

TROPICAL LIFE

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IN the MOMENT



IMAGINE THAT: Second graders Chloe Bensabat, Nicolle Renteria and Nicole Rodan picture how they would love all of the world's people during class.

BY MARCELLA MCCARTHY

Special to The Miami Herald

The thought of asking a classroom full of second-graders to sit still, breathe deeply and be aware of their feelings may sound like a near impossible feat, but at Miami Country Day School children are doing just that.

"Let's bloom like a flower," Hope Stern beseeched her 7- and 8-year-olds standing in a cluster in the middle of the classroom. Clad in red-and-blue school uniforms, the 15 or so boys and girls slowly stretched their arms up and out. On the wall behind them, geometric-shaped, hand-colored paper mandalas representing the universe in the Buddhist faith were pinned up on a bulletin board. The classroom was dim and quiet, and when asked how they felt, relaxed, peaceful, and joyful were the whispered responses.

For the educators at the North Dade

• TURN TO MINDFULNESS, 2E

Buddhist meditation teaches kids mindfulness

• MINDFULNESS, FROM 1E

school, teaching mindfulness, a key principle of Buddhism, is the first step in helping children cope in a culture of text messages, tweets and Facebook updates. Breath, meditate and focus are the mantras behind mindfulness.

"We really find the mindfulness practices to be very effective to help the children self-regulate in terms of stress, anxiety and focus," said Susan Glick, a guidance counselor at the Lower School.

Stern tends to implement mindfulness moments throughout the day after busy activities, or as Michael Port, one of her students said, "After anything we do that we get really hyper."

In Deborah Lee's second grade class, she uses a small chime that echoes through the room to call attention to a mindful moment. When the classroom gets too loud, children can walk up to her desk and give the chime a light tap, signaling a quiet period.

"The key is to teach it in a way that is accessible to children. You can't teach it the way you would teach it to adults," said Amishi Jha, Ph.D, an associate professor in the psychology department at the University of Miami.

Jha's main area of research revolves around how mindfulness changes the brain. More specifically, Jha is interested in how mindfulness can improve attention.

Jha has found that both "attention and working memory seem to be improved," with mindfulness. Working memory is "our ability to hold information for very short periods of time," she said. She cites the example of a waiter who takes orders without a pen and paper in hand, yet still gets everything right.

"I definitely think it [mindfulness] is something that should be explored in the educational

If you go

Mindful Kids Miami is hosting three events this weekend. Contact Valerie York-Zimmerman at 305-668-3590 or ljourney@att.net

FRIDAY

Daniel Rechtschaffen, M.A., a leader in the field of mindfulness, will speak about issues facing schoolchildren. Free. 6:30 p.m., Books & Books, 265 Aragon Ave., Coral Gables.

SATURDAY AND SUNDAY

Free mindfulness workshop, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Temple Judea, 5500 Granada Blvd., Coral Gables.

context since attention is so important to learning," she said.

Dr. Alan Delamater, a pediatric psychologist and director of clinical psychology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, has been working with mindfulness since 1975. The final parts of the brain to develop — the prefrontal cortex — are also the areas involved in the planning of behavior, he noted. "So if you can get children to practice this, it would have a profound effect on their moral behavior and it would create a less impulsive group," Delamater said.

The brain is a muscle, and thus it can be strengthened. "With practice — which is cultivated by sitting still, watching the breath and noticing," Delamater said, one can strengthen his or her attention span.

That is the mission of Valerie York-Zimmerman of South Miami. As a teacher of mindfulness for the past 25 years, Zimmerman, 63, is launching a non-profit organization called Mindful Kids Miami (MKM). Thirty years ago she was working 12-hour days as an executive for Ted Arison, the founder of Carnival Cruise

Line.

Some of her colleagues started practicing mindfulness and she noticed that after two years they were totally different: less stressed, more focused and more efficient. She began her own meditation practice every morning for an hour before work.

"What I found is that I was much less reactive, much calmer and was able to perform to a better level because I didn't get upset so easily," she said. "I was looking for something to calm me down."

Zimmerman's goal is to incorporate mindfulness into the public schools. At The Kampong in Coconut Grove, the lush estate of the late David Fairchild, founder of Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, Zimmerman has started a pilot afterschool program for children at Frances S. Tucker and George Washington Carver elementary schools. In a 30-minute session held once a week, the children bend and roll into postures emulating their favorite super heroes. The key, Zimmerman says, is that their movements are slow and relaxed.

This weekend Zimmerman is hosting a three-day event focusing on mindfulness. Daniel Rechtschaffen, who teaches mindfulness to both children and educators, will run the programs, which are free to educators, parents, grandparents, counselors, and coaches.

Rechtschaffen, a resident of California, started meditating when he was 19 while living in a monastery in France. He created Mindful Children, an organization that trains educators about teaching children about mindfulness.

"If the teacher is yelling at the kids to be relaxed, then it's not going to work very well," said Rechtschaffen. "One of the main aspects of mindfulness is to be able to feel anger rise up in the body and not to react."