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Creating a Mindful Classroom

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Anxiety, depression and emotional disturbance are on the rise in students from elementary through college age. The increase of mindfulness and other socio-emotional learning programs in schools across the nation show that education professionals have started taking notice of these alarming trends. Unfortunately, education reforms are very slow to trickle down to becoming common practice in every classroom. In my work as a holistic educator, I meet classroom teachers and university professors alike who ask me what they can do immediately to help students increase their sense of well-being, self-regulation and focus for learning. My answer is always the same — establish a mindful classroom.

What is a Mindful Classroom?

Mindfulness, as it is currently practiced in its secular form in public schools, offers various practices for becoming fully aware of what is happening in the present moment, both within the self and in the external environment. Such practices can include breath work, journaling, silence, gratitude affirmations, body scanning and guided meditation. By learning to focus attention on internal states, accepting what is (without judgement), students learn to reconnect with their senses and to feel their feelings. By observing their experiences at a deeper level, they

learn to notice how they impact, and are impacted by, the learning environment. Through practicing this awareness over time, students begin to rewire their brains, thereby increasing their capacity to regulate thoughts, emotions and behaviors.¹

In mindful classrooms, the relationships formed between teachers and students, coupled with the structure of the learning space, form an “invisible classroom” that operates beneath the surface of the formal agenda of teaching and learning.² In mindful classrooms, teachers acknowledge that teaching is, in essence, an “emotional practice.”³ Therefore, teachers personally commit to practicing emotional mastery through mindfulness. They actively use these techniques to understand and regulate students’ emotions, behavior and learning by establishing emotionally safe environments. Mindful classrooms can only be created if teachers are as personally invested in transforming their own emotional states as they are in teaching students to behave. This is especially critical for teachers who work with children with learning differences or those who have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences such as trauma, abuse or neglect.

Establishing A Neuroception of Safety

The primary benefit of a mindful classroom is the



establishment of a culture of felt safety. This type of safety allows students who have been exposed to toxic stress or trauma to gain greater access to the parts of the brain that control social connection and focused learning by reducing triggers of the sympathetic nervous system fight-or-flight response. Many people feel they have done their job of establishing a safe learning environment by simply ensuring students' physical safety. Are video monitors in place? Are the doors locked? Have backpacks been checked for weapons? Yes, students may be physically safe in a classroom, but the more important question for learning and self-regulation is, do students have a felt

neuroception of safety — a place where they can settle into a ventral vagal state of relaxed alertness, open to human connection and trust that they are seen and heard with compassion. Teachers in a mindful classroom understand that by taking steps to balance their own nervous systems daily they are better able to co-regulate their students' behavior on a physiological level. The ultimate goal of mindful classrooms is to make punitive behavior management strategies a thing of the past, especially for students of color and students with disabilities — two groups that experience the highest rates of exclusionary discipline.

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sense of emotional safety in the space?⁴

Dr. Stephen Porges,⁴ created the term *neuroception* to describe how the human autonomic nervous system continuously scans the environment for potential threats to safety at an unconscious level. Through neuroception, we are profoundly attuned to our environment, including the internal state of those around us.² In a classroom setting, this means that students subconsciously register all of their teachers' emotions, including their non-verbal body language, whether they are attuned to the present moment and whether they are genuinely liked and cared for by the teacher. The same is true for students as they interact with one another. Porges' polyvagal nerve theory suggests that unless and until we engage in practices that create a neuroception of safety in the classroom, students will have an extremely difficult time activating the ventral vagal nerve — a critical component of the parasympathetic nervous system responsible for a calm body, positive social engagement, physical healing and focus for learning.

Mindful classrooms consistently offer ALL students a

Three Next-Day Mindfulness Techniques

While some mindfulness programs require extensive teacher training, there are some mindfulness-based practices that can be implemented immediately by anyone who would like to establish a safe learning space for students of all ages. The ones recommended in this article are safe to use in a classroom setting and take only a few minutes to complete.

1. The Vagus Nerve Breath – A very simple technique I share with teachers and parents involves bringing the body into a relaxed state by focusing on the breath. The ventral vagus nerve is activated when the practitioner's exhale lasts about twice as long as the inhale. To do this, instruct students to make a complete inhale for a count of four, filling the abdomen, diaphragm and lungs with air. Without pause, exhale slowly for a count of eight, releasing all the oxygen from the body while drawing the belly button back toward the spine. We usually continue this practice for 2-3 minutes, followed by a few moments of focusing inward to become aware of what is happening in the body and mind. This is also a time



where students are invited to set a positive intention for what they want to accomplish that day.

