Mindfulness In The Classroom

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For me, it all started with a simple chime. That's how I first implemented the core practice of breathing — on purpose — into my classroom's daily routine. The chime was a simple, calming sound to alert the students it was time to breathe. Sure, I felt a bit silly asking kids to bow their heads and mindfully breathe, but I did it anyway and, with each passing day, the chime and breathing practice were just part of our classroom culture — a routine I looked forward to throughout the day.

You can use a chime or any sound effect that unites the group for its mindful breathing moment — a quiet, peaceful, mini-break that brings calm to the classroom. Bonus: You may find, as I did, that it allows you to achieve a focused state of mind for your own thinking. Breathing practice has become a routine in my personal life as well.

A Typical Breathing Routine

A snapshot of a typical breathing routine in my class begins with us gathering together for Morning Circle and taking a few cleansing breaths. Be specific when teaching how to properly breathe: in through the nose, out through the mouth, like blowing out birthday candles. This activity prepares them for the quiet of mindful breathing practice. I instruct my students to sit up straight as if they're attached by a string from the top of their heads to the ceiling. They should not be touching anything or anyone. They are to lower their heads, close or lower their eyes, and prepare for breathing practice.

I usually identify something specific to which they can focus their attention, such as the feeling of the air as it enters their nose, or the feeling of the air filling their lungs. I might say, "Breathe air into your lungs as deep as it will go. Hold that for one second at the top. Now, slowly — very slowly — exhale. Let's do it again. This time, breathe in slowly counting to eight and see if you can exhale to eight." Next time, we try a higher number. The purpose of this extreme, focused breathing is to get them to bring awareness to their breathing.

After our breathing routine, I ask the students why we do this. I teach them every day that they are the only ones responsible for their thinking and that they have the ability to change their thinking. But that it takes awareness, practice (lots of practice), and focus.

As you and your students become comfortable with breathing routines, add more varied strategies. Some can literally take just seconds with practice. For instance, if students are struggling with lining up respectfully, take a moment to have them put their hands on their hearts, feel their heart beating, and take a few cleansing breaths before entering the hall. It's a simple, yet effective, way to bring the energy down at any given time. As we go through the year, I use similar breathing strategies to help kids deal with emotions, including anxiety, anger, sadness, excitement, and fear.

Focused Social Emotional Learning Lessons

Once you've incorporated breathing practice into your daily routine a few times a day, you're ready for more intentional, focused social emotional learning (SEL) lessons. The "why we focus on breathing" conversation is a great place to start. Next, the science of the brain helps children learn about the areas of the brain they are capable of controlling. It becomes natural to move next into lessons on the health of the brain and how kindness and empathy contribute to the brain's health. With a little creativity, SEL lessons are easily woven into content areas. I once taught a focus lesson before an owl pellet dissection lab — it was awesome!

I've been incorporating SEL lessons in my class for seven years. Like all teaching, planning and implementing with intentionality are essential steps for success. Teaching SEL lessons, practicing reflection, and incorporating breathing routines are simply part of what I do and how I teach.

Watch this video to see how I plan for one of my SEL lessons:
https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/social-emotional-lesson-plans

Watch me lead my students in a short guided relaxation exercise:
https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/guided-relaxation

My videos are part of the series Creating Success in Middle School.

Anne Mechler is a classroom teacher at Momentous Institute in Dallas, Texas where she has been teaching fifth grade for eight years. She holds a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Texas A & M University-Commerce. Over her 25 year career in education, she has been involved in training teachers, presenting at National conferences, writing curriculum, and teaching a variety of grade levels from pre-K to fifth.

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