



# Modeling Mindfulness by Practicing Presence

by Lisa J. Lucas

Mindful is the word of the moment, and mindfulness in education has exploded. It sounds so obvious; who doesn't want to be mindful? The alternative, mindless, isn't what most of us are striving for. However, mindfulness in education is in the precarious position of being relegated to a programmatic approach. We certainly don't want to mandate mindfulness. This article will advocate that if teachers are to guide mindfulness practices for children, it's important that teachers embody mindfulness themselves and have their own personal practice. Mindfulness isn't meant to be a script—much like you wouldn't ask a teacher who can't swim to teach a swimming class from a textbook.



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Let's let go of the race to adopt a mindfulness curriculum. Instead, let's take a step back, and focus on individual teachers and how to enhance their personal well-being by first exploring ways to practice being present themselves, before we layer on the expectation that they teach it to children. Being present serves both teachers and students.

Breaux and Wong (2003) assert that if well-trained, competent, caring teachers were consciously present in every classroom, we should witness a staggering increase in student achievement, motivation, and character improvement, along with a marked decrease in discipline problems.

A discussion I had with a mindfulness educator, who was employed to teach meditation to children, has reinforced my concern. Dana, a seasoned occupational therapist, spent the last year teaching basic mindfulness skills to kindergarteners. She described how for thirty minutes, once a week, she sat

with children in a circle and facilitated belly breathing, focused awareness, and through pictures taught about the parts of their brains that help them think and respond to stress. I asked if the classroom teacher participated. "Rarely," she responded.

Herein lies the problem. No buy-in from teachers, no consistency nor transfer for students. If we truly want to foster mindful schools, we need to begin with the school leaders and teachers. How can we start? My advice: one moment at a time. Let's try some present moment practices in our own lives. We can begin by identifying what presence is, and the benefits of practicing presence.

Presence is a synonym for mindfulness, which has roots in Buddhist philosophy and psychology. Mindfulness is a more formal, scientific term; presence as it is used in this article is a secular, informal term, intended to be applicable to daily life. Whatever we call it, it's a practice that has been around for a very long time. All humans have had the need to cultivate attention, to focus, and to find

emotional equilibrium. As teachers, practicing presence gives us the ability to anchor ourselves so we aren't carried away by the ever-changing challenges of daily classroom life. Being present means we can observe our own internal state before we react to events, so that we can respond thoughtfully. Presence allows us to be more aware and to observe with clarity and compassion. If we're anchored in presence, the drama doesn't carry us away. The simple act of being present has the power to change how we approach our children, colleagues, and our communities.

Being present is simple, yet difficult. It's available to us at any moment, and it goes by many names. Athletes refer to it as "being in the zone." For soldiers and first responders, it's "situational awareness." Artists see it as "flow," thinkers consider it "contemplation," and Buddhists call it "mindfulness." The name doesn't matter; it's the feeling of peace and stillness that is important. If we want to foster healthier learning environments, we can begin by first attending to our own self-care and work to model presence in the classroom.

Why would early childhood educators need to be mindful or practice presence? Research indicates that teachers are experiencing high levels of stress. Stress in the teaching profession is considerably higher than the workplace average, with more than 89 percent of teachers experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression at work and more than 50 percent feeling severely stressed (National Union of Teachers, 2013). The Mindfulness in Schools Project in 2014 reported that a survey on occupational stress, published in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology* in 2005, ranked teaching as the second most stressful profession out of twenty-six occupations analyzed, second only to ambulance driving.

There seems to be no place in education that has been untouched by the frenetic

demands of society. By practicing presence, we can find a way to manage the anxiety and stress that we feel about the overscheduled, overextended lives we all seem to be leading. Many of us in early childhood education feel a bit overwhelmed. My preferred word to describe how we often feel after a day of caring for others is "flattened."

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*"We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee."*

Marian Wright Edelman

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As educators, many of us graduated from college and plunged into the real world of work without having a sense of how to navigate through all the responsibilities and commitments that real life requires. We didn't think much about it, we just did it, and life just happened. We got a job, some of us started families, and in both situations, we cared for others. In the midst of all this care, we forgot about taking care of ourselves. To counteract this, we can make a conscious choice to treat others and ourselves with a bit more care and compassion.

Chang (2009) describes the teacher's day as a relentless storm of interactions with colleagues, students, and parents that routinely involve uncertainty and actual or potential conflict. To negotiate these conflicts successfully, as teachers we must learn to be flexible. We can do this by shifting our attention, making moment-by-moment decisions, and carefully regulating and managing our thinking, behavior, and emotions in the direction of positive states of mind. Challenges and obstacles are inevitable. We live in an increasingly unpredict-

able and often overwhelming world. We cannot always control what happens to us; however, we can prepare so that we can respond to what happens in a healthy way. Although we are teachers, life itself is the real teacher. How we meet what life dishes out to us, whether good, bad, or neutral, is essentially how we spend our days.

What follows are some simple practices to help us live more intentionally each day, more aware of the present moment.

### Beginning the Day

One simple practice is to begin the day with gratitude. Begin the day by identifying five things you are grateful for. No repeats from the prior day. Vow to do this every day before your feet hit the floor. I can tell you, it's a practice that I wouldn't begin the day without, and I've never, ever been at a loss for something new to give thanks for.