I have found that most people initially have a difficult time with this breathing technique but find significant benefit once they master it. There is a wonderful website, www.xhalr.com, that allows practitioners to program various breath patterns. The program then provides visual cues that can be followed to know how long to inhale and exhale. My teachers love using xhalr.com to guide breathing practices for their students.

2. Box Breathing – Box breath is another simple mindfulness technique to teach students to help them develop *equanimity* — the ability to remain calm and even-minded, even under extreme pressure or stress. This technique is especially useful for students who experience test-taking anxiety. It can also be used to help avoid escalation during an upset or disagreement in the classroom. To practice box breathing, begin in a relaxed, upright position. Inhale for a count of four, hold the breath for a count of four, exhale for a count of four and hold the breath for a count of four. The xhalr.com site can also be programmed to guide box breathing for 2-3 minutes. Many teachers in my training program have reported that their students successfully utilize box breathing to prevent anxiety attacks and emotional meltdowns. They express surprise to see that students default to these practices without direct instruction from the teacher.

3. Loving-Kindness Meditation – This is one of my favorite tools for establishing a mindful classroom, especially when practiced consistently by the teacher. Research shows that regular practice of this meditation reduces implicit bias by promoting unconditional kindness toward self and others.⁵ This is critical for creating a neuroception of safety for all children, but especially for those who have been historically marginalized in school settings.

This practice helps teachers and students put space between their automatic, unconscious thoughts, giving them time to think differently and to choose a different course of action. One of my favorite guided

loving-kindness meditations is led by Dr. Emma Sepala of Stanford University. It can be found at <https://youtu.be/auS1HtAz6Bs>. While this practice takes approximately 15 minutes and is ideal for personal practice, shorter versions, that are best suited for classroom use, can be found on YouTube. Based on the consistent data showing the benefits of this meditation, I firmly believe that a daily practice of this nature should be part of every teacher training program in the nation.

Creating Routine and Ritual

In teaching mindfulness practices to classroom teachers and university professors, one complaint I often hear is that there is not enough time in the day to lead a regular mindfulness practice. This is true even for educators who have a real desire to implement the practice. Curriculum demands and other concerns often take over and the time dedicated to maintaining a daily practice disappears. When I hear these concerns, I always stress the importance of creating routines and rituals in the mindful classroom that students can depend on consistently. Routines provide structure and they add to the sense of felt safety that the nervous system needs to relax into learning. This is especially true for students who may come from unstable home lives that lack order and predictability. It is critical that teachers understand the important role they play in creating a space of healing and restoration for their students through maintaining a predictable mindfulness practice. Choose the same time of day. Play the same song. Ring a simple chime before and after each session. Whatever practice you choose, create secular ways to bring an element of ritual to your mindfulness practice. Your students will benefit.

There is one thing I have found to be critical when leading mindfulness practices with students who have been exposed to significant toxic stress, trauma or community violence. They usually will not close their eyes when asked to participate in mindfulness. I always encourage teachers to respect this and to give students the option to keep their eyes open. After rapport has been established, I find that



most students are willing to completely relax into the process with their eyes closed after we establish a few agreements. First, I promise to always stand at the door during our practice to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the room. We place a sign outside on the door so the principal, or anyone else, knows not to enter until we are done. Second, I ask all students to agree to remain still with no movement in the room so there are no sounds to cause a danger alert for the nervous system. Even if a student chooses not to participate, they all agree to create a safe space where the other students can enjoy their practice without fear. These agreements go a very long way for building trust, comfort and felt safety in a mindful classroom.

A Mindful Classroom for All Learners

After more than 25 years in the field of education, I have not found a more effective tool for supporting students' social and emotional growth than mindfulness. The reduction in anxiety and increased sense of calm focus that I have observed in students of all ages continues to encourage me to do all I can to help educators and other student-serving professionals to develop these skill sets. While it is not an instant cure-all for every mental health or behavioral concern, mindfulness offers a significant tool of empowerment that helps both children and adults understand the innate power they have to positively influence their own state of well-being and the well-being of others. This form of awareness and collective action has the potential to generate the ideal social and educational landscape we all dream of creating for our children and grandchildren.



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