

## Implementing Mindfulness in the Classroom

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*Be the change you wish to see in the world. Gandhi*

Gandhi's words remind us that as teachers working with children and youth, we are agents of change. But the question is, what kind of change do we want to make in education, particularly for gifted students who are too often disengaged with wandering attention, and often performing well below their potential? Mindfulness can provide insight to enable teachers and administrators to envision and create a whole new model or approach to education. Mindfulness is not a new idea since William James in his book *Principles of Psychology* (1950) said, "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character and will." (p. 424). This is mindfulness, and, as James continued, "an education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence."

In today's field of education, there is an emphasis on the exploration of professional dispositions that are required to teach well, and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2008) refers to these dispositions as *habits of mind*, and define them as "behaving intelligently when confronted with problems, the answers to which are not immediately known" (Costa & Kallick, n. d., para.2). Practicing mindful awareness can help teachers cultivate habits of mind such as resilience in response to challenge, nonjudgmental awareness and reflection on their experiences, flexible problem-solving, emotional regulation, and caring, empathetic, and compassionate responding to themselves, to others, and to their students (Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012).

### **What is mindfulness?**

Daniel Siegel, M.D. (2014) defines mindfulness as a way of being aware of what is happening within us and around us with a clear focus of attention on moment-to-moment experiences that enable us to be fully present for life. He said cultivating mindfulness means developing the ability to sense life deeply and to observe our experiences. The linkage of these two streams of awareness—sensing and observing reveals how mindfulness can be considered an integrative practice, and integration is the heart of health. Siegel said studies on the use of mindfulness show that professionals, such as teachers and physicians, who received mindfulness training

have enhanced empathy and a reduction of burnout. There are two kinds of mindfulness, that of intrapersonal mindfulness and interpersonal mindfulness.

### **Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Mindfulness**

Intrapersonal mindfulness is the present moment, nonjudgmental awareness of internal processes, including your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. Interpersonal mindfulness is how you relate to others. Interpersonal mindfulness includes listening and giving full attention to others, present-centered awareness of emotions experienced by you and others during interactions, openness to, acceptance of, and receptivity to others' thoughts and feelings, self-regulation and compassion for yourself and others (Jennings, 2015).

### **Sense of connectedness**

Mindfulness awareness involves a sense of connectedness, a recognition that we are essentially the same as human beings, and that we need to care for one another to survive and flourish. In today's classrooms with the growing cultural diversity in students, this recognition is sorely needed to promote a deep sense of respect and compassion for others. To engage interpersonal mindfulness, we begin with listening, deep listening.

### **Deep listening**

Deep listening involves giving your full attention and maintaining a present-centered awareness of your emotions, thoughts and feelings. Interpersonal mindfulness can help teachers recognize how their behavior affects their students. Gifted students often are *put off* by teachers and others who continue to engage in rearranging papers on their desk, checking their emails etc. while they are trying to explain something that is important to them. Being mindful while teaching can also help teachers manage their classrooms more proactively, as they notice when students are about to go off task, or become disruptive or in the case of gifted students become anxious, and disengaged. Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that teaching is an emotional practice whether it is an undergraduate or graduate college class of students or a kindergarten class. Positive emotions such as curiosity, interest, humor and joy can help to build a strong platform for student motivation to learn and to develop what is currently being called an effective *learning community*. On the other hand, negative emotions such as fear, distrust, sadness and anger turn off the learning process.

## **Wholesome way of learning and living**

Mindfulness promotes a wholesome way of learning and living (Jennings, 2015). As teachers and their students become more deeply aware of their patterns of behavior, thoughts and emotions through engaging in reflection, they both can take responsibility for building positive interactions and to better understand and care how they interact and affect one another. Most gifted students are already quite introspective and conscious of teacher-student interactions which can lead to angst and anxiety when they feel neither understood or valued. Applying mindfulness to their daily teaching, teachers can learn to give themselves *space* by accepting their students for who they are and recognizing the inherent value and meaning in their motives and actions, rather than trying to force fit students into a mold formed by institutional expectations. Teachers can be incredible role models for their students and for their parents, and this role adds to teachers' ability to become agents of change.

