

2018

Book: Venture into a New Realm of Cross-Cultural Psychology Meditation, Mantric Poetry, and Well-being: A Qualitative, Cross- Cultural, Cross-Disciplinary Exploration with American Secondary and Japanese Post-Secondary Adolescents

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ScholarWorks Citation

Duthely, L. M., Sunaoshi, H. Y., & Villar-Loubet, O. M. (2018). Book: Venture into a new realm of cross-cultural psychology meditation, mantric poetry, and well-being: A qualitative, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary exploration with American secondary and Japanese post-secondary adolescents. In M. Karasawa, M. Yuki, K. Ishii, Y. Uchida, K. Sato, & W. Friedlmeier (Eds.), *Venture into cross-cultural psychology: Proceedings from the 23rd Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.4087/XLUL1485>

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Abstract

Higher well-being correlates positively with multiple psychological and social outcomes, including workplace success and better academic outcomes for students. Poetry and meditation, independently, have been demonstrated in prior studies to increase well-being in a variety of contexts, including physical and mental health challenges. To our knowledge, this is the only published cross-cultural study that merged contemplative practices and poetry within the well-being paradigm, particularly among general, non-clinical adolescent populations. The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the use of meditation and mantric poetry in a cross-cultural, educational context. The materials included *The Jewels of Happiness: Inspiration and Wisdom to Guide your Life-Journey* paperback and audiobook—a collection of poetry and prose to enhance positive emotions. A content analysis was conducted with post-secondary student essays and secondary students' comments, subsequent to an experience of meditation and mantric poetry in their respective academic settings. Post-secondary students (n = 34) were enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) course in Japan, and secondary students (n = 30) were enrolled in an English Language Arts (ELA) class in the United States. The most commonly occurring themes that emerged across the two cohorts were *inner peace*, *happiness*, *life-changing experience*, and *overcoming a challenge*.

Keywords: Meditation, contemplative sciences, poetry therapy, well-being, adolescents, language acquisition, Sri Chinmoy

Book: Venture into a New Realm of Cross-Cultural Psychology

Meditation, Mantric Poetry, and Well-being: A Qualitative, Cross-Cultural, Cross-Disciplinary Exploration with American Secondary and Japanese Post-Secondary Adolescents

Happy societies are healthier and contribute to higher social capital, something to which most nations aspire (Diener & Tay, 2013). Well-being, which represents an individual's level of happiness (Diener, 2009), correlates positively with multiple social, psychological and physiological outcomes, including prosocial behavior, better social relationships, increased workplace success (Diener & Tay, 2013), and improved academic outcomes (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016). Higher well-being correlates also to improved physiological and immunological responses (Diener & Chan, 2011). Multiple approaches, including subjective well-being (SWB) exercises (Diener & Tay, 2013), positive psychology interventions (Seligman, 2002; Shoshani & Sloan, 2012), and, more recently, meditation and other contemplative practices such as Hatha Yoga and Tai Chi (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016) have been employed to increase general well-being among both adults and youth. Contemplative pedagogical practices can support education for both school-aged (MLERN, 2012) and post-secondary students (Zajonc, 2013).

As the field of well-being continues to expand, more novel and cross-disciplinary approaches to understanding and increasing well-being are emerging in the literature. Poetry, for example, associated normally with the literary or dramatic arts or within an anthropological context, can be used also as a way to improve mental health and well-being. Poetry therapy is emerging as a viable approach within the well-being paradigm (e.g., Brillantes-Evangelista, 2013; Croom, 2015; Mohammadian et al., 2011), yet few studies have been conducted among general, non-clinical adolescent populations. The careful choice of words naturally found in poetry has a meditative effect for the reader or listener (Brillantes-Evangelista, 2013); even fewer studies fused poetry, meditation, and well-being. Taken together, the purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the use of heart-centered meditation and mantric poetry in an academic, cross-cultural context.

Poetry Therapy and Well-Being

Poetry therapy, defined as the use of language, symbol, or story, in either a therapeutic or educational setting, has broad applications but is used often for mental health and psychological therapy (Mazza, 2017). In poetry therapy, the focus is on personal meaning and experience rather than a prescribed correct interpretation (Mazza, 2017). Mazza's three-part *RES Poetry Therapy Model* consists of the receptive/prescriptive component (R),

where individuals are introduced to existing literature; the expressive/creative component (E), where individuals write creatively something of their own; and the symbolic/ceremonial component (S), involving rituals or celebrations (Mazza, 2017, p. 17). He noted also that the use of chanted word, or repetition, has been used across cultures as a way to bring about some type of change—individual, environmental or societal. In one study, Japanese-style haiku poems were used as meditation therapy for a mental health professional's own self-healing (Sky Hiltunen, 2005).

