



The WCPA News

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Reflection: The Fourth “R” of Learning

By Susan M. Fagan, R.N., L.P.C.

Our society often overemphasizes traditional types of achievement, while providing little emphasis to the development of personal awareness. Nowhere is this more evident than in the school system, already burdened with countless expectations. Children must prove mastery of core curriculum by memorization of facts and figures. While reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic are needed skills, this predictable approach to learning focuses children on the “outside” world. Often absent from the thousands of hours spent in the classroom, is “inside” attention. It is not surprising that our technology-driven, goal-oriented society would foster an outward focus in education.

The distinction between living a “mechanical” life versus an “aware” life can be likened to different kinds of hikers. Achievement oriented hikers measure success by how far they climb or how quickly they reach the summit, while more perceptive hikers are rewarded by the dazzling hidden waterfall. Similarly, some students work for academic standing, whereas others derive gratification from the learning itself.

Our society’s frequent failure to provide individuals with the ability to attune to themselves and others may have unintended and serious consequences. When “doing” overrides “being,” emotions are numbed, rigidity replaces openness and we begin to feel empty. In essence, we start to “malfunction.” The rising rates of addictive, social, physical and mental disorders, as well as learning difficulties, suggest something is missing.

To address these growing problems, our Western world has begun to look beyond traditional treatment to Eastern practices such as “mindfulness.” Defined as paying attention in the present moment without judgment, it has been performed in ancient cultures for centuries. When done regularly, mindfulness awakens the senses and integrates the flow of information and energy in mind and body.

Research suggests that mindfulness not only provides a general sense of well-being, but can actually enhance brain development. The observed benefits of mindfulness are impressive, and studies show that it enhances:

- Neuroplasticity (growth in brain circuitry)
- The capacity to regulate and integrate thoughts and emotions
- Compassion and connection with self and others (attunement)
- Tolerance, social awareness and the ability to perceive nonverbal signals from others
- The body’s immune system function and physical healing
- Resilience to stress and pain
- Concentration, learning and long term memory
- Enjoyment, pleasure and appreciation of novelty in everyday life
- Calmness and “living in the moment”

At the heart of mindfulness is the teachable skill termed reflection. Reflection has three main components - self-observation, openness, and awareness of the mind itself. There are important and practical implications to the use of

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Reflective training begins with an attentive teacher who embeds empathy, authenticity and acceptance into the curriculum. Such qualities not only enhance social skills, problem solving abilities and impulse control, but deters bullying and addictive behaviors. Reflection generates a sense of security that helps children cultivate new ideas instead of the fixed thinking patterns that foster rigidity, perfectionism and reactivity.

Educators can engage students through a number of age-appropriate techniques that train the mind to channel sensations, impulses and awareness of “now.” For example, rather than presenting a set of absolute truths, a more conditional format that uses open-ended questions lets students consider their own attitudes and perceptions. Replacing *is* with terms such as *may*, *might be*, and *sometimes*, evokes curiosity and leaves students in a healthy state of uncertainty. Certainly, there are subjects that are more concrete. Yet often, there is more than one “right” answer.

Even preschool and elementary children can begin reflective thinking. They can play games that explore textures, listen to others play instruments or tell stories, discuss differences without judgment, and be grouped next to each other without touching. Teaching children how to think, and praising them when they recognize their own mistakes, supports awareness of the mind itself.

Children and adults can begin reflective training with simple exercises that awaken the senses. Examples include: focusing on the flow of air in the nose for three to five minutes, noting each sensation in the foot while walking slowly and eating an apple with keen awareness of color, taste and texture. Yoga, tai chi, dance, meditation and guided imagery are other options. Mindfulness and reflection can be incorporated into existing programs such as art, music, writing and sports.

The growing support for mindfulness among Western scientists is encouraging, but we as a society are still catching up to what some have long known to be true: mindfulness offers a more conscious, complete, connected, compassionate and calm way of being in the world. Accomplishments are of little significance if we lose awareness of ourselves and others. School personnel are in a unique position to introduce reflective skills as the fourth “R” in education. This is a way to enhance not only learning, but literally every aspect of life.

