

Evaluating the effectiveness of Zhineng Qigong on emotional and behavioural difficulties in the school environment: Pilot study results

Preverjanje učinkovitosti Zhineng Qigonga pri zmanjševanju čustvenih in vedenjskih težav v šolskem okolju: rezultati pilotne študije

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Abstract

Use and practice of various Qi Gong techniques have been found beneficial in both, medical and other settings. Therefore, we decided to implement the Zhineng Qigong intervention programme in the school environment, teaching the students and teachers different techniques with the intention to reduce some of the emotional, behavioural, and interpersonal problems. Twenty-nine primary school students aged eight and eleven were included in the pilot study. They, their teachers, and their parents filled in the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire SDQ before and three months after the Zhineng Qigong intervention. Results show small to moderate decrease in emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems and an increase in prosocial behaviour; although not all changes were noticeable to all the informants. Even though our pilot study is limited due to lack of an appropriate control group, research results indicate the Zhineng Qigong could represent a tool for improvement of psychophysical well-being, conduct, and social relationships among students and teachers of the primary school. Further research is needed to support our initial findings.

Keywords: Zhineng Qigong, primary school students, learning environment, health, well-being, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Povzetek

Uporaba in vadba različnih oblik Qi Gong prinaša pozitivne učinke tako na zdravstvenem kot na nekaterih ostalih področjih. Na podlagi tega smo se odločili implementirati Zhineng Qigong v šolsko okolje, kjer smo učencem in učiteljem predstavili različne tehnike z namenom zmanjšanja nekaterih čustvenih, vedenjskih in odnosnih težav. V pilotni študiji je sodelovalo 29 osnovnošolcev, starih osem in enajst let. Učenci, njihovi učitelji in starši so izpolnili Vprašalnik prednosti in težav SDQ pred in tri mesece po zaključku Zhineng Qigong programa. Rezultati kažejo majhno do srednje zmanjšanje čustvenih simptomov, hiperaktivnosti, vedenjskih težav in težav z vrstniki ter povečanje prosocialnega vedenja; kljub temu je potrebno poudariti, da sprememb niso opazili vsi informatorji. Kljub omejitvam naše pilotne študije, predvsem odsotnosti kontrolne skupine, rezultati nakazujejo, da bi Zhineng Qigong intervencija lahko predstavljala orodje za izboljševanje psihološkega blagostanja, vedenja in odnosov med učenci in učitelji na osnovnih šolah. Za potrditev naših ugotovitev so potrebne nadaljnje raziskave.

Ključne besede: Zhineng Qigong, osnovnošolski učenci, učno okolje, zdravje, blagostanje, čustvene in vedenjske težave.

1. Introduction

1.1. Qi Gong and its benefits

Qi Gong is an ancient discipline that combines physical exercises with meditation, both in dynamic movements and static postures (Pang & Chan, 2015). There are different methods and techniques of Qi Gong, one of them being Zhineng Qigong (智能气功) which it was declared the most efficient method to maintain health by the Ministry of Health and Sports of China in 1997. It was developed by professor and doctor Pang He Ming that defines it as: *"...a training that requires the participant to consciously use the mind intent to focus inward to transform, improve, and enhance life functions. Mental, posture, and breathing adjustments are the extensions of the inward training. It is a training which enables the participants to transform natural instinctive activities into conscious activities."* (Pang & Chan, 2015, p. 6). As Zhineng Qigong bears no religious nor superstitious connotations and is suitable for large numbers of practitioners to share a common session, disregarding their ethnicity, beliefs, age, sex or original state of health, virtually anybody can join a class, making it ideal for the context of school and other public sectors.

Qi Gong and its various forms have been proven beneficial in medical and other settings. For e.g. Tai chi has been found to improve balance, strength and flexibility in adults with cardiovascular disease risk factors (Taylor-Piliae et al., 2006). Medical Qi Gong (also Zhineng Qigong) has been reported to reduce problems associated with cancer and cancer treatment, such as depression (Overcash, Will, & Lipetz, 2013).

Besides the medical benefits of the Qi Gong practise, there were found improvement of different psychological indicators of well-being or mental health. Qi Gong is found to be associated with reduced perceived stress in hospital staff (Griffith et al., 2008), enhanced psychological well-being and sleep duration (Manzaneque, et al., 2009), reduced levels of burnout, self-rated stress behaviour, fatigue, depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive symptoms (for e.g. Johansson, Hassmén, & Jouper, 2011; Stenlund et al., 2009) and other.