A few recent studies reported the effectiveness of poetry therapy among adolescents. For example, Mohammadian et al. (2011) found that poetry therapy significantly reduced depression, anxiety, and stress among female undergraduate students in Iran. Brillantes-Evangelista (2013) demonstrated that adolescents in the Philippines who encountered abuse benefited from poetry therapy—specifically, decreased depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Additionally, the poetry therapy increased participants' positive emotions. In a U.S.-based study, Furman (2005) found that poetry therapy effectively helped teach empathy to social work students.

Reading Aloud, Poetry, and Meditation for Second Language Acquisition

Reading aloud (RA) improves language learning in the target language. RA techniques include unison reading and synchronized reading to enhance second language (L2) reading skills (Kato, 2012). Reading aloud is effective in language acquisition for Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Kato & Tanaka, 2015).

Used carefully and skillfully, RA improves reading, pronunciation, and writing for EFL and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (Gibson, 2008) and listening ability in the target language (Kato & Tanaka, 2015). Taken together, there is a deep connection between speech perception and speech production (Casserly & Pisoni, 2010; Cogan et al., 2014; Gandour et al., 2007).

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) requires a positive outlook in order for the learning to be successful. Researchers and practitioners sympathetic toward the idea of well-being in SLA classrooms have embarked on a variety of studies based within the positive psychology/well-being framework (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2016). Higher well-being, applicable to both instructor and learner, has been studied in SLA classrooms (MacIntyre et al., 2016).

A few SLA studies involved poetry or meditation, but rarely together. It is perhaps the careful choice of words inherent to the art of poetry that brings about poetry's meditative effect (Brillantes-Evangelista, 2013). Haiku poetry therapy was used among Japanese university students who wrote a "happiness haiku" subsequent to communicating in the target language (English) with student peers (Helgesen, 2016). The activity not only helped students reflect on positive action ideas, but also enhanced their learning of English language skills. In another example, visualization exercises reduced stress among SLA learners (Fresacher, 2016). Students first described in writing their "safe place" (e.g., ocean), then used the "safe place" script to enter into a 3-minute visualization, accompanied by relaxing music. Stress is inevitable when students interact in the target (foreign/second)

language, and decreased stress enhances the language learning process (Fresacher, 2016).

Contemplative Pedagogical Practices

Contemplative pedagogical practices are being used increasingly to support and improve learning in K-12 (MLERN, 2012) and higher education settings (Zajonc, 2013). Contemplative pedagogy encompasses methods for developing student attention, emotional balance, creativity, and academic course content (Zajonc, 2013). The roots of Contemplative Education in the US, for example, can be traced back to the mid-1800s but is currently reemerging in the field of education (Morgan, 2015). Because of their roots in ancient and religious practices, one concern regarding contemplative practices such as meditation and mindfulness is ensuring the secular aspect of these disciplines (Jennings, 2016); another is the need for larger, more systematic interventional studies conducted among public school-aged children and adolescents (Chadwick & Gelbar, 2016). Nevertheless, the positive outcomes reported recently in the literature demonstrate the viability of Contemplative Pedagogical practices, from school-aged students continuing to the post-secondary level (see Chadwick & Gelbar, 2016; MLERN, 2012; Morgan, 2015; Waters, Barsky, Ridd, & Allen, 2014; Zajonc, 2013).

Meditation for Well-being

Contemplative sciences, which include ancient disciplines such as Hatha Yoga, Tai Chi, and meditation, have been studied as a means for increasing well-being among youth and adolescents (MLERN, 2012; Roeser & Zelazo, 2012). Meditation has been tested for more than 30 years as a way to alleviate stress, as well as psychological and physical diagnoses. Only recently has the practice of meditation been incorporated into the well-being paradigm.

