

HOW MINDFULNESS AFFECTED MY TEACHING PRACTICE

by Amy Smith

Rushing through the halls, trying to get all my photocopying done before the next class, making sure I get to my required supervision on time, wishing I didn't use this particular travel mug that keeps leaking tea all over my clothes, and hoping I get my reports cards done at least a day before the deadline so I don't appear to my administrator as though I don't have all my ducks lined up in a row. Sound familiar? That's me on a regular Tuesday. Well, at least it was before I found mindfulness. But this isn't just my story, it's our students' story, our administrators' story—everyone's story! Our 21st century mantra is “go, go, go.” When do we ever get a chance to just sit and focus in on our breath? Well the practice of mindfulness may be the answer.

Mindfulness is a form of meditation that teaches the practitioner to be present in the moment and to not pay attention to the past or the future. Being mindful means to be aware of one's thoughts, bodily sensations and feelings and simply acknowledge them. When you practise mindfulness, you learn to let go of bad thoughts, feelings and emotions and focus on the good whisperings of your mind and breath.

After going to several mindfulness workshops offered by partners of my school board, I learned of the wide range of benefits that this practice produced, such as promoting mental health by reducing anxiety, depression, stress and even symptoms of ADHD. Having students who had a number of those particular challenges, I wondered if mindfulness meditation would help them.

As an individual with anxiety myself, I figured it couldn't hurt. I just had to make sure that it was, in fact, a secular practice since I teach in a public school. I confirmed its acceptance and functionality as a secular practice, got the green light from board personnel, and was ready to try it out with my students.

We started out slowly by listening to audio recordings with guided visualizations and breathing exercises. As our skills as a class developed, we decided to let go of the “direct instruction” and let ourselves enjoy relaxing sounds of nature or music daily. I intentionally had my students practise

mindfulness for five minutes each day right before we began math class. I am familiar with students experiencing math anxiety and wanted them to be in a more positive headspace and enjoy math for all its creative and loveable qualities. I also started to intentionally do mindfulness before tests and quizzes. Believe it or not, my students started to demand it if I ever forgot.

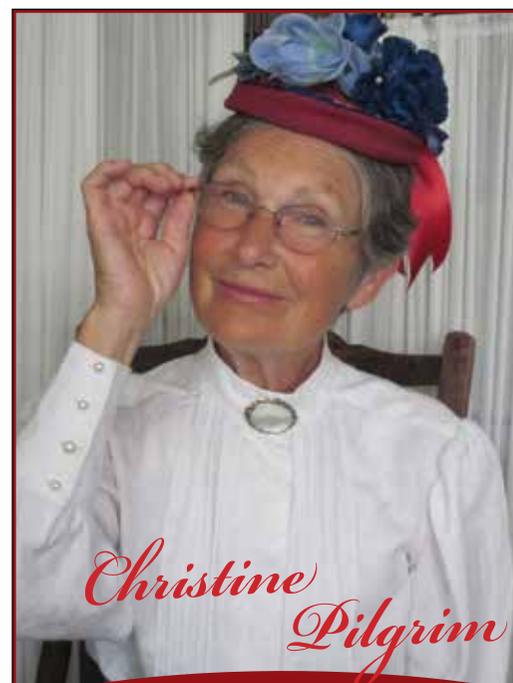
Last winter the weather was brutally cold. My grade six students had indoor recess after indoor recess. I decided to take them on a “Mindful Walk” around the school. First, I charted their feelings before our walk. Students commented on their feelings of being tired, anxious and stressed out. After listening to their feelings, I said I wanted them to take a walk around the school absolutely silently. I wanted them to notice sounds, sights and feelings in their bodies.

After our walk, I again charted my students' feelings. I was actually quite surprised, as I had no clue how this activity would go. My students felt more aware, awake, confident and calm. This was an amazing realization of how simple mindfulness can really be!

Another “I wonder” I had was if perhaps mindfulness was only working with my grade six students because I was their homeroom teacher. I decided to try it out with the grade three students I teach for drama and dance. The same kids who struggle to sit still went dead silent during mindfulness! When I asked my students “how do you feel after trying mindfulness?” they all described feeling strangely different and “in a good way.” After asking them to elaborate, many described themselves feeling calmer and more relaxed.

I swear by the practice of mindfulness now. It's so simple and absolutely free. All it requires is an open mind and heart. In the spring, I loved taking my students outdoors to reap the rewards of nature and the fresh air. Now that I know about mindfulness, I will never chant the “go, go, go” mantra ever again!

Amy Smith is a Special Education Resource Teacher in the York Region District School Board in Ontario, Canada. Amy enjoys blogging (www.amysmith.ca) and tweeting (@smithers_amy) about her passion for mental health, leadership and well-being. 🍁



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