Christian Meditation in Schools

Consolidated Research Findings: 2014 - 2016

\[-3.09, p = .014, \eta^2 = .15\]

\[B = -.41, SE = .12\]

\[P = .001\]

\[\beta = -.30\]

\[p < .001 (z = +/- 3.29)\]

\[(M = 3.37, SD = t(54.39) = 3.0)\]

\[B = -.41, SE = .12, \beta = -.3\]
This report presents the consolidated findings from a two-year 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 Offices in the Lismore Diocese and the Archdiocese of Sydney (now 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.
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Introduction

Existing evidence suggests a compelling link between the spirituality and wellbeing of young people (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008; Holder, Coleman, & Wallace, 2010; Marques, Lopez, & Mitchell, 2013; Rew & Wong, 2006). In light of this it is notable that in a recent ARC research exploring student wellbeing in Australian Catholic schools (Graham et al., 2014), the students made very few references to spirituality or religion as contributing to their wellbeing. Instead, aspects of recognition, including the importance of relationships and opportunities to enact their agency, genuinely participate, and ‘have a say’ emerged overwhelmingly as the key factors influencing student wellbeing at school (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Graham, Powell, Thomas, & Anderson, 2016; Graham, Powell, & Truscott, 2016). The absence of data surrounding spirituality suggests that students do not readily connect the ethos, values and religious practices of the Catholic school system as contributing to their subjective sense of wellbeing. This contrasts somewhat with the beliefs of many of the school staff in the study, particularly principals, who described the way the Catholic school ethos uniquely shapes culture and pastoral care in a way that offers enhanced opportunities to support student wellbeing. It would appear, therefore, that there is some disparity between student and staff views on spirituality and wellbeing within Australian Catholic schools. This suggests the need to explore different ways of approaching spirituality and spiritual development at school, both to help enliven students’ spiritual engagement and enhance current efforts at improving student wellbeing.

One approach gathering momentum in Australian Catholic school classrooms is the practice of Christian Meditation. 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, 2006a; Rymarz & Graham, 2006), this form of personal,
silent prayer is proving popular with children and young people (Campion & Rocco, 2009; Keating, 2017a,b).

The momentum around Christian Meditation in Australian Catholic schools mirrors the growing international interest in contemplative education programs (which includes various forms of meditation and mindfulness) in schools more broadly (Britton et al., 2014; Burke, 2010; Waters, Barsky, Ridd, & Allen, 2014). The burgeoning research in this area indicates that these kinds of programs offer wide-ranging wellbeing benefits for children and young people from clinical improvements in mental health issues, ADHD, sleep disorders and gastroesophageal reflux (Boynton, 2014; Corbett, 2011; Harrison, Manocha, & Rubia, 2004; Lau & Hue, 2011), to aiding in more subjective aspects of student wellbeing such as stress, emotional regulation, concentration, self-concept, self-care, social relations and resilience (Bakosh, 2013; Britton et al., 2014; Campion & Rocco, 2009; Fisher, 2006b; Huppert & Johnson, 2010; Ikonen & Ubani, 2014; Sines, 2009; Taplin, 2011; Yee-Ling, 2012; Yoo & Lee, 2013). However, the spiritual aspect of contemplative education programs, and any spiritual-wellbeing connection, tends to be down-played in schools, and little research has focused on exploring the impact of meditation on students’ spirituality (Keating, 2017b). Part of this paucity of evidence is likely explained by the accountability culture in education systems such as Australia’s, in which the potential of meditation to improve the likes of student concentration, and by extension performance, offers stronger justification for meditation programs. In addition, state or secular schools remain hesitant to engage with notions of spirituality, considering it a potentially sensitive and controversial area still too closely entwined with religiosity (De Blasio, 2011; Fisher, 2007a; Hodder, 2007; Natsis, 2016; Trousdale, 2014).

Catholic schools, by their nature as religious institutions, do not have this same constraint, as they openly promote an ethos that aims to nurture faith and religiosity, and recognise children’s spirituality (Hyde, 2008a; Kennedy & Duncan, 2006; Natsis, 2016). Christian Meditation in Catholic schools therefore offers the opportunity to tap into the wide ranging reputed wellbeing benefits of meditative practice for students, while also openly exploring the potential of the practice for fostering students’ spirituality. Motivated by the desire to find new approaches to supporting student spirituality, and with added impetus from the burgeoning wellbeing agenda in schools (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2015; Eckersley, Wierenga, & Wyn, 2005; MCEETYA, 2008; Redmond, Skattebol, & Saunders, 2013; Wyn, 2007), the Catholic Schools Offices in the Lismore Diocese and the Archdiocese of Sydney (now Sydney Catholic Schools) introduced the practice of Christian Meditation in their schools. Researchers from the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University were approached by representatives
from both Dioceses to undertake a longitudinal study with the specific aim of exploring the impact of the practice over time on the religious and spiritual development of the students. The Director of the World Community for Christian Meditation provided advice on the project and further confirmed the need for such a study. The research was conducted over three school years from 2014-16. This document presents the final, consolidated findings from the study.
Background Literature

Conceptualising Spirituality

Spirituality is an area of increasing interest in academic literature, yet remains a somewhat elusive concept, and continues to lack any agreed definitional clarity (Hyde, Ota, & Yust, 2013, 2014; Watson, 2017). It is no longer considered only a domain of organised religion nor does it necessarily refer to any connection with a God (Boynton, 2011; Holder et al., 2010; King & Boyatzis, 2004; Mercer, 2006), yet it remains largely defined through comparison with religiosity. For instance, Ubani and Tirri (2006) note that “religion is usually defined as the organisational, the ritual and the ideological. The spiritual then refers to the personal, the affective, the experiential and the thoughtful” (p.358). Similarly, Holder et al (2010) describe that “spirituality refers to an inner belief system that a person relies on for strength and comfort whereas religiousness refers to institutional religious rituals, practices, and beliefs” (p.132). However, King and Boyatzis (2004) reflect:

Even if we conceptualise religion as a fundamentally social phenomenon and spirituality at a more individualistic level focusing on a sense of connectedness to other, we are wary of pushing this spiritual-religious distinction too far. We want to be cautious about contributing to an often-overstated false dichotomy (p.3).

Some researchers, particularly those using quantitative measures, avoid becoming embroiled in debate by simply referring to spirituality / religion or s/r for short (see Holder et al., 2010; Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & DeHaan, 2012). However, most researchers endeavour to encapsulate the complex, multi-dimensional nature of spirituality offering their own definitions for the purposes of their study, leading to what Bensen (2004) refers to as “intellectual storming” (p.48).

The most prominent conceptual approach to emerge from recent research into spirituality is to focus upon its relational context; spirituality is increasingly understood as a relational dimension of being (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 (2006a) model of spiritual well-being, 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 adopt relational definitions, such as Flanagan et al. (2012) who describe spirituality as “involving connectedness, meaning, purpose and contribution that is embedded in relationships” (p.7), or Natsis (2017) who describes spirituality as a “holistic endeavour integrating the emotions, body and soul in seeking solidarity with others through acts of compassion” (p.73). These ideas are perhaps most simply described by Bosacki and Ota (2000) who summarise, “Spirituality can stand for our lifelong search for meaningfulness and purpose in the world. In short, it refers to how we make sense of our selves and the universe” (p.205-206).

**Children’s Spirituality**

In line with the burgeoning research interest surrounding spirituality, there has been expanding interest in understanding and advocating for children’s spirituality. Until recently, children’s spiritual ideas were seldom taken seriously, “brushed off as being ‘cute,’ precocious, or merely mimicking adults” (Mercer, 2006, p. 498). Consequently, the focus initially surrounded children and young people’s spiritual development, with research often grounded in developmental theories (Boynton, 2011). This developmental approach made a connection between the key adolescent task of identity formation and contemporary notions of spirituality as a search for meaningfulness and purpose (Quinn, 2008). However, this developmental emphasis retains underlying assumptions of a shift from underdeveloped to developed dimensions of spirituality (Bosacki & Ota, 2000; Ingersoll, 2014).

By contrast, Eaude (2009) has suggested that young children often possess an “openness, curiosity and an ability to ‘live in the moment’ – which adults often lose in themselves, or suppress in others” making the “appropriateness of applying the idea of development to spirituality doubtful” (p.191). Similarly, Nye, who has been highly influential in work surrounding children’s spirituality, believes children are already spiritually “switched on,” and that by facilitating children’s growing fluency in religious understanding, we merely act to enrich “the spiritual life they already enjoy” (2009, p. xii). In seeking to clarify this further, Benson and Roehlkepartain (2008) highlight that the word spirit comes from the Latin spiritus, meaning “breath expressed with vigor and courage” (p.20). Therefore, they summarise, “What is emerging is a sense that ‘spirit’ may be an intrinsic capacity or part of life that propels young people to embed themselves in something larger than themselves. It speaks to what it means to be human” (p.20).

The Catholic Education Diocese of Townsville’s website (www.cominghome.org.uk) highlights these shifts in thinking, connecting to notions of children’s intrinsic spirituality:
Children are usually written about as objects of faith, rather than subjects. Many traditional approaches to spiritual development of children thus miss the point. The real challenge is to build on the ‘spiritual competence’ each child is endowed with; then the development of faith is made possible.

This statement makes connections to contemporary childhood theory, appearing to recognise children as active and capable social agents (James & James, 2008; Smith, 2007) and acknowledge the complexity inherent in children’s spirituality (Hemming & Madge, 2012). As the ‘tweens’ in Bosacki and Ota’s (2000) study highlight, young people seek a sense of personal agency and autonomy over their beliefs and relationships with God:

Mrs Baker tells us about the things she believes and imagines and like it sort of confuses you because you’ve got your own beliefs of how things are. It’s nicer to imagine your own, to have your own ideas...I like doing things like that, for myself, its like making your own decisions and having your own independence, I’m looking forward to that when I’m older (Kate and Lucy, aged 10) (p.203).

In addition, research indicates that the aspects of religious faith children place importance on are often different from adults (Hemming & Madge, 2012), and their happiness more strongly derives from spiritual engagement rather than from following formal religious practices (Holder et al., 2010; Marques et al., 2013). Therefore, an assertion is emerging that although young people may sometimes not appear to be outwardly religiously engaged, and can drift away from organised religion during adolescence, they do often remain spiritually active (Büssing et al., 2010; Engebretson, 2006; King & Boyatzis, 2004; Ubani & Tirri, 2006). As such, for spirituality to better facilitate wellbeing (and indeed to better facilitate spiritual wellbeing) there may be a need to offer greater support for students’ agency in their spirituality. This may be more pertinent than ever given the contemporary spiritual context, which has changed considerably over recent generations. Spirituality in Australia is now ‘relatively secular, eclectic, subjective, individualistic and self reliant’ (Rossiter 2010, 130) and some point out that this is equally true for many students enrolled in Catholic education, including those who identify as Catholic (Casson 2011; Rossiter 2010).

Despite the shifts in conceptual ideas and contemporary experiences, Australian research indicates that children and young people themselves tend to understand spirituality in terms of religious practices and faith (Natsis, 2017). However, this may be due to a lack of exposure to or experience of different ways of articulating or understanding spirituality (Natsis, 2017). For instance, Büssing et al (2010) found that when offered the opportunity to consider different explanations, the teenagers
in their study connected spirituality most strongly to ‘conscious interactions,’ and least of all to prayer, trust in God or ‘transcendence conviction.’ In recognition of this, some researchers argue that there may be something of a mismatch between how spirituality is presented to and experienced by young people, with a concerted view emerging that by confining spiritual development to religious education and the routines of religious practice, children may be being limited from exploring, developing and sharing their spirituality and associated self-awareness (Ingersoll, 2014; Petersen, 2008). There is also something of a cultural hesitation around discussing spirituality (Natsis, 2016), alongside a trepidation that by trying too hard to discuss and unpack it the essence of spirituality will be destroyed (Hyde et al., 2013; Hyde, Ota, et al., 2014; Watson, 2014). Indeed, in Engebretson’s (2006, p. 336) exploration of Australian teenage boys’ experiences of the ‘sacred Other’ she concludes, “We need to support spiritual experience without destroying it by too much discussion.”

Taking account of the above ideas - that spirituality is innate within children, that young people remain spiritually engaged even if not always religiously active, that children and young people desire greater agency in their spiritual lives, and that spirituality might be easily extinguished by too much direct attention - recent ideas are focusing upon how best to facilitate rather than direct children’s spirituality. A number of ideas have been proposed for conceptualising the optimal conditions within which children’s personal spiritual journeys might be nurtured. For instance, Yust, Ota & Hyde (2013) have proposed the metaphor of the womb and Nye (2009) has suggested the acronym SPIRIT, encompassing Space, Process, Imagination, Relationship, Intimacy and Trust, as the key elements necessary to help facilitate children’s spirituality.

Eaude (2014) has built upon these ideas to propose that what is important is the creation of ‘hospitable space.’ He argues space (particularly mental space) is necessary for children and young people to continue to engage in the spiritual journey within the busy-ness of contemporary life. Eaude’s notion that this space must be hospitable emerges from theological ideas that “hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place...[that a host] who is filled with ideas, concepts, opinions and convictions cannot be a good host. There is no inner space to listen, no openness to discover the gift of the other” (Nouwen 1996 in Eaude, 2014, p. 240). Thus, ‘hospitable space’ encompasses attention to issues of power and agency with regard to facilitating opportunities for children to engage in a spiritual journey. In this vein, it is conceivable that Christian Meditation may offer considerable scope as a ‘hospitable space’, allowing children and young people to encounter a more personal, participative space in which to explore their spirituality.
Teachers’ Views on Children’s Spirituality

Whilst there is now a strong voice in the academic literature advocating for children’s spirituality, including their spiritual ‘education’, limited literature has gathered teachers’ views on the topic. In his research on spiritual wellbeing, Fisher (2007b) found some state and non-denomination schools in Australia to be unwilling to take part in his research because they associated it with religion and believed it would be too controversial. In other studies, it emerged that some school staff believe that nurturing spirituality is a home rather than school responsibility, as the concept is too delicate to attend to amidst diverse religious and cultural beliefs (Davies, 1988; Davies, 2001; Jacobs, 2012).

