

The Mindful Educator

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By practicing mindfulness in their own lives—and with their students—educators are setting the stage for a calmer, more focused learning environment.

When you picture someone practicing mindfulness, you might envision a person sitting cross-legged, meditating with their eyes closed, repeating a soft string of "oms" as they send positive energy to the universe. It is a valid assertion, albeit a limited one.

Meditation is one way to practice mindfulness: "You can also practice mindfulness in every moment of your day, even in action, conversation, and movement," says Megan Cowan, cofounder of Mindful Schools.

Cowan, whose Oakland-based nonprofit trains teachers to bring mindfulness to the classroom, explains that "very simply put, mindfulness is bringing the quality of self-awareness to our experience." She likens mindfulness to metacognition or "the ability to know that you are knowing." For example, if you are mindfully sitting, you notice your posture, you notice how your feet feel on the ground, and you notice how your body rests in the chair. Mindfulness, unlike meditation, is "a specific way of paying attention."

In schools, this present-moment awareness can lead to a calmer environment where educators are primed to be less reactive and students are less distracted. Early data on the effects of mindfulness on students "hold promise, particularly in relation to improving cognitive performance and resilience to stress," according to one of the biggest meta-analyses to date ("Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Schools—A Systemic Review and Meta-Analysis," June 2014).

The U.S. Department of Education has even taken note, awarding a \$3.5 million grant to Pennsylvania State University researchers to study the efficacy of CARE for Teachers, a program of the Garrison Institute that uses mindfulness activities to help teachers avoid burnout.

Making its rounds from the cover of *Time*, to Fortune 500 corporations, to the U.S. Marines, mindfulness is becoming an attractive antidote to stress and anxiety. So how can administrators and teachers harness this holistic tool for their personal well-being and that of their students? Science may provide some enlightening clues.

Perfecting Your Practice

Before leading a mindfulness intervention in your classroom or school, experts recommend honing your own practice. "There's a tendency to want to learn a technique or skill and apply it when you need it," explains Cowan, but mindfulness is only accessible when practiced consistently. The science indicates that "even just 5 to 15 minutes a day builds a familiarity in your nervous system with calm or stillness."

Regularly practicing mindful breathing, mindful meditation, or other calming exercises has a cumulative effect from "deactivating the nervous system" which allows the calm to be drawn out in high-stress situations, says Cowan.

"When you practice mindfulness, you have access to more of a pause or a stopping experience," Cowan notes. This presents an opportunity to respond to a situation, rather than react to it.

Being less reactive has been beneficial to Brett James, a high school English teacher at Colorado Academy in Denver. "As teachers, we're in an environment where the dynamic changes every 20 seconds. People say things that might make us angry or catch us off guard, and we don't have to immediately react," he says. "If we can just take half a second and be with what that interaction is, then maybe we can have a better response to the situation."

First introduced to meditation by his high school counselor in the '80s, James turned to the habit again to find balance in his life and teaching practice. The 22-year teaching veteran gets up at 5:00 each morning to meditate because "it's the only thing that keeps me sane."

In the way he teaches, being mindful means "just being aware." Last year, James introduced mindfulness in his senior seminar class to help students relax, especially when he sensed that they were "burned out, tired, or being pulled in 18 different directions."

When leading a 10- or 15-minute exercise at the beginning of class, James has students clear their desks and put their phones in their backpacks. Once they've settled in, they sit straight on the edge of their chair, with their feet flat on the floor and close their eyes. For the first 5 minutes, students "settle into their breath" (silently counting each inhale and exhale). Then for the next 5 or 10 minutes, James either leads a guided meditation, has students continue to focus on their breathing, or plays relaxing music while they contemplate gratitude or other positive affirmations. If the teacher notices students getting restless, he provides a gentle nudge to redirect them. When distracting thoughts arise, James reminds the class to "just acknowledge those thoughts, then let them float off."

They do need direction, James observes. "If I say to them, 'just be in the moment,' they don't know what that means."

More Expectations, Fewer Tools

For similar reasons, Demian Barnett, principal of Peabody Charter School in Santa Barbara, Calif., is betting on mindfulness to alleviate students' stress. During the rollout of the Common Core State Standards, "we were upping expectations of academic performance but not giving students the tools to deal with the stresses that come with those higher expectations," he explains.

