

The Calm and Alert Class:
Using Body, Mind and Breath to Teach
Self-Regulation of Learning Related Social Skills

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Author's Note

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Abstract

This article documents an action research pilot study called *The Calm and Alert Class* which utilized the body, mind and breath of students to teach the self-regulation of learning related social skills. Sixty first graders in four classrooms at a public elementary school were offered a 30 minute class for 28 weeks, which taught explicit skills in these areas: respect for self, others and school; listening; following directions; self control; being calm and alert; maintaining a positive attitude; appropriate behavior in groups at various times of the school day. Effectiveness was monitored by the following data: beginning and midyear surveys of classroom teachers; midyear survey of parents; beginning and end of the year survey of students; anecdotal reports through observation by staff and parents. Results were promising. The group as a whole showed improvement in self-regulation at various times of the school day and individual students exhibited skill mastery and generalization in a number of instruction areas. Future actions based on data include continuing the class and expanding it to other grade levels at this site.

The Calm and Alert Class: Using Body, Mind and Breath to Teach Self-Regulation of Learning Related Social Skills

Introduction

Elementary students are currently expected to perform at ever increasing levels academically, requiring children show the self-regulation of learning related social skills daily to be successful at school (McClelland, Morrison & Holmes 2000;; Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007) Self -regulation has been defined as a “wide variety of capabilities involved in regulating emotion and behavior of the self “(McCabe, Cunnington & Brooks-Gunn, 2004, p. 342) while the term learning related social skills encompasses a number of important interpersonal and work related skills such as: listening, following directions, participating appropriately in groups, , organization, responsibility, independence and the ability to focus and attend(McClelland et al., 2000;). Numerous studies support the importance of such skills on school success (Payton, Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2008; Pontiz, McClelland, Matthews & Morrison, 2009; Malik , 2008; Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007) and most conclude that students without such skills are at risk for school difficulties (Pontiz et al., 2009; Payton et al., 2008; Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007; Eisenberg, Smith, Sadovsky & Spinrad, 2004; McCabe et al. 2004).

Teaching the self -regulation of learning related social skills has historically been done through “modeling, role playing and acknowledging examples of positive student behavior” (Pelco &Reed-Victor, 2007, p. 41). The recent executive summary by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) which comprehensively reviewed the impact of over 300 social emotional learning programs concluded that effective teaching practices for such skill mastery should be “sequenced, active, focused and explicit (SAFE)“(Payton et al., 2008 p. 6). At the same time, there is beginning interest in teaching these skills by utilizing the body, the mind and the breath of students to more comprehensively practice the “effortful control” (Eisenberg et al, 2004 p. 259) numerous learning related social skills demand. (Malik, 2008; Slovacek, Tucker & Pantoja, 2003).

The field of yoga, which requires children simultaneously engage their bodies, minds and breath through movement (Mailk , 2008; Slovacek et al. 2003) and the field of mindfulness, which requires children bring focused attention without judgment to tasks (Gregory, 2009; Seigal 2007; Hooker & Fodor 2008), currently appear to be the most promising for teaching self- regulation of learning related social skills in a more comprehensive way. Research on these practices is in its infancy and studies with children, while promising, are inconclusive and few.

Articles that discuss teaching yoga skills to children show promise in addressing variables such as health, well being and mood, (Crowley, 2002) academic achievement and school success (Buckmeyer & Frietas, 2007; Slovacek et al., 2003;

Kalish & Guber, 2001) and self-regulation (Malik, 2008). A few studies attempt to examine yoga's effects on attention for students with such deficits (Peck, Kehle, Bray & Theodore, 2005; Jensen & Kenney, 2004). Articles that discuss teaching mindfulness to children also express hope that such skills will impact health, school success and self-regulation, particularly of attention (Hooker & Fodor, 2008; Hawn Foundation, 2009). There appear to be few to no risks reported with such practices and most are found enjoyable to students (Malik 2008; Hawn Foundation 2009).

This article discusses a pilot program called the *Calm and Alert Class*, whose goal was to teach self-regulation of learning related social skills to first graders utilizing the coordination of the body, the mind and the breath of students. The author drew on her background as a school and clinical counselor and her certification as a yoga teacher to develop the class, drawing from historical teaching practices, the SAFE practices recommended by CASEL, mindfulness practices for children and yoga practices for children. It is hoped this report will contribute to a newly emerging field.

This pilot clearly fit the criteria of action research in education, a "disciplined inquiry done by a teacher" which was "carried out within the context of the teacher's environment....on questions that deal with educational matters at hand." (Ferrance, 2000, p.1). Accordingly, the details of the pilot will be discussed through the recommended organizational steps in action research (Ferrance, 2000) reflected in the proceeding headings.

