awareness, balance & compassion:
the new ABCs in public schools

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learning awareness, balance, compassion & clarity
in the classroom

the new ABCs

by juniper glass

model by charlotte oh
photography by eric oh
In a small schoolyard garden on the downtown eastside of Vancouver, 20 six-year-olds are learning a lesson. They sit quietly, listening. Then they sit quietly, feeling. Then seeing. Then smelling. They are led gently through the five senses by their teacher. The lesson is called “Mindful of Nature.”

After the exercise, they do a go-round to share their experiences. The teacher turns to one girl and motions for her to say what she’s thinking.

“I feel the heart of the Earth, Ms. Parry.”

“The heart of the Earth!” Janice Parry exclaims, telling me this story from her grade one class at Admiral Seymour Elementary School. “I thought, ‘My god, where did she get that?’ It’s amazing, these practices. I’ll tell you, I have been teaching since ‘81 and I am profoundly affected by this.”
This is a mindfulness education curriculum that Parry has been doing with her students for over a year. On the first day of school, when her former kindergarten class saw that she would be their teacher again, they asked earnestly, “Are we going to do mindfulness?” Three times a day, the children take a break to do deep breathing followed by three minutes of silence. Parry has also introduced some Hatha Yoga into the classroom and follows a curriculum of lessons (“Goal-setting,” “Mindful of What We See,” “Mindful of What We Taste”) that she learned in a teacher training on contemplative education.

“It really is incredible to see these kids. The school is in one of the most impoverished neighbourhoods in Canada and a lot of the children have suffered a great deal. There’s fetal alcohol syndrome, some take Ritalin, others live in foster care. But they know how to stop, just be, observe their thoughts and feelings and let them go.”

Parry’s stories – she has many – are inspiring. Children in her class are soaring academically as well as maturing in their relationship with their own minds and emotions. Isn’t this what education is all about? I marvel. Wouldn’t it be great if every classroom helped children learn about awareness? If I had a kid, I’d certainly want her to be in Janice Parry’s class.

The fusion of mindfulness practices and conventional schools, however, is not simply achieved. It’s a point I’ve been keenly aware of since I tried to lead some Hatha Yoga workshops in two schools last month. I went as a guest facilitator to an after-school girls’ program in a rough part of town. It seemed like a good fit – a group of eleven- to thirteen-year-olds who had been learning all year to think deeply, stand up for themselves and get along non-violently. Teaching them to relax and listen to their bodies should have been a snap, but it wasn’t.

I was confronted by the chaotic atmosphere of the schools. If you haven’t been in a public school lately, let me tell you! It is an incredible world. That many tweens and teenagers in one place makes for a lot of sound, movement, needs and desires. It was difficult to calm the kids down and try out some practices, especially since I had misgivings about being yet another adult telling them what to do.

Teaching children is not the same as teaching adults, not on the surface, anyway. I didn’t know what their religious backgrounds or beliefs were, and I couldn’t assume their consent as when I lead a class of adults who choose to come to yoga class. I instinctively used clearer phrases and less explicitly “spiritual” ideas to convey the practices.

Near the end of one workshop the girls had gotten rambunctious again, but I wanted to give them a chance to try Savasana, the “end relaxation.” We sat down, I told them about it, and then I let them choose. They decided that keeping quiet for ten minutes was worth the promise of relaxation. Watching them lying down, concentrating, the fists uncurling into open hands, and, even more poignant, the fists and shoulders that couldn’t let go, I was reminded why I was there. Classrooms are not the simplest places to introduce awareness practices, but they are perhaps among the most essential. It is so worth the effort.

As I was to learn, I am not alone in my dilemmas nor in my interest to bring awareness practices to kids in schools. Secularism and age-appropriateness are key issues in a growing movement for contemplative practices in formal education. A 2005 scan conducted by the Garrison Institute found a few dozen mindfulness education initiatives across the US. Some, like the Goldie Hawn Institute (formerly the Bright Light Foundation) that trained Janice Parry and other teachers in Vancouver, have several projects on the go, including curriculum development. Others are the result of individual teachers who have chosen to do something a little different in their elementary and high school classrooms.

“It’s a huge trend,” says Dana Winton, a meditation teacher and author of Wake Awake: A Buddhist Guide for Teens. “We’re experiencing a situation where schools are getting worse and worse. Kids are afflicted by media, attention deficit disorder has gone way through the roof and parents and teachers are at their wit’s end. They’re looking for something that’s going to help. I think that mindfulness education is a really terrific response within the schools and it’s getting more known within the culture.”

Susan Kaiser Greenland agrees. Her organization, InnerKids, consistently
receives more requests for their work than they can serve. The California-based foundation offers mindfulness awareness classes to schoolchildren rooted in what they call “the new ABCs”: attention, balance, clarity and compassion. Kaiser-Greenland, a meditation practitioner, consulted with education and mental health professionals to make the teachings appropriate for kids. “The games and activities we play with the kids are informed by spiritual practices that are effective in training attention. We’ve adapted them so that they are developmentally appropriate and fun. That’s why we are able to teach in the schools – the words we use and themes we teach are secular.”