Rather than simply *training* and I use training rather than teaching children and youth to memorize and then repeat/regurgitate facts on standardized tests, mindfulness practices promote several valuable cognitive skills, including perspective-taking, creative thinking and innovative problem-solving. With our global world changing so rapidly, teachers need to guide their students to *think outside the box* and to find new ways to approach the myriad of intractable problems that exist today and in the future. Mindfulness awareness can be described as a kind of *meta-awareness* and Jennings (2015) describes this awareness as noticing everything in your consciousness, like an observer watching a movie, and adopting an attitude of acceptance of everything that is happening. She suggests imagining yourself sitting peacefully beside a beautiful river and focusing your attention on the waves of the water. You may notice boats going by, and people on the deck, but consciously pull your attention back and focus on the waves. Practicing mindfulness is like this, you bring your wandering thoughts back to the present moment.

## **Leaders in Mindfulness**

Two people who have made phenomenal contributions in working with mindfulness practices and meditation over the last 40 years are a Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and an American medical doctor Jon Kabat-Zinn from the University of Massachusetts Medical Center (UMASS). Thich Nhat Hanh has written five books in the Mindfulness Essential Series, *How to Sit* which provides clear simple directions and meaningful inspiration for anyone wanting to explore mindfulness meditation. The second book *How to Relax* addresses the daily stress that we all experience that makes us less productive and less happy. In this book Thich Nhat Hanh shares techniques for bringing your life back into balance. The third book *How to Walk* reminds

us that we touch the Earth with awareness, and we can stop *sleepwalking* and arrive fully in the present moment. The fourth book *How to Love* brings clarity, compassion and humor to the essential question of how to love. The fifth book *How to Eat* tells how the process of eating can be a joyful and sustainable activity in all aspects of eating, including preparing the food, and even cleaning up. Thich Nhat Hanh shares how as a young novice, he and one other novice had to wash the dishes for over 100 monks without running water, soap etc., and yet they made it an enjoyable activity.

### **Walking Meditation**

Thich Nhat Hanh said as you walk, you can marvel over the fact that your body is able to walk, and enjoy each step. You focus on your breath and as your feet touch the Earth, be aware of the sky and the wonder of your environment. With each step there is the possibility of mindfulness, concentration and insight. Walk slowly and mindfully at your own pace. Focus on your breathing and as you walk, you are unifying your mind and body. He says bringing all of your attention down to your feet is as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet. Walking can help you be calm, and if you try this with your students, they too can take on a sense of calmness. With focused attention on one's breath and walking, you stop your thinking, blaming, and judging that takes you away from the present moment. Thich Nhat Hanh said life is only available in the present moment. In walking, you can become free of your past, your future, and your worries and fears. When you walk, you don't think, and you don't talk, even if you are walking with another person. (Hanh, 2015, p.35)

Breathing and being aware of your breath is a powerful mindfulness practice and Thich Nhat Hanh suggests the following poem or *gatha* as you walk or relax:

Breathing in, I calm my body,

Breathing out, I smile,

Dwelling in the present moment,

I know this is a wonderful moment (Hanh, 2015, p.67)

## **Mindfulness –Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Clinic**

When Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the foremost leaders in mindfulness started the MBSR Clinic at the Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979, the word *mindfulness* was nowhere in the medical lexicon. Today there are nearly 1,000 certified MBSR instructors teaching mindfulness techniques including meditation, and they are in nearly every state in the United States and in more than 30 countries. Early on Kabat-Zinn worked with *treatment resistant* patients of other doctors, and after 8 weeks of mindfulness training, the *treatment resistant* patients showed remarkable transformation. The MBSR patients had symptom reduction in blood pressure, psoriasis, and fibromyalgia, and the patients with chronic pain disorders reported a greater sense of well-being (Kabat-Zinn, 1982, 1986, 1998). As a result, considerable interest was sparked in the clinical use of mindfulness and today MBSR is used widely to reduce psychological morbidity associated with chronic illnesses and to treat emotional and behavioral disorders (Kabat-Zinn, 1998).

Randomized controlled trials and studies show impressive reductions in psychological morbidity, reduced stress and enhanced emotional well-being in non-clinical samples (Williams, Kolar, Roger & Pearson, 2001). Also, recent research has demonstrated that MBSR promotes significant changes in brain structure associated with improvements in learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective-taking, all of which are skills critical to effective teaching and learning (Hozel, Carmody, Vangel, Congleton, Yerramsetti, Gard, & Lazar, 2011).

Margaret Cullen, a therapist and MBSR instructor developed an eight week, 11 session program focusing on stress management and using relaxation techniques called SMART. Several activities promote mindfulness with the aim of promoting self-compassion and forgiveness. Mindfulness activities in SMART include the body scan, focused meditation on the breath and loving kindness practices. Studies indicate that participants in SMART improved in mindfulness, focused attention and working memory, as well as self-compassion and they reported reduced occupational stress (Sisk & Kane, 2016).