Brolin (2009) addressed the need and effectiveness of Zhineng Qigong as a tool for enhancing the well-being of primary school students. Our intention was to implement similar techniques as Brolin (n.d.) and thus offer the students and teachers of a particular primary school methods and resources from Zhineng Qigong so they can observe and identify causes of stress, manage them in a positive and constructive way, thus improving their well-being at school and the conditions for learning. The methods and techniques of Zhineng Qigong are meant to improve coordination and concentration, calming mind and emotions and develop self-awareness and self-control.

1.2. Description of the Zhineng Qigong intervention in primary school

The methods of Zhineng Qigong combine visualization and relaxation techniques such as guided meditations that were shortened and adapted for children, low impact soft movements that improve posture, circulation and develop fine motoric skills, chanting and guttural sounds that are a playful way of releasing inner tension and help developing creativity and expression.

Brief examples of Zhineng Qigong techniques were shown to the teachers and parents in a meeting prior to the beginning of the intervention, so they could decide by themselves about the benefits and give a written consent based on proper informed opinion. All the students participated in the research voluntarily. The intervention focused on the students of second and fifth grade taking altogether fourteen 45-minute classes once per week before the beginning of their school schedule. Also, school teachers were instructed twice per week. Teachers received instructions on Mondays and Wednesdays for a total of 30 classes (45 minutes each class).

In the following there are brief descriptions of the main methods we used during the intervention:

Zu Chang Fa (Method for organising the field): This is the basic and most fundamental tool that Dr Pang Ming developed. It is a meditation that can be performed sitting, lying or standing and the time length varies according to one's skills to remain concentrated. It consists of observing and regulating own physical body posture, mental activities and focusing exclusively on a goal we want to achieve. In the case of our programme, we focused on identifying and reducing the causes of stress, improving concentration, comradeship and general wellbeing.

Peng Qi Guan Ding Fa (Method for lifting and pouring Qi): This method is more physically involved, yet all the movements are wide, slow, soft, and gentle. The requirement is to harmonise and integrate mind activities with physical moves. An example of this in daily life could be when we are thirsty we get a glass of water, but we usually do not think about how our arm stretches to reach the glass. In Qi Gong practice it is emphasised that the mental activity must be connected to the movement in order to use minimum effort to achieve a result. So, back to the example of the glass water, we would be consciously moving our arm, hand and fingers to hold and lift the glass of water, creating the path of least resistance.

The whole routine lasts about 20 minutes and consists of 5 sections. The effect of practising is usually a state of inner peace, mental quietness and emotional receptiveness, with the body at ease and relaxed.

Dun Qian Fa (Method for squatting in front of a wall): Is a technique for squatting facing a wall. It is meant to strengthen lower limbs and naturally correct imbalances in the trunk area and spine. Incorrect postural habits and sedentarism can lead to scoliosis, hyper and hypo lordosis, upper and lower cross syndromes. This squatting technique addresses all these issues in a very simple and effective way. We also adapted this exercise to progress in the difficulty levels until mastering the technique, and adding repetitions according to the progress.

Cheng Qi (Extend qi): Is an exercise that mainly focuses in the area between the chest and upper back, opening and relaxing the intrascapular, improving the heart and lungs functions and releasing tensions stored in the thoracic and intercostal fibres. Is also a very simple exercise that we plan to increase progressively the time of practice from 1 to 10 minutes.

La Qi (Pull Qi): Is a very simple dynamic meditation that significantly increases the concentration and sensitivity, allowing to integrate mind with every part of the body as a whole, or to focus in a particular area depending on our needs, relaxing deeply from inside. It combines visualisation, easy movements and sound, so it effectively sets a good state.

Animal's game: This is not strictly a Zhineng Qigong method; nevertheless, different forms of traditional Qigong (such as Wu Qin Xi) and some forms of Kung Fu make use of the frolics, mimicking the animals as a form of training and body conditioning.

Tai Ji: As a form of internal martial art, Tai Ji's slow, constant, round and relaxed movements, allows the practitioners to enter a highly self-aware state by coordinating breath, spatial displacement, proper structural alignment and applied concentration to following in unison the choreography shown by the Teacher.