One of the first things InnerKids teachers do with a new class is “slow and silent walking” – based on walking meditation. “At the beginning we do races,” Kaiser-Greenland explains with a brightness in her voice. “The race is to see who can get to the line the slowest! You have to be very aware of your body in space in order to move that slowly. Gradually the students become aware of breathing while they walk, and feeling the soles of their feet against the floor. With older students we can use more traditional language for the practice, concentrating on the three phases of lifting, moving and placing the foot.”

InnerKids and the Goldie Hawn Institute have taken an inventive approach, adapting practices and creating games and teamwork exercises. Kaiser-Greenland even made a simple tool, the “mind meter,” that helps children identify what they’re experiencing in the moment without labeling it good or bad. (“What is it like to sit still right now – easy, hard or in between?” Children respond by moving the arm of their mind meter. “And now, in this moment, is it easy, hard or in between?”)

Other teachers, such as Diana Winston, who has worked mostly with teenagers, stick closely to classic meditation instructions because they are already fairly youth-friendly.

As part of a common educational movement, all of them are keen to know more about what works well with children, especially in a school environment. “We know very little about how mindful awareness practices impact children,” explains Dr. Susan Smallley of the Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC) at UCLA. “Most studies have been conducted with adults. There are a growing number of studies of such practices in schools but much more is needed.”

To help fill this gap, MARC is planning a study of InnerKids programs this autumn. Researchers at the University of British Columbia recently completed a controlled study of the Goldie Hawn Institute’s work in Vancouver. The research involved hundreds of children in six schools and showed some promising results, particularly in the areas of kids’ self-concept, ability to stay attentive and teacher-reported behaviours.

“We took what we learned from the pilot project and realized we needed a more research-based curriculum in order to disseminate it more broadly,” says Heather Wood Ion of the foundation. While experts at Columbia University help the Goldie Hawn Institute refine its program, UBC researchers will complete a second study examining the effects of mindfulness education on children’s levels of cortisol, the stress hormone.

I certainly see the point of conducting research to help understand and legitimize contemplative education with the goal of making it more widely available in our schools. At the same time, the reliance on scientific results makes me a little uneasy. Awareness practices are very much about lived experience and not everything we experience can be measured.

As Dr. Smallley explains, “We are in the process of operationalizing ‘mindful awareness’ from a Western psychological perspective, so how we measure
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this state is still relatively unknown. Awareness is by definition a first-person experience. We can operationalize it for study using third-person scientific measurements such as EEG, imaging and test performances, but the awareness itself may, and likely will, remain somewhat elusive. Luckily many of the people studying and developing mindfulness education are respectful of contemplative practices, often because, as in Dr. Smalley’s case, they are long-time practitioners themselves.

The quest for “evidence” about the benefits of mindfulness seems to be an unavoidable tension involved in transposing spiritual practices into conventional classrooms. Another point of tension is secularization. It is important to schools that their curricula not appear partisan. Janice Parry, for example, has seen many of her students successfully bring the practices home, even teach them to their parents, but she remains cautious in her language. “I am very careful not to label it yoga or meditation. Instead, I explain that it’s part of the ‘social responsibility’ mandate of our school board.”

I wonder if all of this is just semantics. If kids are getting something out of it, does it matter what words we use? Or is there truly something lost in translation? “The hard-core Buddhists probably feel that way, that I’m watering things down,” Diana Winston responds. “But most people are really, really happy to have it go out into the larger culture. What is probably lost is that in Buddhism, mindfulness is not separated from liberation — real, deep freedom. And we can’t teach that! We can point in that direction but we can’t use spiritual language in schools. I think in some sense that is a loss because our culture is so absent of true spirituality.”

Winston has found a way to focus students on their inner evolution by using “code words for spirituality”: “To provide a little context rather than just referring to mindfulness as a tool, I try to encourage students’ own innate spirituality without ever using that language. I talk about it as ‘being more awake in your life,’ ‘learning to trust your intuition,’ ‘learning to feel more connected to other people and other things.’”

A positive side of secularization, then, is that words and practices become more inclusive. As Heather Wood Ion points out, although many people at the forefront of mindfulness education in North America affiliate themselves with Eastern spiritual traditions, there is a sound basis for common ground. “In the West, too, there are meditative traditions. The Quakers have a strong tradition of contemplative education. Among many First Nations cultures, the vision quest is an important part of adolescent maturity. All religions contain a meditative approach.” The movement for mindfulness education may help us seek out the essence of contemplative practices and find a common language to describe them.

Will a day come when mindful awareness is a standard part of kids’ education? It’s an inspiring vision that many people are working toward. A part of the picture that isn’t yet clear, though, is who would be leading those classes. Can any teacher do it or does she need to be a practitioner herself? Can schoolteachers learn to teach mindfulness just as they do mathematics?