When Jacobs (2012) asked South African teachers to explain their understanding of spirituality, six themes emerged: religion, supernatural power, ethics, morals and values, inner being or soul, religious relativism or diversity and unseen reality. Whilst religion is only a part of these themes, most felt religion and spirituality were inexplicably linked and that it would be difficult to disconnect the two in teaching. Earlier research by Davies (1988; 2001) similarly demonstrated that Welsh headteachers predominantly associate spirituality with social and moral aspects over religiosity, although religious education was considered the main avenue for attending to spirituality within their schools. This complexity of disentangling religion and spirituality within schools mirrors the difficulty in defining spirituality discussed earlier, and may partly explain why any explicit emphasis on spirituality continues to be absent or considered with caution in school contexts such as Australian state schools (Natsis, 2016, 2017).

By contrast, Catholic schools tend to openly promote an ethos that aims to nurture and recognise children’s spirituality (Hyde, 2008b; Kennedy & Duncan, 2006; Natsis, 2016). A study in New Zealand Catholic schools has highlighted the way such freedom has allowed for a broad understanding of spirituality to develop amongst staff (Kennedy & Duncan, 2006). The teachers described notions of relationship, belonging and connection as key to their understandings of spirituality, recognising that it had many layers. They described ways that spirituality was manifest in the school, such as through relational and reciprocal kindness, honesty and listening. Therefore, although they largely understood spirituality from within a religious framework, this did not seem to limit how they experienced spirituality, nor recognised children’s spiritual expressions. Other studies have similarly shown that when spiritual development programs are incorporated into schools, teachers and children recognise and appreciate the importance of getting to know the inner self and of engaging in deeper philosophical thinking (Lynch, 2015; Yee-Ling, 2012).

An additional important point emerges from the narratives of the teachers in
Kennedy and Duncan’s New Zealand study (2006). The teachers emphasised that in order to be able to nurture children’s spirituality they need to first to nurture their own. This resonates with literature on wellbeing in which teacher wellbeing is understood to be inextricably intertwined with student wellbeing (Graham et al., 2014; McCallum & Price, 2010; Roffey, 2012; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Consistent with the need to better support teachers’ in navigating the socio-relational demands of the teaching role (Fetherson & Lummis, 2012; Kearney, 2014; Queensland Government, 2016), researchers advocate the need to better nurture the spirituality of pre-service teachers if they are to attend to the spirituality of their future students (Fisher, 2009; Rogers & Hill, 2002; Stolberg, 2008). Stolberg (2008) writes, “Despite most prospective teachers being neither hostile to the thought of addressing spiritual issues…nor totally convinced of its importance, they are also largely ignorant of the possibility, never mind the potential benefits, of its inclusion” (p.171).

**Christian Meditation in Schools**

To date, a handful of studies have been published exploring Christian Meditation in Catholic schools (Campion & Rocco, 2009; de Souza, Hyde, & Kehoe, 2014; Hyde, De Souza, & Kehoe, 2014; Keating, 2017a). In line with research on meditation more broadly, these studies identify a wide range of benefits of the practice for school students, including increased feelings of relaxation and calmness, reduced stress, reduced anger and improved concentration. The flow-on effect of the practice upon the students’ relationships with others has also emerged, and elements of spirituality, largely in terms of connection to God, are also noted in each study. However, with the exception of Keating’s (2017a,b) research, these studies are initial explorations. Keating’s (2017a,b) research is the only study to date to begin to examine the practice in greater depth, interviewing 70 primary children in Ireland to gather their subjective perspectives of the benefits of the practice, including its impact upon their spirituality. This work indicates the practice has strong potential for nurturing children’s innate sense of spirituality. The Christian Meditation in Schools Study builds upon this work in several ways: by exploring students’ engagement with Christian Meditation over the longer term; by drawing together both qualitative and quantitative data; by gathering complementary data from the students’ teachers; and, through exploring the practice in relation to tensions between student religiosity and spirituality.
Method

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 research on the Christian Meditation program in schools in both Dioceses. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, comprising a pre and post-program student survey, student focus groups and teacher interviews. The research strived to offer longitudinal insights, collecting baseline data prior to engagement with Christian Meditation as well as tracking changes in relation to agreed indicators following three years of Christian Meditation practice at school.

The overall aim of the research was to identify the impact, over time, of Christian Meditation on the religious and spiritual development of school students 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 explored how Christian Meditation might shape students’ understandings of, and relationships with: 1) God, 2) themselves, 3) others and 4) the Catholic Church.

Research Design

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 design involved data collection at key milestones over the three school years, as summarised in Figure 1 and briefly explained below.

**Early 2014:** A baseline survey of the Year 4 students (n = 206, mean age = 9 years) from the 12 Catholic schools was conducted. In line with the research questions for the study, the survey measured the young people’s relationship with a) God, b) themselves, c) others, and d) the Catholic Church at baseline, prior to commencing Christian Meditation at school. The survey questions are included in Appendix A. At this time, the students’ Year 4 teachers attended a one-day training session on Christian Meditation conducted by representatives from the World Community on Christian Meditation.

**End 2014:** At the end of the first year of the study (December 2014), which coincided with the end of the Australian school year, the students’ Year 4 teachers (n = 17) from across nine of the schools were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews covered three key areas: the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on the children; their perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on themselves; and the issues involved in implementing Christian Meditation in schools and classrooms. The interview schedule used is included in Appendix B.

**End 2015:** At the end of the second year of the study (December 2015), and the end of Year 5 for the students, 16 focus groups were conducted across 11 schools with a representative mix of students (n = 114, mean age = 11 years). The students’ Year 5 teachers (n = 19) were also interviewed using the same semi-structured interview schedule as the previous year (see Appendix B). The schedule for the student focus groups is included in Appendix C.

**End 2016:** The end of the study (December 2016) coincided with the end of Year 6 and the end of primary school for the students. Prior to their departure, students (n = 250, mean age = 12 years) from eight of the schools (5 schools in the Lismore Diocese and 3 schools in the Sydney Archdiocese) were re-surveyed to measure their relationship with a) God, b) themselves, c) others, and d) the Catholic Church, following their involvement in Christian Meditation during their latter years at primary school (see Appendix A). The students’ Year 6 teachers (n = 14) were also interviewed, again following the same semi-structured interview schedule as previous years (Appendix B).

**Development of the Student Survey**

The pre- and post-program online survey was created in Qualtrics for the study. The survey had six main sections: (a) demographics and prior experience of meditation;
(b) attitudes towards stillness/silence; relationships with (c) God, (d) self, (e) others, and (f) Church (see Appendix A). Both surveys began with categorical tick-box style demographic items that asked about gender, age, school geographic area, school name, race, language spoken at home and religion. Other items asked ‘How often do you attend church on weekends?’ (Never/Every weekend/Every second weekend/ Once a month/A few times a year/Once a year or less); and ‘Do you pray when not at school?’ (Yes/No/Not sure). The pre-program (2014) study then included the following items, ‘Have you heard of meditation before now?’ (Yes/No/Not sure); If ‘yes’ to the previous question, ‘Have you tried to meditate?’ (Yes/No/Not sure); If ‘yes’ to the previous question, ‘Was it Christian Meditation?’ (Yes/No/Not sure); ‘Where did you do Christian Meditation?’ (At school/At home/At school and at home/Somewhere else).

In both surveys, the above categorical questions were followed by a series of 5-point Likert scale items that measured attitudes toward stillness/silence (4 items), and relationships with God (4 items), self (5 items), others (6 items) and Church (5 items). The item content measures of relationship with God, self, others and the Catholic Church were constructed by the research project steering committee based on content from existing surveys (Büssing, Ostermann, & Matthiessen, 2007; Harris et al., 2008; Underwood, 2011) along with additions generated during collaborative discussion amongst the project team (steering group committee members, the researchers and representatives from the research partners). Where required the phrasing was adapted for Year 4 students’ literacy and the Catholic school context, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Key Survey Items and their Origins

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Area</th>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Original Phrasing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards stillness/silence</td>
<td>I like being silent</td>
<td>Project team</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I find it hard to sit still</td>
<td>Project team</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When I am still I feel more relaxed</td>
<td>Project team</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I like it when the whole class is silent with me</td>
<td>Project team</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with God</td>
<td>I feel close to God</td>
<td>Harris et al., 2008</td>
<td>I want to be closer to God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with Self</td>
<td>I feel close to God when I’m in nature</td>
<td>Project team</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
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<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe in God</td>
<td>Büssing et al., 2007</td>
<td>I have a strong belief in God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know God loves me</td>
<td>Harris et al., 2008</td>
<td>I feel God's love for me directly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a peaceful person</td>
<td>Harris et al., 2008</td>
<td>I feel deep inner peace or harmony</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I make good decisions</td>
<td>Project team</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship with Others</th>
<th>I like being me</th>
<th>Project team</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am thankful for my life</td>
<td>Harris et al., 2008</td>
<td>I feel thankful for my blessings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know I am loved</td>
<td>Project team</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a peaceful person</td>
<td>Harris et al., 2008</td>
<td>I feel deep inner peace or harmony</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I make good decisions</td>
<td>Project team</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship with Church</th>
<th>I like going to mass</th>
<th>Project team</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel closer to God when I visit the church</td>
<td>Project team</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am happy to go to church</td>
<td>Project team</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the 2016 survey, the item ‘I feel close to God’ was changed to ‘I feel close to God when I meditate’. In addition, Year 6 students were asked to rate six statements regarding how doing Christian Meditation since Year 4 may have helped them. The statements were generated through collaborative team discussion and through ideas identified from the student focus group data (mid-way through the study). The statements were:

- Christian Meditation has helped me to be a happier person
- Christian Meditation has helped me to be a kinder person
- Christian Meditation has helped me to feel closer to God
- Christian Meditation has helped me to concentrate on my school work
- I prefer doing other kinds of prayer instead of Christian Meditation
- I will do Christian Meditation later on in my life

The students were asked to rate each of these statements on a 5-point scale, where 1 meant ‘No, I strongly disagree’; 2 meant ‘No, I disagree’, 3 meant ‘I’m not sure’, 4 meant ‘Yes, I agree’, and 5 meant ‘Yes, I strongly agree’. The 2016 survey then culminated with an optional, open-ended question: ‘What is the most important message you would like others to know about your experience of doing Christian Meditation at school since Year 4?’

**Recruitment of Schools**

Primary schools were recruited for the initial pre-study student survey in consultation with the two Catholic Schools Offices, who assisted in making contact with relevant school principals. Selection of schools was based on their current or intended practice of Christian Meditation at the school. In the following years of the study, the initial twelve schools were re-contacted via the Principal to determine their interest and ability to participate in the subsequent aspects of the study. It was not possible for all of the schools to continue their participation throughout all waves of the study, but each school participated when they could (as listed in Table 2). This, however, does present a limitation for the study's findings.
Table 2: Participation of Schools across the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Study</th>
<th>No. of Participating Schools from Lismore Diocese</th>
<th>No. of Participating Schools from Sydney Archdiocese</th>
<th>Total Number of Participating Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014 Pre-Study Student Survey</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 Teacher Interviews</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 Student Focus Groups and Teacher Interviews</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 Teacher Interviews</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 Post-Study Student Survey</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedure

2014 Baseline Student Survey & 2014 Teacher Interviews

After schools initially agreed to participate in the study, the 25 Year 4 teachers across the 12 schools attended a one day training session on Christian Meditation delivered by the World Community of Christian Meditation (WCCM), in which they were introduced or refreshed in the nature and process of practicing and teaching Christian Meditation. At this training day teaching staff were also introduced to the procedure and materials required to recruit student participants and to facilitate the 2014 online baseline survey in the classroom. Each teacher received a research materials pack, which contained information sheets and consent forms for both parents and students, and a one page instruction sheet (copies of these are included in the 2014 survey report). Teachers facilitated the recruitment of students in their class and the survey process, which involved students completing the online survey on individual computers (or other device), either in the classroom or the school computer suite. The students accessed the survey via a secure hyperlink, and the survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

All teachers who had facilitated the online survey with their Year 4 students were contacted by email towards the end of the school year and invited to participate in
the teacher interviews (see interview schedule in Appendix B). The teachers were informed that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, confidential and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequence. Emails were followed with a telephone call to make personal contact with each teacher. Teachers who agreed to participate in the interview were asked to nominate a date and time to conduct the interview. Teachers’ were advised that their reply emails were considered confirmation of their consent to participate in the interview.

The teacher interviews were semi-structured and covered three key areas: the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on the children; their perceptions of the impact of Christian Meditation on themselves; and the issues involved in implementing Christian Meditation in schools and classrooms. The interview questions are shown in Appendix B.

The teacher interviews were conducted by four researchers in accordance with teacher and researcher availability and teacher preference for either a telephone or face-to-face interview. Each interview typically lasted around 30 minutes. Fourteen teachers were interviewed individually, but due to the request from one school with regard to their time constraints, three teachers were interviewed together. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The data was analysed for reoccurring themes, under the overarching structure of the interview schedule and the research questions guiding the study.

