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Being Present: Mindfulness and Yoga at Westminster Center School

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Classroom management. Two words that can make or break a teacher, a student, or a school. The management of behavior and logistics in a classroom is, for many, the cornerstone of instruction. Veteran teachers can recall classroom management strategies that drew on rewards, punishments, combinations of the two, and a good healthy dose of fear from time to time. It is necessary to maintain order if we're going to get any teaching done, right? And maintaining order means getting the kids to do what we need them to do, when we need them to do it. Right?

At Westminster Center School (WCS) in Westminster, Vermont, they know this to be untrue. Classroom management is about building a tone of decency and respect in order to create collaborative communities in which students feel safe and supported. But what about students who don't feel safe anywhere, who don't believe that support is possible, or who are used to punitive punishment? Where do we begin for them? At WCS, teachers face the universal challenges of teaching in the twenty-first century- increasing poverty, intense family dynamics, and an increasingly isolated social culture all of which can lead students to act out in the classroom. For them, the solution lies in the idea of presence. "Being present is simply to have awareness in the moment of what is unfolding both within you and around you so that you can connect with it," according to WCS guidance counselor Jon Schotland. Others say that "being present" is about focusing your attention on one thing at a time, and focusing fully on the person or task before you rather than multitasking, doing many things with partial, fractured attention and intention. For WCS teachers and students, being present is the cornerstone of their learning experience, and there are several routes to that presence.

When Jon, a longtime practitioner of mindfulness meditation, arrived at WCS two years ago, he found students who were struggling to manage their emotions as well as their behaviors. "What I could see, for a lot of students, was that their inner lives were not settled," he says. "They were emotionally reactive, often in an upset state of mind. It made it very hard for them to function in a group, and it certainly interfered with their learning. I wanted to help them to get calm in their bodies and to understand their emotions so they could participate more fully in the classroom." Jon's work builds on the work of his predecessor who would practice Tai Chi with classes to help calm and focus students after lunch. Classroom teachers in Westminster have a history of working with children to build a sense of well-being.

Judy Coven, retired WCS teacher and core faculty member in Antioch University New England's (ANE) Education Department, saw a similar pattern, My education students were telling me that they were seeing more and more kids coming to school with challenging behaviors and issues that made teaching and learning more difficult. Teachers were dealing with increasingly tough kids and groups of kids." Judy had been engaged in mindfulness and yoga practices herself for many years, and says that it became apparent to her that the benefits she had seen in her own life—an ability to feel centered, calm, and present in the moment—could benefit her graduate students (not to mention their students) as well. "It became more and more clear that kids should be doing yoga," she says. She decided to include yoga in her graduate courses, pre-service educators as well as veterans, in order to "walk the talk" of yoga as an instructional technique. "There are poses that can help kids slow down, focus, calm themselves, while others that can empower them and help them build their self esteem," adds Judy. "For example, postures that focus on strengthening can be good for kids who are less interested in the playful poses but are drawn in by 'warrior' poses that lead them to think 'I'm strong. I can do this.'" She now integrates yoga and mindfulness practices into her graduate courses, preparing elementary teachers as part of ANE's Integrated Learning Program. "I'd like teachers to see that yoga can be integrated into their day, for example a sequence to transition from lunch

to a work time or a two-minute break in the middle of the day to calm or energize a group. It can be another tool in their toolbox, another part of their pedagogy. And kids can begin to use these tools for themselves, to choose to use a yoga breath when they feel frustrated or angry.”

Vicky Peters, WCS kindergarten teacher, agrees. “Children’s natural tendency is to crave movement.” Vicky, a long time dance and movement student and teacher, found that yoga provided a way for her students to be more present during the school day. “Yoga is a structure for kids to move within a calm body, but in a safe structure for the classroom environment. It gives children the confidence to express themselves in a safely confident way. One goal is to help kids say ‘I can regulate my behavior myself. I can calm myself down.’ Yoga brings structured, deliberate techniques for helping kids to calm down, and to make it okay to do it. It’s a part of the classroom culture.”

