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# Cultivating Mindfulness in the Classroom

Foreword by **ROBERT J. MARZANO**



**THE CLASSROOM STRATEGIES SERIES**

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*Reproducibles are in italics.*

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# INTRODUCTION

*Cultivating Mindfulness in the Classroom* is part of a series of books collectively referred to as *The Classroom Strategies Series*. This series aims to provide teachers, as well as school and regional administrators, with an in-depth treatment of research-based instructional strategies that can be used in the classroom to enhance student achievement. Many of the strategies addressed in this series have been covered in other works, such as *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001), *Classroom Management That Works* (Marzano, 2003), *The Art and Science of Teaching* (Marzano, 2007) and *Effective Supervision* (Marzano, Frontier & Livingston, 2011). Although those works devoted a chapter or a part of a chapter to particular strategies, *The Classroom Strategies Series* devotes an entire book to an instructional strategy or set of related strategies.

The purpose of this book is to encourage the use of mindfulness as a highly effective, low-cost strategy to help students meet their psychological needs in school and throughout life. It makes the case for why educators must help students become more mindful and offers a user-friendly approach to mindfulness that is grounded in the science of managing stress, focusing the brain for longer periods of time, and increasing emotional intelligence. *Cultivating Mindfulness in the Classroom* takes a broad view of the concept, incorporating positive psychology, emotional awareness and a variety of pragmatic approaches.

We begin with a brief but inclusive chapter that reviews the research and theory on mindfulness. Although you may be eager to move right into those chapters that provide recommendations for practice in schools, we strongly encourage you to examine the research and theory, as they are the foundation for the entire book. Indeed, a basic purpose of *Cultivating Mindfulness in the Classroom* and others in *The Classroom Strategies Series* is to present the most useful strategies based on the strongest research and theory available.

Because research and theory can provide only a general direction for classroom practice, *Cultivating Mindfulness in the Classroom* goes one step further to translate that research into applications for mindfulness in schools. Chapters 2 to 6 describe practical strategies aligned to five major purposes and benefits of mindfulness: (1) stress reduction, (2) attention, (3) emotional control, (4) positive self-concept and (5) positive interactions. These chapters provide detailed guidelines and activities for teachers who wish to foster these positive traits in their students. Chapter 7 presents a step-by-step process and suggestions for developing a more formal mindfulness program in a classroom or school.

## How to Use This Book

Educators can use *Cultivating Mindfulness in the Classroom* as a self-study text that provides an in-depth understanding of mindfulness practices and their effects. Each chapter explains strategies related to a beneficial component of mindfulness. As you progress through the chapters, you will also encounter comprehension questions. It is important to complete these questions and compare your answers with those in appendix A (page 99). Such interaction provides a review of the content and allows a thorough examination of your understanding. Groups or teams of teachers and administrators who wish to examine the topic of mindfulness in depth may also use *Cultivating Mindfulness in the Classroom*. When this is the case, team members should answer the questions independently and then compare their answers in small- or large-group settings.

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# Chapter 1

## RESEARCH AND THEORY

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, education experienced a shift toward a focus on achievement and accountability. Few would argue against the importance of students achieving at high levels, and most would agree that some level of accountability is valuable. But this shift also led to unforeseen changes in the content prioritised in schools. Mandated high-stakes tests, usually emphasising English and mathematics, came to the forefront, often at the expense of the arts, physical education and social-emotional learning. Social-emotional learning in particular includes decision-making skills, self-management, self-awareness, social awareness and people skills. Although these essential competencies are not often emphasised in schools, many teachers see the need for them, especially in the ever-changing and often stressful modern world.

