

Children at a Manhattan Public School Learn Techniques to Relax

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At [P.S. 112](#), spirited second graders return to class after lunch. To calm them down, class teachers Lisa Zachariah and Emily Holdridge, have the children take three deep breaths and then listen to a 10 minute relaxation tape. The 20 kids spread out lifeless around the classroom and listen to instructions on how to squeeze and let go of different parts of their bodies beginning with their faces and moving down to their toes. After this period of relaxation, the children go to their desks and draw. Some images are of hearts, colorful doodles and scenes, one of a boy walking home and another of a tornado.

The children later share their experiences. Eric, 7, wearing a green sweatshirt said, "That was the calmest peace time ever. It's so comfortable when there's no noise. I drew I was sleeping and stars were there." A boy with curly brown hair remarked, "I like peace time. Made me stop thinking about my brother." The classroom became an open ended sharing period where emotions were felt and recognized.

The scene above is an exercise in Contemplative Education (CE), a term used by [Linda Lantieri](#), author, educator, and well-regarded expert in [Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\)](#). According to Lantieri, "CE cultivates the inner life of teachers and children through arts, teaching and meditation. There is cultivation of inner self awareness and reflection, emotional regulation through awareness of breath which leads to compassion and interdependence."

Since 2002, Lantieri has been involved in the field of nurturing the inner life of teachers and children through her foundation [The Inner Resilience Program](#). When the events of September 11th left teachers and parents emotionally drained, Lantieri offered retreats which included meditation, yoga and reflection time to help them regain their inner balance. Soon her practice of Contemplative Education (CE) began spreading to children and into public schools like P.S. 112, a K to 2nd grade school located at 535 E. 119th St., in Harlem. The population of students

is predominantly black and Hispanic with a significant percentage of special education students having reading, math or attention disabilities.

Occupational and physical therapists visit the school regularly -- working with children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorders and Asperger's -- and engage them in 30 minute classes of yoga and guided imagery. Tom Roepke, reading teacher, said, "This population of kids need these skills more than others. We are finding that these kids really have a need to relax and they love it."

Lantieri's Inner Resilience practice is currently embedded in 10 Manhattan schools, in public schools in South Burlington, Vermont, and in the Warren and Youngtowns city school districts, Ohio.

Lantieri says that in all these schools her teachers do something contemplative daily, giving children opportunities for reflection. This could take the form of quiet music time where children color in a mandala, or a three minute gratitude sharing where kids say what they are grateful for.

A study by the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA's Semel Institute, Journal, found that mindful awareness practices -- the practice of cultivating awareness, attention, acceptance and non-judgment -- introduced to second and third graders benefitted kids with executive function difficulties, that is kids who have trouble concentrating and are impulsive. The study added that kids suffering with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity, autism, delinquency and bullying, could benefit from such treatment.

Lantieri believes that the practice of contemplation can benefit kids growing up in this digital, fast paced world and as a counterbalance to what kids are experiencing outside classrooms: stress, over-scheduling and the fact that they don't have time to be kids. "The practice of contemplation, to be present and non-judgmental, makes kids pause, reflect and interpret an event differently, from 'he was trying to diss me' to 'he did not see me,'" said Lantieri.

But how beneficial are such practices on kids? [Dr. Adele Diamond](#), professor of developmental cognitive neuroscience at the University of British Columbia, believes that one of the hardest

exercises for kids is practicing self-control. Several abilities, like inhibition, self-control and working memory, depend on the brain's pre-frontal cortex. "Up to age 13 it's harder for kids to exercise self-control than to remember," said Diamond. "Mindfulness exercises like breath control can help train children in self-control. It helps train you to focus and stay focused and to stop and think before you react. Reacting mindlessly often gets children and adults into trouble."