



The Importance of Integrating Mindfulness into the Elementary Classroom

Mindfulness IS quite simple. It IS NOT easy. Every skill requires practice in order to be integrated into our experiences. Committed Mindfulness practitioners place themselves in dynamic interaction with the students with the understanding that they have an opportunity to change students' experiences. This is one more way that teachers/service providers are privileged by the nature and power of an educational setting. It is well known that teachers change children's lives. Mindfulness practices change lives in fundamental ways.

Effective Mindfulness practices in an educational setting will teach students that their thoughts (feelings) and their behaviour (bodies) are interconnected. Mindfulness as a practice of growth and change is substantiated by work in neuroscience, positive psychology, social-emotional learning and education. *It is an experiential exercise of change.*



Mindfulness is a thoughtful path. It offers opportunities to introduce new language, new physical activities, new relationships and new perspectives. Embedded in this journey is the experience of hope that changes lives. "Hope and optimism enable achievement. Hopeful students are more likely to work diligently and not to give up or drop out – they work harder, persevere longer, and ultimately experience success, which in turn begets more success." (Dweck, 2006 in MindUP)

In schools, building relational trust with each student within a safe and caring school is the foundation for learning. Connection we know is at the core of effective teaching and its absence in a students' school life is at the core of most of their reported stress.



Rose Avenue PS,
Kindergarten Class
Participating in "Pass the
Pulse"

Physically moving is a metabolic activity which also helps students develop focus and awareness. It is a felt experience that again highlights what regulation feels like. Students will willingly do jumping jacks putting them in hyper-aroused states. Runner's lunges allow the body to recalibrate. Adding in focused breath enhances the body's return to a resting state.

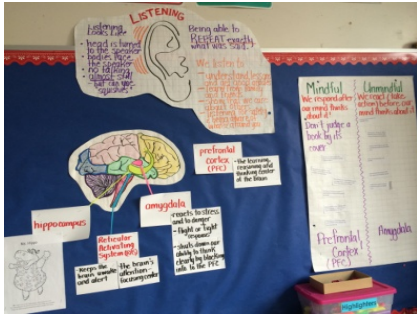
We model and teach that noticing our own habits (behaviour patterns of mind and body), with kindness and curiosity, offers an opportunity to change them. Paying attention, staying connected to ourselves and each other in relationships is fundamental to any sense of well-being. Both the teacher and the student are benefiting from the shared experience which is really the power of being in the now.

Even if you can't sing, you can breathe a moment with a student and lay the foundation for a habit of joy. With each breath, a word; with each word a feeling; with each feeling, awareness. Breathing and saying, singing or thinking, this is mindfulness.

(By Susan Stern, TDSB Social Worker – Area B)

Remember to view the "Foundations of Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being" online training module on KEY to Learn. This module has been loaded onto everyone's Learning Profile - click on the "MyLearning" tab to get started.

MindUP at Gordon A. Brown Middle School



Gordon A. Brown MS, Aaren Hodgins-Fennell's Special Education HSP Classroom, Grades 6, 7 and 8

The *MindUP* program was introduced this year at Gordon A. Brown MS by Principal Kim Jensen as a contribution to the TDSB Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy. Using *MindUP*, students are learning how their brains work and applying this knowledge to learning processes, such as focusing, memory and emotional regulation. Exciting both pedagogically and psychologically, *MindUP* provides students with tools from neuroscience to enhance learning and well-being.

What does *MindUP* look like in action? Last week I visited Ms. Aaren Hodgins-Fennell's classroom. A poster of a human brain was displayed prominently at the entrance, highlighting two key brain structures involved in learning: the *amygdala* (emotions) and the *hippocampus* (memory). The most striking visual impact was seeing how close these two brain structures are to each other. In fact, they physically touch each other. This highlights the close functional relationship between emotions and memory. Lesson: emotions matter for learning. You remember what is emotionally significant and strong emotions, like anxiety, can limit learning.

And it goes deeper. Entering further, I saw about 100 'emotion words' on the wall. This emotion vocabulary describes many graduated differences in the broad range of human emotions. Ms. Hodgins-Fennell explained that students are using these vocabulary words to build their emotional intelligence. For example, it makes a difference if students label their feelings as 'anger' or 'frustration'. Anger motivates a relatively narrow range of behavioural outcomes that usually involve aggression, blaming or retribution. In contrast, identifying an emotion as 'frustration' motivates a broader range of behavioural choices, usually involving fixing the problem or navigating around an obstacle. Seen this way, it is easy to understand how emotional vocabulary impacts learning and well-being.

Mindfulness is another component of the *MindUP* program. Mindfulness is a special kind of attention that students can use to 'stand-back' from all the immediate things that vie to capture their attention. For example, when students concentrate on their breath, and only their breath, they exercise this 'standing-back' ability. The process of bringing their attention back to their breath, again and again, strengthens their attentional control. More importantly, they learn that all those automatic sensations, feelings, and thoughts do not have absolute power over them, nor are they in charge of what someone does. This experience of 'mind-space' is often a revelation to students. "Wow, I never really knew that I had so much choice and conscious control over what I do!" Yes, and what is more, this executive functioning ability – the ability to 'stand-back' – is strengthened by exercise. Dwelling purposely in the present moment, students enlarge their circle of choice and freedom. The words of Oogway in the movie *Kung Fu Panda*, come to mind: "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, but today is a gift – that is why it is called the present."