Identification of Problem Area

The research pilot was conducted at the Woodside Elementary School in Topsham, Maine during the 2009-2010 school year. The Woodside School is a 365 student, K-5 school in a middle income working class community in midcoast Maine. Although a neighborhood situated school, students from three additional towns attend, including those attending two district-wide special programs. Currently a Title One school with 28% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch and 18% of students identified for special education, the population is 93% Caucasian, 2% African American, 2% Asian or Pacific Island and 3% Hispanic.

In the 2009-2010 school year, the school had four first grade classrooms, with approximately 15 students in each classroom, groups generally balanced with equal numbers of typically developing children and children with behavioral or academic challenges. This particular grade level was chosen for the pilot for two reasons: one, because the demand for self-regulation of learning related social skills in first grade is always high and two, because there were a number of students in the group as a whole with seriously lagging skills in these areas. In kindergarten, the group had received social skill instruction through the Second Step Curriculum, learning related social skill instruction through Responsive Classroom approaches and self-regulation instruction through short term guidance lessons, but teachers were concerned about the group's lack of mastery and consequent ability to be successful in grade one. A more innovative, systematic and comprehensive approach was needed.

Organization and Data Collection

The class was designed collaboratively with input from both kindergarten and first grade teachers about particular learning related social skills not taught, or needing further emphasis, in the classroom. Utilizing this input and her knowledge of guidance/clinical counseling issues, and mindfulness and yoga techniques for children, the class met 30 minutes weekly for 28 weeks, with material taught in units of 3-5 lessons (see Appendix A for outline of units, content and design of each class). Weekly lessons were taught by the author and skills were practiced optimally each day, led by classroom teachers. The layout of each first grade classroom allowed for moveable furniture, adequate space and student mats for safe and comfortable movement.

The team committed to collecting the following data:

*Beginning and midyear surveys of teachers (see Appendix B)

*Midyear survey of parents (see Appendix C)

*Assessment of concept mastery with students through informal survey by teachers with students in September and May (See Appendix D); anecdotal evidence reported through observation of students by staff.

Interpretation of Data

Teacher data. The responses to the beginning survey given to teachers was congruent with information in the literature concerning the importance of self-regulation of learning related social skills for school success. Teachers cited the need for learning related social skills (such as following directions, listening, self control) and remarked that self-regulation was “vital” that “no other learning can take place without it.” Most teachers found their classes “somewhat” regulated at various times of the school day in September.

Data from the midyear teacher survey was very encouraging: all teachers were finding improvements in appropriate student behavior at all times of the school day, reported that the skills were supporting their teaching and were using the skills either daily or weekly. They also saw students using concepts and skills taught in the class spontaneously. Interestingly, the one “drawback” mentioned by all, was the observation that students with the greatest lagging skills were showing the least improvement in mastering the skills.

Parent data. One third of the parents surveyed responded midyear. Most were aware of the class, had heard about it from various sources, with a high percentage reporting “my child talks about the class.” More than half of the children were using some of the skills taught at home at least weekly. No drawbacks were reported, and a number of benefits were mentioned, most frequently that children were using breathing techniques to remain or become calmer at home.

Student data. The survey data concerning concept mastery showed that students had made growth in their understanding of the skills and concepts taught in the class. Before the class began, general skills were named such as “listen” to

most questions and students did not know the various times of the school day and what was expected. At the end of the year, the groups in general could define “respect” and could specifically name specific skills, times of the school day and what is expected.

The anecdotal data was compellingly positive. Throughout the year, both classroom teachers and other staff members reported students spontaneously using the movements and skills taught in the class and could articulate why they were using them. For example, an upset student might say “I need to do the puddle (one of the movements) to calm down” or a struggling student might say “I am having muddy thoughts (negative learning attitude) and need to change them to clear thoughts (positive learning attitude)” Parents reported children teaching their siblings breathing techniques and poses and singing the class songs. School staff noted an increase in self-regulation exhibited by the entire grade level at school events such as assemblies, special event days and recess.

Actions Based on Data

The *Calm and Alert Class* pilot was so enthusiastically received and the data so encouraging the educational team would like it to continue, expand and be delivered in various ways in the future at the Woodside School. In the 2010-2011 school year, the 30 minute weekly class will be offered to all kindergarten and first grade students, and time permitting, to all second grade students. This expansion of the class K-2 is being done in recognition of the need for the mastery of the self-regulation of learning related social skills in the early grades. The team is also recommending *Calm and Alert Class* “mini lessons” as an intervention for those upper grade classrooms 3-5 that may need support in this area.

