

Mindfulness in Alternative Education: An evaluation of a small pilot programme teaching mindfulness and yoga to marginalised young people during the Manawa Ora programme 2016

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Background

Through a partnership between the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand (via its subsidiary, Mindful Aotearoa), the Kindness Institute, and Ngā Rangatahi Toa, a mindfulness and yoga pilot program for rangatahi was delivered during September 2016. The primary participants in the program (the rangatahi) had been excluded from mainstream education due to behavioural issues or truanting. Secondary participants included mentors working with the rangatahi and Ngā Rangatahi Toa staff as explained below.

Ngā Rangatahi Toa supports young people to transform their lives through education and creativity. Mindful Aotearoa develops, researches and trains people to deliver mindfulness programs in educational contexts. The Kindness Institute supports young people to live meaningful lives through mindfulness, yoga and stress management.

This current program was designed and delivered by Kristina Cavit of The Kindness Institute, with Grant Rix from Mindful Aotearoa providing advisory and evaluation support.

Ngā Rangatahi Toa delivers a flagship program called Manawa Ora; a performance-based arts mentoring project that supports marginalized youth to creatively explore their own life experiences and begin to transform their own lives. The participants (nine of the 2016 Manawa Ora program served as an ideal population for the mindfulness and yoga program, especially since Kristina Cavit had worked previously with Ngā Rangatahi Toa on similar projects which had deemed to be successful. 9 mentors, 5 staff and 1 volunteer also participated in the program.

During Manawa Ora each rangatahi is paired with an artist mentor and together they create a collaborative work based on the life of the rangatahi. This is brought to the stage in a performance season at professional theatres in Central and South Auckland.

The mindfulness and yoga pilot project was delivered as part of the Manawa Ora mentoring process over the course of two weeks. This included:

- two days of professional development, induction, mindfulness and yoga for staff & mentors
- five intensive days of mindfulness, yoga, and creative arts workshops
- three days of rehearsal
- four days of performances

The mindfulness and yoga pilot program took place each day throughout the 2 week intensive period and was delivered to rangatahi, mentors and Ngā Rangatahi Toa staff.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of giving our full, open-hearted attention to what is immediately occurring, physically and mentally; within and around us.

This involves:

- intentional focus on immediate experience
- being curious, open and accepting of that experience

When we are mindful we enhance our ability to appreciate life's beauty, and to respond to life's challenges in considered rather than reactive ways.

Over time, and with repeated practice, mindfulness (as a state experienced from time to time) develops into a more sustainable way of being (a trait) that could be described as the balance of body and mind in accordance with situation and circumstance.

The calmness and clarity that result from practicing mindfulness provide an important foundation for learning while fostering social and emotional wellbeing.

Benefits of Mindfulness Practice

Among adults, mindfulness is effective for reducing symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression (Goyal, et al. 2014; Hoffman, et al. 2010). Some studies have also shown positive brain changes in areas responsible for attention, sensory processing, learning and memory, and empathy and compassion following 8-weeks of mindfulness training (Hölzel, et al. 2011). In long term practitioners, brain activity associated with increased feelings of spaciousness and a sense of coherence has been observed, even when the practitioner is not formally meditating (Lutz, et al. 2004)

Why teach mindfulness to children and young people?

Childhood mental health difficulties tend to predict adult mental illness (Britton et al., 2014). Experiencing mental illness while young has also shown to significantly increase the risk of substance abuse, suicide attempt, educational underachievement, unemployment, and early parenthood (Fergusson & Woodward, 2002). Finally, suicide, an indicator of a population's mental health, continues to be a significant cause of death amongst young people in New Zealand (MSD, 2008). Thus, there is a clear impetus to develop strategies that foster wellbeing among children and young people (Bernay, Graham, Devcich, Rix & Rubie-Davies, 2016).

As well as catering to academic needs, schools are increasingly being called on to address student well-being. As part of a broader shift towards early prevention of mental illness, recent decades have seen the rise of school-based programs that teach children and young

people how to regulate emotion, and manage conflict and stress. A number of these programs are based on teaching children and young people to become more aware of their thoughts, emotions and actions through mindfulness-based techniques.

