

Sitting at School: The Case for Contemplative Education

By Dr. Patricia Jennings

It's no secret that American schools are facing a crisis. Academically students lag behind their peers in other industrialized nations and the drop-out rate is escalating, as are the numbers who have learning and mental health problems that put them at risk of developing serious disorders.

Increasing numbers of educators are exploring the use of contemplative or mindfulness-based methods to reduce teacher and student stress, enhance classroom climate and students' ability to focus their attention and to promote care and concern for others.

Research shows that gaining competency in focusing attention and maintaining emotional balance increases children's resilience for meeting life's challenges. It also improves their academic performance. Recent findings suggest that meditation practice may provide a simple, drug-free way to support the development of core emotional and social competencies that underlie successful learning and help students and teachers excel.

The point of this is not to make kids good meditators, but to help them become loving, caring humans, engaged in the world. Contemplative education techniques called Mindful Awareness Practices (MAPS) consist of exercises of attention, observation and reflection that aim to help children understand the way their minds work and how their thoughts and feelings affect their behavior. They may also be key to developing the five core skill dimensions of Social and Emotional Learning.¹

MAPS may help teachers as well as students. Teachers who get training in emotional skills, self-reflection and mindfulness-based techniques may improve their effectiveness as teachers and role models, reduce their own stress and lower their burnout rates.

But advocating "teaching meditation" in schools, especially in public schools, can be controversial. Even though MAPS are not like prayer – they include a range of practical methods anyone can use such as breath awareness, mindfulness and other forms of simple concentration techniques – they can still raise questions about keeping school curriculum



Andres Gonzalez, Ali Shah Rasool Smith and Atman Ananda Smith, co-founders of the Holistic Life Foundation, at the Garrison Institute's Education Symposium. HLF works with severely at-risk youth in East Baltimore, offering yoga and meditation in after-school programs, and is involved in a study of the effects of the meditation on children's cognitive, attentional, coping, academic, and behavioral skills.

secular, and about what is developmentally appropriate for children of various ages.

Research into these questions is underway. In April 2008 the Garrison Institute Initiative on Contemplation and Education held a symposium on "Developmental Issues in Contemplative Education," which was attended by over one hundred activists, educators and scientists.

Dr. Patricia Broderick² presented the results of her study of the BREATHE program³ she developed for teenagers. Piloted among a group of 123 high school senior girls, results showed decreases in negative emotion, somatic symptoms like aches and pains, overtiredness, and disorders of emotion regulation. They also showed increases in self-acceptance, relaxation, and the ability to let go of distressing thoughts to control stress.

Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl⁴ presented research evaluating a classroom-based primary prevention program.

² Professor in the Department of Health and the director of the Stress Reduction Center at West Chester University of PA.

³ The acronym spells out the themes of the program's six training sessions in Mindful Awareness Practices (MAPS): Body, Reflections, Emotions, Attention, Take-it-as-it-is (non-judgment), Habits for a healthy mind – plus Empowerment / Gain the Inner Edge.

⁴ Professor of Education at the University of British Columbia.

¹ Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Developed and funded by the Hawn Foundation (founded by actress Goldie Hawn), the “Mindfulness Education” (ME) program consists of teaching a series of simple techniques designed to enhance self-awareness, focused attention, problem solving abilities, stress reduction, and prosocial behaviors in children. Study participants included 12 teachers and 249 children from grade 4-7 classrooms (6 experimental and 6 wait-list control classrooms).

Results revealed that students who participated in the ME program, compared to children who did not, improved in self-concept, self-reflection, positive affect, optimism,

mindful awareness, and prosocial goals. Compared to children in the control group, teachers reported children in the program showed significant reductions in aggressive and oppositional/dysregulated behaviors and significant increases in social competence and attention/concentration.

As the evidence grows, educators and policymakers will increasingly be able to adopt mindfulness-based techniques. ●

Dr. Patricia Jennings is the director of the Garrison Institute's Initiative on Contemplation and Education. Its April 2008 Education Symposium presenter materials and audio clips, and a mapping survey of contemplative methods now used in K-12 educational settings, are available at www.garrisoninstitute.org.

‘Why Does the Buddha Wear Lipstick?’

The title reveals just one of the questions inquisitive children ask at Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London. Brian Richardson reports ...

So far this year, Jamyang Buddhist Centre has had visits from ten primary schools and one teacher training college. Altogether, about 350 primary school children have visited the center. In previous years there have been as many as 1,400 children visiting.

Jamyang’s team of volunteers give children and teachers a tour of the building and an explanation of some of the ways Buddha taught on how to live life with a good heart. Jamyang not only contributes to a school’s curriculum, but also offers a positive experience for both kids and teachers, who often speak of the peace and happiness they experience after the meditation session in the gompa. “By teaching children to have a good heart and be kind to others, they grow up to be good human beings,” Lama Zopa Rinpoche has explained.

Fortunately, nobody has asked what enlightenment is. Having enjoyed a jammy dodger and an apple juice, we do a short secular meditation, which the children love. They also love waiting for the note of the bell to fade away before they can open their eyes. We get comments like: “My memories all disappeared and my mind became fresh.”

We are planning to put some web pages on the Jamyang site with details of how to book a tour, along with other pages for children to learn about Dharma. We also want to develop some teaching materials, and to visit schools.

Oh yes, why does the Buddha have red lips? Because it symbolizes his sacred speech. And when Cynthia Bonell (who has recently returned from teaching Tibetan children at the refugee reception centers in Kathmandu and Dharamsala) did the equanimity meditation, one child said afterwards: “I felt like my head and my heart changed places.”

NOTE: As *Mandala* went to press, a week-long summer school for children between the ages of four and twelve was being planned, providing an opportunity for youngsters to participate in arts and crafts work and to play together in the conducive environment of the center, with an emphasis on learning to appreciate and value each other in all the activities that were to be undertaken.

A crèche facility for parents was also offered, and activities for parents included discussion, meditation and some free time. ●

For more information go to www.jamyang.co.uk.