1.3. Aim of the paper

Our purpose is to present the basic principles and techniques of the Zhineng Qigong program that was conducted with primary school student in one of Slovene schools and to present the result of our pilot study.

Aim of our pilot study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Zhineng Qigong program in schools and its effect of student's different strengths and difficulties. We estimated that emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, conduct and peer problems will decrease after the enrolment in the Zhineng Qigong program and that the prosocial behaviour would increase after the enrolment.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Our sample consisted of 29 primary school students; 15 from second grade (8 years old) and 14 from fifth grade (11 years old) who were enrolled in Zhineng Qigong programme at one of the primary schools in Slovenia. Also, two teachers (form masters of those two classes), and parents of the students participated in our study; they served as informants regarding the improvement of different aspects of students behaviour after the participation in the programme.

2.2. Instruments

We administered the Slovene version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 1998) to students, teachers, and parents before and three months after the Zhineng Qigong program. The questionnaire is intended for three to 16 year olds and includes 25 items that comprise five scales, each containing five items, that are can be rated on a three-point scale from 0 to 2; where 0 means *not true*, 1 represents *somewhat true* and 2 means *certainly true*; scores ranging from 0 to 10.

The SDQ measures emotional symptoms (e.g. worrying, being unhappy, and having headaches), conduct problems (e.g. losing temper, fighting, and lying), hyperactivity (e.g. being restless, fidgeting, and easily distracted), peer problems (e.g. being picked on, not having friends), and prosocial behaviour (e.g. being nice, helpful and kind to others, and volunteering). First four scales, i.e. emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems can be summed in a total difficulties score (ranging from 0 to 40) and the last one, i.e. prosocial behaviour represents the strengths.

2.3. Research design

The pilot study was proposed to and agreed by Ana Nuša Kern, the principle of the primary school Oš Preserje pri Radomljah, where we carried out the Zhineng Qigong programme. It was carried out between March and June 2018. We presented the program and the pilot study at the parent-teacher meetings in March 2018. Inform consents for participating in the Zhineng Qigong programme were obtained from both, parents and students. At the beginning of the program all the participating students, their parents and their grade teachers (Greta Groselj of 5th grade and Manca Mihelcic of 2nd grade) filled in the SDQ questionnaire regarding different aspects of students' behaviour. Three month after the Zhineng Qigong programme all participants filled in a follow-up SDQ questionnaire.

The Cohen's *d* was calculated for each dimension of the SDQ questionnaire before and at three month follow-up.

3. Results

We wanted to evaluate the Zhineng Qigong programme that was implemented in the second and fifth grade in one of Slovene primary schools. Using SDQ to measure emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, and prosocial behaviour before and after the implementation of the Qi Gong techniques, we can determine the possible positive effects of the program.

The average scores of each of the scales and the total difficulties rated by students themselves, teachers and parents together with the effect sizes are presented in Table 1 (second graders) and Table 2 (fifth graders).

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics and effect sizes for strengths and difficulties of second graders*

Scales of SDQ	Before the programme			After the programme			Cohen's <i>d</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Total difficulties ^a	Parents	11,93	7,43	Parents	7,40	4,27	0,748 ^b
	Teachers	8,53	6,99	Teachers	8,27	5,93	0,041
	Students	12,33	5,05	Students	12,60	5,91	-0,048
Emotional symptoms	Parents	3,40	2,41	Parents	1,87	1,77	0,725 ^b
	Teachers	2,67	2,06	Teachers	2,60	1,84	0,034
	Students	3,60	1,50	Students	3,47	1,96	0,076
Conduct problems	Parents	2,40	1,84	Parents	1,27	1,28	0,714 ^b
	Teachers	1,33	2,06	Teachers	1,13	1,77	0,104
	Students	1,93	1,71	Students	2,60	2,10	-0,348 ^c
Hyperactivity	Parents	4,67	3,27	Parents	3,13	1,81	0,581 ^b
	Teachers	3,13	3,09	Teachers	3,67	3,58	-0,159
	Students	4,13	2,23	Students	4,07	2,09	0,031
Peer problems	Parents	1,47	1,55	Parents	1,13	1,64	0,209 ^c
	Teachers	1,40	2,53	Teachers	0,87	1,41	0,261 ^c
	Students	2,67	1,68	Students	2,47	1,64	0,121
Prosocial behaviour	Parents	7,53	1,85	Parents	8,33	1,35	-0,495 ^c
	Teachers	8,80	0,86	Teachers	8,80	1,32	0,000
	Students	8,33	2,19	Students	7,67	2,85	0,262 ^c

