mindful
taking time for what matters

The Future of Education: Mindful Classrooms

Creating a safe place for our kids to learn might begin with creating some space for them to breathe

By: Caren Osten Gerszberg

On a cold March afternoon, the hallways were abuzz with chatter and giggles at Chatsworth Elementary School in Larchmont, New York. As the kindergarteners from Liz Slade's class ambled into their classroom from lunch and recess and put their jackets and lunch boxes into their cubbies, Slade asked, "Can today's mindful leader please come up front and begin?"

Isabella, a 6-year-old wearing a heart-clad gray shirt and polka-dot leggings, quietly took a cross-legged seat on the classroom rug facing her peers. With her palms facing up and resting on each knee, she began to tap her thumbs on each of her fingers, simultaneously repeating the words "I-am-calm-now" with each tap. Without hesitation, each of Isabella's classmates, along with their teacher, followed their mindful leader, tapping their thumbs and saying "I am calm now," gently lowering their voices after each repetition until the room grew quiet. Slade then asked her students to slowly make their way to their tables and take out their "feelings" journal.

"They are learning the experience of settling their body," said Slade. "What used to be a wild time now becomes a charming, sweet moment when we all take a pause and come back to being present."

Chatsworth is one of thousands of schools across the country that is bringing mindfulness into the classroom. Growing numbers of teachers, parents, and children are reaping the benefits that learning mindfulness—defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally"—can bring, including reduced levels of stress and anxiety, increased focus and self-regulation, and improved academic performanceand sleep, among others.

With heightened academic pressure trickling down to kids as early as kindergarten, resulting in less time for play and the arts, children today are faced with an unprecedented amount of stress and anxiety—25% of 13- to 18-year-olds will experience an anxiety disorder according to the National Institutes of Mental Health. Such early stress levels can negatively impact learning, memory, behavior, and both physical and mental health, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Escalating stress and pressure continue into middle and high school—a survey of 22,000 high school students conducted by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence found that, on average, students reported feeling negative emotions, such as stress, fatigue, and boredom, 75% of the time. An antidote to all this stress has never been needed more. Enter mindfulness.

The Research on Mindfulness in Schools

While the implementation of school-based mindfulness programs for children in grades K through 12—such as Inner Resilience, Mindful Schools, Learning to Breathe, and MindUp to name just a few—is becoming more popular, empirical research proving the benefits of mindfulness is only beginning to emerge and more rigorous research will be needed over the coming decades. "We know very little about which programs work and what works for whom and under what conditions," said Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, Ph.D., co-author with Robert Roeser of the recently published *Handbook of Mindfulness in Education: Integrating Theory and Research into Practice*, and a professor and researcher at the University of British Columbia. A 2015 study by Schonert-Reichl looked at the effectiveness of a 12-week social and emotional learning (SEL) program that included mindfulness training. Ninety-nine 4th and 5th graders were divided into two groups: one received MindUp's weekly SEL curriculum and the other a social responsibility program already used in Canadian public schools. After analyzing measures, which included behavioral assessments, cortisol levels, feedback from their peers regarding sociability, and academic scores of math grades, the results revealed dramatic differences. Compared to the students who learned the social responsibility program, those trained in mindfulness scored higher in math, had 24% more social behaviors, and were 20% less aggressive. The group trained in mindfulness excelled above the other group in the areas of attention, memory, emotional regulation, optimism, stress levels, mindfulness, and empathy.

Although in its early stages, research on the effects of school-based mindfulness programs is being fueled by three decades of studies on adults, which shows promise for its psychological and physiological benefits. Researchers are turning their focus to children and teens to figure out

what, when, how much, and from whom the teaching of mindfulness works best. “We don’t have conclusive evidence at this point about the benefits or impacts of mindfulness on youth,” said Lisa Flook, Ph.D., associate scientist at the Center for Healthy Minds, at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. “We do see the promise of interventions and trainings on outcomes related to grades, wellbeing, and emotional regulation.” In other words, the research looking at the benefits of mindfulness in education is pointing toward the positive.

“Mindfulness is a powerful tool that supports children in calming themselves, focusing their attention, and interacting effectively with others, all critical skills for functioning well in school and in life,” said Amy Saltzman, M.D., director of the Association for Mindfulness in Education, and director of Still Quiet Place. “Incorporating mindfulness into education has been linked to improving academic and social and emotional learning. Also, mindfulness strengthens some underlying development processes—such as focus, resilience, and self-soothing—that will help kids in the long run.”

What Does a Mindful Classroom Look Like?

No one sees the value of a child’s impulse control and focused awareness as clearly as a teacher. Liz Slade, who’s been integrating mindfulness into her classroom for the last eight years, once observed a student walk up to a tall structure of blocks being built by a few of her classmates. “I watched this little girl raise her foot to kick the blocks, take a breath and then walk away,” she said. “The kids can learn to notice distraction, self-regulate, and ask themselves, ‘What do I need?’”

Slade came to mindfulness on her own about 10 years ago, and after seeing the benefits in her own life, she started experimenting in the classroom with practices that used breathing and mindful listening. “As I became more knowledgeable, experimenting and seeing what was working, I was really impressed,” she said. “The kids verbalized to me that they felt they had tools to use to handle stressful situations, which was very moving to me.”

Recognizing the impact of her own practice and the positive effects in her classroom—and with the support of her school’s principal, a critical component—Slade went on to apply for a grant for her school to bring in a formal training program called Inner Resilience, created by Linda Lantieri, who is also a founding member of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). From there, the support and enthusiasm spread throughout the Mamaroneck School District among teachers, parents, and the administration, with the Inner Resilience training program now offered to teachers and support staff at all six of its schools,

which serve 5,200 students. “The best way to implement mindfulness is in an integrated way with social and emotional learning,” said Lantieri. “If we are going to be in schools we need to make sure we are helping kids learn better, and if mindfulness can help with that, great.”

