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Silence Is Golden

Judith Gaston Fisher

Leading students in weekly mindfulness meditation helps them learn to calm their emotions and focus their thoughts.

It's Monday morning, a time when many students and teachers might exhibit lethargy. But the faces of my students don't reflect dread of the coming week. They greet one another with smiles that say, "Yes! It's Monday!"

To begin their school week, students turn their chairs to face the wall, put their hands on their knees, and wait for the music to commence. This action signals their readiness to begin Monday morning meditation. We all sit up straight, relax our muscles, and focus on deep "belly breathing." For the next 10 minutes, we settle into silence and a reprieve from external pressures.

My students, participants in a program called the Learning Center at the Community School in St. Louis, Missouri, need this reprieve. Selected students from the school's 3rd through 6th grades come to the Learning Center four times a week for 30- to 40-minute help and enrichment sessions. My room is full of students needing extra attention. Before I initiated a meditation routine, many of these learners lacked both calm and focus. Some have an official diagnosis like ADHD, some need help with a particular topic or project, and others struggle with organizing academic tasks or even their backpacks. ("I can't find my planner." "I *know* I turned in that missing assignment.") A few come to my classroom because of social issues: They feel left out or even angry that they aren't accepted by their peers.

Educators are familiar with the challenge of teaching students with widely different strengths and problems. During my years of teaching, I have benefited from many helpful methods for tailoring teaching to diverse students. I've planned lessons and activities that touch on Howard Gardner's nine intelligences (1991), and I've followed Carol Ann Tomlinson's approach of differentiating content, process, and assessments according to student readiness and interest. (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Still, for many years I felt that a sense of readiness, of wholehearted participation, was missing. I wanted my students to be engaged, but like many teachers, couldn't identify what was standing in their way.

Overscheduled and Overwhelmed

As I considered this question, I observed my students' lives. I saw hurried children caught in a fast-forward pace. Wake up, grab breakfast, get dropped off at school, travel from one class to another, jump in the car, go to your tutor, hit horseback riding before dinner, and in the evening practice soccer (or tennis, singing, or piano). Add in homework, elaborate birthday parties, keeping up by e-mail and text message, and—for some kids—shuttling between mom's house and dad's house.

I considered pediatrician Mel Levine's (2003) claim that many children today are exhausted, even sleep deprived. What I perceived as my students' lack of motivation was instead, I concluded, a response to stress that was sapping their attention.

Scientific research has increasingly focused on the visceral experience of stress. The Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) identifies and assigns value points to 43 common stressors occurring in adult life, ranging from death of a spouse (100 points) to receiving a traffic ticket (11 points). An individual subjected to a stressor rated as low as 25 points will undertake coping strategies (Harrington, 2008).

We don't have the equivalent of an SRRS scale for children, but surely stress affects them, too. If we were to construct such a scale focused on students' worlds, I imagine it would include the following events:

- Moving
- Changing schools
- Parental pressure to perform in school or in an extracurricular activity
- Lack of sleep
- Losing a pet
- Parents getting divorced
- Being bullied
- Social isolation

Knowing that my students experience such pressures—and suspecting that packed schedules aggravate the punch that each event packs—I pondered the consequences. I wondered if students might feel perpetually overwhelmed. Some young people with alternative learning styles seem to be particularly susceptible to getting overwhelmed by internal and external stimuli in a way that causes focusing problems.

The human body is meant to experience the physical components of stress—pounding heart, racing pulse, a surge of cortisol and adrenaline, and a rise in insulin and blood pressure—as warning symptoms in emergencies. But on a day-to-day basis, these symptoms are harmful (Benson, 2004). Many adult health problems—stomach ulcers, insomnia, and migraines, to name a few—are connected to stress. What if the pressures many children feel also hurt their health—and sap their ability to think and learn well?

My question became, How can I get my students to relax? Although I couldn't make their lives stress-free, I thought a weekly meditation session might help them experience the physical, emotional, and social benefits of stepping back from constant activity and calming their minds. So, tentatively, I began teaching them the art of silence.

Guiding Meditation

I instruct students in a meditation approach called mindfulness, focusing on four components: awareness of the present moment, conscious deep breathing, visualizations, and affirmations. To begin, I guide students in positioning their bodies to be relaxed and alert and to focus on rhythmic breathing. I read aloud meditative passages I have created that help them get into this relaxed, alert state or visualize pleasant and empowering scenes, such as the following:

Place your hands on your knees. Close your eyes. Imagine a string connected to the ground, moving up your spine, and emerging at the top of your head. Feel the pull of the string causing your back to become straighter, your shoulders to drop, and your chest to push forward.