Another goal for the future from feedback is to develop parent and teacher understanding of the *Calm and Alert* concepts and skills. This will be done through the creation of consistent materials for use in the classroom and at home, and ongoing communication about the class in the school community. In this way, the adults working with students will be better able to teach, to reinforce and to practice the concepts and skills.

Reflection

This pilot suggests that utilizing the body, the mind and the breath of young students may be an effective way to teach the self-regulations of learning related social skills. This suggestion is based on the enthusiasm of teachers, parents and students for the *Calm and Alert Class* and the way the skills were practiced, used and exhibited by students throughout the school year.

Most students truly enjoyed the controlled movement of their bodies taught in the class. This enjoyment led to better self-control and motivation to use the skills in other settings. Students were able to notice the workings of their minds more easily than expected, and so learned to see their mind as a tool for managing their behavior and attitude. Most notably, students quickly learned the benefits of even brief deep breathing as a way to self-regulate and exhibited self-awareness by

using it spontaneously when needed. Although the students with a considerable degree of lagging learning skills had difficulty mastering these skills, they might have shown more improvement with greater instruction and practice, something this pilot was not designed to accommodate. .

Examined with the lens of Response to Intervention (RTI) the *Calm and Alert Class* may develop as one aspect of core instruction for the teaching of learning related social skills K-2 at this particular school. Students lagging in mastery could potentially be offered additional/repeated “calm and alert” instruction individually or in small groups as a Tier 2 intervention. If skill deficits persist, the team could then more effectively target the specific areas of need in the Tier 3 population and develop instruction accordingly.

This pilot was a limited site-specific action research project in an emerging field. Research is needed. Future studies could help to dispel any concerns that can arise with the use of body, mind and breath practices by highlighting the safety and neutrality of such practices for students led by trained instructors. Also needed is a closer examination of how and why engaging body, mind and breath may be an effective way for teachers to teach and for students to learn the self-regulation of learning related social skills. If future research supports the effectiveness of the practice, a curriculum could be developed that would ensure reliability.

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Appendix A
Overview of Calm and Alert Class Units

Unit 1: Respect for Self, Others and School

Respect means being caring, gentle and serious

Unit 2: Being Calm

We can learn to be quiet and steady

Unit 3: Being Alert

We can learn to be awake, focused and ready to learn

Unit 4-7: Using our Body Mind and Breath at different times of the school day

Unit 4: Learning times: Most all times of the school day:

I listen to and follow teacher directions
I focus on my job
I use my body and mind to do my work
I think "I can do this"

Unit 5: Social Times: Lunchtime and recess

My body is in control
I respect myself, others and school materials
I do and say things that show people I care
I am safe and appropriate

Unit 6: Transition Time: times of change

I listen to and follow teacher directions
I focus on my job
I keep my bubble space
I am safe and appropriate

Unit 7: Easy Times/Hard times at school

Some times at school are easy
Some times at school are hard
I use my skills to stay calm and alert at easy times and hard times

Weekly class design:

Room set up (3 minutes)
Deep breathing , called "Time In"(3 minutes)
Teaching of Skill for the day (5-10 minutes)
Movement incorporating skills (5-10 minutes)
Ending rest (5 minutes)

Appendix B
Teacher Surveys

1. Teacher Survey: Beginning of the Year

Teacher Name _____ Date _____

Calm and Alert Class

Grade _____ WDS 2009-2010

1. How would you describe self-regulation in a first grade student?
2. How important do you feel self-regulation is for a first grade student?
3. How does self-regulation impact learning in first grade?
4. Please rate how self-regulated your class is during the following times:
Learning times (attention, focus and work expected)

1	2	3	4	5
very much	pretty much	some what	just a bit	not at all

Social times (interaction with others allowed, nonwork time)

1	2	3	4	5
very much	pretty much	some what	just a bit	not at all

Transition times (moving from one task, activity or class to another)