So, where are there programs using mindfulness in classrooms and how successful are they?

## **Evidence-Based Mindfulness Programs for Children and Youth**

In 2005, the Garrison Institute published a report that listed only a few mindfulness-based programs for children and youth, and the report cited little or no research available that studied their effectiveness. Since then there has been a growing number of mindfulness programs

developed including promising research on their practices. One successful mindfulness program is Learning to BREATHE.

### **Learning to BREATHE**

This mindfulness based program for adolescents and pre-adolescents primarily aims at developing emotional awareness and improving emotional regulation, stress reduction and attentional focus in students. Patricia Broderick (2013) developed the program and she reports that many schools in both Canada and the United States have adopted the program called (L2B). Each lesson takes approximately 45 minutes to complete, and the program can be offered once per week or offered in alternate ways depending on the school schedule. L2B has six themes based on the acronym BREATHE:

**B:** Body: Emphasizing building body awareness

**R:** Reflections: Building understanding and working with one's thoughts

**E:** Emotions: Building understanding of one's emotions and working with feelings

**A:** Attention: Integrating awareness of thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations

**T:** Tenderness: Reducing harmful self-judgment and learning to take it as it is.

**H:** Habits for a healthy mind: Integrating mindful awareness into daily life.

**E:** Empowerment: Gaining the *Inner Edge* which is an outcome of the other six themes.

L2B is interactive and students work in groups with discussions designed to demonstrate the lesson's theme, and activities for class practice and home practice options are included. Some of L2B activities include body scanning, mindfulness of thoughts and emotions, mindful movement and loving-kindness practice.

A number of pilot studies found that L2B promotes feelings of calmness, relaxation, and self-acceptance. The program also improves emotion regulation, emotional awareness, emotional clarity, and emotional regulation (Broderick & Metz, 2009). A recent study was conducted with high school students in a quasi-experimental design with one group of students receiving L2B and another group of students who did not. Compared to the comparison group, L2B students

reported lower levels of stress, negative affect, and psychosomatic complaints. The students also reported increased levels of efficacy and emotional regulation (Metz, Frank, Reibel, Cantrell, Sanders, & Broderick, 2013).

## **MindUp**

MindUp was first introduced in British Columbia in early 2000 when actress Goldie Hawn and her family were living in Vancouver. MindUp is sponsored by the Hawn Foundation and available for elementary students from Scholastic. The program has four units: *How Our Brains Work*, *Sharpening Your Senses*, *It's All About Animals*, and *Taking Action Mindfully*. MindUp includes daily mindful listening practices called *Brain Breaks* and mindfulness activities that focus on honing the senses and movements. MindUp teaches children how to generate positive emotional states including happiness, caring and compassion and provides opportunities for perspective taking. MindUp also focuses on ways students can take mindful action into the world. This aspect of the program is particularly applicable to gifted students who want to make a difference, and be involved in service projects. The program includes suggestions for integrating activities into the general curriculum and there is an extensive list of books available that provides examples of the four unit themes. And most important for administrators, the program is aligned with state standards, including Common Core.

MindUp is included in the curriculum of most of the elementary schools in the southern mainland of British Columbia, Canada, and recently the program was adopted by the entire city of Newark, New Jersey. Studies on the effectiveness of the program in British Columbia have found that students who participated in the program were more optimistic and self-confident, and their teachers reported that they demonstrated more social competence in comparison to students who were not involved in the program. Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor (2010) reported that Vancouver added a mindfulness-based stress reduction program for professional development for teachers.

## **Conclusion**

One easy way to get involved in incorporating mindfulness in your life and in your classroom for gifted children and youth is to connect with others who are trying to do the same thing. Websites and resources in the references of this article will help get you started and there are free audio recordings of guided mindfulness practices that you can download. You can make a difference at the school level by asking that your school's professional development include

the topic of mindfulness in the classroom. It will be important for you to approach your work in mindfulness with an open-hearted, present-moment, nonjudgmental awareness. Mindfulness activities and programs can truly transform your classroom, school and district. In our troubled times, mindfulness offers a strategy for transformation and change. Just the simple act of concentrating on your breath when you are stressed, breathing in 1-2-3 and breathing out 1-2-3 can calm you and give you time to reflect on the situation. I find it is a great way to go to sleep after a challenging day, and I wish you well in your journey in exploring mindfulness.

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