

I. Introduction

Welcome to the *Peace of Mind Core Curriculum for Middle School*. In this curriculum, we offer the practice of mindfulness not only as a means to help students calm down, but also as a skill to help them become kind and courageous peacemakers and agents of positive change.

I began teaching conflict resolution at my school in 2003. I quickly realized that my students were not able to use the skills we practiced in class when it mattered. Most of them just didn't know how to calm down enough in order to put their conflict resolution tools to work. When I began to incorporate mindfulness practices and basic neuroscience into my classes, everything changed. I was able to teach about conflict resolution and social emotional learning in a way that was deeper and more effective. This work has been transformative for my students and our school, and led us to write *The Peace of Mind Curriculum Series* to share what we know works.

Many people think that practicing mindfulness means clearing your mind. But it's actually quite the opposite: it's more about *metacognition* or "thinking about thinking."

Through mindfulness practice we notice how our mind is always flitting around finding new things to think about, almost as if there is a remote control in our brain that changes our channels randomly. We can consciously choose a channel, but then our mind might change the channel, and we might not even notice it. Sound familiar?

Mindfulness helps us to get better at noticing what is happening in our minds, and get more intentional about what we want to be thinking about. Having the ability to notice what your mind is doing and make a choice about what you want to do is liberating and powerful.

As we write this curriculum, our country is in the midst of two pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism. As we live in quarantine for months on end, people have also taken to the streets in huge demonstrations to protest the killing of George Floyd and many other Black people. We believe that our country and our world are at a crossroads and that mindfulness can be a powerful tool to help us find our way.

We can use mindful breathing practices to help us to deal with fear and anxiety. We can use metacognition to help us to notice when we are walking around in a fog of worry and make a different choice. These skills

have helped my students and me tremendously during the COVID-19 pandemic. As you practice these skills throughout the year, they will begin to be there when you and your students need them too.

Mindfulness can also be an important tool to help us deal with structural challenges in our schools and communities, including systemic racism. Metacognition skills help us to investigate our own thoughts in order to uncover, challenge, and face our own implicit bias.

We all have implicit or unconscious bias; it is passed on from our families and through the culture. We are not responsible for having this bias. We didn't choose it. But it is our responsibility to reckon with it. And we can only do that if we know that it's there. This is work we can do ourselves and that we can help our students explore as well.

James Baldwin said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced." Through mindfulness practice we are able to start to see what we are thinking about other people and ourselves and then wonder: Why do I feel this way? Where does this feeling come from? Where did I hear these stories? Is this how I really feel? What can I do about it? These metacognitive skills are some of the most powerful mindfulness tools we can develop.

As much as I believe in the power of mindfulness and social emotional learning, I do have a concern. I sometimes hear mindfulness programs pitched as something that can help children "control" their emotions. Administrators are sometimes convinced to incorporate mindfulness programs like this one to help with kids who are "out of control" or in schools that have serious behavior challenges. I sometimes hear people say that mindfulness skills are especially important for "those kids." This is not what mindfulness is about.

Mindfulness is not a behavior management tool or a punishment. Children have a right to all of their emotions. Mindfulness skills can help all of our children to cope with and heal their emotions and it can also prepare them to channel their anger into righteous action to change the world, if that's what they choose.

As teachers we are all in a position to shape the minds and the hearts of our students. That is an awesome responsibility. And I believe that we owe it to our children to do our own work first. To be sure that we model and teach the skills that they will need to create the world that they deserve. A world where every child knows that they are loved and valued and safe exactly as

they are. A world in which children of color are not heralded for "beating the odds" but a world in which the odds aren't stacked against them.

There is no question that we are going to make mistakes - I have made quite a few and learned from each one. We hope that learning along with your students, especially learning and using the mindfulness practices, will be a powerful way to build connections with each other.

We are all at different places in our work with social justice. Some of you might have picked up this curriculum because you are a long-time social justice educator and want to deepen the scope of your work by bringing in mindfulness. Some of you may be new to this work and will find some of these lessons challenging. Your experience teaching this curriculum will vary based on your own racialized or gender identity and your own experiences with discrimination.

There is plenty of room in the Peace of Mind Curriculum for your ideas, experiences, stories and interests, and the lessons will benefit from everything that you can bring to them. The more you are willing to share your own experiences with your students, the more they will feel safe and comfortable taking the risks that lead to growth.

Please let us know if you have questions about the *Peace of Mind Curriculum* or suggestions for us. We would love to hear from you.

We wish you happiness, health and peace.

Linda Ryden 2020