2015 Student Focus Groups and Teacher Interviews
Principal whose schools were able to participate in the 2015 interviews nominated a suitable date for the researchers to visit their schools to collect data. Following confirmation from the Principal, all Year 5 teachers were sent an invitation by email to seek their assistance in recruiting students for the student focus groups and to invite them to participate in an individual teacher interview. As in 2014, whenever possible, each teacher was also contacted by telephone to discuss their participation and their facilitation of the student recruitment. As for the 2014 survey, teachers were sent electronic copies of parent and student information sheets and consent forms and instructions on how to facilitate the consent process with their students (a copy of this information is included in the 2015 interim project report). Teachers’ were asked to reply by email to confirm their consent to participate in the interview, while parents and students consented by submitting their signed consent forms.

The teacher interviews in 2015 were semi-structured and followed the same interview schedule as in 2014 (see Appendix B). Nineteen teachers agreed to be
interviewed in 2015, and all were interviewed individually. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

The focus groups with Year 5 students lasted approximately 40 minutes each and the questions covered the children’s experiences with Christian Meditation in their classes. They involved both discussion questions and opportunities to reflect individually and write notes to help facilitate students’ participation in different ways. 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. In total, 16 focus groups were conducted across the schools. The number of participants in focus group each ranged from 4 to 10 students, with 114 students participating overall. The focus group questions are shown in Appendix C.

The 2015 interviews and focus groups were conducted by three researchers in accordance with teacher and researcher availability. Each interview and focus group was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The data was analysed for reoccurring themes as per for 2014 and the 2014 and 2015 teacher data was compared for similarities or differences.

2016 Student Final Survey and 2016 Teacher Interviews
Once Principals confirmed that their school would be able to participate in the 2016 wave of data collection, the Year 6 teachers were sent information to assist them in facilitating student recruitment for the post-program survey, along with inviting them to participate in an individual teacher interview. Teachers were also provided with electronic copies of information letters and consent forms for parents and students. The student survey was conducted online and followed a similar format and process to that in 2014 (with some additional questions as described previously, see Appendix A). On average it took the Year 6 students just under 15 minutes to complete the survey (SD = 12 mins 30 seconds), despite the additional questions.

Teachers were recruited for the 2016 interviews in the same way as that described above in 2014 and 2015. As in previous years, the interviews were semi-structured and followed the same interview schedule (see Appendix B). Fourteen teachers agreed to be interviewed in 2016, and all were interviewed individually. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Teachers who agreed to participate in an interview were asked to nominate a date and time to conduct the interview. The interviews were conducted by four researchers in accordance with teacher and researcher availability and teacher preference for either a telephone or face-to-face interview. Each interview was audio recorded and summarised for analysis in the same manner as in previous years.
Ethical Considerations

The research project was approved by the Southern Cross University’s human research ethics committee (ECN 14-133; ECN- 15-303). Schools were given funding support by their Dioceses to allow teachers to have time away from their classes for both the interviews and to administer the surveys. Aside from this, the participation of individual teachers and students was voluntary, anonymous, confidential, no inducements were offered and participants (and participating schools) could withdraw at any time with no negative consequences. It was reiterated to teachers that facilitating the recruitment of students did not require them to also participate in a teacher interview. Some teachers exercised their right to dissent and chose not to be interviewed (see Table 3 below for a summary of the teacher numbers).

For the student waves of data collection, parent information sheets and consent form templates were provided to schools to send home to students’ parents/carers, as indicated above. Students whose parents gave consent then received their information sheet and consent form. For the 2016 survey ‘opt-out’ forms were utilised, as most parents and students had already consented to involvement in the study and been informed of its longitudinal nature. For each wave, students took part only if both they and their parent consented (or in 2016 did not ‘opt-out’). However, students retained the right to stop the survey or 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 / or on the computer.

Sample

Teacher Sample

As described above, the students’ Year 4, 5 and 6 class teachers were invited for interview. In each year most agreed to be interviewed, as summarised in Table 3 below (refer to Table 2 above for the number of schools involved in each year).

Table 3: Teacher Sample

| Year | Lismore | | Sydney | | Year | Total |
|------|--------| |--------| | Year | Total |
|      | Male   | Female | Total | Male | Female | Total |
| 2014 | 4      | 9      | 13    | 1    | 3      | 4      | 17    |
| 2015 | 3      | 7      | 10    | 2    | 7      | 9      | 19    |
| 2016 | 2      | 8      | 10    | 0    | 4      | 4      | 14    |
**Student Sample**

Table 4 below reports the number of students from each Diocese involved in each aspect of the study. As detailed in Table 4, a total of 206 Year 4 students participated in the 2014 survey and 114 in the Year 5 focus groups. By 2016, despite fewer schools participating (8 rather than 12 schools (in 2014)), the student population had grown and a total of 250 Year 6 students participated in the post-program survey.

**Table 4: Student Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lismore</th>
<th></th>
<th>Sydney</th>
<th></th>
<th>Year Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 (Baseline Survey)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 (Focus Groups)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016* (Final Survey)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* One Lismore student in 2016 did not report their gender making the total number of students in Lismore Diocese 171, and the total sample size 250.

In Year 4, a total of 89 males and 117 females were involved in the study, representing 43% and 57% of the sample respectively. In 2015, more female students than male also participated, representing 56% compared to 44% of the sample. By Year 6 this gender balance was reversed with 142 males and 107 females participating in the final survey, representing 57% and 43% of the sample respectively.

Beyond gender, the detailed demographic data gathered during the survey offers further insight into the student sample involved throughout the whole study, as well as any differences between the two Dioceses involved. In both Sydney and Lismore, a similar number of students identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI status): 5.1% of Sydney Year 6 students and 5.8% of Lismore Year 6 students (there were more students who were uncertain in their response to this question in Year 4). Sydney schools had greater linguistic diversity with 50% of Sydney students reporting speaking English and another language at home (or
another language only) in Year 4 (40.5% in Year 6), compared to 12% of Lismore students in Year 4 (10.5% in Year 6).

In interpreting the results it is also important to appreciate that not all students attending the schools identified themselves as Catholic. A greater proportion of the students attending Sydney schools identified as Catholic (80% compared to 74% of Lismore students in Year 4; 76% compared to 60% of Lismore students in Year 6). The religiosity of the Sydney students may also have been stronger as Sydney students (whether in Year 4 or Year 6) were more likely to report that they attended church every weekend compared to Lismore students (further details on this in the findings section below). These differences between the Dioceses are important to bear in mind when considering the results presented below, particularly the survey results from Year 6 when Sydney students comprised a smaller proportion of the overall student sample.

**Reporting of Results**

Throughout the study, interim progress reports were prepared. Collectively, these form a suite of documents, as listed below. These explain more fully the method for each wave of data collection and they also report the gathered data in full detail. 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

Plain-text summary documents were also developed for participating schools during the course of the study. These comprise a ‘Tips from Teachers’ document produced and disseminated in 2014 and an mid-way ‘What are we Finding Out’ document reporting the 2015 teacher and student qualitative data. These are also now openly available on the CCYP website.

This document represents a consolidated report drawing together the headline findings from each year of the study. It examines what the data highlights about the longitudinal impact of Christian Meditation on the religious and spiritual development of the students and proposes recommendations aimed at improving the practice of Christian Meditation in schools.
Presentation of Key Findings

This section draws together data from across all components of the Christian Meditation in Schools Study. The annual teacher interviews gathered teachers’ observations or their sense about the impact of Christian Meditation upon the students. The interviews also explored the benefits and challenges of the practice for teachers and the practical aspects of leading Christian Meditation in the classroom. Complementing this, the Year 5 focus groups offered a somewhat unique opportunity for the students to reflect upon and discuss the impact of the practice upon themselves, with the teacher interviews indicating that they had had little other opportunity for such conversations. Through their engagement in the focus groups it was evident the students were capable of sharing meaningful reflections and articulating their own personal spiritual experiences. They shared varied views and experiences and they offered insightful advice, which adds a subjective layer to that gathered from their teachers.

The student survey adds a quantitative component with the potential opportunity to explore longitudinal changes by comparing data from when the students were in Year 4 and in Year 6, following three years of Christian Meditation practice at school. As mentioned earlier, the full statistical analyses performed are available by consulting the 2014 Baseline Student Survey Report and the 2016 Final Student Survey Report documents, therefore only the headline statistics are discussed in this report. In addition to the statistical data, the Year 6 survey culminating open-ended question offered an anonymous and freeform platform for the students to express their views and complements the qualitative data collected in the student focus groups. The majority of students took the opportunity to respond, many at considerable length, and some of this data is also shared in this report.

Key data from each of the components of the study are synthesised together to offer insight into the practice and experience of Christian Meditation in schools. This is presented and discussed under the following headings:

1. Overview
2. Student Spirituality and Religiosity
3. Students’ Personal and Social Relationships
4. Christian Meditation and Teachers
5. Practical Issues in Schools
1. Overview

At the beginning of the study, most of the students (90.3% according to the Year 4 survey) and all of the teachers (as reported in their 2014 and 2015 interview responses) were aware of meditation in a general sense. However, many of the students and teachers had not encountered Christian Meditation before. Prior to starting Christian Meditation with their class then, many of the teachers in 2014 and 2015 recalled initial feelings of trepidation about the idea:

*The thought of sitting for five minutes with a group of children and being silent was just ridiculous.* (Belinda, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

*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, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

In the 2015 focus groups, many of the students, too, recalled that they had felt unsure about what to expect from the practice, with students thinking it was likely to be either boring or relaxing. Most students did not find it easy to remain still and silent to begin with, and they found even one or two minutes to feel like a very long time.

Over time, the teachers’ worries were replaced by awe and positivity, with some of the teachers at the end of 2014 and 2015 being incredibly moved by the children’s efforts to meditate.

*Some kids are mind blowing, they just, they’re elsewhere. It’s quite amazing to watch.* (Anna, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

*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.... it’s been a fabulous journey.* (Nicole, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

By 2016, any initial reservations were much less evident, with Harris (Year 6 Teacher) describing that the practice had become ‘part of the school fibre now - it’s just what we do’. Nevertheless, it was evident that over the course of each school year each class embarked upon a shared journey through their efforts to meditate together. At the beginning of the year, as the students adapted to a new class, teacher and meditation routine, they had to work together to re-find the meditative space. In particular, the teachers felt that in the classroom setting the students had to feel a level of trust in their peers before they could keep their eyes closed and let themselves go into a meditative state. This was mentioned by teachers in all cohorts, but perceived to be of greater influence as the students became older.
Over the course of each school year, most classes tried to gradually lengthen the time they spent meditating. In 2014 and 2015 meditation in most classes managed between three and five minutes (as reported by the teachers), although one teacher reported achieving up to 11 minutes with their class. Reflecting the increasing age and experience of the students, the reported length of meditation tended to be longer for the 2016 classes, generally between five to eight minutes, with a few sometimes reaching the target 12 minutes for this age group. However, teachers explained that depending upon the energy in the classroom on a given day, it could be easier or more difficult for the class to find and remain in the meditative state – the process was an on-going journey and teachers adapted the length of the practice on a daily basis depending upon the needs of the class.

Most classes followed the typical procedures described by the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM, 2013), including the repetition of the word ‘Maranatha’, but they each used their own choice of props (such as candles, gongs, music, a timing app) to help facilitate the meditation process. Teachers reported that non-Catholic students sometimes selected to use an alternative mantra of their choice, or to meditate without the use of a mantra. Most of the classes in 2014 and 2016 practised on a daily basis (in 2015 there seemed to be greater irregularity to the practice in some classes), and most classes meditated either first thing in the morning or straight after recess or lunch.

Teachers and students described particularly appreciating the opportunity Christian Meditation offers to settle the class, to generate an atmosphere of calm, and to offer a little collective breather within the busyness and intensity of the school day.

*I think our lives are just so busy, even little kids, they’re so timetabled that to have that opportunity to just, no one’s talking to them, no one’s expecting anything from them other than to just be still…* (Sandra, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

*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 6, Group B)

Overall, the teachers’ narratives were largely very similar across all three years, with all teachers very positive about the practice.

*I love it, absolutely love it. I feel that the children get a lot out of it. I feel that it’s just as important as doing one of our key learning areas…* (Belinda, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)
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. (Tim, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

That time after meditation is just beautiful, it’s serene. (Fiona, Year 6 Teacher, 2016)

In the focus groups, too, the students were overwhelmingly positive about Christian Meditation, with most students describing enjoying the practice and feeling that it benefited them positively.

Despite the general positivity, in all components of the study it was persistently reported that there were some students who had on-going difficulties with the practice, particularly in remaining still and keeping their eyes closed. Although teachers reported greater ease with the practice over time, the number of students struggling may actually have increased over the course of the study. Teachers in 2014 generally reported that by the end of the year just one or two or a small handful of their students had difficulties, whereas in 2015 and 2016 they reported there could be as many as a third of the class. The 2016 survey results echoed these latter statistics, with 43% of Sydney Year 6 students reporting that they find it hard to be still ‘all’ or ‘most of the time’. Interestingly, students in Lismore did not report such difficulty with this, with only 19% of Lismore students reporting such frequent difficulty.

While some students genuinely struggled, some teachers thought that some of the students may have begun to disengage with the practice towards the end of primary school - ‘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, Year 5 Teacher, 2015). This may have been the case, as the compared to the 2015 focus groups students reported more mixed enjoyment of the practice in the 2016 student survey.

