take part in the group but think you might need someone to help you, then that is fine too. Just let your teacher know.

What you tell us will help people who run schools decide whether Christian Meditation is helpful for you and other students.

Only the group will know what you say. We will record the group's discussion so we can write a report about what you tell us. We will keep what you tell us safe. We will tell you and your teachers about the important things we find out from all the students, **but we will not use any names.**

If you have any questions please email me at: anne.graham@scu.edu.au

If you want to take part please fill out the form on the next page and give it to your teacher.

Yours sincerely,

Anne Graham
Centre for Children & Young People
Email: anne.graham@scu.edu.au

I'd like to have a say!

My name is and I would like to take part in the research that's finding out whether doing Christian Meditation at school helps me.

I agree to take part in a group discussion, which will take about 30 minutes.

I know that I can change my mind and stop at any time.

I know that only the researchers will know my answers and will not use my name.

I know that I can contact Anne Graham at: anne.graham@scu.edu.au if I have any questions.

Please sign your name here:

.....

Date:.....

Please give this page to your teacher when you have finished

Appendix G: Checklist for Teachers Recruiting Students for Focus Groups

Student Engagement in Christian Meditation Project

THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO ASSIST US WITH THIS IMPORTANT RESEARCH

If you have any questions at all about this process, please talk with your principal or call Donnah Anderson at the Centre for Children and Young People on (02) 6620 3802

Consent forms:

- 1) Please send a copy of the parental consent form home with each student in your class (see attached)
- 2) Once consent forms are returned to school, please distribute the letter of invitation to the students in your class whose parents have provided consent for their child to participate in the focus groups (see attached). Please make sure each child has read the invitation or, if they need help, please organise for their parents, yourself or teacher's assistant to read it to them.
- 3) Please collect the parents' and children's signed consent forms and give them to the researcher on the day of the focus groups at your school.

The Focus Groups:

On the day and time of the Focus groups we will ask you to please release the students who have given both parental and their own consent, from class for around 40 minutes.

Thanks!



Graham, A., Anderson, D. & Truscott, J. (2016). *Christian Meditation in Schools Interim Project Report: Teacher Interviews and Student Focus Groups 2015*. Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University: Lismore, NSW, Australia.