

chapter 16

Using Mindfulness and Poetry to Build Relationships and Writing Skills

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When I was thirteen, my older brother David had a psychotic break and was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I don't remember ever talking to any teacher or counselor at school about what was going on at home. My family was ashamed of David's mental illness and angry at him for his rambling monologues at the Sunday dinner table. The tension in the room was palpable. I silently prayed for things to return to normal.

I wonder how life might have been different if I'd been able to share the sadness, fear, and confusion I felt with my parents, teachers, classmates, and other caring adults. What if I'd been offered compassion and encouraged to express my conflicting emotions through poetry, storytelling, or some other form of creative expression? I believe it would have "normalized" what was happening and provided me a pathway to the support I needed.

Just like me back in my school days, we teachers only see the tip of the iceberg. There's so much about our students we don't know—where they've come from, their home life, how they rank in the fierce social order of their peers. Before becoming a mindfulness and writing consultant, I taught English Language Development for three years at Helms Middle School in San Pablo, CA, a full-service community school in an impoverished neighborhood, where students are provided with three meals a day, and free medical and counseling services—if they're lucky enough to secure an appointment in the overburdened department.

When a therapist would knock on the door to take a student out of class, it left me wondering what was going on. Because of confidentiality, the therapist couldn't tell me. Still, I had a gut sense that whatever the issues were, they were standing in the way of that student and I developing an authentic relationship, as well as taxing my classroom management skills.

I Simply Needed to Know More

The opportunity presented itself in October. "The Day of the Dead" is an ancient Mesoamerican (Mexico and northern Central American) holiday honoring those who have passed away in a celebratory way including sugar skulls, "pan de muerto," a sweet bread shaped like a skull, monarch butterflies, marigolds, and traditional paper banners. I used the occasion to share another family tragedy.

In his early twenties, my oldest brother Jeff had a motorcycle accident while driving drunk that left him a paraplegic. He spent thirty years in a wheelchair before dying at the age of fifty-six from smoking-related bladder cancer. To lighten the storytelling a bit and create audience participation in my class of newcomers, I used gestures to indicate his drinking, motorcycle riding, smoking, and

wheeling his chair, while the students filled in the missing action words. Allowing myself to be vulnerable with my students by sharing this story gave them permission to tell their own tales of loss.

We'd already begun using mindfulness in our classroom—anchoring our attention to sounds, our bodies, and our breath. Compassion was an integral part of our practice. For example, I appreciated students' efforts to come to school every day and acknowledged that, in truth, sometimes *I* didn't want to come to school either. In challenging classes after lunch, I'd remind them in a calm and empathetic tone of voice—"Just a few more hours." In this way, I normalized the desire many had to go home already.

Training Myself First

Taking part in Mindful Schools' Year-Long Mindful Teacher Certification Program changed the way I thought about mindfulness in education. Mindfulness stopped being a thing to do on Mondays—just because it made sense to start the week with a positive intention, and the alliteration sounded good. The most important thing was not to teach my students mindfulness, but rather to become an embodied, mindful teacher.

Training myself meant developing a moment to moment practice that required pausing, breathing, and when necessary, naming whatever was going on inside me and around me in the room. "Wow! It's really wild in here right now, isn't it?!" I'd remark when the energy in the room seemed to be bubbling over. However, my tone was not accusatory or judgmental. Instead, I simply verbalized what I was noticing and feeling in the moment. By regulating my own nervous system in this way, I could help students regulate their own.

Mindful Literacy Curriculum

The Mindful Literacy curriculum sprung out of my work with English learners, many of whom had multiple "adverse childhood experiences" (ACEs) and needed a lot of support, both with self-regulation and writing. It's designed to help teachers build authentic relationships with their students and help young people build their writing skills as well as deepen their connections with themselves and each other. Each lesson introduces a new mindfulness concept and provides a script for a short, guided awareness practice paired with a poem that reinforces the theme. Listening activities and poem templates support students to appreciate the artistry of the works and create their own poem.

A poem I often share to inspire compassion is "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye. It begins: "Before you know what kindness really is /you must lose things, /feel the future dissolve in a moment /like salt in a weakened broth." It's an evocative image that reminds us of how ephemeral and vulnerable our lives really are. It also helps young people open up: we've all lost someone dear to us, and acknowledging our shared humanity builds safety and trust in the classroom.

The line "Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, /you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing" reminds us that true empathy and compassion are built upon acknowledging our own suffering. At the end of the poem, the speaker shares the insight one gains from this journey, as kindness "raises its head/ . . . to say/ it is I you have been looking for/ and then goes with you everywhere/ like a shadow or a friend."