International research shows that teaching mindfulness to children and young people has a range of benefits that are best summarized as building resilience and boosting of cognitive performance (Zenner, Herrleben-Kurz and Walach 2014). Local research investigating the benefits of the Mental Health Foundation's Pause, Breathe, Smile: Mindfulness in Schools program (PBS) has shown increases in calmness, self-regulation, self-awareness, the forming of positive relationships between peers, an increased ability to resolve conflict and statistically significant increases in wellbeing (Rix and Bernay 2014; Bernay, Graham, Devcich, Rix and Rubie-Davies 2016).

From a mental health promotion perspective, it is considered best practice to instill healthy behaviours in the early and younger years of life that will provide the best opportunity to develop the skills necessary to navigate life's challenges and grow as healthy, flourishing adults.

Among teenagers, teaching mindfulness has been shown to improve:

- mental health
- wellbeing
- mood
- self-esteem
- self-regulation
- positive behavior and learning (Weare 2013)

Prior to the current project, the Mindful Aotearoa has been focused on the delivery and research of PBS with children aged 6-13 years. In 2016, the delivery of PBS extended to include a trial of young people aged 13-14 years within a mainstream high school setting. The current project has provided the opportunity to extend evaluations further by exploring the effects of delivering a customised mindfulness and yoga programme to marginalised young people aged 15 – 19 years old.

This report outlines the structure of the programme, the evaluation methodology and the outcomes of the evaluation.

Structure of the program

The pilot mindfulness and yoga program was delivered over two weeks in the following format:

Two days of professional development, induction, mindfulness and yoga for staff

Staff and mentors were introduced to mindfulness and yoga practices during their induction and training days.

Five intensive days of mindfulness, yoga and creative workshops

The mindfulness & yoga program took place for 60 minutes at the start of the day with young

people, mentors and staff. Each day ended with a gratitude circle where everyone was invited to share one thing they were grateful for from the day.

Three days of rehearsal

During rehearsal, mindfulness and yoga classes were 20-45 minutes long.

Four days of performances

Before each performance, the participants and mentors were taken through Mindfulness practice and breathing exercises for 10-20 minutes.

Educational Concepts

Through yoga, mindfulness, korero and a 'training the trainer' model, the program content included developing present moment awareness, mental and physical strength and flexibility, awareness of the breath, the senses, focus, compassion, kindness, gratitude, conflict resolution and stress management tools.

Evaluation methodology

In response to the needs of the community, the evaluation process consisted of interviews with the participants to ascertain their responses to practicing mindfulness and yoga. This qualitative approach allowed for evaluations to be interpreted based on participant's direct experience and what was meaningful for them. A simple thematic analysis was conducted to ascertain the common themes that emerged from the interview data.

During the pre-program phase, mentors and staff with existing relationships with the rangatahi completed an evaluation assessing the rangatahi capacities around stress, calmness, focus, empathy and conflict resolution (see table one). During each of the 5 workshop days, the mentors and staff held a debrief session exploring the day's activities and opportunities for improvement. During these debrief sessions, mentors provided ongoing observations of the mindfulness & yoga program.

The mindfulness & yoga classes themselves included a feedback element where rangatahi and mentors were invited to reflect on what they learnt and discovered through that day's session. This was shared in pairs and with the class through korero.

Throughout the course of the two week program, feedback and comments from participants was collected during korero and interviews outside of the mindfulness & yoga sessions. This feedback also helped shaped the direction of the program which responded to the needs of the rangatahi.

On Day 5, during the final mindfulness and yoga 60 minute session, all rangatahi were invited to feedback on the program and its impacts. During this same day, mentors and staff met for a formal debrief session and were asked to feedback on the impacts they saw on the rangatahi throughout the mindfulness & yoga pilot program. Feedback was recorded and collated. All mentors completed a post program evaluation.

Further feedback was collected during rehearsal and performances from participants and the public audience.

Initial themes were noted first from what was directly stated in the debrief sessions from the rangatahi and mentors experiences. After we reviewed these initial details, the feedback from the pre and post program evaluations were reviewed.

The feedback and evaluations were reviewed again for broader themes and were cross-checked for the themes that had emerged.

The specific themes clustered around several key ideas that were reflected in previous research:

1. Increases in calmness/relaxation
2. Increased ability to focus
3. Increased kindness and respect
4. Increased sense of connection

Theme 1: Increases in calmness / relaxation

Participants responded particularly well to the activities related to relaxation, particularly after the physical practice of yoga, students responded well to the concepts of relaxation of the body and mind. Mentors reported that participants engaged with the activities and korero related to gentle encouragement and fun.