### **Addressing Students' Levels of Stress, Worry and Depression**

Small amounts of stress are motivating and can be positive. Excessive stress, especially in children, has negative effects on emotions and physiology (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014). On a day-to-day basis, students feel a tremendous amount of stress. Fourteen percent of children ages eight to twelve self-reported that they worry a great deal. Forty-four percent of children and teens (ages eight to seventeen) reported worrying about success in school. Other sources of stress for eight- to twelve-year-olds include having family financial worries and getting along with their peers (American Psychological Association [APA], 2009). In a survey of 1018 teenagers, 64 per cent shared that they had felt either moderate or extreme stress in the preceding month, and 82 per cent of teens said they had felt moderate or extreme stress in the preceding year (APA, 2014). Respondents also revealed the negative emotions related to their stress levels: 31 per cent reported feeling overwhelmed, 30 per cent reported depression and 36 per cent stated they felt fatigue. Further, findings suggested that worry and stress are affecting youth at much higher rates than perceived by parents. Only 2–5 per cent of parents believed their eight- to twelve-year-olds experienced high levels of worry or stress. Youth responses indicated that they might not be receiving adequate family support to help them learn healthy strategies for handling worry and stress (APA, 2009).

In primary school, for students who face high levels of stress, effects can include stuttering, having night terrors, crying excessively, wetting the bed, being unable to control emotions, being overly aggressive, experiencing mood swings, developing incontinence, having headaches and stomach-aches, and experiencing changes in eating habits such as eating very little or overeating (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014; Hale, 1998). Coping mechanisms for younger children can also include emotional traits such as regressing, crying, clinging, stuttering and withdrawing (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014).



In middle years and high school students, stress can result in feelings of irritability, anger, anxiousness and sadness. Of students surveyed, more than a quarter reported being short or irritated with classmates because of stress (APA, 2014). Many adolescents, when upset or distressed, react automatically, without effectively considering consequences. They can often get into the habit of using unhelpful behaviours to serve as coping strategies (APA, 2014). These include the following.

- **Over- or under-eating:** Twenty-six per cent of teens reported overeating to manage stress, while 67 per cent skipped meals because of a lack of appetite due to stress.
- **Not receiving adequate sleep:** Thirty-five per cent of teens reported difficulty sleeping at night due to stress or worry.
- **Utilising media to cope:** Thirty-six per cent of students admitted to watching television for more than two hours a day to manage stress; 43 per cent said they surfed the internet to cope with stress; 46 per cent reported playing video games to handle stress.

Stress is exhausting for students of all ages. These effects can also compound over time: “One of the most insidious effects of prolonged stress is that it pushes people into depression” (Medina, 2014, p. 67). From 2009 to 2013, the number of children diagnosed with anxiety increased by 23 per cent each year and the number of children diagnosed with depression increased by 12 per cent each year (Sung, 2013). The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013) results revealed that in the twelve months leading up to the survey, 17 per cent of students seriously considered attempting suicide. Further, the same survey results showed that 28.4 per cent of high school students feel sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row.

One source of this stress and anxiety may be technology. From iPhones to video games to texting and social media, students today are barraged with seemingly constant sensory input. While technology use has its benefits, it also has significant drawbacks. Facebook use has been shown to increase users’ feelings of being socially and emotionally supported (Hampton, Goulet, Marlow & Rainie, 2012), but overuse can have the opposite effect. A 2013 study by Ethan Kross and his colleagues studied the well-being of young adults in their late teens and early twenties in relationship to their time spent checking Facebook. Although the sample size was small (eighty-two participants), the results showed that the more the participants checked their Facebook accounts, the worse they felt about themselves. This type of decline in self-esteem may increase signs of depression. The connection between social media use and lowered self-esteem and signs of depression may be partially caused by incorrect impressions of other users’ lives. A study (Chou & Edge, 2012) of 425 undergraduate students at Utah Valley University showed that checking Facebook is linked to the perception that other people are happier and much more successful. A study of more than a thousand Chinese teens ages thirteen to eighteen had similar findings. Teens who overused the internet were 2.5 times more likely to experience bouts of depression than teens with normal use of the internet (Hendrick, 2010).

Regardless of its cause, stress also interferes with students’ ability to learn. When the amygdala, the brain’s emotional regulator, recognises threats or stressors, it immediately goes into fight-or-flight mode in order to keep the body safe. Unfortunately, when amygdala activity is high, the prefrontal cortex, where higher-order thinking takes place, shuts down. Too much stress causes self-protection to take over (Gregory & Kaufeldt, 2015). Thus, when there is fear, anxiety or stress, learning opportunities decrease dramatically.

Next, we address the importance of educating the whole child, including consideration of outside stressors and other issues.