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Smiling mind: research validates the benefit of meditation in school

ET staff

Does meditation have a place in education or is it all a bit ‘feel good, oom, tinkling bells... that sort of thing? A Google search on ‘meditation’ found 153,000,000 results and suggested in Australia any number of meditation classes, teachers, learn-to-meditate websites, Buddhist and Maraheshi schools, serious discussion on *The Conversation* website... and the rather strange Shibari suspended bondage meditation technique.

Addie Wootton, CEO of not-for-profit

Smiling Mind, which has a growing presence and following in Australian schools, acknowledges that to achieve its goal to have the mindfulness meditation program included in the Australian curriculum by 2020 would need quality research to justify its claim for time in the busy school day.

“Funded by the Victorian Government, we conducted a large randomised controlled trial over eight weeks last year to examine the benefits of teaching mindfulness meditation to students. Twelve Victorian schools took part –

seven inner metro, four outer metro and one regional school,” Wootton said. “In total 1853 students and 104 teachers participated.”

Deakin University, Insight SRC, Young and Well CRC and Smiling Mind reviewed the literature and developed the research methodology. Participants were allocated to one of two groups using a three-wave counter-balanced design. In the first wave, baseline data was collected from the control group and treatment group (Time 1).

These data were used to establish the



psychometric properties of the assessment tools and provide a baseline assessment of all students. In the second wave, data were collected from the treatment group (post-program) and the control group was measured again (Time 2).

The control group then participated in the program and thus became a second treatment group. In the third wave, post-program data was collected from both groups (Time 3).

The effect of the Smiling Mind Program was firstly examined across all participating students by comparing the Wave 1 and 2 results for the treatment group with the results reported by the comparison group. Students who participated in the intervention reported significantly better sleep and ability to cope with student misbehavior in their classrooms than students in the control group who did not receive the intervention.

To further explore the effects of the program, students were split using the median score on the psychological distress measure Kessler 10 (Kessler *et al.*, 2003). Students who reported lower emotional wellbeing before participating in the intervention were compared to the participants in the control group. Students with lower levels of wellbeing at the commencement of the program reported significantly better sleep quality, reduced negative wellbeing, enhanced positive wellbeing, enhanced ability to manage emotions, improvements in concentration, and reductions in bullying and classroom disruptions after completing the eight-week intervention.

Teachers completed a brief survey about their own wellbeing, the culture and climate in the school and their experiences of implementing the Smiling Mind program at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3. Teachers also completed this survey at Time 0, which was used as a baseline before they completed the training and undertook the five-week program to introduce them to their own personal mindfulness practice.

Data analysis followed with the results released in September this year.

Results

Significantly improved sleep

All students who participated in the Smiling Mind Education Program experienced significant improvements in sleep quality compared to the control group

Significant increase in student safety at school and decrease in classroom disruptions

Participation resulted in significant improvements in student reported safety at school as well as significant reductions in classroom disruptions

Students at-risk for emotional distress experienced the most benefit

Students with lower levels of wellbeing at the commencement of the program reported significantly better sleep quality, reduced psychological distress, enhanced positive wellbeing, enhanced ability to manage emotions,

Smiling Mind

Smiling Mind's Education Program of mindfulness meditation has lesson plans tailored to each age group across primary and secondary school levels. It provides schools with the skills and resources needed for an optimal learning environment. The program aims to create a generation of mindful students who are equipped with the essential skills needed to be resilient, resourceful and able to cope with the many challenges they face in today's fast-paced culture.

The programs are delivered through the Smiling Mind app. This approach makes the programs accessible, cost effective and scalable.

Mindfulness in the classroom

72 modules

249 sessions

7–9 years

16 modules

55 sessions

10–12 years

16 modules

55 sessions

13–15 years

20 modules

69 sessions

16–18 years

20 modules

70 sessions

There are several different Smiling Mind programs, developed by psychologists and based on mindfulness meditation techniques that are available to download free for people of all ages. In addition, Smiling Mind also offer schools a range of professional development workshops and training programs.

Email education@smilingmind.com.au

www.smilingmind.com.au

"Anecdotally, we had seen positive benefits from the meditation with teachers reporting that their classes settled down faster and concentrated better..."

improvements in concentration, improvements in student safety, reductions in bullying and improved classroom behaviour.

Tracy Allinson, Literacy Leader, at 800-students Lara Secondary College near Geelong, Vic, said that six teachers and 250 students participated in the study at her school. "I thought that it was great for students with issues like anxiety, trouble sleeping and concentration.

"Sessions after breaks and lunch helped the children to settle down and get on with their work."

Rosebud Secondary College at Rosebud on the Mornington Peninsula, 90 minutes by road from the Melbourne CBD also participated in the study and Assistant Principal Geoff Seletto has been impressed by the results. The school had been approached by Smiling Mind during 2014 and introduced mindfulness meditation at the start of 2015 so the opportunity to be one of the 12 schools in the study was welcome.

"Anecdotally, we had seen positive benefits

from the meditation with teachers reporting that their classes settled down faster and concentrated better. Of our 1150 students, 500 took part in the study.

"Though we thought that our students were benefitting from the program, when the data came through we knew for a fact that it was worthwhile.

"I have dropped in on classes where I knew that there were disruptive children and seen how a brief meditation helps them to settle down and be actively involved in the work."

Next year the school will expand the program to cover all of the 1150 students. And, with the support of the RE Ross Trust, will have funds to employ a dedicated teacher to implement the program for three years. The school is also busily fundraising to build a wellness pavilion where class groups, individual students and Southern Peninsula families will have a tranquil place to let their stresses go. To date the school has raised \$250,000 of the \$400,000 target.

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