



Quiet Time: Reducing Stress and Improving Life Outcomes for Students

The Challenge

We all know what it's like to feel fear or anxiety in response to stressful situations: our heart pounds, our hands sweat, our mouths go dry. Our bodies also respond in ways we can't see. A normal immune system reacts to stress by churning out inflammatory proteins and chemicals, causing the fight-or-flight response, that then dissipate once the stressful situation resolves. However, if individuals are constantly bombarded with one high stress situation after another, such as living in a neighborhood that experiences high rates of violence or poverty, their bodies never get a chance to reset.

This type of physiological response cycle, called "toxic stress," has been shown to cause permanent changes in brain structure and function. Some of the lasting and detrimental impacts associated with toxic stress include:

- Impaired development of linguistic, cognitive, and social-emotional skills
- Damage to memory and mood-related functions
- Weakening of contextual learning abilities, leading to difficulty in distinguishing between danger and safety

For too many students in Chicago's public high schools, toxic stress is a pressing problem. The pressures of school can pale in comparison to the safety concerns in their neighborhoods or the family pressures they face every day.

What if there was a way for you to help your students reset their brains and bodies amid the stress of their everyday lives and help them get ready to learn?

The Approach

We think the answer could be as simple as practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM) during the school day. The David Lynch Foundation's Quiet Time (QT) program allows students to opt in to short daily meditation periods, led by TM instructors and supervised by regular classroom teachers. Twice a day, in the morning and afternoon, students close their notebooks, close their eyes, and meditate. "It's like taking a water break on a hike up a mountain," one student said. TM has been shown to counteract the body's biological response to stress, creating a period of calm for students that could potentially reduce violence and improve academic outcomes.



Working Together to Generate Evidence

We believe that one of the key reasons we have not made more progress in addressing the challenges of dropout and youth violence in the United States is that we have failed to learn from experience—cities across the country try promising innovations all the time, but rarely implement them in ways that enable rigorous study, which inhibits our ability to learn which strategies truly work to improve kids' lives.

From 2015-19, the David Lynch Foundation has been working together with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and the University of Chicago Crime Lab to implement and study its QT program in six CPS high schools. The Crime Lab is studying QT using a randomized controlled trial (RCT), a method that has been used for decades in medicine to generate gold-standard evidence of what works to treat disease and promote health. Six CPS high schools partnered with us in this evaluation process during 2016-18 for the RCT phase of the study. Roughly half of the students enrolled in partner schools practiced TM each day while the other half of students participated in a controlled, quiet activity. This research design will generate empirical evidence about whether this type of intervention can positively affect the stress response enough to meaningfully impact students, leading to reduced violence involvement and improved academic performance. In SY 2018-2019, the QT program is being delivered school-wide in 2 CPS high schools and the Crime Lab is conducting a qualitative evaluation including focus groups with students and interviews with school staff and administration.

Can Quiet Time reduce in-school misconduct and out-of-school arrests? Can Quiet Time improve GPA and test scores? The answers to these questions could change how urban public school systems across the country focus their efforts to improve the lives of young people and their communities. Preliminary results from the RCT are forthcoming. To learn more about this project, or for more information about how to support this work, please contact Roseanna Ander, Executive Director, UChicago Crime Lab and Education Lab, and Senior Director, UChicago Urban Labs, at rande@uchicago.edu.