

Teaching children to meditate

Stephen Benner explains how meditation is helping some New Zealand children to cope better with school.

Is it possible to make all kids smarter and happier than they are now?

Any teacher surveying the young faces of his or her class must often wonder why is it that certain students seem to understand the lessons more quickly and easily than the rest. All the children have two eyes, two ears and one brain – yet some young brains seem to work better than others.

Up until now, we have more or less accepted that the comprehension levels of a student are fixed. The accent in education has been on developing the quality of the information fed into those young brains, rather than developing the quality of the intelligence that is receiving that information.

Fair enough, because up until now there has been no reliable standard technology in the world of education for ‘upgrading the hardware’ within the cranium of each and every student. However, there is now a quiet revolution going on in a number of schools around the world that is challenging the notion of fixed intelligence and the inevitability of under-achievement.

This quiet revolution is being driven by the introduction of a simple, natural, mental technique utilised by all students and staff for a short period at the beginning and end of each school day. The technique is called Transcendental Meditation (TM for short), which has been available around the world in a standardised form for more than 50 years, although its origins go back to the ancient Vedic civilisation of India.

Since 1970, TM has been subjected to extensive scientific research; there is now a clear understanding of its effects both during the practice and as a result of the practice. During meditation,

refined levels of mental activity are experienced with the outcome being greater ‘inner wakefulness’ and enriched brain functioning. Of interest to educators is the fact that EEG studies show that whole-brain functioning is enlivened during TM practice and that different parts of the brain begin to work in a more synchronous and orderly fashion. Higher levels of brain integration are associated with greater moral reasoning, emotional stability and decreased anxiety. Simultaneously, the physiology experiences a profound level of deep rest, whereby accumulated stress and tension is naturally alleviated, leaving one refreshed, relaxed and revitalised.

Over 340 peer-reviewed studies carried out at universities around the world have found a wide range of practical benefits resulting from the practice of TM, including increased creativity, focus, and memory; improved academic achievement; decreased stress, anxiety and depression; and greater happiness, coping ability and tolerance.

TM comes into the daily routine of a school in the first and last 15 minutes of the day during a period called Quiet Time, when students sit in their classrooms and practise the technique along with their teacher. Taught by qualified instructors, the programme is non-sectarian and is easily integrated into any public or private school curriculum. In our experience, when the programme is fully implemented, not only do the individual teachers and students flourish, but the entire school atmosphere becomes harmonious, happy, safe and conducive to learning.

As an example, when a South Auckland school decided to take on the TM Quiet Time programme a couple of years ago, the principal acknowledged that at that time the school was not a safe learning environment and was unable to provide appropriate strategies to manage the high levels of stress in the students’ lives. Lack of achievement was the norm, with only five per cent of students reaching the national standards for reading ability.

Since the introduction of the TM programme, there has been a major turnaround and the school now has a calm, peaceful environment. Teachers find the students interact with each other in a more positive fashion, and 49 per cent of students are now reaching or exceeding national standards in reading.

One staff member commented: ‘My students are focused and there is calmness about them. There has been a shift in their learning.’ In contemplating the beaming faces in front of her soon after the programme started, another teacher quipped: ‘Who are these kids . . . where has my class gone?’

By reducing the acute stresses that undermine learning and health, and by developing the full brain, the TM Quiet Time programme is a practical, highly effective approach to promoting learning readiness among students and thereby markedly improving their academic performance and success in life.



It’s worked for us

Kataraina Nock, principal of Edmund Hillary School in Papakura, reflects on the changes engendered by teaching TM to her pupils.

Our school motto – bestowed by Sir Edmund Hillary at the official opening in 1963 – is ‘Aim High, Be Determined’. It presents a formidable challenge to all who have participated in the transformation process of turning around a school with a long history of failure. Now, in the sixth year of change, it is a much better place.

This is mainly attributable to the many people who have entered the gates with their hands up to help. They are all passionate, committed people who see a need and want to contribute. Among them is our Transcendental Meditation family, who began by training staff and later students. The Board, school, families and community have given their wholehearted support and the entire school has been practising the TM technique twice each day at school for the past two-and-a-half years. Yrs 1–5 students walk either inside or outside their classroom for five minutes with their eyes open and meditate. Students from Yrs 6–8 sit at their desks in the classroom, close their eyes and meditate for 12 minutes.

What have we noticed over those two-and-a-half years? The school is now a much more peaceful place most of the time. The number of incidents involving children in conflict has significantly reduced over time and there are no longer queues waiting to see the

principal. Visitors make various comments about the tone of the school. Some say there is a feeling of ‘aroha’, others remark on how happy and friendly the children are. Those who know the history, comment on the remarkable change in the school environment.

Teachers report that students are more settled in class, have increased concentration and are doing their work better. This is evident in the changes in student achievement. In 2011, reading results school-wide showed some outstanding improvement. For example, in 2010, for Yr 4 Pacifika Boys, 87 per cent were below or well below the national standard, while 13 per cent were above. In 2011, for the same group, 86 per cent were reading at national standard and 14 per cent were above. As a result, by 2012 there were no children in this year group in need of additional learning support; they had moved from poor-achieving to high-achieving readers. The children themselves say they find it easier to study and they feel calmer, happier and less pressured.

Another significant difference now is the stability of staffing. Up until 2010, the recruitment and retention of quality teachers was a major issue. Now, in 2012, most of the teachers have been in the school for two years or more. All staff except for a new teacher this year have trained in TM.

We appreciate and value the opportunity we have been given as a result of the introduction of TM into Edmund Hillary School. We are aiming high and are determined to reach the top of the mountain, just as Sir Edmund Hillary did. Transcendental Meditation is helping us get there.

You can get more information at: www.stressfreeschools.org.nz

Do the claims stack up?

Sceptics query whether TM really works and say its effects are not scientifically proven. However, the *New York Times* recently reported the results of a study focusing on transcendental meditation, concentrated on a young healthy population.

The study, published in *The American Journal of Hypertension*, found that stressed-out college students improved their mood through TM, and those at risk for hypertension were able to reduce

their blood pressure. It was carried out at American University in Washington and included 298 students randomly assigned to either a meditation group or a waiting list.

Students who were at risk of hypertension and practiced meditation, reduced systolic blood pressure by 6.3mm of mercury and their diastolic pressure by 4mm of mercury on average, reported the *Times*.