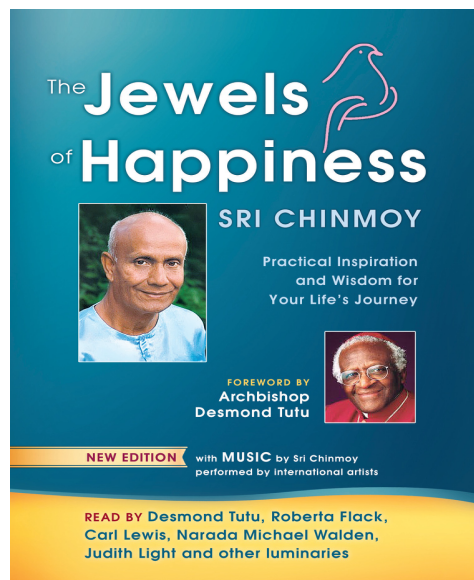
A broad definition of meditation frequently used in the academic literature is that meditation is a family of techniques that help to quiet the mind and focus the attention (Shapiro, 1984). Many types of meditation interventions have been tested with adolescents, including mindfulness meditation, Loving-Kindness Meditation, Transcendental Meditation, Vipassana meditation, and Centering Prayer meditation (see Waters et al., 2014). In this study, heart-centered meditation exercises (Sri Chinmoy, 2010; 2013) were instructed to both student cohorts.

Methods

Current Study

The current study brings together: the frameworks of the practice of meditation and other contemplative practices for well-being among adolescents (MLERN, 2012; Roeser & Zelazo, 2012; Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016); the historical use of repetition, or chanted word, in the context of poetry to affect a personal change (Mazza, 2017); and the receptive (listening) and expressive (writing) component of Mazza's (2017) *Poetry Therapy* model. The aim of

this retrospective, qualitative, cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural analysis was to identify common themes related to well-being and academics expressed by two convenience samples of adolescent students who experienced heart-centered meditation and mantric poetry. A content analysis was conducted (n=64) on course essays submitted by Japanese post-secondary students (Cohort #1) and study interviews conducted with American secondary students (Cohort #2). Subjects experienced the meditative effect of poetry (Brillantes-Evangelista, 2013) and the repetition or chanted words of poetry to effect a personal change (Mazza, 2017).



“In the outer life you cannot have peace unless and until you have first established peace in your inner life. Early in the morning, if you treasure a few divine thoughts before leaving your home, then these thoughts will enter into your outer life as energizing, fulfilling realities.”

—Sri Chinmoy

Figure 1. The Jewels of Happiness Audiobook and Example

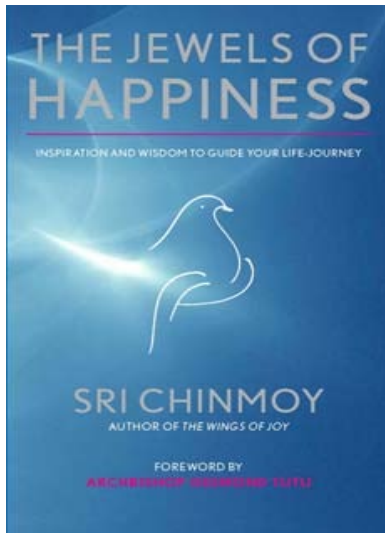
Populations

Two separate cohorts made up the study samples. Cohort #1 consisted of 34 older adolescents (18-19 years old) enrolled in a required English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course held in a post-secondary institution in Metropolitan Tokyo, Japan. The institution serves predominantly middle-income students that enter the school with top-tier national scores. The course was a theme-based EFL course held over 13 weeks. Sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes, and the course content focused on four positive themes—inner peace, joy, enthusiasm, and self-transcendence—or achieving beyond your goals (Figure 1). During the weekly sessions, visualizations (see Sri Chinmoy, 2013) were used with the English Language Learners (ELL) to help reduce the stress inherent in expressing oneself in a target language (Fresacher, 2016) (see Table 1).