Most experts feel that the best implementation of mindfulness involves a teacher having her own mindfulness practice, or at least an understanding. “It is how they teach, not just what they teach, and if a teacher is mindful in a classroom, the kids learn to be mindful,” said Tish Jennings, M.Ed., Ph.D., associate professor at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, who started a program called CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) for Teachers. “Teachers are really under a lot of stress and we know their stress affects our kids, so supporting them is a win-win,” said Jennings. Her recent research found that teachers trained in the CARE for Teachers program felt less time urgency and were more positive and more sensitive. In addition, children were more engaged and productive.

For Rosalie Choniuk, a teacher at P.S. 94 in the Bronx, New York, learning mindfulness through the CARE for Teachers program has been life changing. “I am a completely different person since learning mindfulness—mentally, physically and emotionally,” said Choniuk. As an ENL (English as a New Language) teacher, Choniuk wears several hats in her school, often providing coverage for teachers when they need to be out of the classroom. Before developing her mindfulness practice, Choniuk grew anxious every time she was to report to a particular fifth grade classroom, where kids were unruly and fights often broke out. “Now when I go, instead of having anxiety, I set an intention to be calm and deal with them in a positive manner,” said Choniuk. “I see the changes in the kids, who are less reactive, and the changes in myself, and now I look forward to being in their class.”

Creating a Culture of Mindfulness in Schools

If a classroom teacher is not able to provide mindfulness lessons to their class, schools often bring instructors in from outside the school. But long-term mindfulness programs can be difficult to maintain in the classroom with this model. “With an outside person, programs can work insofar as they can train teachers to keep it up,” said Trish Broderick, Ph.D., founder of the Learning to Breathe program and a research associate at the Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center at Penn State University. “The advantage of bringing in a program to teach mindfulness is that it can be replicated and used effectively when taught by teachers or school staff who already have a relationship with the kids.”

The Mindful Schools program prefers to call its approach an adoption—where mindfulness begins at the individual teacher level—versus a rollout, or top-down decision made by leadership to implement a new program. “We don’t mandate this for all the teachers; we let it grow organically,” said Camille Whitney, former head of research at Mindful Schools. “We encourage any number of people to take the course voluntarily, and encourage it as a group so they can practice and build a program together.”

Integrating mindfulness into a health and wellness curriculum is another alternative for implementation. “Rather than adding on, a program can be supplemented into an existing

program," said Broderick, whose Learning to Breathe program is often used as part of a middle or high school's health curriculum.

Last winter, Annie Ward, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction for the Mamaroneck Union Free School District, wandered into a high school health class during a school visit. Ward was struck to see the students sitting quietly with their eyes closed and feet on the floor, as they listened to a guided meditation the teacher was playing on a CD. "It was great to see this meditation happen with no fanfare, watching the kids settle right into it and seeing that it was clearly a ritual," said Ward.

When teaching mindfulness is accepted and embraced, it can change the tone and tenor of an entire school, or district. In 2008, the South Burlington, Vermont, school district began an effort to train teachers and students, using the Inner Resilience program for younger grades, and the Learning to Breathe program for older ones. For two years, almost 130 teachers volunteered to take the mindfulness training, and the program continued to grow and expand more deliberately to include cafeteria staff and bus drivers, totaling 170 trainees.

On top of the school-wide effort, they also invited parents to participate by offering evening mindfulness classes and lectures by local experts and visiting instructors, and in some cases, regular updates from teachers on mindfulness activities in the classroom. Training the teachers before the children and parental involvement were two components integral to the success of the South Burlington district's efforts, according to Marilyn Neagley, former director of Talk About Wellness, an initiative dedicated to funding and developing programs for youth and family wellness.

Including parents when a program is introduced is a way to expose them to what mindfulness is and is not. And then there's the questionable connection to religion, which can, in some communities, be a hot topic. "One of the most important things we learned from public meetings with parents and the community was to be sure the training is completely secular with no religiosity at all," said Neagley. The teaching is based entirely on emerging neuroscience and keeping all references to Buddhism, and words commonly used during yoga, such as *namaste*, out of the school vernacular is critical. In some schools, the word yoga has been replaced with "mindful movement" so there is no confusion about the ways in which mindfulness is being taught. "What we are teaching is how to pay attention and be more aware, and how to implement that awareness in our lives," said Lantieri. "What we are teaching we teach in a secular context."

For systemic change to take place in a district—as it did in South Burlington—administration and teachers need to figure out where mindfulness can fit, how it will work, and what is needed to bring it in. And there needs to be a point person who can move it forward. "Any district I'm working with has a superintendent or assistant superintendent who is thinking five years out, not just about one classroom," said Lantieri. "That's how SEL started, with one teacher who got excited."

After journaling time was over, Liz Slade's kindergarteners gathered again on the rug to do some imagination breaths. Going around the circle, each child paired a breath with a made-up hand movement and named it—a snowflake breath, a jellyfish breath, a clamshell breath—and the rest

of the class mimicked the movement. After a while, when the kids got antsy, Slade asked them to get up and jump around. There were wiggles and tumbles and twists and then she said, “Now make a mindful statue.” The children froze in place, and all you could hear was the sound of their breath.

Caren is a writer and certified positive psychology life coach. She works with individuals and groups, helping clients find balance, resilience, and positivity during transitions and challenging times. A contributor to publications, such as The New York Times, Psychology Today, and Mindful, Caren’s articles cover health and wellbeing, mindfulness and education.