An excellent newly published book that both informs and guides reflective learning practices is The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D.

Parents’ Educational Lunch Meetings Offered

Today, schools often experience low attendance at evening parent meetings that are not made mandatory. Everyone’s lives are so busy, and our students’ parents are no exception. As are our own, their evenings are often consumed with work, children’s activities, sports, and meetings. Evening “down time” can become precious, a treasure to be guarded. As an alternative, WCPA can provide your school with lunchtime parental education meetings – where lunch, brief education about a topic relevant to parenting today, and discussion is combined. If you are interested in providing such educational opportunities for your school’s parents next school year, contact Amy Maus at the WCPA office, (314) 275-8599. We can choose the topics and schedule that best suit your school’s needs and preferences.

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

Drug Testing 101: What School Professionals Should Know

By Michael E. Mahon, M.A., L.P.C.

There are many misconceptions about clinical drug testing today. People often have questions like, “For what drugs can these tests screen?” “How far back in time can a drug test accurately measure?” and “Is drug testing reliable?” (The answer to that question is a resounding yes!) It will be helpful to answer these three questions in order to correct misunderstandings about drug testing.

Testing comes in many forms. For example, blood, hair, urine, saliva, breath and nail filings can all be tested for indications of drug use. The two most common forms of testing with which school personnel might come into contact are hair testing and urine testing. Both of these forms of testing have advantages and drawbacks. The best way to understand the comparison is to look at how these two procedures match up in response to the common questions, above.

Both of these methods of testing screen for the same drugs. These include: marijuana, amphetamines, ecstasy, acid, heroin, cocaine, PCP and methamphetamine. The drugs used to treat ADHD, such as Ritalin and Adderal, fall under the class of amphetamines and are tested for in both hair and urine testing. One difference is that alcohol can be tested for in a urine test but cannot be tested for using hair.

Hair and urine testing are very different, however, in relation to how far back in time they accurately test. Urine testing will only report reliable results for alcohol for about twenty-four hours after use. For cocaine, amphetamines and ecstasy, urine will report reliable results for about seventy-two hours. For other drugs, urine will report reliable results for about two weeks. In contrast, hair testing will report reliable results for all the drugs it tests for a full ninety days.

To answer the question about reliability, it is important to understand how drug tests are commonly used. The most common use of drug testing is in employee drug screening. Because testing is so commonly used in the workplace, it is important to never have a false positive report, as this might lead to litigation. In response to this, drug tests are designed so that false positive reports do not occur. The way this is done is that the drug levels that signal a positive result are set high enough so that most simple errors cannot affect the result. This means that an individual may be able to use a small amount of a drug and not test positive on a drug test. When this happens, the report is not unreliable because a certain tolerance is deliberately engineered into the test.

For many schools, the most important questions are, “Should we use drug testing?” and/or “When should we use drug testing?” The fact is that drug testing is being used more and more in our society. If a school is going to use testing, it is important to first decide what the school wants testing to do. Does the school want to test all students to help eradicate drug use from the school? Does the school want to use it as a way to encourage at-risk students to get help? Whatever the reason, a school that is going to implement the use of such tests should have strong and consistent policies about testing – who will be tested, under what circumstances, and what will happen to those students testing positive. Also, these tests should always be performed and evaluated by trained professionals, not administered by school personnel. These tests report a great deal of clinical data when interpreted correctly.

Finally, it is important for schools to decide what to do if a positive drug test is reported. A skilled professional, with a specialization in substance abuse, should provide a substance abuse evaluation for such students. This is true even in the early stages of drug experimentation. This type of professional evaluation is the most effective way to determine what action school personnel should take in these circumstances.

Drug testing is a very effective tool in the fight against drug use. However, it is only one tool; one step in the right direction. Testing students alone will not correct the problem of substance abuse. Students need additional tools and resources -- in the form of clear expectations, communication, responses and, when necessary, treatment -- from their parents, schools and communities.

Michael Mahon is the Substance Abuse Services Director for WCPA. If you have any questions or concerns about drug testing or about assessment, treatment or referral for substance abuse services, you may reach him at the WCPA office.

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