Cohort #2 consisted of 30 middle adolescents (11-15 years old) enrolled in a required English Language Arts class held over 19 weeks in a secondary school in Metropolitan Miami, USA. The school serves predominantly low-income students, many of whom scored below the national average in the previous year's standard testing. The cohort was enrolled simultaneously in a 10-session research study focused on the themes of peace and gratitude (Figure 2). Visualizations (see Sri Chinmoy, 2010) were used with Cohort #2 to increase their general well-being (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016). Cohort #1 and #2 descriptions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Study Cohort Description

	Cohort #1	Cohort #2
Geographic Location	Tokyo, City Centre	Metropolitan Miami, Inner-City
Population	Post-secondary School Adolescents: Middle-Income Top-Tier Scores	Secondary School Adolescents: Lower-Income Below Average Scores
Course	Themed-based EFL (4 Themes) Weekly, 90 minutes 13 Weeks	English Language Arts (Multiple Themes) 3X per Week, 90 minutes 19 Weeks
Exposure	6 Lessons, non-Research 15 Minutes/Lesson 90 Minutes Total Meditations: 2 Minutes/Lesson Length: 4 Weeks	5 Sessions, Research Study 17 Minutes/Session 85 Minutes Total Meditations: 5 Minutes/Session Length: 2 Weeks
Tools	<i>The Jewels of Happiness</i> Audio Book Audio Recordings Repetition: Mantric Poetry Essays	<i>The Jewels of Happiness</i> Paperback Book Readings by Researcher Repetition: Mantric Poetry Aphoristic Poetry Cards
Source for Analysis	Course Essays Long Essays	Interviews with Researcher Open-ended, 5-10 minutes
Methodology	Content Analysis Major Themes Extracted	Content Analysis Major Themes Extracted



Unhorizoned is our inner peace.

Like the boundless sky,

It encompasses all.

–Sri Chinmoy

Mantric poems from the chapter “Peace”, The Jewels of Happiness book

Figure 2. The Jewels of Happiness Paperback Book and Example

Data Sources

Data were extracted from two sources. Data for Cohort #1 consisted of course essays of 34 older adolescents enrolled in a required EFL course in Tokyo, Japan during the 2014-2015 academic year. There was no research component to this EFL course. Data for Cohort #2 consisted of transcribed notes of short interviews (5-10 minutes) conducted with 30 middle adolescents living in the U.S. The U.S. students were enrolled simultaneously in a required English Language Arts class and a research study, also during the 2014-2015 school year. In their respective locations, both cohorts experienced meditation, aloud readings, and mantric poetry.

Cohort #1. Cohort #1 experienced the poetry and meditation lessons for six lessons, averaging 15 minutes per lesson. The total time was approximately 90 minutes over the course of four weeks. Each session began and ended with a guided one-minute meditation. For 15 minutes of the six lessons, students listened to the audio version of *The Jewels of Happiness: Inspiration and Wisdom to Guide your Life-Journey* (Sri Chinmoy, 2013) depicted in Figure 1. Students listened to aloud poetry and prose during the sessions and repeated poems as well. Due to comprehension barriers inherent with ELL learners, students were expected also to listen to the audio recordings on their own time. After the sixth week, students composed essays from the chapters of *Peace* and *Joy*. The written essays were submitted to fulfill course requirements. The prompt (in English) given to Cohort #1 (Japan) for composing the written essay was, “What did you learn most from this class?”

Cohort #2. As a result of their enrollment in a research study conducted in their required Language Arts class, the subjects of Cohort #2 experienced poetry and meditation, as well, for approximately 17 minutes per session. During the first five sessions, which were conducted over a two-week period, poetry and prose were read aloud from the paperback book *The Jewels of Happiness: Inspiration and Wisdom to Guide your Life-Journey* (Sri Chinmoy, 2010; see Figure 2). The selections, which were read out by the lead researcher,

centered on the topics of “Quieting the Mind” and “Peace.” Students repeated the poetry in class, were given copies of the poems, and were encouraged to practice the techniques at home. It is estimated that Cohort #2 engaged in the sessions for a total of 85 minutes. Mini-interviews were conducted with the students, and notes were taken. Students of Cohort #2 (USA) were asked, “Tell me about your experiences so far. Did you feel these techniques were helpful, and if so, how did these techniques help you?”

Data Analysis

A content analysis was executed for written course essays (approximately half-page) of 34 older adolescents enrolled in a post-secondary EFL course in Japan and transcribed short interviews (5-10 minutes) conducted with 30 middle adolescents in a U.S. school, simultaneously participating in a well-being intervention study. Both groups experienced meditation, aloud readings, mantric poetry, and were enrolled in their respective, required academic course. The content analysis was conducted as a four-step process. The analysis for this study was limited to tabulating themes related to well-being, happiness and academics.