1	2	3	4	5
very much	pretty much	some what	just a bit	not at all

5. How calm and alert are your third grade students at the following times

Morning/before lunch

1	2	3	4	5
very much	pretty much	some what	just a bit	not at all

Afternoon/after lunch

1	2	3	4	5
very much	pretty much	some what	just a b	not at all

2. Teacher Survey: Midyear

1. Please list any ways you feel Calm and Alert Class has supported your teaching

2. What skills do you use? And how often?

_____ time in/time in plus _____ daily _____ weekly _____ never

_____ poses _____ daily _____ weekly _____ never

_____ songs _____ daily _____ weekly _____ never

_____ rest _____ daily _____ weekly _____ never

3. What benefits have you found the skills have for your students?

4. What drawbacks have you found for your students?

5. What skills do you feel students have mastered at this point?

Time in/time in plus _____

Calm: quiet and steady _____

Alert: awake and ready to learn _____

Respect _____

Understanding the different times of the school day _____

Anecdotes (back of sheet)

Appendix C
Documents for parents

Notification letter 1: Beginning

Septmeber 2009

Dear Parents:

Many of you may know that for the last few years in Kindergarten I have been teaching students skills for self regulation I call **Utilizing Body, Mind and Breath as Tools for Success at School**. There have been so many benefits for learning, I have decided to offer a weekly 30 minute class this year for all first graders, which we will be calling the "Calm and Alert Class."

The core teaching for all students will be that our body, mind and breath can help us at school. We have control over our body, our mind (thinking) and how we breathe, and can make healthy choices to have the three help us.

Our **bodies** help us when they are in control

Our **minds** help us when we are ready to learn

Our **breath** helps us when it is slow and deep.

I will be utilizing songs ,exercises and skill building practice from brain gym, relaxation training and yoga exercises for children to teach the concepts. The lessons will be organized into 5 units, including:

1. Respect for ourselves, others and school
2. Being calm at school
3. Being alert at school
4. Using our body, mind and breath during learning times, social times and transition times
5. Using our body, mind and breath during easy times and hard times at school

The teachers will be using the skills I introduce regularly in the classrooms, and we are hoping to see improvement in self regulation throughout the school day.

If you have any questions, please contact myself or one of the teachers, and be sure to ask your son or daughter to show you what they are learning at school!

Helene McGlaulin

School Counselor

Notification Letter 2: End

June 2010

Dear Parents:

I have now completed 28 weeks of teaching “Calm and Alert” class to all first grade students. Throughout the year, with your help and the help of teachers and staff, I have been collecting data about the effectiveness of the classes for students. The information obtained from surveys, observation, anecdotes and comments from the children has been very promising!

I am hoping someday to write a professional article documenting the effects the classes have had for student learning. This proposed article would discuss the effects on the group as a whole, what was taught and what was mastered.

You may remember that the overall goal was to improve self- regulation in all students by utilizing our body, mind and breath. The five units taught:

6. Respect for ourselves, others and school
7. Being calm at school
8. Being alert at school
9. Using our body, mind and breath during learning times, social times and transition times
10. Using our body, mind and breath during easy times and hard times at school

The data I have collected shows that the students are regularly utilizing many of the skills and concepts, and use them in various settings at school and at home. We have also been pleased to see an overall improvement in self-regulation in the group as a whole.

We will be continuing the classes next year in grades K,1 and 2. Thank you for your support and response to my survey. From your feedback, I plan to develop more materials for home use next year.

Always, please contact me anytime with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Helene McGlaulin, counselor

Midyear Survey of Parents

Dear Parents: You may remember that I have been teaching a weekly class called "Calm and Alert" in all the first grades in order to improve self-regulation. I am collecting data about the effectiveness of the class and would love information from you. If you have time, please fill in the survey below and return it with your child. I appreciate it. Helene McGlaulin, Counselor

Grade 1 Calm and Alert class
Midyear Survey for Parents

1. Were you aware of the calm and alert classes being taught by the school counselor? _____yes_____no
If yes, how have you been informed?
 my child talks about the class
 I received a letter about it
 my child's teacher told me about the class
 I have spoken t the counselor about the class

2. What skills do you see your child use? And how often?
 time in/time in plus _____ daily _____ weekly _____ never
 poses _____ daily _____ weekly _____ never
 songs _____ daily _____ weekly _____ never
 rest _____ daily _____ weekly _____ never

3. What benefits have you found the skills have for your child(ren)?

4. What drawbacks have you found for your child(ren)?

5. Please use the remainder of this space to make comments or ask questions about any component of the class

_____ I would like the counselor to call me to talk further about the class
Name/number_____

Appendix D
Concept Mastery Questions asked of students in September/May:

1. What does respect mean?
2. What does Calm mean? What does it look like to be calm?
3. What does alert mean? What does it look like to be alert?
4. What is a learning time? What should kids be doing during a learning time?
5. What is a social time? What should kids be doing during a social time?
6. What is a transition time? What should kids be doing during a transition time?