For each of these teachers, the specifics vary. Adult-oriented practices have been modified to make sense for the age, grade, and developmental level of the students. For Jon, this means focusing on activities rather than the subtle (and more traditional) concept of breath as the means of centering. He may ask a student to take a walk with him, with the task of counting steps until the student reaches 40. When the student stops walking, Jon typically discovers that the child has regained a sense of calm and control, and is ready to discuss the issue that was troubling. In a different situation, students may help put away game pieces, putting away one piece per breath. The task helps the students to connect with their own breath, to put away the game at the same time that they “put away the distraction. Mindfulness practices help students to calm down, get centered, so that they can then reconnect, either with other students, or with their learning.”

Another typical activity would be a “cookie ceremony” in which students are given a cookie and charged with eating it as slowly as possible. The goal is to be as aware as possible of the taste, texture, and experience of eating—to be fully present in the experience of eating the cookie. In this way, students begin to have the experience of focusing on only one thing, but focusing on it fully. Jon finds that, by building skill in focusing, he sees a benefit in not only the students’ ability to concentrate academically, but also in their ability to sort out complex social problems. “They have the ideas of how to solve problems, but their emotional reactions were getting in the way.” Through mindfulness practice, students learn to sort out their emotions, to regain control of their actions, and to resolve the problem.

In Vicky’s kindergarten classroom, yoga is a tool for play as well as for relaxation. She might include a series of yoga poses as the activity during morning meeting, for example. “I’ll be in down dog [a pose in which only the hands and feet are placed on the ground, making a bridge] and they’ll go under.” On one side, the children do a pose they have learned, and on the other side, they do their own pose, either their favorite pose, or one they invent. This gives the students a chance to be creative, to play and take physical risks in safe ways, demonstrating their unique ways of “doing” yoga, thereby building community and acceptance of differences. She also uses yoga during that seminal kindergarten activity, nap time. “Some kindergarten friends don’t nap,” she says. “So we have one side of the room that is reserved for napping, but on the other side of the room, we do quiet, gentle yoga. We roll and twist and turn, but it’s quiet and relaxing, as opposed to wiggling our giggles out.”

Judy reminds her education students that yoga and mindfulness practices don’t necessarily need to be separate from the curriculum they are teaching.. “Yoga can be integrated into many things the class is studying; you can make connection to content. If students are studying waterways or water animals, there are a bunch of poses the teacher can use that relate to water. He can do a series that tells a story or is built around a theme. I modeled this with my graduate students, we did one about going to warm places. We went to a river: the pose we used was forward bend, but I called it something different in order to make it fit the story, so a forward bend became the flowing river as we reached up and folded over at the hip joint. Then we got into our kayaks by doing boat pose, sitting on our bums with our arms and legs in a V, a balancing pose. We followed with a variety of other poses which represented birds, the waves of the ocean, fish, whales, and dolphins. The possibilities are endless.” Since Judy no longer works with young children, she works to help her students build these techniques into their own pedagogy. “Once you’re familiar with the poses, you can use them creatively to fit them into all kinds of different curriculum. You can rename them to make them fit the story.” Judy also uses yoga poses in her math methods course, in fact. Teacher education students learn poses and then try to determine which poses are symmetrical, what lines of symmetry exist, and what impact changes in the pose might have on the symmetry. This then becomes part of the way they will then teach these concepts in their own classrooms.

While all three agree that the teacher must have some training in yoga and mindfulness practices in order to use them with students, all also agree that one need not be an expert before trying to integrate some elements of the practices into their own pedagogy. Judy notes, "You can buy boxes of cards that have pictures of poses that you can practice with your kids. It won't look the same from classroom to classroom or even from kid to kid, but that's okay." You don't have to correct their form or be certain of the pose yourself; that's not the goal. The goal is to build the ability to concentrate better, to center. The goal is to have fun, to move, to get your blood moving. All the reasons that movement is good for you, yoga is good for you. The earlier they start, the more they'll want to develop it as a way to develop strength and flexibility. Yoga is good for you, no matter your size, shape, form, physical condition, age. I've seen lots of people do poses that I can't. It reinforces and presents the idea that we're all different and we all start from wherever we are, and we do whatever we can." She suggests a simple technique, a "take five" breath, as a place to begin. When the teacher asks students to "take five," everyone breathes in for the count of five, and then out for the count of five. "This is a way of bringing students together; at the end of the count, everyone is there, quiet and ready to listen," Vicki says.