If we have begun our day with intention and careful preparation, we will be better prepared to respond thoughtfully instead of reacting unconsciously. Unfortunately, much of the world gets up, gulps two cups of coffee to get caffeinated, and then listens to the flood of negativity on the morning news. If we begin our day watching the local news, we are subject to all the stories that capture the crimes that have occurred while we slept: the fires, missing children, horrific crime scenes, home invasions, drunk-driving arrests, and dangerous weather. We are bombarded with stories that can't help but trigger a stress response. Even though they aren't actually happening to us, they send alarms to our brains and nervous systems, perpetuating a constant subliminal undercurrent of unease. This is the opposite of good self-care; instead, we are revving up our nervous systems before we even leave our homes.

## Incorporating Presence in the Midst of the Day

Throughout the day, there are small fragments of time that could be used for a mini presence practice. One that I integrate into my day is a simple four-minute meditation.

### Simple four-minute sitting meditation

Park all your electronics, turn off your phone. Set a timer for four minutes.

- Choose a comfortable seat. You can sit in a chair with your feet on the floor, you can sit loosely cross-legged, in lotus posture, you can kneel—all are fine. Just make sure you are stable and in an upright position. Tune into your body.
- Feel your breath. Follow the sensation of your breath as it goes out and as it goes in.
- Notice when your mind has wandered. Inevitably, your attention will leave the sensations of the breath and wander to other places. When you notice this (often in just seconds), simply return your attention to the breath.
- Be kind to your wandering mind. Don't judge yourself or obsess over the content of the thoughts you find yourself lost in. Just bring your focus back to the breath.

When I shared this technique with a colleague who is a director of a preschool/kindergarten, she laughed and explained that she has been doing this on her own for years. She described her practice.

"I have a lot of very long days working different jobs. I take five minutes in between because that's all I have. I sit down and do absolutely nothing; it's as if I refreshed or rebooted myself. I simply sit, close my eyes, and I'm ready for the

next thing. I started doing this when I started working two jobs in 1999. I had small children, and there were times I had three jobs. They were such long days. It's more survival than anything. I now do it once a day. I'm always running, but I attempt to find time to sit down, preferably when no one is home. I prefer going to my bedroom. I usually sit in a chair, close my eyes, and think of nothing. It's like a window shade, I pull it down when I sit, then five minutes later, the shade goes up."

Call it survival; call it a presence pause, the name doesn't matter. The truth is, it's nothing new, and it's been going on for centuries. What may be different is the intentionality of making time to pause. If we don't build some type of practice into our work and home lives, the days and nights just blur together and we only pause when we fall into bed at night, exhausted.

## Ending the Day

How we end the day is as important as how we begin. Most of us have control over the last few minutes before we fall asleep. Once, while facilitating a workshop on the topic of stress reduction, I asked a group of teachers, "What is the last thing you do right before you close your eyes at night?" Their responses varied, but in rank order from most to least, the responses went like this:

- Watch TV or Netflix on iPad
- Check email
- Text a friend
- Scroll through Facebook
- Check Instagram
- Make a to-do list for the next day
- Shop online
- Read a book

I would like to propose an alternative. Try using these pre-sleep moments to program your subconscious mind with thoughts of joy, kindness, gratitude, and anticipation of good things to come. As I lie in bed each night, I review in my mind all the good that happened during the day and I am grateful for every moment. I don't dwell on what went wrong, I let it go, knowing that tomorrow will provide a fresh start.

Integrating presence and self-care practices into our daily routines takes purposeful planning. The bottom line is that you have to want to make wellness a high priority in your life. Self-care isn't selfish; it's actually selfless. We are better equipped to serve our students, colleagues, friends, and family when we have invested the time to learn how to best care for ourselves.

## How to Explore Mindfulness

- Find a local qualified mindfulness teacher to hold a sample session for teachers and staff to get a sense of what it's all about.
- For those interested, establish a cohort of teachers and commit to a weekly practice session to discuss the benefits and explore ways to integrate mindfulness into the day.
- For those who are interested in learning more, explore an eight-week course for teachers derived from Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, or another evidence-based program.
- In addition to cultivating interest at a grassroots level, it's also key to identify an administrator (the principal or director) to oversee program development.
- Clearly define the purpose of the program.

Before we attempt to integrate contemplative practices into our classrooms, let's try on some presence practices in our own lives. If implemented thoughtfully, with support, careful planning and buy-in from teachers, we can create a culture of mindful schools, which will expand to a mindful community and world.

It is important to reiterate that effective self-care starts with one's self. Identifying, creating and practicing your own ways to be present transfer into all areas of our daily lives. Practicing what you preach has never been a more applicable statement than when it is referencing mindfulness. Mindfulness is not something simply to be achieved; it's more about being than doing. Keep this in mind if you start to share strategies and practices with others, especially children. Mindfulness has the potential to change the way we educate children, and how we approach our lives as educators.

More present-moment practices can be found in my book *Practicing Presence: Simple Self Care Strategies for Teachers*, published by Stenhouse Publishing.

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