



Christian Meditation in Schools



Final Research Findings: Summary

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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.

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Background

There has been 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. 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.

Research Aim

To identify the impact, over time, of Christian Meditation on the religious and spiritual development of children in the context of Catholic education. The research also sought to investigate the impact on teachers facilitating the process.



Religious and spiritual development in this study was understood broadly, in line with contemporary notions of spirituality.

This was reflected in the framework of four overarching research questions guiding the study.

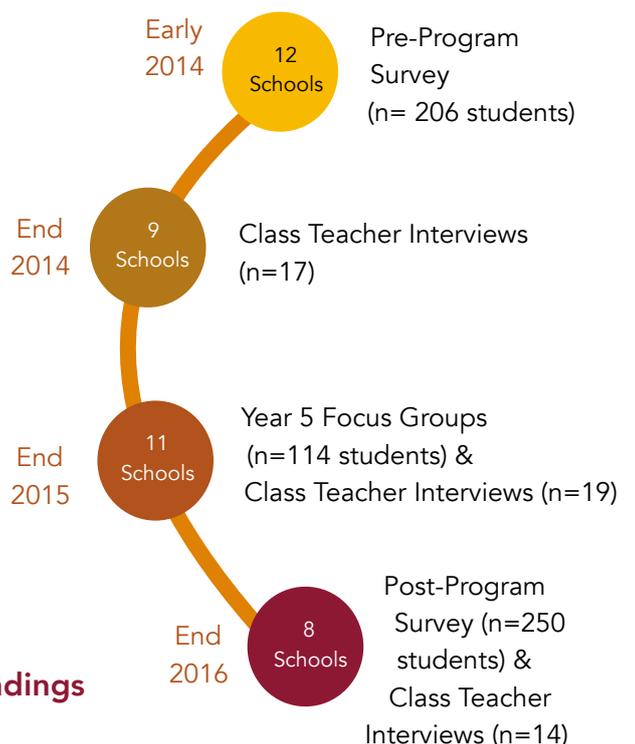
Research Questions

In what ways does Christian Meditation at school shape children's (and teachers') relationships with:



Method

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 across the two Dioceses. The study then followed a substantial proportion of these students until the end of Year 6 (December 2016). The research project was approved by Southern Cross University's human research ethics committee (ECN 14-133; ECN- 15-303).



This document provides a synthesis of the key findings and recommendations from the study.



Findings

Practising Christian Meditation at School

All of the teachers interviewed in all years of the study were very positive about Christian Meditation at school. They thought it offered immeasurable benefits for the students and they personally enjoyed the moments of stillness and peacefulness.

"I love it, absolutely love it. I feel the children get a lot out of it. I feel it's as important as doing one of our key learning areas..."
(Belinda, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

The post-program survey found mixed results regarding students' enjoyment of the practice. Some students found it very powerful, and insights from the focus groups suggest that most students feel Christian

Meditation is a beneficial experience, most of the time.

The majority of students particularly enjoy the opportunity to relax during the social and educational intensity of the school day:

"It's my own time to just get away from everything, all the fuss that's going on in this world."

(Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 2)

"There's no work involved, there's no thinking; you just sit and relax."

(Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 6B)

There was a small sub-group of students, identifiable both in the survey and the focus groups, who really disliked Christian Meditation and felt it did not offer them any benefits.

Remaining still, keeping their eyes closed and focusing on the mantra even for just a few minutes is not easy for students. Even after almost three years of practice, many students struggle at least some of the time with these aspects. However, most students found that with repeated practice remaining still and silent does get easier.

"I feel like it doesn't help me at all. I just feel like I am sitting doing nothing."
(Year 6 Girl, Sydney)

"When you do Christian Meditation at first it is really hard when you have never meditated before but after a while you will get used to it so you just try your best to stay still and you will gradually get better at it and find it a lot more easy to do."
(Year 6 Boy, Lismore)

Students' Relationships with God and the Catholic Church

The teachers were uncertain about the impact of Christian Meditation upon students' relationship with God. This was not something readily discussed in class and teachers were hesitant to postulate about this. Therefore, the students' views offered valuable insight.

It was found that experiencing Christian Meditation had expanded many students' understandings of prayer.

In addition, in the focus groups and at the end of the post-program survey, many students described profound experiences of listening, talking or revering being in God's presence.

*"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."
(Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 3A)*

*"[It's] like God is just wrapping his arms around me."
(Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 2)*

*"Christian Meditation is something all Catholic people should experience. Christian Meditation is one of the most empowering things a person can do to feel closer to God."
(Year 6 Boy, Sydney)*

*"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..."
(Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 4)*

However, some students, particularly in Lismore, perceived that the practice offered a more secular or inclusive experience of spirituality that was not limited to the Catholic faith.