"And it's not just the kids that reap the benefits," Judy continues. "By doing yoga with kids, teachers get the same benefit, the slowing down, breathing, centering, and the more teachers feel centered, in their bodies, in the present, the more able they are to teach and to deal with challenging situations with kids. Because the breath work is so integral to the yoga (it's really what separates yoga from other stretching/strengthening work), if teachers are breathing and focusing and concentrating as they're doing yoga, they will feel the same benefits we aim for with kids, which then makes it easier for them to do their jobs well!" Jon agrees. "I use these practices in my counseling office, but they're used throughout the building as a way of just giving the students some time to settle. We're not trying to engage with the student while they're too upset. We remind them, 'I'm right here, and I'm ready to talk as soon as you can sit down and be ready to talk about whatever is bothering you.' We try to settle ourselves—I don't think you can do mindfulness with kids without doing it yourself. You have to be calm, to be present, in order to help the kids settle. I think we have a lot of people in this building who do that. That's why I like working here."

The first elementary school in Vermont to join the Coalition of Essential Schools, Westminster Schools serves about 210 students in grades k-6. This community public school is actually two schools in one (Westminster Center School and Westminster West School) that share a population that is largely white with 55% qualifying for free or reduced lunch (well above the state average).

Definitions of Mindfulness

"Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally."

- Jon Kabat-Zinn, teacher of mindfulness meditation and the founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center.

being present is being exactly where you are
 being at your center
 so purely
 that you allow yourself to be removed from yourself
 so you can see
 the whole of your inner landscape
 as a hawk
 circles the land to see what lies within each nook
 gently let yourself be taken away enough
 to be able to peer into each nook
 to see your center
 for all it is
 often when we are in the thick of it - it can be tricky to
 seek the very it we seek

being centered or sitting, meditating
 is not about emptiness or lack of thought
 being present in you
 in one's day
 you may encounter an hysterical joke
 a lavish joy
 a deep sadness
 a sudden confusion
 being present is simply being aware
 no more, and happily so, no less
 being present is consciously removing yourself
 ever so slightly
 and in doing so
 there you are
 found
 being present is actually extremely practical
 often people think of it in theory -
 when its just life,
 as
 it
 is
 whole

- Vicky Peters, Westminster Center School teacher

Children and Mindfulness: Why does it matter?

Centering with children, through play-based yoga, or calm, awareness-developing "team meetings," opens up a wealth of opportunities. Through developmentally appropriate, accessible, and engaging mindfulness practices, children:

- integrate material they are learning into parts of themselves
- make use of their own experiences and observations as a foundation for knowledge
- pursue and complete projects
- develop their sense of self-esteem and self affirmation, because their own natural resources—their own bodies and minds—are authentically feeling the discovery and making meaning of it
- explore new modes of self-expression
- learn to take risks
- learn how to interact with others in group projects
- learn to reflect upon new information
- practice academic skills
- analyze subjects
- apply knowledge to new situations
- synthesize ideas and information
- explore feelings and ideas without being "right" or "wrong"
- learn to trust their ability to succeed
- learn to trust themselves
- learn to trust others and realize that they are a part of the "other"
- explore private space that can be shared
- experience parts of themselves that may be hard to reach, such as gentleness or strength

Centering and Creative Moment Resources

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Book Corner: Stories to Inspire Characters, Yoga and Mindfulness

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Cherry, L. (1990). *The Great Kapok Tree*. New York: Harcourt Brace & CCo.

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