Following three years of Christian Meditation practice at school half of the Year 6 students (n = 129, 51.6%) reported enjoying Christian Meditation at school (this question was not asked in 2014). Despite their greater difficulties in remaining still, a slightly greater proportion of students from Sydney schools (n = 44, 55.7%) said they enjoyed Christian Meditation than those from Lismore schools (n = 85, 49.7%). The open-ended responses at the end of the 2016 survey added further insight into the range of student views.

I really like doing Christian Meditation because it helps me relax when I am stressed or frustrated. (Year 6 Boy, Sydney)
I like the fact that it is just a time where you get to sit down, relax and reflect on my great mates, great teacher, great relatives and my kind, caring and loving family. (Year 6 Boy, Lismore)

I am not a fan of Christian Meditation because I feel like it doesn’t help me at all. I just feel like I am sitting doing nothing. (Year 6 Girl, Sydney)

Well I learnt nothing, my opinion of Christian Meditation is that it is boring and I hate it. I think the school shouldn’t do meditation. (Year 6 Boy, Lismore)

The student survey is one of the very first quantitative (and as such anonymous) investigations of Christian Meditation in schools, and the mixed results add an insightful dimension to the consistently positive findings reported in school-based Christian Meditation studies to date. Throughout the sections below we examine both the benefits and challenges of the practice for students in remaining engaged with the practice over time and we propose some recommendations for refining best practice approaches to Christian Meditation in schools.
2. Student Spirituality and Religiosity

This section shares and discusses the main findings regarding the impact of practising Christian Meditation at school upon students’ spirituality and religiosity. In line with the overarching research questions for the study, the findings are collated under two subheadings: students’ relationships with God and students’ relationships with the Church. Data is drawn from all components of the study: the 2014 and 2016 student surveys; the teacher interviews from 2014, 2015 and 2016; and the student focus groups conducted in 2015.

Students’ Relationships with God

At the beginning of the study, the survey responses of the Year 4 students indicated that many felt a strong relationship with God (Mean composite score from survey items relating to ‘Relationship with God’: M = 4.36, SD = 0.81)\(^1\). Notably, the analyses demonstrated that this was largely independent of students’ reported religious affiliation (whether they identified themselves as Catholic or identified with another religion, were unsure of their religion or had no religion).

In the interviews at the end of 2014, 2015 and 2016, the class teachers were invited to reflect upon whether they felt practicing Christian Meditation as a class over the course of the year had impacted upon aspects of students’ religiosity and spirituality. Most of the teachers hoped or believed that the practice might have had a positive influence in these regards. However, some teachers were unsure whether all students viewed the practice as a form of prayer and a time to connect with God.

\[ I \text{ think the Christian children, the Catholic children understand it as a form of prayer. I don’t think the others may. I don’t know that they can make that connection. They might just see it as a quiet time. (Nicole, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)} \]

\[ \text{Other than calling it ‘Christian Meditation’ and having the symbols there, I don’t see that they… because it’s so simple and there’s no talk from me or no front-loading about what it’s necessarily about, I think that they more see it as quiet reflection time rather than so much focused on faith. (Daniel, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)} \]

\(^1\) Mean composite score generated from responses to four 5-point Likert scale questions: I feel close to God; I feel close to God when I am in nature; I believe in God; I know God loves me. M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation. The higher the mean composite score, the more favourable the attitude across the sample in terms of relationship with God.
There was also the occasional teacher who themselves had not connected the practice to prayer: ‘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…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, Year 5 Teacher, 2015). This is important as a teacher’s understanding and conceptualisation of Christian Meditation will likely impact upon the way they introduce and model the practice with the students.

It was notable that none of the 2014 teachers had missed the connection between the practice and prayer, something likely attributable to the fact that all teachers from this cohort had attended the Christian Meditation in Schools training. In addition, many of the 2014 teachers described a unit of work for Year 4 exploring different types of prayer and how the programming of this unit tied in very well with the commencement of the Christian Meditation programme. Consequently, compared to the teachers interviewed in 2015 and 2016 they seemed the most confident in believing that the students understood Christian Meditation to be a form of prayer.

Overall, the majority of teachers across all cohorts seemed to believe that Christian Meditation offered a valuable space within which the students could potentially experience a relationship with God. However, the teachers felt unable to say whether this potential was being realised.

> 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, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

As these comments highlight, it was evident that the teachers rarely asked students about their Christian Meditation experiences. This lack of discussion may have been influenced by an impression some teachers may have taken from the Christian Meditation in Schools training that they were not to ask students too many questions about their experience of Christian Meditation, but rather just allow them to experience it. It may also reflect beliefs that the students’ experiences are personal and private, or an implicit understanding that spiritual experiences can be difficult to articulate and concerns that they may be extinguished by efforts to discuss them (Hyde et al., 2013; Hyde, Ota, et al., 2014; Watson, 2014). The 2015 focus groups therefore offered a unique opportunity to hear from the students, in their own words, regarding how they conceptualise Christian Meditation and whether or not they find the practice to be a ‘hospitable’ space for nurturing their relationship with God.
In the opening stages of the focus groups, when students were asked in an open-ended way to describe Christian Meditation, only a few students directly referred to it in terms of prayer (‘It’s like a silent prayer’ (Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 5). However, in every focus group there were students who described the practice as offering time with God, explaining it as an opportunity to ‘just be with God’ (Sydney, School 3, Group B) or ‘a time to let the Holy Spirit in and chat with God’ (Lismore, School 1). When the students were then asked to try to describe broadly how they feel during Christian Meditation, more students began to articulate a sense of experiencing a connection to God during the practice, using words or phrases such as I feel respectful, close to God or ‘like God is just wrapping his arms around me’ (Sydney, School 2). In addition to notions of ‘being’ with God, many students described speaking or listening to God. When asked broadly about whether they felt they had changed in any way through practising Christian Meditation, some students, again unprompted, described an enhanced connection with God: ‘It changes me in a way that my relationship with God is much stronger’ (Sydney, School 3, Group B). Therefore, when the students were later asked directly whether they felt Christian Meditation had brought them closer to God, there were already many students, who had voiced their enhanced relationship, both in Lismore and in Sydney schools.

In the focus groups, some students tried to reflect upon why they felt the practice of Christian Meditation might have instigated the changes they had experienced in their relationship with God. Some students, particularly in Lismore, felt it was the non-forceful, personal nature of the practice:

I used to not really believe in God that 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. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 1)

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)

Other students described the new avenue of communication and the opportunity to connect with God in a private, quiet way:

You can feel that he’s talking to you, you can just feel it in your heart. (Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 5)
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. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 1)

A few students also explained that the private nature of the practice helped to reduce embarrassment around what they talk to God about: ‘Sometimes kids don’t want to say things out loud because they think other kids might judge them’ (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 4). At the same time, the group nature of the practice was described as reducing the stigma that might surround 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. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 3)

In these comments it is evident that in accordance with the teachers’ beliefs, experiencing Christian Meditation had expanded these students’ understanding of prayer. When the students were asked about this directly, many clearly explained how their thinking had changed in this regard:

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 3, Group A)

In line with the teachers’ hopes then, the focus group student data suggested that practising Christian Meditation has a positive impact upon most students’ understandings of prayer and their personal relationship with God.

It is also important to recognise that there were a number of students who did not consider the practice a form of prayer and who did not feel meditating brought them closer to God (‘I don’t think it has an effect on God’ (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 6, Group C)) but still very much enjoyed it, and sometimes even advocated strongly for it. This nuance was most evident in the narratives students shared in the focus groups, and particularly in Lismore schools. These students preferred to preface the relaxation or mindfulness benefits, but there was evidence of a sense of spiritual engagement as well:

Well I guess it’s kind of like a prayer, but…it can be for any belief. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 4)
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… (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 5, Group A)

It seems in such sentiments that some students were seeking to describe a balance between the secular benefits and the spiritual aspects of Christian Meditation, and perhaps to make a distinction between notions of spirituality and the Catholic faith. The desire to make this distinction may reflect the experiences of young people who did not identify as Catholic. Alternatively, it may represent the beginnings of a shift away from organised religion or family religious ties that can often occur as young people enter adolescence (Büssing et al., 2010; Engebretson, 2006; King & Boyatzis, 2004; Ubani & Tirri, 2006).

The 2016 survey offered further insight into students’ perceptions of the impact of the practice on their relationship with God, and demonstrated that there was considerable diversity of opinion amongst the total sample as well as identifiable differences between the two Dioceses. As Figure 2 shows, 51% of Sydney Year 6 students said they felt close to God ‘Most of the time’ and ‘All of the time’ when they meditate, but only 28% of Lismore students selected one of these options. As the focus group data indicates, this does not necessarily imply that students did not enjoy or find benefit (perhaps even spiritual benefit) through the practice of Christian Meditation. Further, it may be unrealistic to expect students to feel close to God all of the time while meditating for a short period of time in a classroom setting. Indeed, only 18% of Lismore students and 10% of Sydney selected ‘not at all’, indicating the fast majority of students feel close to God at least ‘every now and then’ while meditating at school.

Figure 2: Percentages of Students Reporting Feeling Close to God during Christian Meditation
The 2016 survey also invited students to reflect on the longitudinal experience of practising Christian Meditation since Year 4. It asked them to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, ‘[Practising Christian Meditation since Year 4] has helped me to feel closer to God’. Most students responded positively to this statement, although differences between the Dioceses were evident with Sydney students scoring significantly higher ($t(178.39) = 3.55, p < .001, \eta^2 = 5.0\%$). As can be seen in Figure 3, 63% of Sydney students indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement and only 11% disagreed or strongly disagreed. By comparison, 45% of Lismore students agreed or strongly agreed and a fairly similar proportion (33%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. As indicated earlier, the fairly large proportion of Lismore students disagreeing with the statement does not necessarily indicate that a third of the students did not find the practice beneficial. While there were a sub-group of students who really disliked the practice, other survey items supported the focus group data in indicating that many of the students in Lismore Diocese tended to preface the calming and centring benefits of the practice over its potential to specifically build their relationship with God. Perhaps connected to this, it is also notable that there were also a significant of percentage of students from both Dioceses who reported feeling unsure about the impact of the practice upon their relationship with God (22% in Lismore and 27% in Sydney).

![Figure 3: Percentages of Students Reporting that Christian Meditation had Helped Them to Feel Closer to God](image)

The Year 6 students responses to the open-ended question at the end of the 2016 survey, add further support to the largely positive results in terms of students relationships with God. Some students from each Diocese took the unprompted opportunity to advocate for the way practising Christian Meditation had brought them closer to God.
My message is enjoy Christian Meditation because it helps me to become closer to god, peaceful and it is one-on-one time with God. (Year 6 Girl, Lismore)

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)

Despite many Year 6 students reporting that Christian Meditation helped them feel close to God (either during meditation practice, or as a result of meditating regularly), the longitudinal survey data recorded a decrease in students’ reported religious behaviour between Year 4 and Year 6. This was particularly evident in Sydney where the percentage of students attending church every weekend fell by half (from 38.5% in 2014 to 19% in 2016). When this is considered alongside the number of students feeling ‘unsure’ about the impact of Christian Meditation on their relationship with God, it emerges that the practice may be an important form of prayer through which students might explore and diversify their spirituality as they approach adolescence. Overall then, the combined data from the focus groups and the 2016 survey suggest that Christian Meditation is a potentially ‘hospitable’ space or time (Eaude, 2014) within which students can connect with God, with it noted that there were many students who described very profound experiences.

Students’ Relationship with Church

In the 2014 survey, in contrast to their strong relationships with God, the Year 4 students as a whole reported a fairly weak relationship with the Church (Mean composite score from survey items relating to ‘Relationship with Church’: M = 3.87, SD = 1.08)², although there was considerable variation within the sample. Perhaps not surprisingly, Catholic students reported significantly closer relationships with Church compared to non-Catholic students ((M = 3.37, SD = 1.42), t(54.39) = -3.09, p = .014, η² = .15). The effect size was large. It is also noteworthy that there was significantly greater variation in the non-Catholic students’ scores on relationship with Church compared to Catholic students’ scores, as shown by the standard deviation values and a significant Levene’s test, p < .001. Sydney Year 4 students overall reported stronger relationships with Church than Lismore Year 4 students.

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² Mean composite score generated from responses to five 5-point Likert scale questions: I like going to mass; I feel closer to God when I visit the church; I am happy to go to church; Going to church helps me to be kind to others; I like being with other people at church. M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation. The higher the mean composite score the more favourable the attitude across the sample in terms of relationship with Church.
When the teachers were asked whether they thought practising Christian Meditation might impact upon students’ relationships with the Church, the vast majority felt that it was unlikely the students would make any connection. Most thought the students would conceive of the Church predominantly in terms of bricks and mortar rather than Catholicism or the church community. Therefore, they thought it very unlikely that the practice of Christian Meditation at school would have any impact upon the students’ relationship with the Church.

When the students were asked the same question in the focus groups, most students echoed the teachers’ thoughts, answering the question with a clear, ‘No.’ Other students intimated that it was something they hadn’t really considered before, ‘That’s a hard question’ (Sydney, School 5), and any positive responses mostly supported the teachers’ beliefs 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). Only one student voiced a connection to the wider church community, although this emerged later in the focus groups when asked for their advice to help others implement the practice in schools:

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 – you’re connecting with the Christian community. (Sydney, School 2)

A final notable point emerged in relation to parents and the wider Church community. A couple of the teachers mentioned that a few parents had voiced reservations about the practice of Christian Meditation at their schools. These parents were skeptical about the Christian basis of meditation and queried the time being dedicated to the practice each day: ‘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...’ (Beth, Year 5 Teacher, 2015). The views of these parents might weaken any likely relational connection between Christian Meditation and Church for the students, by giving the impression that Christian Meditation is a ‘school thing’ rather than something embraced by the wider Catholic community. Indeed, an inkling of the importance that the whole Catholic community embrace the practice was evident in the ‘important message’ one of the Year 6 students chose to share at the end of the 2016 survey:

Personally I do not think Meditation is a part of the Christian belief, we are not Buddhist or Hindus. 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, it was evident that many students felt Christian Meditation had impacted positively upon their spirituality and religiosity, through significantly enhancing their connection to God and expanding their understandings of prayer. For those students who were not religious, or who did connect with the religious basis of the practice, there is a sense that they still may experience a spiritual connection, although this was not always easy to articulate clearly. However, for all students, even those who described the strongest religiosity, it was unclear whether, at present, the spiritual and religious enhancement they were experiencing through the practice extended to their relationship with the Catholic Church.

