



Using Yoga, Mindfulness and Social-Emotional Learning to Promote Student Success

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As an elementary school educator I have seen the pendulum swing on educational policy, practices, and theory for nearly 40 years. In the year 2018 I find we are still missing the mark on addressing the needs of the whole child. We continue to have a test score and standards driven curriculum, expecting all students to fit into the traditional mold and meet the expected academic mark. However, all students are not the same and should not be treated as so. Teaching At-Risk Learners for most of my career I see the traditional educational model fall short of addressing the Social-Emotional needs of most students. Much research has surfaced showing a child's developing brain is changed by repeated traumatic experiences. National Education Association (NEA) Today states that one in every four students has experienced trauma before the age of four and more than two thirds have by the age of 16. Areas of the brain most affected by trauma are retention of memory, regulation of emotion, and the development of language skills (Flannery, 2017). This is often the case with At-Risk Learners. When affected by trauma, these students exhibit states of fight, flight, freeze. The brain is then in an alerted state of survival. How can these students possibly be in an optimal state of learning? Simply stated, they can't! It is important for the needs of the whole child to be addressed so that learning can take hold. Neuroscientists and psychologists are zeroing in on the neuroplasticity of the brain and ways to rewire the brain, and the use of Social-Emotional Learning, yoga, mindfulness and breathing support this rewiring.

Looking at the effects of trauma on the brain, it is obvious a shift needs to occur in the educational setting in order to promote student success. We are beginning to see this shift in some schools across the country but it is not yet mainstream. I made the decision to begin looking more deeply at meeting the needs of the whole child in my own classroom. As a Trauma Informed Yoga Educator I began implementing several strategies in my classroom to support my students. With the use of Social-Emotional Learning and a yoga corner, thinking tent, focus jars, and other breathing and calming exercises in place, I am observing heightened student success and a reduction of escalated behaviors. With the use of these strategies, students are able to identify how they feel and then choose a tool to help regulate their emotions. As students reduce their fight, flight, freeze responses they become calm, happy, and more present to learning. This not only works with At-Risk Learners, but with all students. California Educator cites a study showing participants in Social-Emotional Learning programs had a significant increase in positive social behavior and an 11 percent increase in academic achievement (Posnick-Goodwin, 2016).

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Yoga, mindfulness, and Social-Emotional Learning go beyond being useful in the classroom – students are also educating their parents on breathing and calming strategies. During a parent conference, a parent told me when she came home upset from work, her daughter said, “Mommy, sit down and let me show you how to breathe. It will help you.” The fact that students are internalizing these coping mechanisms and sharing them with family members speaks to the success.

Below I will share an activity that I have found useful in my classroom, with hopes it can support others. This activity can be used in a school or home setting.

There’s a Monster in My Body!

Goals:

1. To support students in identifying their emotions
2. To provide students with a safe, non-threatening activity to release emotions
3. To support students with self-regulation
4. To support neuroplasticity and rewiring of the brain to increase learning

How to use:

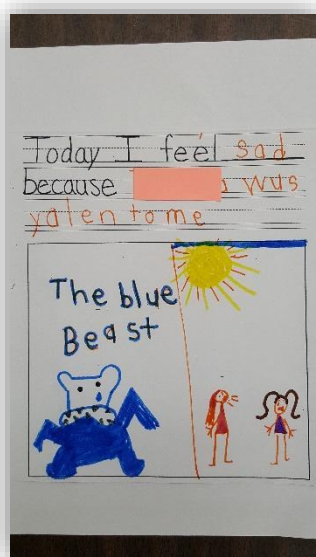
1. Discuss how it might feel to have an angry monster in our body when we become upset. It may be helpful to read and discuss a children’s storybook about anger. There are a few listed below.
2. When upset, have the student identify any emotions he/she is feeling.
3. Remind the student about the angry monster inside. Tell the student we can use our breath to blow the monster out of us and it can help us feel much better.
4. Place a feather or pompom in front of the child on one end of a yoga mat or table. Have the student use deep inhales through the nose and exhale deeply through the mouth, blowing the feather away from him/her.



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5. Ask the student to “check in” on how he feels inside now. Note any behavior changes. If needed the exercise can be repeated.
6. You may also want to have the student write and draw about the experience. Use your judgment.
7. If writing or drawing, provide the student with paper, markers, colored pencils, crayons.
8. Ask the student to draw what the monster looked like. Encourage details! What did the monster’s face look like? Can you draw his teeth, eyes, and mouth? How many arms and legs did he have? What color was he? The more details the better!



9. Then have the student write about how it felt with the monster inside. What did the monster want to say? If you made a speech bubble for the monster, what would you write in it? What kind of sounds did the monster make? What did the monster want to do?
10. Last have the student identify and write or draw about how he feels now. Tell the student that at times we may get upset and it is okay to be upset but sometimes we need tools to help us. Reassure the student that the feather/pompom and the monster are always there as tools to support him/her when he/she becomes upset.

Supportive storybooks for children:

1. *The Red Beast*, K.I. Al-Ghani
2. *Goldie Is Mad*, Margie Palatini
3. *If You're Angry and You Know IT!* Cecily Kaiser
4. *When I Feel Angry*, Cornelia Maude Spelman
5. *Hands Are Not for Hitting*, Martine Agassi

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About the Author

Jennifer Backe is an Elementary Educator in the Simi Valley Unified School District. Jennifer is also a Yoga Educator and holds multiple Yoga Certifications, including Adult, Children, Teens, Autism Spectrum, and Trauma Informed Training for Youth. She is a member of Educators Doing Justice. Jennifer holds a strong belief that supporting the needs of the whole child leads to improved student success, and therefore incorporates Social-Emotional Learning, Yoga, Mindfulness and Breathing Strategies in her classroom. She also volunteers her time offering yoga to staff members.

References

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Posnick-Goodwin, S. (2016). Managing Our Inner Selves, Kids Learn Compassion, Self-Control With Social-Emotional Learning. *California Educator*, 21(4). <https://www.cta.org/en/Professional-Development/Publications/2016/11/November-December-2016-Educator-Magazine.aspx>