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Susan Kaiser-Greenland responds. “It’s something a lot of us in this community are trying to figure out.”

“The absolute best method,” reflects Diana Winston, “is a teacher who has her own practice, who embodies it and brings it into the classroom. Now, how many of them are there? So, second best might be a process of training teachers that requires them to have their own practices and a curriculum to support them. Another possibility is bringing in special mindfulness instructors. And perhaps the worst case is something like a curriculum I developed where teachers read a script for ten minutes a day while students follow. It might not work at all if teachers have no background in mindfulness, but we don’t know. Let’s see.” This
Parry seems to be one of those special teachers. Aside from her beloved weekly yoga class, she does not have a personal practice. “Mindfulness is really not a difficult tool to use in the classroom, but I think you have to be trained,” she says. “And open-minded. You have to have an eagerness to help children be the best they can be.” With her open-door policy, Parry has welcomed in anyone who wants to observe her mindfulness classes. The enthusiastic response from other teachers has convinced her that many will take up the challenge to introduce similar practices into their classrooms.

As Kaiser-Greenland points out, those who do may benefit just as much as their students. “I've been practising meditation for many years and some of my best experiences of mindful awareness have been in the classroom. Children already have a level of awareness of the present moment that adults work so hard to develop! They simply are present and we need to meet them in that presence.”

Juniper Glass loves to get into a subject and write about it. She lives in Montreal where she works for Filles d'Action, an organization that engages girls in learning about themselves and their world. She teaches Hatha Yoga and is a student of the marvellous and illuminating Kundalini system. Her articles have been published in ascent, Lime, and Inspired Living (ascend's best-of collection). Reach her at juniperglass@hotmail.com.

web exclusive: Clay artist Charlotte Oh shows us how to build a yoga class from simple lumps of clay in a web exclusive slideshow! Visit www.ascendmagazine.com for this and other web exclusives.
contemplation on campus

"Essentially, it’s an experiment," says Professor Louis Chauvin. Last semester he introduced fifteen minutes of meditation into a business course at McGill University, telling students in the first class simply, "We’re going to try something a little different."

"I was very surprised," recalls Lina Comaty, a fourth-year business student. "He turned off the lights and put on some music and told us to follow our breath — in a management class! After a couple of weeks, he asked if we wanted to continue or not and it was a unanimous decision to keep going. Even just a few minutes at the beginning of the class gave me a boost of energy," she adds. "I felt calm. Thoughts were coming better and with much more structure."

Students were so keen that they asked Chauvin to go deeper. He drew on his long-time meditation practice to introduce exercises such as following the natural breath and controlling the length of the inhale and exhale.

"We repeated the mantra Om, too, but only silently. The classroom was right beside the dean's office and I wanted to lay low!"

Chauvin admits he is a renegade in a university known for sticking to tradition. His motivation is his students' ("I care about my students as people, not just business people") and his concern for their future impact on the world through their business practices.

Chauvin's course, Business in Society, takes a critical look at issues such as ethics, the environment and social development. He urges students to question basic concepts such as "work" and whether "doing business" has made our lives better. "The idea of introducing meditation into the course was to stop a little bit in the busyness of our day, to take time to reflect," Chauvin says. "I think meditation is personally transformative; I don't think you could meditate without questioning a lot of things."

"It was a special course," Comaty says. "There were no textbooks and we talked every class. The meditation and reflection worked together. Meditating before a test class, for example, would not have been the same!"

Comaty and Jean-Michel Marcotte, who started doing yoga and meditation regularly outside of the class, say Chauvin gave them a taste for awareness practices. Marcotte, a finance major, found the practice made him more open-minded and less stressed. "Business is a matter of being responsive to your environment and responsive to yourself. Meditation helps you to have a broader perspective."

about mindfulness

A definition of mindfulness, from Jon Kabat-Zinn: Paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.

The Mindful Awareness Research Centre on the effects of mindfulness on the brain: Initial research reveals that the practice of self-regulated attention—the learning of mindfulness—enables individuals to achieve improvements in physiological health, mental well-being, and interpersonal relationships. How we pay attention directly influences how our brain's neural circuitry will become activated. Brain activation in turn shapes the connections among neurons. By learning to regulate the flow of energy and information in our brains—by learning to pay attention in a mindful way—it is likely that we can change the regulatory structures of our brain. By learning to become mindfully aware of the moment-to-moment experiences of life, individuals can greatly improve their medical, emotional, and social health.

resources


The Mindful Awareness Research Centre investigates the effects of awareness practices in education and is treating and promoting mental health among children and adults. The website also offers recordings of "mindful meditations" led by Diana Winston, www.mar.cchs.edu

The InnerKids Foundation website contains some fun "mindfulness challenges" that children can do. www.innerkids.org

Goldie Haven Institute www.brighthopefoundation.net

The Mindfulness in Education Network is a venue for educators, parents and students to share ways in which they use mindfulness practices in schools. www.mindfulness.org