Step #1: Major themes were extracted from the individual sentences of the source documents and then coded for each cohort, separately. Themes unrelated to general categories—well-being, happiness, academics and foreign language acquisition—were omitted. For the first pass, the author whose primary language is Japanese extracted major themes from the course essays of the Japanese students (Cohort #1), and the author whose primary language is English extracted major themes from transcribed mini-interviews of the U.S. students (Cohort #2).

Step #2: Authors exchanged source documents. Both the source documents and the theme categorization files were exchanged. The content was reviewed and revised; where necessary, the original categorizations were modified.

Step #3: Themes were entered into an electronic spreadsheet and categorized by major headings. Themes with two or more counts remained. Themes occurring only once were removed at this step.

Step #4: Themes were collapsed across cohorts into categories, and then ranked in order of frequency. Counts were tabulated. Sample student text appears in Table 2. The most frequently occurring themes are summarized in Table 3.

Results

Example text from both cohorts are exhibited in Table 2. From the first round, 25 themes were extracted from Cohort #1 text, and 13 themes were extracted from Cohort #2 text. For the purposes of this paper, only themes related to well-being, happiness, and academics were examined. Examples of themes that remained include: “It’s power and strength to overcome obstacles” and “I learned the most the importance of happiness”; examples of excluded themes are: “memorable,” “refreshing,” and “inspired by the [audiobook] readers.”

Table 2
Example Text of Common Themes by Study Subject

Subject #	Cohort #1 and Cohort #2 (Excerpts)	Themes (by Cohort)	Themes (Combined)
JP #3	"This class was different from other normal classes. I could learn not only how to speak English but also about life, future, mind being, and so on."	-SLA improvement -Life	-Academic improvement -Life
JP #8	"Now I can speak better than I could in the past."	-SLA improvement	-Academic improvement
JP #17	"First, I learned I can get joy and happiness not by outer circumstances but by inner being. Whatever outer circumstances are, I can be happy and get joy. And when I'm happy, I have peace."	-Happiness -Joy -Inner peace	-Happiness -Inner peace
JP #27	"I got a lot of joy and I think it changed my life."	-Joy -Life Change	-Happiness -Life Change
JP #14	"I think something grew or change in my heart."	-Life Change	-Life Change
JP #13	"... through the group work, I became less ashamed in the speech"	-Overcame Shyness	-Overcame a challenge
JP #14	"So at first, I couldn't speak well. I looked at the memo every time. But I came to look up and make eye contacts"	-Overcame Shyness -SLA improvement	-Overcame a challenge -Academic improvement
USA #5	"These sessions changed my life! ... I realize ... all that's important is focus ... inside me."	-Life Change -Centeredness	-Life Change -Centeredness
USA #19	"Helped me not to react to things around here."	-Self-regulation	-Self-regulation
USA #13	"I feel happier since I'm a part of this."	-Happiness	-Happiness
USA #30	"I learned how to forget the thoughts about what happened before ... before I moved ... something bad happened"	-Overcame a life experience	-Overcame a challenge

After the second round, the 25 themes of Cohort #1 were collapsed into 17, and the 13 themes of Cohort #2 were collapsed into 10. For example, the themes “learning about myself” and “enlarging self” were collapsed into one theme: “self”; the themes “happiness” and “joy” were merged into “happiness.”

At the end of third round, the five most frequently occurring themes that remained for Cohort #1 were: “peace,” “happiness,” “life change,” “SLA improvement,” and “overcame shyness.” The five most frequently occurring themes that remained for Cohort #2 were: “peace,” “happiness,” “centeredness,” “self-regulation,” and “overcame a life experience.” Themes were unified such that “SLA improvement,” applicable for Cohort #1 only, was recoded to “academic improvement.” Likewise, “overcame shyness” was recoded to “overcame a challenge” (see Table 3).

The content analysis summary is depicted in Table 3. The data from Cohort #1, extracted from adolescents enrolled in a Japanese post-secondary school, is summarized in the first column. The most frequently occurring themes that emerged were that subjects reported experiencing the following: enhanced sense of inner (personal) peace and happiness, something changed in their life, improved academic performance, and overcame shyness. The data from Cohort #2, extracted from adolescents enrolled in an American secondary school, is depicted in the second column (Table 3). The most frequently occurring themes were: increased inner peace, increased sense of happiness, more centeredness, increased ability to self-regulate, and overcame an adverse life experience.