Notes. *M* – mean; *SD* – standard deviation; ^aSum of scales Emotional symptoms, Conduct problems, Hyperactivity and Peer problems; ^bmoderate effect size; ^csmall effect size; according to Cohen's criteria (1988). *N*=15.

As we can see in Table 1, all four difficulties, including the total difficulties, decreased after the enrolment in the programme and the small to moderate effect sizes were present when comparing the before and after scores on SDQ and the prosocial behaviour increased. Nevertheless, in most cases the differences in second grade students were noticed only by their parents and not also by teachers and students themselves. The exceptions were reduced peer problems that were noticed also by teachers. There was also relevant change in conduct problems and prosocial behaviour that was noticed by students themselves. Here we must

stress that students noticed the decrease in prosocial behaviour and the parents noticed increase of such behaviour and similarly students noticed increase of conduct problems and their parents noticed the decrease of such behaviour.

If we take a closer look at the analyses of the fifth grade students' strength and difficulties (Table 2), we can see that in all the categories, with the exception of peer problems, fifth graders themselves noticed the difference after participating in the programme, since there are small to moderate effect sizes. Parents noticed the decrease of emotional symptoms, peer problems, total difficulties, and increase in prosocial behaviour and teachers noticed the changes in emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, and total difficulties.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and effect sizes for strengths and difficulties of fifth graders

Scales of SDQ	Before the programme			After the programme			Cohen's <i>d</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Total difficulties ^a	Parents	11,14	7,61	Parents	9,43	5,06	0,265 ^b
	Teachers	9,93	7,99	Teachers	7,93	5,47	0,292 ^b
	Students	11,21	5,95	Students	9,00	5,41	0,389 ^b
Emotional symptoms	Parents	2,71	1,94	Parents	2,29	1,94	0,221 ^b
	Teachers	1,71	1,77	Teachers	1,07	1,69	0,372 ^b
	Students	2,50	1,79	Students	1,93	2,09	0,294 ^b
Conduct problems	Parents	2,14	2,32	Parents	1,79	1,93	0,168
	Teachers	1,36	2,27	Teachers	1,00	1,92	0,170
	Students	1,71	1,49	Students	1,00	0,78	0,600 ^c
Hyperactivity	Parents	4,36	3,34	Parents	3,93	2,64	0,142
	Teachers	4,36	3,69	Teachers	3,57	3,11	0,230 ^b
	Students	4,29	2,09	Students	3,36	1,98	0,455 ^b
Peer problems	Parents	1,93	2,30	Parents	1,43	1,65	0,250 ^b
	Teachers	2,50	2,68	Teachers	2,29	2,05	0,090
	Students	2,71	2,58	Students	2,71	2,73	0,000
Prosocial behaviour	Parents	8,00	2,18	Parents	8,50	1,29	-0,279 ^b
	Teachers	7,43	3,61	Teachers	7,43	2,50	0,000
	Students	7,93	1,38	Students	8,57	1,28	-0,481 ^b

Notes. *M* – mean; *SD* – standard deviation: ^aSum of scales Emotional symptoms, Conduct problems, Hyperactivity and Peer problems; ^bsmall effect size; ^c moderate effect size; according to Cohen's criteria (1988). *N*=14.

There were also non-formal interviews with students regarding their experiences in the programme carried out after the intervention. Students' answers were not recorded and analysed systematically, nevertheless, they reported having experienced a state of peace and relaxation, which was also noticed by the teachers.

4. Discussion

The purpose of our pilot study was to evaluate the possible benefits of participation in Zhineng Qigong programme on emotional, behavioural, and interpersonal aspects of primary school students. Results show the decrease in emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems and an increase of prosocial behaviour in both second and fifth graders, which confirms our hypothesis.