Summary of Key Findings: Student Spirituality and Religiosity

• Many students found Christian Meditation to offer a valuable space for experiencing a connection with God, and for bringing them closer to God over time, with many students describing profound experiences of listening, talking or revering being in His presence.
• Experiencing Christian Meditation had expanded many students’ understandings of prayer.
• There was a reported decline in students’ religious behaviour (such as church attendance).
• There may be a degree of tension between the relaxation benefits, a contemporary or eclectic experience of spirituality and the Christian or Catholic basis of the practice for some students.
• No association was found between the practice of Christian Meditation and students’ relationship with 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 the class and teachers were hesitant to postulate about this.

Discussion: Student Spirituality and Religiosity

It is evident from the findings above that the practice of Christian Meditation at school was enriching many students’ connection to God and expanding their understandings of prayer. What the students particularly seemed to appreciate about the practice was the private and personal nature, within which they had a degree of freedom and agency to build and experience their own relationship with God. Therefore, if spirituality is conceptualised in a religious sense, the findings indicate that Christian Meditation does seem to offer what Eaude (2014) has referred to as ‘hospitable space’ for many students of this age group.
However, there were other students who enjoyed the practice of Christian Meditation, but articulated this primarily in terms of the relaxation and wellbeing benefits. For these students the practice appears to offer a potential ‘hospitable space’ for exploring their spirituality, but it was unclear whether this was being fully realised at present. Through their narratives it seemed possible that these students conflated spirituality with religiosity and therefore were not fully engaged with the spiritual potential of the practice. Given indications of waning religiosity amongst the students as they neared the end of primary school, this conflation may also impact upon Catholic students’ interest in the practice. Furthermore, for those students who felt ‘forced’ to engage in the practice, Christian Meditation may feel a somewhat inhospitable place for relaxation or the development of spirituality in any sense.

Considering how to best realise the potential of Christian Meditation for all students, raises the question of the purpose of the practice in Catholic schools. The findings indicate that there is a degree of tension at present between whether the practice is predominantly an act of religiosity or a relaxation and wellbeing exercise (this tension becomes more apparent in the following section). Indeed, in the schools in this study there were students and teachers who advocated that reinforcing the religious basis of the practice might better engage reluctant students. Meanwhile, others felt that prefacing the relaxation and mindfulness benefits may be the most inclusive approach in diverse contemporary classrooms. In reality, this dichotomy is unnecessary. If the practice is positioned more clearly as a ‘hospitable space’ for enriching students’ spirituality, in the broad sense in which it has come to be conceptualised in contemporary literature (for example, Benson, 2004; Fisher, 2006a; Flanagan et al., 2012; Hyde, 2008a; Hyde, Ota, & Yust, 2012; Kennedy & Duncan, 2006; Nye, 2009), it can comfortably offer both experiences simultaneously. A focus on spirituality offers students the privacy and freedom to engage on a religious level and deepen their faith, or instead to explore a more eclectic or personal spiritual experience in/through the stillness.

If the practice was to be more explicitly positioned as a way of facilitating students’ holistic spirituality, it might be necessary to facilitate students’ understanding of this concept. However, the literature on children’s spirituality warns that care must be taken with regards to discussing spirituality, suggesting its mysterious quality may be easily destroyed through over dissection (Engebretson, 2006; Hyde et al., 2013; Hyde, Ota, et al., 2014; Watson, 2014). This could represent a particular risk for students already enjoying deeply religious experiences through Christian Meditation or indeed those who just enjoy the quiet, relaxing space. Yet, the open and non-prescriptive discussion process engaged in during the focus groups seemed to extend the benefits of Christian Meditation by offering students the space to make
sense of and reflect upon their experiences. Through statements such as, “more about like relaxing and a little bit of connecting to God,” it was evident that the focus groups gently encouraged and ‘held’ students’ evolving understandings as they made sense of the interplay between their experiences during Christian Meditation and religious faith. Perhaps then, the opportunity to explore the notion of spirituality and the different ways in which it may be conceptualised is a critical aspect of ‘hospitality’ for children and young people, particularly for those on the cusp of adolescence. The opportunity to engage in such discussions may lead to the exploration of other related concepts, such as students’ conceptualisations of the Catholic Church.
3. Students’ Personal and Social Relationships

This section explores the key findings relating to the impact of Christian Meditation upon students’ relationships with themselves and their relationships with others. As in the sections above, data is drawn from all components of the study: the 2014 and 2016 student surveys; the teacher interviews from 2014, 2015 and 2016; and the student focus groups conducted in 2015.

Students’ Relationships with Themselves

At the beginning of the study, the majority of the Year 4 students’ survey responses indicated that they had a very comfortable sense of self (Mean composite score from survey items relating to ‘Relationship with self’: M = 4.32, SD = 0.44)\(^3\) with no difference between Catholic and non-Catholic students. When the teachers were asked to consider the impact of Christian Meditation on this, they felt it was very difficult to comment, with many factors potentially impacting upon students’ relationship with themselves and the nature of the relationship very subjective and personal. However, in 2014, the teachers made some tentative links to confidence, self-esteem and self-control. These comments were in relation to the process of Christian Meditation – the sense of achievement students might gain from their increasing ability to master meditation:

*It could be that they’re building their self-esteem through the meditation...They’re realising that they can do some things for a certain amount of minutes and every day they’re doing a little bit more or they’re doing it a little bit better.* (Belinda, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

*Maybe a confidence thing for some kids who can’t sit still during classroom activities.* (Christopher, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

*Just the discipline of it all. The discipline of being able to maintain quiet and keep your body still.* (Dianne, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

More commonly, the teachers across all cohorts made general comments about the relaxing, calming and centring effects of the practice as this was something observable and also an aspect that some students had been forthcoming about sharing aloud: ‘Some children have made comments like, “I really needed that today”, “I felt really good after that...”’ (Mary, Year 4 Teacher, 2014). Several teachers in 2016 believed the opportunity was particularly valuable for boys, who

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\(^3\) Mean composite score generated from responses to five 5-point Likert scale questions: I like being me; I am thankful for my life; I know I am loved; I am a peaceful person; I make good decisions. M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation. The higher the mean composite score the more favourable the attitude across the sample in terms of relationship with self.
they felt could have a lot of excess energy and who they believed might be less likely to independently seek out meditation-type activities as a means of calming and centring themselves.

In addition to a short-term calming effect, most teachers discussed the potential benefits they felt that practising Christian Meditation might offer for students’ mental and emotional wellbeing more broadly:

*The meditation, the stillness, for that wellbeing, the opportunity to be prayerful if they choose.* (Brianna, Year 6 Teacher, 2016).

*Just sit and see what happens within themselves, within their mind and their heart – just allowing whatever comes, to come.* (Joy, Year 6 Teacher, 2016).

It was notable that the 2016 cohort of teachers were most conversant in the use of the term ‘wellbeing’, perhaps reflecting the growing discourse and emphasis upon student wellbeing in Australian Catholic schools (Graham et al., 2014).

The teachers across all cohorts also talked about meditation as a being a ‘tool’ or ‘skill’ that students were gaining, which they could make use of to help them independently balance and maintain their emotional wellbeing.

*I think that it gives them the skill then...when they’re on their own…it may give them that time to just release some tension*… (Christina, Year 5 Teacher, 2015).

Some teachers, like Christina here, talked about the advantages of this tool in the present, but many, particularly those in 2016, framed this in terms of the students’ future lives, as something they ‘might fall back on later in life...a skill set that a percentage of children will carry with them for the rest of their days’ (Andrea, Year 6 Teacher, 2016). The teachers reflected that because the students are ‘growing up with it, it will be something that’s just natural for them’ (Francesca, Year 6 Teacher, 2016) and hoped that it might help the students ‘become more accepting of themselves over time’ (Joy, Year 6 Teacher, 2016). The 2016 cohort of teachers in particular, then, referred to what they sometimes termed the ‘backdated success’ of Christian Meditation. The narratives of the 2016 teachers may have been particularly future-oriented because they were reflecting on the fact that the Year 6 students would shortly be leaving primary school, and as such they were thinking consciously about the skills and attributes that they might take with them as they go forward in life.

The data from the 2015 student focus groups and the 2016 student survey offer unique windows into the students’ perspectives of the impact of Christian
Meditation on themselves. Overwhelmingly, across the focus groups, the students used positive words such as happy, calm, great, relaxed and refreshed to describe how they feel during and immediately after practising Christian Meditation. Some students added that they felt free, focused, safe, light and de-stressed, with one student describing, ‘I feel like I just got out of the ocean on a hot day’ (Lismore, School 1). Echoing the teachers’ comments then, what many of the students appreciated was the opportunity to relax and re-centre themselves amidst the social intensity of school life.

I also like not talking to anyone else and just resting for a little bit. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 4)

You won’t feel as crazy as before - we do it after recess. (Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 1)

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. (Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 5)

Most students in the focus groups described this relaxing effect as having positive personal benefits. For instance, many students found the calming effect of Christian Meditation to be helpful in the short-term for diffusing and managing their emotions, particularly anger, stress or frustration, or as time to help free themselves of their worries.

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

It’s a time to relax and let all of your worries off your shoulders. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 1)

It’s when you block out all the bad things and you just calm down. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 6, Group A)

Occasionally students described using the time to reflect upon those things they are grateful for in their lives, an approach known in wider literature to help bolster a sense of happiness:

I like the fact that it is just a time were you get to sit down, relax and reflect on my great mates, great teacher, great relatives and my kind, caring and loving family. (Year 6 Boy, Lismore (2016 survey response))
In these ways, the students seem to endorse the teachers’ beliefs that Christian Meditation is useful in helping them to balance their emotional wellbeing in the present.

In addition, students, both in the focus groups and in the open-ended comments at the end of the 2016 survey, described finding the calming influence of Christian Meditation helpful in readying them to concentrate and focus on their school work. Many students described this in an immediate way – they found themselves better able to concentrate when they were calm after meditating. Others described this effect in a more sustained way, suggesting that through the regular practise of Christian Meditation, they had learned to become better at concentrating.

*It’s been really hard for me to concentrate and focus on what we’re going to do… so it really helped me focus. (Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 5)*

*It helps students like me to concentrate more on their school work and also things at home as well (Year 6 Boy, Sydney)*

Despite these positive descriptions, the 2016 survey responses to the statement, ‘Christian Meditation has helped me concentrate on my school work’ were fairly mixed. While 42% per cent of Lismore students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In Sydney, 35% of students agreed or strongly agreed, and 33% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Considering these Diocesan differences alongside those for relationships to God above, it may be that Sydney students prefaced or focused upon the religious aspects of the practice, whereas students in Lismore made greater connections to the wider wellbeing or practical benefits.

In general though, students seemed to find it difficult to directly answer the survey questions regarding whether Christian Meditation might have had any impact upon their personal wellbeing. In the 2016 survey the students largely reiterated their responses from Year 4 across all survey items relating to ‘relationship with Self’, and the most frequent response to the question inquiring whether practising Christian Meditation had helped them to be a happier person was, ‘I’m not sure’ (34% of Lismore students; 38% of Sydney students). Considering this alongside the data from the focus groups suggests that the majority of students feel calm during and immediately after meditating, but they were unsure whether this had an impact on their way of being more broadly or over the longer term. There were just a few comments in the focus groups in which students indicated positive sustained personal change:
I’ve become a lot more patient with things…[with] myself and
taking time to do other things. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore,
School 1)

I think because it made me a better kid. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 2)

However, one further comment, shared unprompted as the ‘most important
message’ by one of the Year 6 students in the 2016 survey, captures the way the
religious basis of Christian Meditation potentially could help strengthen a student’s
sense of self.

Christian Meditation strengthens you and builds and fixes your
connection with God and his creations. It helps you appreciate
what God has given you. (Year 6 Girl, Sydney)

Like the findings relating to student spirituality, it is important to note that there
were some students who felt the practice had ‘no effect…’ on them personally (Year
5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 6, Group C) and had not brought about any
changes in them ‘at all’ (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 5, Group B), neither in
the short or long term. These may have been students who did not like the practice,
and who consequently chose not to engage in it fully. It also emerged that some
students felt forced to do the practice and consequently the practice could possibly
have a negative impact upon their emotions: ‘Most of the time I don’t really bother
but I feel angry when I do it’ (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 5, Group B). The
potentially negative impact of the practice was reinforced in the 2016 survey where
a sub-sample of students (12% Lismore Diocese; 4% from Sydney Diocese) selected
‘strongly disagree’ to the statement ‘Christian Meditation helps me to be a happier
person.’ These students may have been being particularly negative because they
did not like meditating or did not support the practice. Alternatively, their selections
may reflect that they found Christian Meditation to be frustrating experience or a
recurrent point of tension in their day.