Table 3
Most Frequently Occurring Themes, by Study Cohort and Combined

	Cohort #1 (N = 34)	Cohort #2 (N = 30)	Combined (N = 64)
Age in Years (Range)	18 – 19	11 – 15	11 – 19
Emerging Themes (Most Common)	1) Inner Peace 2) Happiness 3) Life Change 4) Academic Improvement 5) Overcame Shyness	1) Inner Peace 2) Happiness 3) Centeredness 4) Self-Regulation 5) Overcame a Life Experience	1) Inner Peace 2) Happiness 3) Life Change 4) Overcame a Challenge

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we summarize a qualitative, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary exploratory study of retrospective data collected from two cohorts—Japanese post-secondary students enrolled in an English Language course and U.S. secondary students enrolled in an English Language Arts course. Previous studies reported on the positive effects and benefits of poetry (poetry therapy), and meditation (contemplative practices), independently; in this study, the two paradigms were fused together, and students' comments were evaluated through content analysis. To our knowledge, this is the first such study specifically examining heart-centered meditation and mantric poetry.

The commonality between the two cohorts include poetry and meditation sessions based on the book *The Jewels of Happiness: Inspiration and Wisdom to Guide Your Life-Journey* (Sri Chinmoy, 2010; 2013), and both cohorts were enrolled in a required course for their respective academic levels. Students experienced both the receptive component of the poetry therapy, where they listened to existing poetry and prose, and the expressive/creative component of Mazza's poetry therapy model, where they expressed themselves—either on paper or orally. Both cohorts were instructed on meditation exercises outlined in Sri Chinmoy (2010; 2013). The differences between the two cohorts include: cultural orientation, age range, socio-economic status and English language fluency. Despite the differences between the student cohorts, taken together there was commonality among the two groups regarding the reports of their experiences of the meditation and mantric poetry sessions.

Several themes related to well-being emerged. In previous studies, it was reported that the use of poetry alleviated depression, other mental health diagnoses, and increased positive emotions (Brillantes-Evangelista, 2013). Poetry also had a positive effect for future mental health professionals (Furman, 2005). In the current qualitative study, the most commonly occurring themes across the two cohorts include a sense of increased inner peace, overall happiness, the perception of a life-changing experience, and the ability to overcome one or more challenges.

Both cohorts expressed positive school-related experiences. Not unlike previously reported studies (see Kato, 2012; Kato & Tanaka, 2015), the EFL cohort (Japan) reported improved English skills. The EFL cohort perceived that they were less shy as a result of their experience, which helped their English language skills. Stress is inevitable for students interacting in a foreign, target language, noted in Fresacher (2016), and so methods and techniques that alleviate stress contribute also to enhanced foreign language learning. The U.S. cohort reported an increased ability to self-regulate, which in turn helped them academically. Self-regulation, or the ability to remain focused and on track, is something that students at all levels may struggle with, and it impacts academic learning. From seemingly diverse populations of individuals of differing life circumstances, unifying experiences were reported.

Both strengths and weaknesses can be found in the present study. The strengths of this study lie in its uniqueness and its cross-disciplinary approach. This is the first known cross-cultural study that merged poetry and meditation in academic settings within the well-

being paradigm—particularly among general, non-clinical adolescent populations. The study is limited in methodology, as this was a secondary analysis of previously existing documents. The study is limited also by its rigorousness and sample size. Nevertheless, the field of contemplative pedagogy in school-aged children (MLERN, 2012) and in higher education (Morgan, 2015; Zajonc, 2013) is gaining attention as “[n]early every area of higher and professional education from poetry to biology... from medicine to law is now being taught with contemplative exercises” (Zajonc, 2013, p. 84), and it is well-worth further study within a secular (Jennings, 2016), cross-cultural context.

The findings suggest a need to evaluate the cross-cultural pedagogical effects of contemplative education and contemplative practices, which took the form of heart-centered meditation and the repetition of mantric poetry in this study. Rigorously designed, empirical cross-cultural research would systematically test this approach of improving well-being and academics, simultaneously with poetry and meditation. As an example, a larger, prospective, mixed-methods study would further illuminate the viability of such a program, or intervention, for adolescents from the middle years to post-secondary school. Finally, the findings suggest also that poetry and meditation, both rooted in ancient, cultural, and religious traditions, may hold promise for addressing modern-day issues and challenges faced by students at all levels.

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