The improvement in second graders was mostly noticed by students' parents; on the contrary, fifth grade, students were the ones who noticed the changes more often than teachers and their parents. The comparison of the average Total Difficulties scores of the fifth graders before and after intervention noticeably shows beneficial changes that were perceivable to all the informants (parents, teachers, and students themselves). The difference could be a consequence of the beneficial nature of the Zhineng Qigong intervention.

The comparison of the baseline and follow-up average scores of the Total Difficulties from the second grade shows that the improvement was only perceivable by the parents and very mildly by the teacher. The reason for this could be the fact that second-grade students might be less aware of their emotional behavioural and social aspects compared to fifth-grade students who were more likely to notice the difference themselves. This can represent a valuable insight to help researchers who involve young students in their research; it might be reasonable to include also the teachers and parents as the informants, especially regarding the behavioural aspects.

In second grade, the students noticed that the conduct problems increased after the intervention and that prosocial behaviour decreased. An aspect to consider here is the nature of Qigong itself that requires self-observation skills that in the group of second graders might still be in an incipient state, in comparison to the more mature self-awareness of the fifth graders. Another important skill that the practitioner must cultivate in order to harvest good results with Qigong is unwavering determination to improve in the long term and concentration to the specific task in the short term. Of course, these skills might not be present initially and can emerge and evolve with the practice, but it is logical to assume that the difference in age between our two groups also reflects upon the results. At the same time, the practice itself reinforces the self-observance and therefore, problems that might have gone under-noticed before, become now more evident. On this issue, we can only suggest to patiently dedicate more time to the practice accompanied by self-acceptance and compassion to later see in retrospective the improvements.

The other reason for these results might lie outside of the Zhineng Qigong intervention programme. We presume that the vicinity of June to the final exams and the upcoming summer holidays might have had a significant effect. This could also be the reason that the effect sizes of the differences between baseline and follow-up assessments of total difficulties were smaller in fifth graders in comparison to second graders. Latter are at much less stress at the end of the school year than their fellow students in fifth grade. Control group would help eliminate this dilemma in future research.

Last but not least, one remark that is worth mentioning is also that the principal of the school chose these two specific groups among the whole school population for us to carry the study pilot, due to the high level of problems they denounced before the intervention. In other words, we initiated the study pilot with the most "problematic" groups of the school, and that

might explain the relatively high SDQ baseline scores and the lack of representativeness of the sample and thus generalizability of our results.

4.1. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

The main limitation of our study was the small sample size. We only included 29 students that were participating in the Zhineng Qigong programme at their primary school. The sample was convenient and was not randomised. Also, we did not include a control group that would enable us more solid conclusions regarding the benefits of the programme.

Despite the limitations of our pilot study, we believe that the results show that further endeavours in school settings are reasonable. We propose including Zhineng Qigong programme in school activities together with more refined research protocol to assess the possible benefits of the program. We suggest that the control group should be included in the research design, that the particular attention should be put on the appropriate time intervals in which the programme would be held and consequently the baseline and follow-up evaluation assessment. Additionally, some other measures of well-being and stress management can be included in the evaluation.

5. Conclusion

Despite the limitations of our pilot study, we conclude that the Zhineng Qigong intervention programme that was carried out in the second and fifth grade of one of the Slovene primary schools showed promising results. The emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems decreased after the participation in the program, and prosocial behaviour increased. The carefully selected control group and particular attention put on the time intervals of the programme and its evaluations should be included in the further research of the Zhineng Qigong effectiveness.

6. Literature

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Short presentation of the authors

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Anja Trampuš has gained her magister degree in Sinology. She studied at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana and has expanded her knowledge of Chinese at the National Taiwan Normal University and the Shanghai University of International Business and Economics. During her studies, she got acquainted with calligraphy, which she integrates into her art pieces during her leisure time. She is deeply devoted to spreading the Chinese culture through her work with traditional Chinese medicine, teaching of Chinese language, and the promotion of Zhineng Qigong in her hometown.

Andraž Purger has been exploring the human body for thirteen years. To him as a sports teacher, movement represents a way of life. He has been passing on his knowledge on body awareness, activation of particular muscle groups, and the proper movement patterns as a personal trainer. He has been gathering extensive experience as a masseur for over a decade, specialising in the areas of traditional Chinese medicine, sports massage, and the acupuncture massage therapy according to Penzel. He is also a dedicated practitioner of Zhineng Qigong.

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