*"Well I guess it's kind of like a prayer, but...it can be for any belief."
(Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore)*

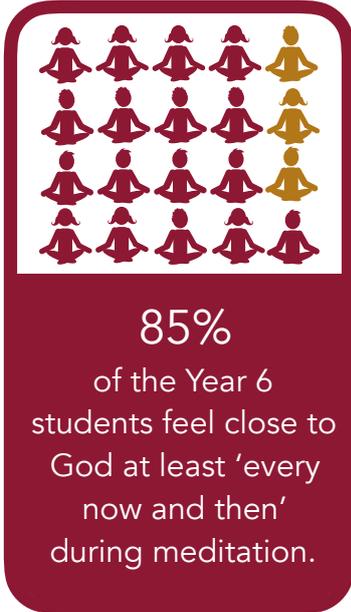
*"Some people think it's all about God and Jesus... a little bit of it is but not all of it and that's why people don't do it...it's more about like relaxing and a little bit of connecting to God..."
(Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 5A)*

The post-program survey responses were also largely positive for students' relationships with God, although there were distinguishable differences between the Dioceses.

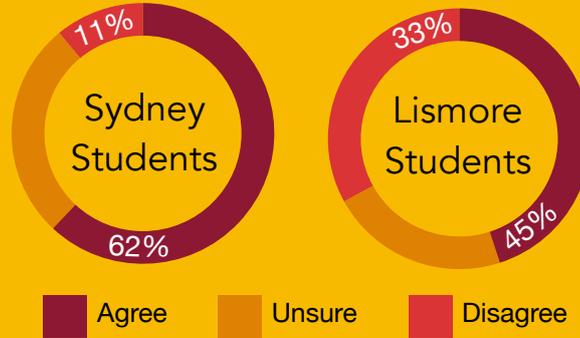


Students' relationships with God...

...during meditation.



...as a result of meditating regularly.



62% of the Sydney Year 6 students believe the practice has helped them feel closer to God.

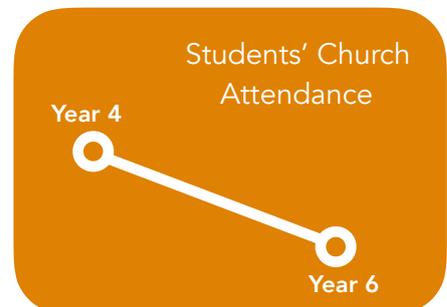
45% of the Lismore Year 6 students agree, although a similar proportion (33%) disagree.

In both Dioceses there were students who were unsure: 27% in Sydney; 22% in Lismore.

The percentage of students disagreeing in the Regional Diocese does not necessarily indicate that they did not find the practice personally or spiritually beneficial. Rather, other survey items supported the focus group data in indicating that students in this Diocese tended to preface the calming and centring benefits of the practice over its potential to specifically build their relationship with God.

As such, the potential of the practice seems fairly positive given that students were meditating for short periods of time in busy and often noisy schools. The above results might also be considered particularly positive given that the survey recorded a decrease in students' religious

behaviour. This was particularly evident in Sydney, where regular church attendance fell by half. Therefore, Christian Meditation may be a key tool by which young people can nurture and explore their relationship with God as they approach adolescence.



Lastly, it was apparent in the data that a small number of parents and students do not believe meditation has a Christian basis and see it as a school activity rather than a form of prayer practised by the local or wider Catholic community. This may be undermining some students' engagement with the practice.

"[Some parents are] convinced that it's not a Christian thing to do; meditation is not Christian, no matter how many times you try to explain..."
(Beth, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

"Personally I do not think Meditation is a part of the Christian belief...Our parish priest did not approve of the ways and strongly disapproved, and so do I. Maranatha means come Lord, but what Lord, the Devil, or Buddha?"
(Year 6 boy, Sydney)

Overall, the above findings suggest that Christian Meditation offers a valuable space for nurturing Catholic primary school students' relationships with God. No association was found between the practice and students' relationship with the Catholic Church.



Students' Personal and Social Relationships

In both the Year 4 and Year 6 surveys, most students perceived they have strong, positive relationships with themselves and others. In general though, the Year 6 students were unsure whether practising Christian Meditation would contribute to this.

The process of engaging in open-ended discussion about Christian Meditation during the Year 5 focus groups seemed to offer a valuable reflective experience for the students and helped them articulate some of the benefits for their personal and social relationships. In the student focus groups (as well as the teacher interviews), Christian Meditation was described as having a calming and centring effect on the vast majority of students. This offered immediate benefits for student wellbeing.