The compulsory nature of the group practice was mentioned by other students who
explained that, although they generally liked it, at certain times they were not in the
right state of mind and struggled to access the positive benefits: ‘I find that if you
are in an angry mood when you do the meditation, you will not really do the
meditation properly, you will just brood over what had just been happening…’ (Year
6 Girl, Lismore). A few students in the focus groups also mentioned that they would
often find themselves thinking of lost loved ones during meditation, which could
leave them feeling sad. In this vein, in the 2016 survey two students took the
opportunity to make anonymous comments sharing that they found closing their
eyes extremely difficult because they found it impossible to stop unwanted difficult thoughts arising:

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. I can’t close my eyes for 5 minutes. Are you crazy? I’ve had to deal with enough in my life so you shouldn’t make it harder for kids after they’ve dealt with so much their whole life. (Year 6 Boy, Lismore)

It would be seem possible that Christian Meditation if engaged in deeply and fully (i.e., to work to really clear the mind and focus on the mantra), could be helpful for these students. However, within the compulsory setting of the classroom this potential may be compromised through the lack of autonomy students have over how they personally engage with the practice and for how long (i.e. being able to stop at the point when they lose focus on the mantra and traumatic thoughts arise). While these comments should not detract from the positive wellbeing benefits experienced by the majority of students, there is a risk in assuming that a potentially beneficial practice will be a positive experience for all. (Some practical suggestions for addressing these issues are discussed in the Practical Issues section).

Students’ Relationships with Others

At the outset of the study, the majority of Year 4 students self-reported strong relationships with friends, family and teachers (Mean composite score from survey items relating to ‘Relationship with others’: M = 4.33, SD = 0.54). When the teachers were questioned about these aspects at the end of each school year, they felt any changes in student behaviour towards others could not be attributed solely to Christian Meditation:

I can’t draw any links, it’s very hard. There’s been changes in behaviours, but it’s hard to know, did it start at around that time, and did the meditation have any influence on that? I’m not sure. (Christopher, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

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4 Mean composite score generated from responses to six 5-point Likert scale questions: I forgive people who have hurt me; I am kind to my friends; I am kind to my family; I am kind to my teacher; I feel like I belong at school; Other people are kind to me. M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation. The higher the mean composite score the more favourable the attitude across the sample in terms of relationship with others.
I couldn’t specifically say that that’s what it was. (Christina, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

However, most teachers did feel that the settling effect of Christian Meditation had a positive influence on student interactions immediately afterwards, helping them to interact with one another more calmly and defuse social tensions:

I think particularly after Christian Meditation they are very patient with one another in how they respond to each other or how they communicate with one another and they become very kind and caring and are more able to stop and listen to each other. (Margaret, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

They would come in, there would inevitably have been issues on the playground...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... (Shana, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

In particular, when Christian Meditation was undertaken after recess or lunch the teachers felt it offered an opportunity for students to reflect upon peer issues and playground disputes and to resolve these more calmly. Or, as one teacher termed it, ‘find a Christian way of dealing with relationship issues’ (Joy, Year 6 Teacher, 2016).

In the 2015 focus groups the students echoed these ideas. The social intensity of the students’ break and lunch times emerged particularly strongly, with arguments and disagreements with friends and peers appearing to be forefront in the students’ minds. Therefore, from the outset of the focus groups, unprompted, many students reiterated the teachers’ explanations about the way Christian Meditation helped to calm the class following break times and helped dissipate tension, anger and upset:

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. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 3)

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. (Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 3, Group A)
A few students attributed these changes not just to the calming effects of Christian Meditation, but 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’ (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 6, Group D).

Some teachers and students also discussed that over time, repeatedly working through relational issues in a calmer (or more Christian) manner, alongside the act of meditating as a group, could help bring the class together, and foster a sense of class comradeship:

I think it brings the class together. (Year 5 Focus Group, 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. It’s a lot easier to talk to everyone. (Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 4)

The class atmosphere has changed...Me and the kids together. The whole team. ...we’re all doing the same thing. I can’t think of any other time in the day where that would happen in the classroom. I think that’s a really important aspect of it. (Deborah, Year 4 Teacher, 2014).

The majority of the data gathered both from the teachers and the students referred, not unsurprisingly, to relationships with others in the school context. However, a few students described using the Christian Meditation technique in other situations, such as at home, where they perceived it helped in 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’ (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 1).

There were a number of students, particularly in Sydney, who did not feel Christian Meditation affected their relationships with other people. This, of course, included those students who did not like the practice, but some other students as well: ‘It’s ways to make you calm yourself and with God, not with people around you’ (Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 3, Group A). However, it seemed that for many of the students the reflection and discussion they engaged in during the focus groups provided a unique opportunity for them to consider a potential connection:

Sometimes I guess... it sort of does because you’re calm and relaxed. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 5, Group A)
Yeah, I guess so, because you feel more patient with your friends. (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 6, Group B)

Without the benefit of group discussion, this potential connection may have been lost for the Year 6 students when they completed the survey. Although the majority, like in Year 4, responded positively to statements relating to their relationships with others, they were uncertain over the impact of Christian Meditation in these regards. For instance, the most frequent response to the question inquiring whether practising Christian Meditation had helped them to be a kinder person was, ‘I’m not sure’ (38% of Lismore students, 41% of Sydney students). Alternatively, the prevalence of this response may genuinely capture the likelihood that Christian Meditation may at some times, or in some ways, impact upon their relationships with others, but is unlikely to be the sole influence.

Overall, the relational benefits for students arise largely as an extension of the beneficial effects of the practice upon themselves: they feel relaxed, so can be more patient with one another; they calm down, so can resolve their disagreements more positively. Accordingly, there was some indication from Lismore Diocese that if the practice had a negative effect on a student, this could create a less positive cycle of relational energy: ‘Like someone might not like meditation and then they have to do it and then they get angry…and like aggro…’ (Year 5 Focus Group, Lismore, School 3). For other students, their difficulty in engaging in the practice could act as a point of tension that could have negative repercussions for their relationship with their teachers:

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

Kids shouldn’t have to deal with teachers screaming at them telling them to close their eyes and some teachers even keep their students in to practise meditation in their lunch time. (Year 6 Boy, Lismore)

In addition to impacting upon the student-teacher relationship, these negative experiences might undermine these students’ relationships at school in other ways. For instance, rather than a feeling of class comradeship they may feel as though they do not belong. By and large though, it was found that Christian Meditation had a potentially beneficial effect upon most students’ relationships with others, including the cohesion of the class for most students, although the extent to which any relational benefits might be sustained overtime were inconclusive.
Summary of Key Findings: Students’ Personal and Social Relationships

- Most students, both in Year 4 and Year 6, reported strong, positive relationships with themselves and others.
- Practising Christian Meditation has a positive calming and centring effect on the vast majority of students, and this offers some immediate benefits for their personal wellbeing and emotional management.
- The calming effect of Christian Meditation offers benefits for inter-student relations and class cohesion. It can be particularly helpful after the social intensity of break times (recess and lunch).
- Teachers believe that Christian Meditation is a valuable tool for students to help balance their wellbeing in the present and future.
- Christian Meditation can help students concentrate on their school work. This benefit was mainly felt immediately after meditating, but some students noticed an improvement in their ability to concentrate more generally.
- The process of engaging in open-ended discussion about the practice (for example, about the potential relational benefits) seemed to be a valuable reflective experience for the students.
- Some students have difficulty keeping sad memories or difficult thoughts at bay when they close their eyes to meditate.
- Some students feel ‘forced’ to do the practice which has a negative influence upon how they view and experience Christian Meditation, and a possible negative impact on their wellbeing and/or relationships at school.

Discussion: Students’ Personal and Social Relationships

The findings indicate that Christian Meditation at school can help students of this age group to regulate their emotional wellbeing, improve peer-relations and improve their concentration. Collectively, these aspects likely engender a positive cycle, with existing literature indicating that student wellbeing, their relationships and academic engagement are inter-related (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Graham et al., 2014). These are incredibly valuable benefits for students in their immediate lives at school, as well as to potentially encompass into their way of being as they grow. Although the quantitative data was fairly inconclusive, the substantial qualitative evidence suggests benefits occurred in the short-term for many students and can grow cumulatively over a longer period of time. Therefore, given the growing wellbeing agenda in schools, which recognises the importance of developing students’ skills to regulate and manage their social and emotional wellbeing to help them thrive in the modern world (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2015; Eckersley et al., 2005; MCEETYA, 2008; Redmond et al., 2013; Wyn, 2007), Christian Meditation emerges as a very valuable practice for schools to adopt and sustain.
Despite these positive outcomes, there were some emergent issues surrounding the compulsory nature of Christian Meditation in the school setting. For those students who strongly disliked it, found it very difficult or who had experienced trauma, there were indications that the practice might have a negative influence upon their wellbeing and relationships at school. It would be very rare for any intervention to benefit all students, yet the potential for the practice to have negative rather than just a neutral or non-effect for some students signals the importance of continuing to refine best practice.

Recent research indicates the importance of student participation and agency for fostering student wellbeing (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Graham et al., 2014). While Christian Meditation ostensibly offers a level of autonomy in how students connect to God and the opportunity to personalise the practice (e.g., to use an alternative mantra, or no mantra), the students do not have any choice over whether they meditate or not. It is interesting to consider this in relation to other health and wellbeing activities at school, such as physical education, for which students can usually have parental or medical permission to opt out, even if this might seem to be at the sacrifice to their physical health.

In the previous section on ‘Students’ Spirituality and Religiosity’ it was concluded that it may be beneficial to more clearly position the practice of Christian Meditation as a means of facilitating students’ spirituality in a broad, holistic sense. Contemporary notions of children’s spirituality encompass their relationships with themselves and with the others (de Souza & Hyde, 2007; Fisher, 2006a; Flanagan et al., 2012; Hay & Nye, 1998; Moriarty, 2011; Natsis, 2017; Sewell, 2009), although little evidence was gathered in this study of teachers or students articulating this connection in spiritual terms. Further, many of the teachers and students were hesitant to attribute relational benefits to the practice of Christian Meditation, despite recurrent descriptions of improved inter-student conflict resolution and class cohesion. However, like the earlier exploration of other aspects of student spirituality, it seemed that through the process of reflecting and discussing the effects of Christian Meditation during the interviews and focus groups many students and teachers began to consider the relational benefits they had implicitly observed or experienced. This reinforces the above discussion, suggesting that opportunities to explore and discuss the concept of spirituality may be an important accompaniment to the practice of Christian Meditation in schools. Existing research would appear to support this idea, demonstrating that when given the opportunity, students and teachers recognise and appreciate the importance of getting to know the inner self and engaging in deeper philosophical thinking (Lynch, 2015; Yee-Ling, 2012). Engaging in such thinking in relation to the practice of Christian Meditation might help to underscore the personal and social benefits that many students are in.
fact experiencing, and perhaps to give a new sense of purpose to the practice for those students who dislike or feel disengaged from it.
4. Christian Meditation and Teachers

In recognition of the role teachers’ own spiritual journeys play in how they view and approach student spirituality (Fisher, 2009; Kennedy & Duncan, 2006; Rogers & Hill, 2002; Stolberg, 2008) as well as the interconnectivity between teacher and student wellbeing (Graham et al., 2014; McCallum & Price, 2010; Roffey, 2012; Spilt et al., 2011), the teacher interviews invited the teachers to reflect upon any benefits they had experienced through the practice of Christian Meditation.

While all teachers enjoyed the peacefulness Christian Meditation brought to the classroom, teachers often felt they had a duty to supervise the class and so were less able enter a fully meditative state and reap the full benefits of meditation during class time.

To tell you the truth I haven’t actually been able to meditate with the kids. I’ve been more on crowd control. So I haven’t actually observed any personal changes. (Scott, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

I have to be honest, I don’t feel that I myself am meditating as deeply as I should be because I’m more of a caretaker role. (Cathy, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

This seemed to be particularly voiced by the 2014 cohort of teachers and became less emphasised over the three years of the study. Given that the numbers of students struggling to engage with the practice remained fairly consistent, this suggests that the teachers became more confident in managing the group practice.

Despite not always being able to meditate as deeply as they might be able to outside of the classroom, many teachers still felt that the peacefulness in the classroom had benefits for them, particularly in terms of their wellbeing and their relationships with the students. They talked about the way the practice helped to reduce their stress levels, helped them to appreciate their lives, better understand their own emotions and helped them to be calmer and more patient in their interactions with the students afterwards.

I think I’d find that if I missed my eight minutes I cannot be as patient with the children. I can really notice the difference. (Belinda, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

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, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)
Many teachers described their own difficulties in remaining still, and trying to clear their mind, particularly in the middle of a busy workday, highlighting that the practice is a challenging process, regardless of age. In this sense the practice is something of social leveller, and the teachers described feeling the shared experience brought them closer to their class. Further, their own on-going experience of the challenge of the practice helped them to feel greater empathy for their students’ efforts, offering a foundation for a more caring relationship.

“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).

It’s probably helped me …to relate to the children because I can see just even for sixty seconds how hard it is… so I’ve probably been able to maybe be a lot more patient with those kids… (Deborah, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

Alongside this, several of the teachers intimated that facilitating the process of Christian Meditation and watching the students benefit and progress in the practice, offered them a sense of personal and professional fulfilment:

“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, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

In addition to these kinds of personal and relational gains, some teachers had noticed personal spiritual benefits emerging from practising in the school context, particularly an expansion of their own understandings of prayer. In general, there was a sense that the teachers felt grateful to have the chance to explore and grow their own spirituality while in the workplace.