Last year, Barnett teamed with an expert from the University of California, Santa Barbara to implement a schoolwide mindfulness program. The consultant provided professional development to staff members around mindfulness, discussed goals, and practiced exercises in faculty meetings. Some teachers piloted it in their classrooms, often to ease transitions (after recess, for instance). This year, the consultant is building on that initial work, collaborating directly with grade-level teams so that all Peabody students experience mindfulness at least once.

A major part of the early implementation was spent educating teachers and the community, says Barnett. Before teachers started their work in classrooms, the consultant led a presentation with parents, sharing the science behind mindfulness and how it would be applied in the school.

"Frontloading the community" can quell most questions or concerns, says Barnett. Otherwise, if a student goes home and says to his or her parent, "We meditated in class today," the parent may not know what that means, and that may raise some issues."

On a personal level, mindfulness helps Barnett cope with the increasing demands of the principalship. Right after students have lunch each day, he retreats to his office to spend 10 minutes—sans devices, e-mail, and phone—in a mindfulness meditation (using his breath as an anchor).

Establishing a personal practice in a school environment can be challenging, he admits. "It's hard to give yourself permission to take that time, especially as a principal, because you want to feel like you're constantly on."

But prioritizing the 10 minutes each day has been "transformative" for Barnett, who says his teachers have noticed a difference in him, too. "They see someone who has more capacity to listen, be empathetic, and attend to their needs"—they see a more present principal.

Quality of Attention

The way mindfulness redirects our attention to the present can prove beneficial in any educational setting. "There's a whole subset of thinking that is automatic, habituated, and may or may not be helpful," explains Cowan. "When we bring awareness to our thinking, we are empowered around a choice: Do I want to continue with that thought?"

That choice can be empowering for teachers and students.

"One of the primary ironies of modern education is that we ask students to 'pay attention' dozens of times a day, yet we never teach them how," Amy Saltzman elucidates in PBS's *Mindfulness: A Teacher's Guide*. "The practice of mindfulness teaches students how to pay attention, and this way of paying attention enhances both academic and social-emotional learning."

It is the type of quick redirection that makes Joshua Rothschild's students learning-ready. A 2nd grade teacher in the Baltimore City Public Schools and a part-time yoga and meditation instructor, Rothschild applies mindfulness as a whole-class technique, mixing it up with other "brain breaks" throughout the day (singing, stretching, etc.). When students are being "really rambunctious," he leads a one-minute mindful breathing or mindful listening exercise, and almost immediately, "the whole energy dynamic of the class changes."

"All of a sudden we have this wonderful quality of attention and I can start my lesson because kids are ready to learn," Rothschild explains.

Classroom Experiences

Mindful Schools recommends starting with a simple practice like mindful listening, where students sit in silence and notice the sounds around them (visit www.mindfulschools.org for a sample lesson). During this exercise, teachers can ring a bell (or tap a singing bowl or vibratone) and have students follow its sound, raising their hands when they no longer hear the ring.

Activities like these "retrain the brain's capacity to stay with an experience," Cowan emphasizes.

Making mindfulness a part of the daily classroom routine will produce the greatest results, according to Cowan. The length of practice, however, depends on students' moods; classroom dynamics; and of course, their age. As a general recommendation, Cowan suggests keeping it to a minute or so for younger kids, at the same time every day, and making sure the activities are "body-based." As students get older, they have "a deeper capacity for self-reflection or self-awareness" and the practice can be extended to 5 minutes or more.

Rothschild acknowledges that in a lot of ways, his 7- and 8-year-old students are too young to understand how mindfulness really works, but at least he can expose it to them.

Barnett agrees. "The elementary level is the perfect time to introduce students to the concept behind mindfulness—being able to check in on your own state of being."

There is an important caveat, nevertheless, to its application in the classroom. Educators should set reasonable expectations no matter what age level they're working with, Cowan warns. "When kids are restless, it doesn't mean that something has gone wrong." Teachers should respond to that restlessness with "kindness, openness, and a normalization of that experience."

Mindfulness isn't meant to create a "militaristic classroom," Cowan explains, "but rather to provide kids with the tools to redirect themselves instead of teachers having to redirect them constantly."

Turning the Faucet Off

Admittedly, bringing mindfulness to the classroom takes both a sense of bravado and an authentic commitment to individual and classroom practice. It requires a shift away from productiveness that is counterintuitive to our fast-paced learning environments.

"This is nonintellectual practice," quips James. "So for 15 minutes, students can get out of their brains and not be academic."

Like James often tells his high school seniors, just "turn the faucet off"—sage advice for any harried student or educator