Using the *MindUP* program, students at Gordon A. Brown MS are learning how their brains work, and they are applying this knowledge to enhance learning, self-regulation, and well-being. New tools and techniques are being discovered, such as emotion vocabulary, 'standing-back', and mindful awareness. Embedded into the regular curriculum, *MindUP* is proving to be a valuable way of contributing to the mental health and well-being of students in the TDSB.

(By Philip Wall, TDSB Psychological Associate – Area C)



Photo Credit: Elizabeth Addo, Central Coordinating Principal – School Effectiveness



White Haven PS, Anthony King's Grade 8 Class

We Want to Hear from You!

Do you have great Mental Health and Well-Being initiatives in your school? If so, send us pictures, student written work, or art work that you would like to highlight. Please email submissions to: saleem.haniff@tdsb.on.ca

Wake up to Mindfulness

The grade 5/6 Cedar Class at da Vinci School begins each and every morning with their mindfulness practice, a simple breathing practice and three times a week the day starts with a more invigorating yoga practice. It is the development of the practice as a regular routine that is so important. What begins as a new challenge becomes a part of the day that students look forward to and even depend on as something that prepares them for their day ahead.

Having done research in mindfulness and the development of self-regulation with my grade 1/2 class last year, I saw many benefits of the practice. This year, I was excited to see how an older group of students would respond to the regular mindfulness program. It was indeed a challenge at the outset. It is hard for anybody to sit still, quietly and to train the brain to focus on the breath, aware of its inherent desire to wander and consistently redirect it back to its focus on the breath. There were the inevitable giggles and fidgeting at the outset that gave me an opportunity to open the discussion about why we do this practice. I talked with my students about the research that suggests the brain building potential of regular mindfulness training.

I have always found that children have a natural love of yoga. I hear the same things every time I introduce the practice to a group of children, "This feels so good!" My students wrote to me in a reflection, "Yoga and breathing help me develop self-awareness skills and relaxation in my head." Another student writes "my breathing practice helps me with focusing on the moment and to block out all distraction. When I do the practices, I do not focus on my future intentions, nor what I want to change in the past."

These practices help my students, and can also help those who need to find ways to reduce their stress levels and be more present for their students. In an age when our distractibility has reached epic proportions, mindfulness practices can help our students achieve the balance necessary for mental wellness and optimal learning.

(By Gillian Thornley-Hall, Teacher – da Vinci School)

Mindfulness Resources are available through the TDSB Professional Learning Library at <http://tdsweb/site/viewitem.asp?siteid=144&pageid=144&menuid=144>

Upcoming Events

First Annual Secondary School
Anti-Stigma Student Symposium
Montecassino Hotel & Event Venue – 3710 Chesswood Dr.
November 27, 2014 – 8:30 AM to 2:45 PM

Health and Wellness at Rose Avenue Public School

Children have anxieties, worries and feel stressed at times and these feelings can impact negatively on their learning and social interactions. At our school, we are introducing a number of research-based strategies to support children with their mental health. By embedding meaningful exercises, discussions and activities into our teaching, we hope to promote relaxation and focus, which may in turn influence the child's ability to concentrate, self-regulate and improve their resilience.

Teachers at Rose Avenue Public School have embraced the *MindUP* Curriculum which provides a series of lessons focusing on social-emotional awareness, decision making and mindful attention to yourself and to those around you. The lessons provide links to research, suggested classroom activities and connections to curriculum. Our teachers are experimenting with the ideas in this curriculum to encourage student engagement, reflection and optimism. In particular, our Kindergarten students are engaged in deep breathing and calming activities during transitional times. These quiet and peaceful tasks encourage focus and self-regulation and help the children prepare for the next step in their learning.

(By Diane Jamieson, Vice-Principal – Rose Avenue PS)

A FOS Approach: Mental Health and Well-Being in WR6 Classrooms

On October 10, WR6 held a half-day session for classroom teachers (K to 12) on Mental Health and Well-being in our classrooms. The goals for the day were to provide an overview of the *TDSB Mental Health Strategy*, to be introduced to a variety of learning strategies and to begin to develop a school plan. Participants deconstructed some of our *FOS School Census* data that focused on mental health and wellness. They were also given approaches on using mindfulness in the classroom. Mindfulness strategies included becoming familiar with the *Zones of Regulation*, mindful breathing, check-in strategies for students, and community circles. Participants became familiar with the *MindUP* Curriculum, (a resource that has been purchased for every school in WR6). Curriculum connections to mental health and wellness were also explored. As schools shared best practices around supporting mental health and wellness, it was clearly evident that good things are happening in WR6! Finally, one school shared how they developed their Mental Health and Wellness plan. Participants were provided with a framework and the opportunity to begin their thinking around creating their own school Mental Health and Wellness plans. *(By Sue Bryer, Itinerant Guidance Counsellor and Rosa Militano, Teacher)*

Mental Health and Well-Being Core Leadership Team

Heather Johnson & Saleem Haniff, Social Workers, Mental Health and Well-Being – System Support
Rose D'Alimonte – Chief of Social Work/Attendance – Area D
Marcia Powers-Dunlop, Interim Senior Manager – Professional Support Services
Sandy Spyropoulos, Executive Superintendent – Student Support Services and Care