“I think it’s given me an opportunity as a human being, not just as a teacher, to be able to form my relationship with God even though I’m at work in my professional faith with my professional face on, I’m still able to move myself into personal time with God. That doesn’t happen in a lot of places. (Belinda, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

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, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)
Not all teachers felt a spiritual connection though, and some felt that, having experienced it, the practice was really more about the mindfulness benefits than God and prayer. In addition, none of the teachers in 2015 or 2016 felt the practice had impacted upon their relationship with the Catholic Church. However, this contrasted quite considerably with those teachers from 2014. A number of the 2014 teachers described that they had not previously associated meditation with the Catholic Church, and were appreciative of the Church’s willingness to embrace meditation as a new form of prayer with particular benefits for contemporary life.

_I thought it was nice that the Catholic Church was prepared to take this on board, and invest in helping children to make that connection with Church and faith and their own mental health too._ (Sandra, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

That there was such a divide between the cohorts in respect to their relations with the Catholic Church may reflect that the practice of Christian Meditation was new to most of the schools, and consequently to many teachers in 2014. In addition, as has been mentioned previously, all of the teachers in 2014 had attended the Christian Meditation training. As part of the training they learned about the historical roots of the practice and this may have helped build greater connections between the practice and the Church.

In addition to experiencing Christian Meditation at school, some teachers had been inspired to incorporate the practice into their daily routine beyond the classroom and these teachers often described quite profound personal changes, with particular benefits in terms of their relationships with God and their own personal wellbeing.

_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)

_If I give myself a few minutes just to sit in silence, meditate, then everything seems clearer. That’s really impacted on my life._ (Belinda, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

_...usually I finish my day, I sit at my desk quietly and close my eyes and spend a few minutes before I go home because when we get home there’s all these other things that have to be done...I look for those couple of minutes here and there..._ (Mary, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

Overall, despite remaining in a supervisory role, the practice of Christian Meditation in the school setting was found to benefit teachers’ wellbeing, stress levels and their
relational engagement with their students. Where they are inspired to adopt the practice into their lives more broadly these wellbeing benefits may become more profound, alongside a deepening of their faith.

**Summary of Key Findings: Teachers and Christian Meditation**

- When facilitating Christian Meditation at school it is not always possible for teachers to meditate fully. However, this seems to become easier as the students and/or teachers become more experienced.
- Regardless of whether they can meditate deeply in the classroom context, the practice of Christian Meditation at school seems to be beneficial for teachers’ wellbeing, stress levels and interactions with their students.
- Many teachers appreciate the opportunity to engage with Christian Meditation and the associated opportunity to develop their 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.

**Discussion: Christian Meditation and Teachers**

In comparison to the findings exploring the impact of Christian Meditation upon students, the teacher data was much more conclusive. Despite some potential tensions around their supervisory duties in the classroom, all of the teachers who participated in an interview enjoyed the practice of Christian meditation at school and described experiencing personal, relational and spiritual benefits even if their practice was restricted to the classroom setting alone. In this respect, the teacher data further validates and underscores the earlier assertion about the value of practicing Christian Meditation in schools.

This value is strengthened further when considered in relation to literature indicating issues of teacher wellbeing, stress and burnout in Australian schools (Fetherson & Lummis, 2012; Kearney, 2014; Queensland Government, 2016). Spiritual engagement aside, the opportunity simply to pause within their day alongside the sense of togetherness this generated for teachers with their students would seem to be an easy way to help contribute to raising teacher wellbeing in the workplace. The potential of the practice to also contribute to teachers’ personal spiritual engagement and personal emotional balance then offers added benefits for teachers’ wellbeing both personally and professionally. These benefits then have the potential to become further-fold through the now well-recognised connections between teacher and student wellbeing (Graham et al., 2014; McCallum & Price,
2010; Roffey, 2012; Spilt et al., 2011) and indications of a similar link in nurturing teacher and students’ spirituality (Fisher, 2009; Rogers & Hill, 2002; Stolberg, 2008).
5. Practical Issues

This final section shares insights from the students and teachers regarding the practical issues of practising Christian Meditation in the classroom setting. These are distilled into recommendations, with the aim of improving practice in the participating schools and supporting others seeking to implement Christian Meditation in their school. As with the above sections, the data in this section is drawn from all components of the study: the student surveys in 2014 and 2016; the interviews with the Year 4-6 teachers; and the focus groups with the students when they were in Year 5.

The Year 4 survey asked students whether they had any prior experience of Christian Meditation. These results indicated that students who reported having tried Christian Meditation before scored significantly higher on their attitude to stillness/silence, and relationships with God, self, others and Church than those Year 4 students who had never practiced Christian Meditation. However, as the above findings have highlighted, these positive associations were not necessarily found for the Year 6 students following three years of practising Christian Meditation in the classroom. This suggests that aspects of practising in the classroom environment may dilute or undermine some of the potential benefits of the practice. The findings shared below point to some reasons why this might be the case and offer recommendations for improving practice in schools.

School Distractions and Interruptions

Teachers highlighted that the on-going distractions and interruptions that occur in the school setting – people walking around, the intercom, phones ringing, knocks at the door, other classes doing noisy activities – were an issue when trying to conduct Christian Meditation with their class. Some teachers took the phone off the hook, or had a sign for their door, and others worked with the students to try to help them to filter out distractions:

I’ll just quietly remind them that we’re not worrying about the noise around us and we’re talking to God… noise is fairly constant in the school and so they’re really good at not getting distracted but it takes a while. (Miriam, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

Some teachers also described the busyness of school life, in which it could be easy to run out of time for meditation and for the routine of the practice to be lost. This seemed to be particularly the case in 2015, suggesting that the enthusiasm of 2014 may have initially waned, but then schools may have responded to findings from the study and moved to prioritising meditation on a regular, often daily, basis again in 2016.
A recurrent suggestion from teachers that might help to reduce distractions and maintain the routine of regular meditative practice was to set aside a time each day when the whole school would be meditating. However, other teachers cautioned for the need to retain ‘professional judgement’ (Beth, 2015) - to retain ‘a certain amount of freedom’ (Bianca, 2016) and allow teachers ‘to find the right time for the kids’ (Nicole, 2015). A number of teachers explained that it is important to have the ‘flexibility each day if the kids are struggling then you can cut it short; still do it but cut it’ (Sarah, Year 5 Teacher, 2015). This flexibility would seem to be particularly pertinent in light of the sentiments above from students about feeling ‘forced’ to meditate when they may not always be in the right frame of mind. As one student reiterated: ‘Teachers force a time that children must sit still for instead of giving the children free choice of if they want to meditate for 1 minute or 5 minutes...’ (Year 6 Boy, Lismore). One way forward may be for schools to trial having a set ‘quiet time’ each day, when there will be no announcements or distractions. Within this time teachers could use their judgement about the length of time their class meditates for on any given day and use any remaining time for another quiet class activity such as reading. It may be possible to extend some flexibility on an individual level to students as well, see section below on ‘Difficulties Remaining Still and Silent’ for ideas.

**Recommendation:** Trial a school-wide ‘quiet time’ each day to enable classes to practise Christian Meditation without distraction or engage in an alternate quiet activity.

**Difficulties Remaining Still and Silent**

Students did not tend to mention the sorts of school-wide distractions discussed above. Instead, most students described their personal difficulties in remaining still and silent. This seemed to be something nearly all students struggled with some of the time, or had struggled with initially. Indeed, in the student surveys it emerged that compared to when they were in Year 4, the Year 6 students scored significantly lower on feeling relaxed when being still, p = .001. This perhaps reflects their greater experience of trying to remain still and silent and the difficulties they have encountered in doing so. That said, in response the question, ‘When I am still I feel more relaxed’, the Year 6 students most frequently selected ‘most of the time’ (27%). In addition, the most frequent response was ‘all the time’ (30% of the Year 6 sample) to the statement, ‘I like it when the class is silent with me.’

A few teachers suggested it would be beneficial to start the practice earlier in school life - when the students are as young as possible: ‘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, Year 5 Teacher, 2015). The evidence from the study would appear to support this idea for most students, and a large number of students and teachers felt compelled to offer their reassurance that remaining still and silent does get easier with time.

Don't give up on meditating...because if you keep trying to meditate God WILL speak to you, you WILL relax and you WILL improve at being a proper person. (Year 6 Boy, Lismore)

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)

Start slowly...it's not going to work immediately...there are going to be children who will resist for months and months… (Belinda, Year 4 Teacher, 2014)

[Don’t] expect too much because when we first started we were lucky to get 30 seconds out of some groups...start off with little increments… (Kim, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

In addition to difficulties remaining still and silent, quite a number of students and teachers reported that there were students who had difficulty keeping their eyes closed. For many of these students it seemed to be an issue of concentration or alternatively of embarrassment or lack of trust in others in the classroom. However, in the 2016 survey a couple of students explained that they found it impossible to avoid difficult thoughts arising when they closed their eyes (see ‘Students’ Relationships with Themselves’).

Many teachers offered modifications of the practice for students who had difficulty with keeping their eyes closed, as well as for students who did not connect with its Christian basis. However, amongst the 2016 cohort of teachers in particular, it emerged that several teachers had deviated quite considerably from the standard protocol for Christian Meditation in an effort to engage their students, such as using guided meditation or playing music. These approaches were not always popular with students though: ‘My teacher annoys me because she reads out these weird little cards while I’m trying to meditate so yeah, there is no point in doing it unless you’re alone…’ (Year 6 Boy, Lismore). Some teachers also raised concerns that too much deviation or an overemphasis of the relaxation benefits might risk the Christian basis and reverent nature of the experience becoming lost. Some suitable modifications that teachers had tried for students who really struggle to keep their
eyes closed suggested included allowing students to put their head down on the desk, to focus on a candle or to select a pleasant image of their choice that they wish to look at. These sorts of approaches do not deviate too far from the process of Christian Meditation and also encourage the engagement of all students by allowing a small sense of agency in how they undertake the practice.

When students had difficulty remaining still, silent or keeping their eyes closed and began to misbehave during the practice, this could affect not only their meditation, but the concentration of other students in the class. Some students shared their frustration at their fellow students who they felt did not take the practice seriously: ‘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”’ (Year 5 Focus Group, Sydney, School 3, Group B). Similarly, some teachers explained that their students had told them ‘that as soon as one or two people start to be silly then it loses the specialness of it’ (Shana, Year 5 Teacher, 2015). Some teachers discussed this problem at considerable length, because they found it difficult to know how best to intervene without disrupting the meditation practice further:

> What I find the most difficult...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? (Tim, Year 5 Teacher, 2015)

Some teachers described trying to bring everyone’s attention back to the mantra: ‘As soon as they’ll lose it...you’d say, “You got distracted, remember our mantra” [but] the majority of the time, once they’ve lost it, they’re lost it, they can’t get it back’ (Mark, Year 5 Teacher, 2015). Other teachers shared with their class their own personal difficulties in remaining still, in an effort to try to motivate the students to keep trying: ‘I think all of that helped them to think, “Oh, it’s okay if I can’t do that either...”’ (Kylie, Year 5 Teacher, 2015). A number of the teachers also felt that it was important that the teacher role-modelled their engagement in the practice, ‘I think that’s helped I guess make, especially the boys, probably be a bit more comfortable in doing it’ (Todd, Year 5 Teacher, 2015).

Another way forward may be to reconsider the ‘target’ number of minutes that classes are recommended to aim for. It is commonly suggested that classes work towards a target based upon the students’ age – so 9-10 minutes for 9-10 year old students. However, this study found little support from students for these longer periods of meditation:
I have always been good at meditating so I don’t really mind doing it. I can’t tell whether it helps me to be a better person but I do know that it’s nice to relax after a busy day at school. I find that meditation goes really quick if it is for under 5 minutes but any more and I can lose concentration. (Year 6 Girl, Lismore)

I enjoyed it a tiny bit. Not to be rude but after a while it gets really boring, the 5-7 minutes were fine but when we get to 10 the rest of the class starts to get fidgety and they ruin the silence which is why I said I don’t really like doing meditation with my class… (Year 6 Girl, Sydney)

While some classes did regularly achieve the age targets over the course of the study, no evidence was gathered of the positive benefits being hampered by classes meditating for slightly shorter periods of time (although this would be a valuable avenue for further longitudinal study in schools). Given the student difficulties reported above and issues of behaviour management, it may be more appropriate to keep the length of the meditation practice at a level at which the majority of students remain positive and confident about their ability to meditate. Perhaps reframing the ‘target’ number of minutes as ‘maximum’ lengths, or shifting the target from students’ age to their year level (e.g. 5 minutes for Year 5 students) would help in maintaining a positive sense of accomplishment for students and teachers in the school context.

**Recommendation:** 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.

**Recommendation:** 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.

**General Useful Advice**

Three further points emerged consistently from the teacher and students:

- Students’ enthusiasm for the meditation ‘kit’;
- The need for further information for students about Christian Meditation; and
- The importance of the Christian Meditation in Schools training.
A range of resources were in use across the different classrooms including chimes, gongs, candles, pictures, music and a timing app, and there was a lot of enthusiasm for this meditation ‘kit’. In 2014 and 2015 in particular the teachers explained how much the students enjoyed the sense of ownership in setting these up in preparation for their meditation, with most classes operating a roster so that all students got the opportunity regularly. Many teachers recommended that any other schools looking to implement a Christian Meditation program begin by investing in some resources for each class.