“The rangatahi respond well to this environment where they can trust you and your energy. Love this kaupapa of not forcing them, just making them feel welcome. (They appreciate) laughing together and keeping it light.” – Mentor

Mentors discovered that due to their involvement in the activities, participants were often very calm after the mindfulness and yoga sessions.

“Concentrating on breathing and belly breathing was very life changing / situation changing. He (participant) felt very relaxed after it and is looking forward to it tomorrow – he said he can't wait!” – Mentor

“Getting into it in a deeper way helped with their anxiety.” – Mentor

The young people responded well to korero related to relaxation and safety in the yoga and mindfulness space.

“Rangatahi can't always relax at home, they are always hypervigilant. They want to be in a relaxed space. They are hyper aware of energy and trust us enough to participate and be engaged (in yoga and mindfulness). They respond to the relaxed space.”

– Ngā Rangatahi Toa Director

Theme 2: Increased ability to focus

Mentors noted improved focus from participants who had previously been having difficulty focusing. Mentors discovered that due to their involvement in the activities participants were able to focus and be more open to their creative work after the mindfulness and yoga sessions.

"I started thinking I wanted it to be wrapped up soon so we could start working. Wednesday and Thursday I realised it's all cumulative work. Once we got to the actual work, they were physically and mentally warm (from mindfulness and yoga). They could find those feelings already because they kept popping up in Mindfulness." – Mentor

Mentors referred to the influence the pilot program had on the creative work produced by the participants at the end of the first week of workshops.

"You can't get those things (from the young people) at the end of week without plugging into it and your feelings in mindfulness." – Mentor *"It was amazing for the kids noticing thoughts - good or bad and knowing that it's ok either way. Just focusing on them for a second, to take a minute to think about what's going on in your head."* – Mentor

"I've noticed a big difference in myself. I was able to really get into it, go there, tune into my senses. Instead of following the group (on the mindful walk), I went my own way and I am proud of myself for not following the others. I would like to bring this more into my own life - creating my own path." – Rangatahi

Theme 3: Increased kindness and respect

Participants responded very well to the concepts of respecting their friends in class through non-comparison and non-judgement. On the first day during the debrief session staff and mentors commented on how impressed they were with all the rangatahi who participated and were actively engaged. They commented on the rangatahi that didn't fully participate, and how they still had a lot of respect for the others.

"(They) listened and we're really engaged, kind, respectful and not laughing at others for trying something new." – Ngā Rangatahi Toa Director

One participant, who also attended Manawa Ora in 2015, showed great improvement from last year's mindfulness & yoga program where he did not participate. He encouraged participants on their first day saying that although he felt weird at first, after a while he loved it:

"It's a natural high. I loved giving it a go. Just give it a go." – Rangatahi

Mentors noted that this participant showed great leadership and kindness towards the other young people and towards the end of the program talked with his mentor about carrying on mindfulness and yoga outside of the pilot program.

Participants responded well to activities related to kindness, compassion, gratitude and love. Mentors noticed that throughout the program a culture of respect and kindness was developed and participants were more empathetic and kind, particularly to themselves.

“Meditation and yoga helps me with making decisions. I am able to be more grateful for people I love. It helps me to try send that same gratitude and loving kindness to people even if they say and do things I don’t like. Even though I still have a hard time being honest and saying when I don’t like something, the mindfulness helps me in my mind to be kinder to people and not feel so negative. It helps me feel relaxed - especially the breathing. It also helps with challenges - to clear my mind, overcome fear and just believe in myself more.”
– Rangatahi

Rangatahi noted what they wanted to take away from the mindfulness and yoga pilot program.

‘Respect each other’s space and be grateful for your body.’ – Rangatahi

“Be mindful and kind to others on the outside and also on the inside. I learnt to have positive thoughts even when things get tough. The breathing has helped me to love myself and my body” - Rangatahi

Theme 4: Increased sense of connection

Mentors and staff noted that participants responded extremely well to activities related to connection. This included partner work, sharing, small team work and particularly mindful walking outdoors as a group.

“Their awareness shifted when we did the mindful walk. It shifted their awareness of other people and things around them.” – Mentor

Mentors and staff commented on the increased connection and confidence of the group through the ‘training the trainer’ model in which participants were invited to teach each other what they had learnt through mindfulness and yoga.