*"[Christian Meditation makes me] feel like I just got out of the ocean on a hot day."
(Year 5 Focus Group,
Lismore, School 1)*

*"I feel all of the anger in my head going out."
(Year 5 Focus Group,
Sydney, School 2)*

*"I really like doing Christian Meditation because it helps me relax when I am stressed or frustrated."
(Year 6 Boy, Sydney)*

Students and teachers also discussed how the calming effect of Christian Meditation can offer flow-on benefits for student peer relations and class cohesion. It was perceived to be particularly helpful after the social intensity of break times (recess and lunch).

*"The class atmosphere has changed...Me and the kids together. The whole team. ...we're all doing the same thing."
(Deborah, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)*

*"The peace and calmness...It takes all the drama away like what happened at lunch time. You can just calm down."
(Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 3A)*

*"After Christian Meditation they are very patient...in how they respond to each other or how they communicate with one another...[they] are more able to stop and listen."
(Margaret, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)*

Some students found that Christian Meditation helped them to concentrate on their school work. This benefit was mainly experienced immediately after meditating, but some students thought their ability to concentrate had improved more generally.

In line with all of the above benefits, then, teachers perceive that Christian Meditation is a valuable tool for students to help balance their wellbeing in the present and future.

However, there were some students who found it challenging not to think about difficult or sad experiences when they close their eyes to meditate.

"I am not sure if meditation helps me, I am always thinking about things that trouble me rather than peaceful and happy things."
(Year 6 Girl, Lismore)

"If you do Christian Meditation it reminds you of all the bad things in your life and you get really emotional."
(Year 6 Boy, Lismore)

In addition, some of the students who disliked or struggled with Christian Meditation described feeling 'forced' to do it. This may have been contributing to how they view and experience the practice, as well as having a possible negative impact on their wellbeing and / or relationships at school.

"Christian Meditation is only for those that have learnt how to sit still or want to learn to sit still, those who want to be closer to God and for those that want to escape their busy lives. None of these are me, therefore this must be the re-occurring reason for my dislike of Christian Meditation. Meditation is about being at peace with yourself so should be an option, not something forced upon you."
(Year 6 Boy, Lismore)

"[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...looks at me with this face."
(Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 5B)

Overall, these findings suggest Christian Meditation has short-term calming and centring effects on most students, with flow-on benefits for students' interactions with their peers and concentration on their school work. The research was not able to identify any conclusive long-term effects.



Teachers and Christian Meditation

The Year 4 and 5 teachers explained that it was not always possible for them to meditate alongside their students. This created a tension for them between the desire to role-model meditation and the need to supervise their class. This did not seem to be such an issue for the Year 6 teachers and many described meditating along with their class, perhaps because the students were more experienced or because the teachers had gained confidence in managing the practice.

"I feel... '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 I remember things a bit better..."
(Jacinta, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

Even if they are unable to meditate fully in the classroom context, the process of facilitating Christian Meditation at school seems to be beneficial for teachers' wellbeing, stress levels and interactions with their students. Many teachers also feel very appreciative of the associated opportunity Christian Meditation offers to develop their own faith during work time.

When teachers are inspired to practise Christian Meditation beyond school, they may experience added benefits in terms of wellbeing and a deepening of their faith.

"I've literally been growing with the kids on my own personal journey...in just that stillness, that quiet in my mind."
(Sandra, Year 4 Teacher, 2014).

"I've got an over-active mind [so] it's actually a really powerful thing to just manage stress..."
(Kylie, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

"I tend to go to that form of prayer now...from a personal level, it's changed my faith life."
(Sam, Year 6 Teacher, 2016)

Teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of Christian Meditation for themselves and their students. Facilitating the practice seemed to support their professional and personal wellbeing and strengthen their relationships with God and their students, even if they were not able to meditate fully.





Recommendations

Overall, the study found that Christian Meditation is a valuable initiative in schools, with most teachers and students reporting benefits in terms of their relationships with God, self and others. A number of key recommendations emerged from the study to help improve the practice of Christian Meditation in schools. These aim to assist schools to support students who have difficulty with the practice and to help maintain students' engagement with the practice over time. Please see the final full project report for further details related to these recommendations.

1. Trial a school-wide 'quiet time' each day to enable classes to practise Christian Meditation without distraction or to engage in an alternate quiet activity.
2. Encourage collegial discussion in school where teachers share positive and effective approaches to encouraging stillness during meditation, particularly for those students who find this a challenge.
3. Consider reframing or reviewing the 'target' number of minutes for Christian Meditation in a way that might help support students to remain positive and confident about the practice.
4. Invest in some special resources for each class that are only used at Christian Meditation time.
5. Develop some brief educational materials / discussion sheets targeted to different age groups to accompany the practice of Christian Meditation in schools.
6. Provide the opportunity for all teachers to attend the Christian Meditation in Schools training.

To view the suite of project reports, along with other short summaries prepared during the study, please visit: www.scu.edu.au/research-centres/centre-for-children-and-young-people/our-research/





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