

*Mindfulness in the
Classroom-Getting to Know
Yourself in School*

By Jon Kabat-Zin*

In South Jordan, Utah, at the Welby Elementary School, a fifth-grade teacher named Cherry Hamrick has been incorporating mindfulness into her teaching to support her students, not only in being themselves but in knowing themselves better as they learn. She has made time each day for the children to focus inward. She speaks of it as a time to become "intimate with yourself."

Each day, a different child is in charge of ringing a bell to signal the beginning and the end of this quiet time. The rule is, the child decides how long the class is to sit quietly and follow their breathing, with an upper limit of ten minutes. The children choose how long they practice, and in what ways. In addition to sitting meditation, they sometimes practice a body scan meditation and mindful stretching, walking meditation in the schoolyard, and standing meditation on line before they go into the classroom. Their stress reduction exercises went from seeming "weird" and "strange" to them in the beginning, to being an important part of their day to them, and something that many of them love and enjoy sharing with their parents and siblings.

In the process of focusing on their breathing and watching their thoughts come and go, they learn that they don't have to react to every thought that comes into their minds, that just because the mind is jumping around and agitated at times doesn't mean they have to jump with it. With practice, they become more comfortable with silence and sitting still. One boy with ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder), after years of problems in the lower grades, was able over the course of a year to learn to sit still and be relatively comfortable, and to focus on the flow of his breathing for up to ten minutes at a time. His ability to concentrate in the classroom changed dramatically, and for the first time he was accepted by his peers and teachers. His mother told me this one day when I (jkz) visited the classroom. This boy led a ten minute sitting meditation for the class, including some visiting parents, giving the instructions himself as we sat in silence.

Learning at a young age to touch silence and stillness within oneself, especially if it is taught in school in an open and non-manipulative or coercive way, can be valuable in balancing out and dealing with the stimulation and outward orientation of the school day. Among other things, children can discover how to tap into their innate ability to go into deep states of concentration, and use it to focus on the task at hand. One of Ms. Hamrick's students, an eleven-year-old girl, wrote to me, saying:

"Doing meditation has become more of a habit at home for me, and I will be doing this for the rest of my life. While I was doing meditation at first, and an itch came, I would say, 'feeling, feeling: to myself but after one minute, I would find

myself scratching it. But now I don't scratch it because now I can be with it long enough that it just goes away. In my meditation, I've also noticed that my breathing has become deeper and I'm more focused on it. In yoga, I've noticed that I get more energy than before, and I think it's because I'm more mindful on what I'm doing. Because of meditation and yoga, I don't rush everything I do like I used to."

Ms. Hamrick has not only brought mindfulness-based stress reduction into the classroom. She has integrated mindfulness in one imaginative way or another into virtually every aspect of the curriculum, including math, English, science, and geography. She encourages her students to use their whole selves in their learning. They approach a subject so that they develop not only their cognitive and information-processing skills but also their intuition, their feelings, and their bodies. In this way, they are learning the basics of what is now called *emotional intelligence*, as well as developing greater enthusiasm for learning.

A teacher in the school wrote, describing his experience of sharing an open classroom with Ms. Hamrick:

"The attitude and climate in her classroom was very impressive, especially as I had not heretofore experienced anything like it before. I became aware of certain vocabulary she used to describe things. . . . She referred to what she was trying to attain as a 'functional classroom:

"I noticed a peaceful atmosphere in her classroom with the students cooperating and discussing their work together. Talking was encouraged; but only work-related talk and 'feeling' talk was allowed. There was genuine interest and concern among the students and the teacher. They practiced talking about feelings and processing them on a daily basis. I noticed the students grow in their self-esteem and their regard for human life as well as all life in general.

"The students seemed genuinely happier and more content in the classroom setting than I had ever observed or experienced myself. They expressed their love with appropriate touching (hugs), and they knew how to resolve conflicts and problem solve in a loving, caring fashion rather than in a hostile or abusive fashion.

"Ms. Hamrick also taught the students how to focus and how to get in touch with their own breathing, and how to control their own lives with that technique. They seemed to be able to work better during the day after a few moments of meditative preparation in the morning. We taught in an open classroom situation, and their ability to focus and not be distracted by all of the noise in that type of environment is a tribute to Ms. Hamrick's application of her training and drive."

Ms. Hamrick herself described in a letter to me a trying time when her class had to move temporarily to a new space while renovations were conducted during the school year:

"The fifth grade teachers have all been commenting on the disruption of this move and the radical behavior changes in their students. Actually, the comments about poor behavior can be heard throughout the school. The first day was chaotic for most teachers. I found our daily [mindfulness] practice to have paved the way for some simply beautiful days [in the new environment]....

"Our first day of the move was peaceful, with attitudes focusing in on working together as a classroom. . . .While the school was going crazy with teachers and students making efforts to tour their surroundings to find out where everything was located, the Rainbow Riders simply wanted to break in their classroom with what they refer to as 'their feeling': They wanted to sit together in the 'feeling' they experience when they meditate together. They love the saturated serenity they experience together. They are cute about saying it is something that is hard to explain. They insist that it isn't 'words'; which is frustrating for most adults if they want an explanation. The students say it is something that has to be felt, and 'it didn't come to them for a while and it happens best when they are together:

"That first day of the move, I just sat back and let them lead the way. I do that a lot because it gives me the sense of where their understanding and process is really at. They were not interested in knowing where everything was located, just the essentials like the restrooms and drinking fountain. They simply wanted to connect with each other and get involved with our own classroom. I waited until 11 A.M. and I asked them to let me know when they wanted a tour of the school. They simply smiled and said they were all OK. They said I could show them the cafeteria at lunch, but that we weren't there yet. The students continued to explain to me politely that I was 'using my forecasting talent' and that for now it would be better to stay in this minute of time. I said, 'Oh, okay; and wondered what they must think of me. One boy [the one characterized as having ADHD] was upset at the explanation and said, 'Don't rescue her thinking. She will figure it *our*: . . .

"We are on our second week [in the new space] and they still have only wanted to see the essentials and the rooms they need at the time. I am loving the results of our practice. I have continued to ask them to tell me when they want to go on a tour and they have said that it might be nice to tour the school upon leaving. They have commented on what they see as 'the other classes are caught up in a lot of things that they really don't need and are not focusing in on being and working with themselves or each other: P. said, 'They do a lot of running around always trying to get something and it never stops: "

These children, under the guidance of a highly skilled, deeply motivated, imaginative, and daring teacher, are learning to focus inwardly, and are getting to know themselves better and to experience working together in ways that are meaningful and deeply authentic.

* from Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting* (New York: Hyperion, 1997)