Relax your eyes. Let your jaw open as you let go of the tension in your mouth. Relax your neck and shoulders. As they relax, your shoulders will drop into your torso. Let the tension go from your chest. . . .As your stomach relaxes, it will push forward just a bit. Relax your buttocks, your legs, and your feet. Now scan

your body for any sign of tension and let it go. Your body is as heavy as lead.

As students turn their focus within, their minds stop jumping around. Meditation is about training oneself to live in the present instead of dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. Focusing on your breath or concentrating on a sound or phrase helps achieve this awareness of the present:

Begin slow and deep breathing. To the count of six, bring in a slow, steady breath of fresh air into your belly and lungs. Let go of the breath to the count of six, releasing the impure air that has been trapped in your pores and cells. In the next breath, imagine the air as a color. Watch the color slowly move to all parts of your body. As you release the air, see the impurities disappear into the surrounding sky.

What's Happening As Students Meditate

According to research, getting into a meditative state not only relaxes people, but also counters the negative physical effects—and the barriers to learning—that chronic stress produces (Benson, 2004). It may even improve the emotional state. University of Massachusetts researchers Richard Davidson and Jon Kabat-Zinn have reported that individuals with high levels of brain activity in the left prefrontal cortex exhibit overall feelings of enthusiasm, joy, energy, and alertness, whereas individuals with more activity in the right prefrontal cortex feel greater tension and stress and are more prone to depression and disease (Goleman, 2003). In one study involving 41 adults, after subjects practiced mindfulness meditation for eight weeks, their brains showed increased activity in the left prefrontal cortex and they reported a happier state of mind than did control subjects (Kalb, 2004).

I sometimes lead students in guided visualizations designed to increase their focus and positive mood:

You are in the desert. The sky is blue with only wisps of clouds on the horizon. The sun is bright. You feel the wind on your face and through your hair as you lift your eyes and inhale the freshness of the day. Small and giant cacti are in full bloom. . . .

You are struck by the stark beauty of the desert as sagebrush blows from one place to another.

Meditation often gives students the ability to shift thoughts into a more positive state. They use these new habits of mind to avoid self-defeating thoughts that once impeded their potential. We've experimented with using *affirmations*, positive thoughts and words that can lead to positive feelings and, in turn, better actions.

Each student selects an affirmation—such as "I pay attention in class" or "I complete my homework." We create bookmarks containing these affirmations, and I urge students to recite them to me as they enter the classroom. They repeat key words from their affirmations and repeat them during our meditation sessions. Amazingly, their behavior often comes into line with their affirmation.

For example, Susannah often struggled with anger and self-control in our classroom. She chose as her affirmation, "I am a calm and beautiful person." As she continued to declare this phrase to herself—and at times to the whole class—she indeed became more calm and considerate.

Observable Benefits

My observations, brief surveys, and comments from students, teachers, and parents tell me that my students are benefitting vastly from doing morning meditations and using personal affirmations. My students have become more accepting of themselves and others, more focused, and more in control of their emotions. I have seen students identify "triggers"—emotions or behavior that in the past might have sent them spiraling into anger or fear—and avoid responding negatively to them.

My 6th grade boys were the first to share with me how meditation was affecting their daily lives. They'd say, "Mrs. Fisher, I know it's Friday, but can we meditate? I need to prepare for my baseball game tonight." Another boy reported that before a secondary school entrance interview, he asked his parents if he could sit in the car alone to calm himself.

One Friday, the 6th grade boys noticed that I was agitated and anxious. As I began to teach, they asked me to stop and confidently stated, "Mrs. Fisher, you seem like you need to get calm. We need some silent time so we can all be more able to learn. Can we meditate?"

But it was Susannah who let me know how significant this work was for her life. After three years of participating in Learning Center, she stopped me in the hall, a wide smile replacing the scowl that had once been her signature expression. "You know, Mrs. Fisher," she said. "These affirmations really work!" Susannah hugged me and skipped down the hall to join her classmates.

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Judith Gaston Fisher teaches in the Upper Elementary Learning Center at the Community School in St. Louis; 314-503-7966; www.twitter.com/education_beat; jfcs900@aol.com.