**Recommendation:** Invest in some special resources for each class that are only used at Christian Meditation time.

At various times throughout the study, both students and teachers indicated that they felt the students needed more information about meditation to help them better engage with the practice and to persevere when they encounter difficulties. As has been discussed in the sections above, there was generally little discussion taking place in the classrooms about Christian Meditation, perhaps, as mentioned above, due to an impression some teachers may have taken from the Christian Meditation in Schools training that they were not to ask students too many questions about their experience of Christian Meditation. However, it would be possible to provide students with valuable information about the practice, without impacting upon student privacy or the sacredness of their experiences during the practice. In line with the findings discussed in the section on ‘Students’ Spirituality and Religiosity’, it would seem beneficial to offer students the opportunity to explore the concept of spirituality, in addition to providing students with information about the secular health and wellbeing benefits of the practice and more detail on the history and expansion of Christian Meditation specifically. Age-appropriate information / discussion topics that might address some of the issues encountered by the students in this study include:

- Explaining that just as we try to eat healthily and do exercise for our bodies, meditation is an important form of exercise for our minds. It is important for everyone, not just those who are feeling stressed.

- Explaining that it is OK to be distracted from the mantra – in fact, that is part of the exercise! Remind students that as soon as they realise they’ve become distracted to just gently return their focus to the mantra. Similarly, if they feel an itch, try to acknowledge it and then return their focus to the mantra. Explain that very time they do this they’re repeating the exercise. Where
swimming laps in a pool builds fitness and lifting a weight builds muscles, meditation is an exercise for the mind that builds concentration, resilience, discipline and mindfulness.

• Explaining that in the past the importance of healthy eating and exercise were not so well known and so the average person was unlikely to, for example, go jogging. Nowadays, of course, we do not think this is strange! The importance of meditation has only been realised more recently and so it is just beginning to be adopted more widely.

• Helping students to investigate some research on the benefits of meditation (meditation techniques generally as well as Christian meditation specifically). Particularly inspiring research might be the findings from the groundbreaking Harvard MRI studies that have demonstrated meditation builds ‘grey matter’ – that meditation can actually help physically build or more positively wire the brain (see: http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2011/01/eight-weeks-to-a-better-brain/).

• Learning about the history of Christian Meditation.

• Exploring different forms of prayer.

• Exploring the concept of spirituality.

• Exploring sites such as the World Community for Christian Meditation (see: http://wccm.org) to learn how others practice Christian Meditation in different parts of the world.

• Hearing how other people (or other children) describe their spiritual connections with God through the practice of Christian Meditation (such as some of the findings from this research or research by Keating, 2017a,b).

The findings suggest that revisiting this information regularly, such as at the start of each school year, may be helpful in consolidating and expanding students’ understandings and re-enthusing them towards the practice.

**Recommendation:** Develop some brief educational materials / discussion sheets targeted to different age groups to accompany the practice of Christian Meditation in schools.

Last of all, the value of the Christian Meditation in Schools training has emerged consistently throughout the findings presented above. It was evident that when
teachers had attended the training they felt more informed about the background to the practice, more confident in the Christian basis of the practice, gained confidence in facilitating the practice in the classroom, and seemed to have a deeper connection or enthusiasm for the practice. Further, when teachers have the necessary training they may be more likely to help students find suitable alternative ways to engage with the practice if required. Certainly, those teachers in the study who had undertaken the training highly recommended it as an important starting point for schools, suggesting that it involve the whole staff including, if possible, the casual teachers.

**Recommendation:** Provide the opportunity for all teachers to attend the Christian Meditation in Schools training.
Conclusion

This document has presented, explored and discussed the consolidated findings from the annual teacher interviews, student focus groups and the pre- and post-program student surveys. Overall, it has been highlighted that Christian Meditation is a positive experience for most students and for all teachers, with particular benefits for students’ and teachers’ personal relationships with God and their ability to handle the social intensity and busyness of daily school life. Despite the general positivity, there was little conclusive longitudinal data gathered from the survey, with considerable variation in the students’ responses and many students responding ‘I’m not sure’ to statements regarding whether or not the practice of Christian Meditation over time may have helped them. This likely highlights the genuine difficulty in isolating or attributing the contribution of Christian Meditation to their life particularly during the rapid growth, change and extensive learning that takes place during childhood and adolescence. Despite this, by considering the data gathered during all aspects of the study, it is possible to get a rich picture of the benefits and challenges both in the immediate and longer term. These are summarised here under the research questions guiding the study:

1. The practice of Christian Meditation generally seemed to have a positive impact upon students’ relationship with God over time. Many students described feeling God’s presence or communicating with God while meditating and some students described (or were observed as having) quite profound experiences in these regards, all of which likely contributed to an enhanced relationship, even if this might not be experienced every time they meditated in the classroom context. Not all students experienced an enhanced relationship though, some students preferred the relaxation or wellbeing benefits and a small proportion of students did not like the practice at all or persistently found it too difficult to experience any positive benefits. If teachers were able to meditate a little alongside their students (generally towards the end of the school year or with the older students) then they perceived the practice had a beneficial impact on their own relationship with God, and they highly appreciated the opportunity the practice offered to further their faith in the workplace.
2. Practising Christian Meditation in the school setting seemed to offer some wellbeing benefits for both students and teachers, even if it was difficult to wholly articulate this in terms of their relationship with ‘self’. Many students were clear that they felt calmer and more relaxed immediately after meditating, and that this centring effect could help reduce strong feelings or concentrate on their school work. Some students felt the practice had improved their ability to concentrate over time. However, most students were unsure if any positive effects were sustained over time. Despite this lack of evidence, it was evident that many had now mastered a tool they could potentially appropriate at times of need to help them balance their emotions and wellbeing both in the present and potentially into the future. All teachers perceived the peacefulness and calming effect to be personally and professionally beneficial to them, and there was a sense it contributed to their professional wellbeing. The wellbeing effects seemed to be particularly elevated for teachers who had adopted the practice outside of the classroom.

3. Pausing to engage in Christian Meditation during the school day seemed to offer positive benefits for the majority of students and teachers in terms of their relationships with others in the classroom. These benefits were largely an offshoot of the personal calming and centring benefits, allowing students and teachers to interact with one another and resolve conflict more calmly immediately after meditating. There were some perceptions that these benefits were sustained over the longer term, with descriptions of improved class cohesion through the process of engaging in meditation as a group. However, for those students who highly disliked the practice, there was the potential it could be a source of tension in their relationship with their teacher, and contribute to feelings that they did not belong.

4. The study found no evidence that the practice of Christian Meditation had any effect, either positive or negative, upon students’ relationship with Church. A few teachers perceived that it had impacted positively on their own relationship with the Church, as they felt a sense of appreciation that the Catholic Church had embraced this ‘new’ form of prayer, and one with such potential benefits for modern life. It is possible that students might develop this sense of appreciation in the future.

Complementing the above summaries, the key findings elucidated throughout the results section are collated here for ease of reference, followed by a collation of the recommendations.
Summary of Key Findings: Student Spirituality and Religiosity

- Most students found Christian Meditation to offer a valuable space for experiencing a connection with God, with many students describing profound experiences of listening, talking or revering being in His presence.
- Experiencing Christian Meditation had expanded many students’ understandings of prayer.
- There was a reported decline in students’ religious behaviour (such as church attendance).
- There may be a degree of tension between the relaxation benefits, a contemporary or eclectic experience of spirituality and the Christian or Catholic basis of the practice for some students.
- No association was found between the practice of Christian Meditation and students’ relationship with 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 the class and teachers were hesitant to postulate about this.

Summary of Key Findings: Students’ Personal and Social Relationships

- Most students, both in Year 4 and Year 6, reported strong, positive relationships with themselves and others.
- Practising Christian Meditation has a positive calming and centring effect on the vast majority of students, and this offers some short-term benefits for their personal wellbeing and emotional management.
- The calming effect of Christian Meditation offers benefits for inter-student relations and class cohesion. It can be particularly helpful after the social intensity of break times (recess and lunch).
- Teachers believe that Christian Meditation is a valuable tool for students to help balance their wellbeing in the present and future.
- Christian Meditation can help students concentrate on their school work. This benefit was mainly felt immediately after meditating, but some students noticed an improvement in their ability to concentrate more generally.
- The process of engaging in open-ended discussion about the practice (for example, about the potential relational benefits) seemed to be a valuable reflective experience for the students.
- Some students have difficulty keeping sad memories or difficult thoughts at bay when they close their eyes to meditate.
- Some students feel ‘forced’ to do the practice which has a negative influence upon how they view and experience Christian Meditation, and a possible negative impact on their wellbeing and / or relationships at school.
Summary of Key Findings: Teachers and Christian Meditation

• When facilitating Christian Meditation at school it is not always possible for teachers to meditate fully. However, this seems to become easier as the students and/or teachers become more experienced.
• Regardless of whether they can meditate deeply in the classroom context, the practice of Christian Meditation at school seems to be beneficial for teachers’ wellbeing, stress levels and interactions with their students.
• Many teachers appreciate the opportunity to engage with Christian Meditation and the associated opportunity to develop their 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.

Recommendations

1. Trial a school-wide ‘quiet time’ each day to enable classes to practise Christian Meditation without distraction or 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.
References


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Appendix A: Student Survey
Questions 2014 and 2016

DEMOGRAPHICS and PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE

1. What date is your birthday (text box, 1 line)

2. Are you:
   o A girl
   o A boy

3. How old are you?
   * 2014 options: a) 8, b) 9, c) 10, d) 11
   x 2016 options: a) 11, b) 12, c) 13

4. Is your school closer to:
   o Lismore
   o Sydney

5. What school do you go to? [Schools listed depended upon Diocese selected]
   o School name and town
   o School name and town
   o School name and town
   o School name and town
   o School name and town
   o School name and town

6. Are you an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?
   o Yes
   o No
7 Which language do you speak at home?
   o English only
   o English and another language
   o A language other than English

8 What is your religion?
   o Catholic
   o Other religion
   o No religion
   o Not sure

9 How often do you go to church?
   o Once a week
   o One or two times a month
   o Once a month
   o A few times a year
   o One or two times a year
   o Never

10 Do you pray when you are not at school?
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not sure

11* Have you heard about meditation before now?
   o Yes
   o No
12* Have you ever tried to meditate?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not sure

If no is selected, then skip to end of block. If not sure is selected, then skip to end of block.

13* Was it Christian meditation? (where you sit still and silently say a word such as ‘Maranatha’)
   - Yes
   - No (proceed to next section of survey)
   - Not sure (proceed to next section of survey)

If no is selected, then skip to end of block. If not sure is selected, then skip to end of block.

14* Where did you do Christian meditation?
   - At school
   - At home
   - At home and at school
   - Somewhere else

11X Do you enjoy Christian Meditation at school?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not sure

* 2014 survey only
x 2016 survey only
12X Have you ever tried to meditate when you are not at school?
- Yes
- No
- Not sure
If no is selected, then skip to end of block. If not sure is selected, then skip to end of block.

13X Was it Christian Meditation? (where you sit still and silently say a word such as 'Ma-ra-na-tha')
- Yes
- No
- Not sure
If no is selected, then skip to end of block. If not sure is selected, then skip to end of block.

14X Where did you do Christian meditation when away from school?
- At home
- Somewhere else
INSTRUCTIONS

Please read each sentence and then slide the arrow along to a number on the line to choose your answer.

In 2014 the 5 point scale was labelled 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = agree, 5 = Strongly agree.
In 2016 the 5 point scale was changed slightly to be clear for the students to understand. In 2016 the scale was labelled 1 = Not at all, 2 = Every now and then, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Most of the time, 5 = All the time.

(The change in scale was made to as the 2016 scale was perceived to be more meaningful to the students. The change meant that it was not possible to directly compare the two datasets. For others seeking to utilising this survey, it is recommended to use the 2016 scale in both the pre- and post- surveys).

In 2016 a practice question was included to ensure students understood how to operate the scale. The practice question was: I like hanging out with my friends.

Relationship with God

15* I feel close to God
15X I feel close to God when I meditate
16 I am close to God when I am in nature
17 I believe in God
18 I know God loves me

Relationship with self

19 I like being me
20 I am thankful for my life
21 I know I am loved
22 I am a peaceful person
23 I make good decisions

Relationship with others

24 I forgive people who have hurt me
25* I am always kind to my friends
25X I am kind to my friends
26* I am always kind to my family
26X I am kind to my family
27* I am always kind to my teacher
28 I feel like I belong at school

6 The order of all the items from all sections below was randomised in the survey.
29 Other people are kind to me

Relationship with Church

30 I like going to Mass
31 I feel closer to God when I visit the church
32 I am happy to go to church
33 Going to church helps me to be kind to others
34 I like being with other people at church

Subjective Experience

35 I like being silent
36 I find it hard to be still
37 When I am still I feel more relaxed
38 I like it when the whole class is silent with me

The following questions were in the 2016 survey only:

INSTRUCTIONS:

These questions ask you to think about how doing Christian Meditation in class since year 4 might have helped you.

Please read each sentence and slide the little bar to a number on the line to choose your answer. You can choose any number from 1 to 5. 1 means No, I strongly disagree, 2 means No, I disagree, 3 means I'm not sure, 4 means Yes, I agree, 5 means Yes, I strongly agree.

39 Christian Meditation has helped me to be a happier person
40 Christian Meditation has helped me to be a kinder person
41 Christian Meditation has helped me to feel closer to God
42 Christian Meditation has helped me concentrate on my school work
43 I prefer doing other kinds of prayer instead of Christian Meditation
44 I will do Christian Meditation later on in my life

THIS IS THE LAST QUESTION (Text box provided)

45 What is the most important message you would like others to know about your experience of doing Christian Meditation at school since Year 4?
Appendix B: 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

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]

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 to 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?

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 C: Student Focus Group Schedule

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 a 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:

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

Share with person next to you…

Share with the 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?