“The highlight of my day was when he went up to the front of the room and wanted to teach and be with the others. It was only his second class – he was the person who talked during meditation and tried to fool around on the first day. In the beginning he tried to push it and get others to talk to him. He calmed down and wanted to really focus and did it.” - Mentor

Mentors commented on the positive changes in participants’ connection as a group, their confidence in sharing and their ability to connect to their senses, thoughts and feelings. One mentor commented on “the internal struggle we go through each morning in yoga and mindfulness’ that brought the group closer together.”

Mentors and staff noted how the mindfulness and yoga positively impacted on the strong sense of whanau and connection.

"It would never have been the same without it and we wouldn't have been able to do the same thing without it." – Ngā Rangatahi Toa Director

Feedback was given on the programs ability to set participants up in a positive way for the entire day.

"Thank you for the yoga and mindfulness each morning and for bringing calm, happiness and love which sets us all up for the day." – Manawa Ora Director

Summary of impact

Although the rangatahi were the central focus of the program, we discovered that the program had a much wider reach. The program benefited a range of people including mentors, staff, volunteers, family members and the public audience who watched the Manawa Ora performances. These benefits are depicted in figure 1.

Mentors, Staff & Volunteers

Mentors and staff noticed a positive impact on their own sense of calmness / relaxation and connection through their engagement with the practices. Mentors noted that the practices allowed them to form a deeper sense of connection with the rangatahi and also supported them on a personal level to manage stress, anger, frustration and anxiety throughout the program.

"I was having a bad morning then I did yoga & mindfulness and felt great afterwards; clear and calm." – Mentor

Mentors expressed gratitude for the practices and particularly for learning how the breath could support them through challenging times. One mentor carried on his learnings and taught his wife yoga and mindfulness who expressed gratitude for being taught these skills.

"I realise how much tension I'm feeling and carrying in my body through our sessions...I'm so grateful for mindfulness because I would normally get so upset with people being crazy in traffic. I sent them loving kindness and wished they would get home safely instead."

- Volunteer

Family Members

Although our contact with whanau was limited, family members expressed gratitude for their young people being able to participate in mindfulness and yoga. One family member noted that the mindfulness and yoga program has positively impacted their daughters approach to life.

*"I can confidently say that through the mindfulness program that she took part in this year with Kristina Cavit, Emily's*whole approach to life, school, her after school job and her*

relationships has made her a new person, it's been a massive blessing to her journey and something that she now uses in her day to day life.” – Foster Mum of participant

The World (the public audience)

One participant decided that instead of doing an art based performance at the end of the program, she wanted to share mindfulness and yoga with the public audience. During each show she led an audience of 180 people through three mindfulness meditation practices.

The public commented on the impact of the mindfulness practices and that afterwards they felt a sense of safety, connection, openness, relaxation, gratitude and present moment awareness. One audience member commented on the relief they felt after the mindfulness practice as they were able to share gratitude and send kindness to someone who had been troubling them. Another audience member commented on how open minded they felt after doing the mindfulness practices.

“I opened my eyes deciding that I was grateful and I wasn't going to judge others and see things with a new perspective!”

Conclusion

In conclusion, this pilot project highlighted a number of benefits for rangatahi from alternative education practicing mindfulness and yoga. The mentor observations suggested that mindfulness and yoga contributed to increased experiences of calmness, kindness, respect, connection and focus for participants. These initial findings are consistent with previous research conducted by Rix and Bernay (2014) showing the benefits of teaching mindfulness to younger people in New Zealand.

With more participation in mindfulness and yoga, we speculate that a deepening of the themes highlighted in this report would be observed. We also speculate that an increase in calmness, kindness, respect and connection has potential to reduce conflict situations, as well as undue stress and anxiety facing young people in alternative education.

More in-depth work in this area would provide an opportunity to explore additional dimensions of wellbeing including investigating how participation in mindfulness and yoga might assist rangatahi in alternative education settings to positively engage with the educational process.

Although the primary audience for this pilot program was intended to enhance the wellbeing of rangatahi in alternative education, we discovered positive impacts for mentors, Ngā Rangatahi Toa staff and the public, which appeared to reinforce the positive benefits experienced by rangatahi.

This program supports previous research suggesting that mindfulness and yoga lead to a general feeling of connectedness, kindness and calmness among participants. In future we would like to expand this pilot to include an intensive school holiday based mindfulness and yoga program to further enhance rangatahi wellbeing outcomes and to upskill educators to

integrate mindfulness in alternative education settings. This work can be achieved with funding support that will help foster the links between The Kindness Institute's current program and Mindful Aotearoa professional learning pathway for educators.

*Name has been changed to protect privacy

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