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# Mindfulness as a Path to Social Justice in Education

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**W**hen I first embarked on mindfulness practices almost 20 years ago, I thought of it only as a tool for personal well-being. It offered strategies for repairing my nervous system after the shock of losing of my first baby and it allowed me to imagine and manifest a life free of asthma symptoms. Over the years, mindfulness helped me cool my hot temper by putting space between me and my natural inclination to “burn down the barn” on many occasions. It was because of these personal life-changing events that I embarked on a career path that now includes leading mindfulness retreats for teachers and other helping professionals.

My passion for sharing mind/body wellness techniques with educators grew in part from recognizing how many teachers, like myself, are physical or emotional empaths who absorb or take on the energy of those around them. This can be especially depleting for teachers who work in communities where students experience higher rates of violence or suffer from the effects of economic disparities. The burnout rate for these teachers is high, leading many to leave the classroom within the first five years of entering the profession.

Teacher burnout affects many aspects of classroom

functioning. In addition to burnout causing a decline of positive interactions between teachers and students, teachers also experience more difficulties in providing effective feedback to their students due to their lack of ability to establish or maintain close relationships with them. A teacher’s occupational stress is very likely to negatively affect their ability to create a caring atmosphere that aligns with their students’ needs.<sup>1</sup> Research shows students taught by disengaged or exhausted teachers have the tendency to become frequently disruptive, struggle both emotionally and socially and meet their education goals less frequently than their well-supported peers.<sup>2</sup> With this research in mind, I began designing mindfulness retreats to support teachers in the development of self-care routines that would allow them to rejuvenate and learn to set healthy energetic boundaries to prevent empathic burnout and remain in the profession. Little did I know, mindfulness-based wellness practices would become the basis of a social justice revolution in the classroom.

## The Mindful Path to Change

Earlier this year, I led a group of teachers from a local school district in Southern California on a 4-day, 3-night mindfulness retreat. My team and I led the participants in a range of exercises and activities



that explored both the science and practice of mindfulness. As is appropriate for public school teachers, our approach was built on teachings within the secular mindfulness movement as promoted by thought leaders like Jon Kabat-Zinn, Daniel Siegel and Stephen Porges.

Each morning began with an optional 7am outdoor yoga class. During workshop time, participants built clay models of the human brain, discussed the inhibitory effect of trauma and toxic stress on learning and explored the healing power of the vagus nerve. Participants practiced evidence-based breathing techniques, structured to reset the autonomic nervous system. They explored the use of visualization and the cultivation of elevated emotions

against Christian religion by practicing mindfulness. And the worry made it difficult for them to completely engage.

When I checked the rest of the room, we discovered approximately ½ of the group had some level of concern about believing they could use their own breathing patterns and the visualizations of their minds to spark a healing response in the body, without invoking God or Jesus to intercede. The concern stemmed from the idea they were denying the power of God to heal. For some, it meant they were putting themselves above God by claiming they could potentially heal themselves with mindfulness practices. What emerged from the initial disclosure was a 90-minute conversation about the role of

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to spark healing reactions in the body. For many of the teachers, this was the first time they had been introduced to the possibility that their minds could be used as a tool for self-healing. While most of the them were excited about the possibility of using these techniques to manage their own stress and optimize performance in the classroom, I could sense several 'holdout' participants in the room even though participation was 100% voluntary.

Initially, I thought perhaps 'holdout' participants were uncomfortable with breathing in a new way or closing their eyes in an unfamiliar setting. By the morning of day 3, the real elephant in the room emerged and the true breakthroughs began. I started the day with the usual morning rounds, to assess the emotional temperature. Cautiously, a third-grade teacher raised her hand to share that her group had concerns. She shared although her group was enjoying the teachings and felt relaxed by the practices, in the back of their minds group members were worried they were going

religion in public education — we moved from the role of God in how we heal, to the role of God in how we teach and finally, to who we teach.

### **One Nation Under God with Liberty and Justice for All**

My work with this group of teachers began as a secular practice of mindfulness — one that was consciously stripped of all religious associations and grounded in science to create a program that could be implemented for the benefit of public-school teachers. In that moment, our work together turned into a mindful exploration of whether teachers strip themselves of their Christianity when they enter public schools to teach children who are raised in different religions, cultures and traditions. On the surface, the participants insisted they treat all children fairly and they do not promote their religion beliefs in the workplace. They asserted because it is a public setting, they honor the separation of





church and state. Instead of addressing their initial inquiry about mindfulness and Christianity, I gently redirected them to engage their new mindfulness skills to notice, without judgment, which students they have positive relationships with and which students they struggled to reach. I assigned a 3-hour silent meditation and invited them to become mindfully self-aware of how their interactions with students reflect their Christian beliefs and values. I asked them to notice which students are included and which students are excluded in their classroom. Finally, I asked them to contemplate how the relationships are reflective of their deeply held beliefs, even the ones they would never speak about in a public setting.

At the end of the day, a few teachers approached me privately share. They spoke about how the silent mindfulness practice made them aware of how they have used their religious teachings to silently discriminate against students their faith tells them are unworthy of God's blessings. For example, the teacher did not openly disrespect a homosexual or transgender student in the classroom; however, they allowed other students to bully the homosexual student without stepping in to stop it, because the student's "lifestyle choices" were wrong or against God. Some participants also became mindfully aware they withheld affection, denied attention and/or did not go out of their way to build relationships with Muslim, Jewish or atheist students. Again, these actions resulted from being taught in church that only those who believe in Jesus are saved. I was especially touched by one teacher who told me, "Dr. Niki, I say that God teaches me to love all people, but at the same time the bible tells me there will always be the poor among us. When I think about it now, I think in the past, maybe I gave up on some of the low-income students of color in my class because I accepted the belief that maybe they are supposed to be the poor among us. . . and there was nothing I could do to change that. I choose not to believe that anymore. I need to find another way to apply the teachings of my faith."

For the remainder of the retreat, I watched in awe as the teachers sat at mealtimes and break times, discussing effective ways to reconcile mindfulness with their faith. I was blown away by their commitment to return to their classrooms and uproot injustice as they would now see through new eyes of non-judgmental self-awareness. Once back in the classroom, many of them noticed their own (and their colleagues') behavior toward students in a new light. They also began to see how certain children, particularly African American boys, were treated more harshly than white children for the same behaviors in school. In a follow-up meeting, several teachers reported they have found effective ways to incorporate mindfulness into their existing spiritual beliefs. Some have begun to address the inconsistencies in their faith and how it plays out in the classroom and in their work with children. As one teacher reflected, "mindfulness has shown me that if Jesus told me to love my neighbor as myself, I have to be mindful of whether I actually love myself first. That's the self-care part of what you taught us. Then, I have to remain mindful of whether I truly am sharing my love with **ALL** of the children I have been called to serve. That's the social justice part."



Author Niki Elliott can be found at [www.InnerLightMethod.com](http://www.InnerLightMethod.com).

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