Benefits and Research of Meditation in Schools

The practice of meditation is becoming increasingly popular in schools as research shows that having a regular meditation practice enhances physical and mental health, and overall well-being. Meditation leads to a feeling of calm and clarity thereby reducing the effects of stress on the mind and body. These life-long enhancing benefits apply to everyone.

During an era when schools are experiencing increased pressure to perform academically and teachers have increasing demands from the needs of their students, educators are recognizing the need to take a new approach to education, promoting social and emotional learning, to bring about transformation and change (Broderick, 2013). The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University states that “cognitive, emotional and social capacities are inextricably intertwined” and impossible to disentangle.

Neuroscience has found that meditation leads to increased neuroplasticity, the brain’s ability to change based on experience, which can have a profound effect on learning by creating and strengthening the neural pathways that affect regulation of emotion and cognitive functioning (Davidson 2008). Further, researchers reason that because children’s brains are innately more malleable than adults, it is plausible that meditation will lead to long lasting positive effects (Waters 2015).

Educators are paying attention to this research and schools across the county are integrating meditation programs into elementary, middle, and high school curriculums with encouraging results. Current research affirms that that these very programs are positively affecting the lives of children in a myriad of ways. Meditation has a calming effect on the central nervous system and meditation programs are giving students an experience of stillness, repose, and well-being. Students who practice meditation report having more positive emotions, stronger self-identity, greater self-acceptance, and higher optimism. They also experience reduced stress, anxiety, and depression (Waters et al. 2015). A study published in the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology showed that at-risk adolescents who underwent an eight-week meditation based stress reduction program reported reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression and increased self-esteem (Biegel et al. 2009). At Burton High School in San Francisco, youth who participated in daily meditation practice reported similar results experiencing far less stress and depression and greater self-esteem than those who did not participate (Kirp 2014).

In addition, programs that include meditation are teaching children and adolescents how to develop more responsive and intentional decision making abilities. The practice of meditation
teaches youth how to consciously witness the rise and fall of thoughts and emotions in daily life thereby creating a sense of spaciousness allowing them to respond rather than react to daily stress. Lorraine Hobs, the director of youth and family programs at UC San Diego’s School of Medicine and Center for Mindfulness, highlights “when teens can learn to pay attention to their present moment reality, they have a better chance of identifying their reactive patterns and make better choices” thereby enhancing their relationship with themselves, others, and with life.

Classroom teachers are also discovering that meditation practice is creating more positive learning environments where children are attentive and ready to learn (Suttie 2007). Meditation is a valuable tool for increasing working memory, attention, creativity and concentration (Warner 2005). Meditation also offers students a method for reducing test related stress and anxiety during a time when students are feeling an increased pressure to perform (Kuyken 2013). Further, students who practice meditation report less anger and aggression and teachers recognize that as students are given an opportunity to drop into their inner experience, their expression of empathy and kindness for others in the classroom increases.

School administrators are enthusiastic about the transformation that meditation can bring to private and public schools in neighborhoods across socio-economic and cultural lines. Urban elementary low-income third grade students who received eight weeks of meditation and breathing exercises showed decreased signs and symptoms of attention deficit disorder, better classroom attendance, and improved classroom behavior (Klatt 2013). As reported in the San Francisco Gate, when Vistacion Valley Middle School implemented a meditation program in 2007 they discovered impressive results. Despite high rates of crime and violence at the time of implementation, Vistacion Valley middle school suspension rates have dropped dramatically, daily attendance has improved greatly, grade point averages have increased, and these middle school students report the highest level of happiness in the San Francisco area (Kirp 2014).

Meditation programs in elementary, middle, and high school curriculums have the potential to plant the seeds for schooling success and cultivate qualities that will have a positive effect on the lives of children and adolescents. By addressing the whole child, meditation programs are opening the door to greater learning opportunities for children in our schools today.