A shy, soft-spoken student named Karina wrote the poem below, which echoes the transformative power of acknowledging our suffering:

What Kindness Is

Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things. Feel the future dissolving in a moment like sugar in strong coffee. If you lose a family member like me, you will know. One day the people you love and have in your hands will never come back. That is very sad and you start knowing what kindness is.

Writing these lines gave her an opportunity to express the sadness that was in her heart. She “named it to tame it,” which helps develop emotional intelligence and connection with others. Along with writing poems, another option is to have students write a personal narrative reflecting on a significant loss and its meaning.

Toward the end of the school year, students’ poems were collected in an anthology entitled “This Being Human: Poems to Help Us Remember.” One student commented on the process, saying, “By writing poems, I’ve learned to be calm and patient, especially when I get mad about something dumb.” Another student showed pride in having her writing published: “I feel good because other kids can use it for calming down when they’re angry.”

Reaping the Benefits

To see how creative writing lessons grounded in mindfulness impact students, I invited them to rate their resilience through a self-compassion survey at the start of the school year and again in the spring. Dr. Kristen Neff, pioneering educational researcher, teacher, and author of the book *Self-Compassion*, created this survey to measure how we relate to ourselves when confronted with difficulties, failures, or a sense of our own inadequacies. The survey can be found at self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are.

Two-thirds of students surveyed increased in self-compassion. The program also works at developing their reading and writing skills. At mid-year, forty percent of my students advanced to the next level of ELD (English Language Development), compared to twenty percent the previous year.

“Meet students where they’re at” is a wise adage in education. Having the strength and courage to learn about students’ whole lives is our task as educators, today more than ever. Creating a safe space where students can open up, drop their defenses, and write about experiences of loss or trauma requires that we show our own vulnerability. Reflecting on the impact of traumatic events from our own childhoods and generating compassion for ourselves allows us to bear witness to our students’ trauma instead of getting triggered by it. Then true healing can begin to happen.

Lesson Plan on Loss and Self-Compassion

Here is an excerpt from the lesson on the theme of loss and self-compassion based on the poem “Kindness.” You can find the full lesson plan at mindfulliteracy.com/sample-lesson-plan.

Step 1: Quickwrite (5 min)

Prompt: Write about a time when you lost someone or something dear to you.

Step 2: Guided Practice (5–7 min)

Script excerpt:
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Now, grounding your body, your feet rooted in the earth, your back supported by the chair. (pause) Taking a few deep breaths and letting go of any remaining tension in the body (pause). . . Now calling to mind a moment of sadness or disappointment from this week . . . maybe you felt left out or unseen by somebody or somebody said something unkind to you or maybe it was your own voice of disapproval and blame. . . (pause) Touching in to where you notice the emotion in your body, maybe in your heart center or your belly or throat. Allowing whatever sensation you're experiencing to just be there, knowing that, in time, it will change.

If you feel comfortable, placing your hand on your heart. (pause) And recognizing that you're not alone in feeling this way. Everyone experiences sadness, frustration, anxiety, whatever emotions have come up for you . . . and offering yourself some kind words like you would to a friend who was going through a hard time. "I'm so sorry this is happening right now" or "It's okay to feel sad." Whatever words feel right to you. (pause) Then gently, returning to your breath, taking a deep inhalation and exhalation and opening your eyes when you are ready.

Step 3: Read "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye (2 min)

See above or full lesson plan.

Step 4: Making Connections (5 min)

What words or phrases do you remember?

What images stand out in your mind? Colors? Sounds? Textures? What is this poem saying to you?

"Kindness" Poem Writing Play Sheet

Students fill in the blanks with their own creative responses to the lines of the poem using the suggestions given. I encourage you to try it!

Before you know what kindness really is you must lose things, Feel the future dissolve in a moment
Like _____

(something that dissolves)

...

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside

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You must know _____

(something difficult you've had to endure)

Then it is only kindness that _____

(a realization or insight)

Only kindness that _____

(how kindness comforts you)

DID YOU KNOW?

Mindfulness is about befriending ourselves. To acknowledge our own sorrow is to awaken self-compassion. Dr. Neff explains that by simply placing our hand on our chest, we're able to tap into the mammalian care-giving system, triggering the release of oxytocin. This feel-good hormone increases feelings of safety and trust, calms stress and anxiety, and lowers the harmful effects of elevated cortisol levels.