

Building a Contemplative Classroom for Students with Anxiety

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Abstract

This thesis addresses student anxiety in school. Many students feel a deep and chronic sense of anxiety, and this thesis thematizes this topic around the author's experience as a primary school teacher. The author undertakes autobiographical reflections on her teaching experience and observations about students she teaches, studies the literature on student anxiety, and finally brings all of these into the conceptual framework of contemplative inquiry. The contemplative inquiry framework provides a lens through which to interpret and understand students who are anxious, and moreover, it provides ways of working with anxiety. The thesis presents the understanding that, for students to feel comfortable and safe in the classroom atmosphere, it is vital for educators to help create a classroom that students may feel is positive. The thesis goes into detail on inner work, mindfulness, and living curriculum. The author's first-person experience of studying and learning in her Master of Education program, as well as autobiographical writing that capture the author's childhood memories that pertain to the thesis topic, are presented in this thesis.

Keywords: anxiety; school children; mindfulness; inner work

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my family, who has been my support and my motivation.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

Working with a Community, Not Just a Child

A teaching career is one I have visualized for myself since I was quite young. I believed I had a personality that encompassed the traits of an educator. I did not realize what a learning curve I would have when I began my teaching career. This learning curve had nothing to do with the actuality of teaching and/or the curriculum, but rather with the students I would connect with each year, along with my personal growth as a human being.

I currently teach in an elementary school in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. I teach a Grade one/two combined class. Previously, I taught learning support, kindergarten, and Grade four. Currently, most of my students are from a South Asian background, most of them speaking Punjabi or Hindi as their first language. Most of them are first-generation Canadians whose parents were born in India and moved here just a few years ago.

Teaching in a community in which the majority of my students do not speak English as their first language entails a different perspective from me as an educator. Since I am also a first-generation Canadian whose parents came from India, as well as the fact that Punjabi is my first language, I am able to understand and build a connection with my students. I understand their cultural backgrounds and how they must be feel in the school system, because when I was their age, I went through similar circumstances.

I see that for them not only is the language a barrier at school, but the difference in cultures can be a barrier as well. The students have difficulty balancing the Canadian and Indian cultures in their lives, especially considering that sometimes what is considered the norm in one culture is not in the other.

The community not only plays a significant role in the students' lives but also impacts my teaching style and the community I build within the classroom. On a daily basis, the students get picked up and dropped off at school by their grandparents, who speak no English. The parents work long hours and some also work multiple jobs, making it difficult for them to play a role in their children's school lives of their children. The grandparents take over this role but are limited due to their inability to speak or understand English. Because I can communicate with them in Punjabi and Hindi, I am able to connect with these grandparents and allow them to communicate with me freely. This creates a level of comfort between us and also with my students. Many students who may not know a word or phrase in English are then more comfortable coming to me and asking me in their first language what they cannot understand.

What I notice when teaching students from a South Asian community, is that they are anxious when they begin school because there is so much that is new to them. When the students come into kindergarten, many of them have not been around unfamiliar children and new adults, so kindergarten comes as quite a shock. The majority have not been anywhere without their grandparents or parents, and not having these adults around creates some anxiety. In addition, school is a brand new environment with not just unfamiliar individuals but also an unfamiliar space. School is therefore out of the comfort zone of many students, most of whom have never been in an environment away from family members.

Working in this community, I have come across many students who suffer from anxiety due to experiences they have before they enter school and/or when they are at school. I will provide examples of students I have worked with later, but for now, I wish to address the reasons for this inquiry. My research focus is not only on the children but also on myself as an educator who is learning and growing alongside my students who are experiencing anxiety. As a learner, I hope to better understand how anxiety manifests itself and how it impacts children specifically in the context of learning environments, such as school. Why do children feel anxious? How do they display their anxiety and ask for help? I wish to understand how anxiety impacts the children with whom I work. What is the primary source of the anxiety; the home or school environment, or both? What can I, as their teacher, do to help alleviate the anxiety my students display?

Through my parallel processes of working in a school and being a student in the Master of Education in Contemplative Inquiry program at Simon Fraser University, I was concurrently in the roles of student and educator. Coming back to post-secondary education only after two years of graduating from my bachelor's degree, it was not all new to me, but it certainly was a new beginning. More than a degree, this was a life-changing experience for me. Being an educator and a student, I felt I brought both aspects into my journey. As a teacher, I began to be mindful of the students' experiences from their points of view, and as an educator, I began to be more mindful of my own teaching practices in creating a safe and comfortable environment for my students. Using both roles, I hoped to better understand this concept of anxiety and how it impacts the students I teach as well as how I can learn to build a classroom environment that is beneficial and safe to my students and myself.

The Real-Life Stories

In order to better understand this concept of anxiety, I began by observing the students with whom I worked. Gaining perspective in detail on these real-life stories allows me to reflect on my initial views of the children and the process of development which occurred in them. Observing these children helps me reflect on their learning journey as well as my own. I will be sharing some narratives from my students, whom central to my research. My research stems from my own observations and reflections in my classroom, so the students' personal information, including their names and genders, has been changed to ensure their privacy.

During the summer children are not at school, and they become comfortable once again in their non-school lives. When they begin school again in September, school may come as a shock to them. On the first day we had seated all the Grade one students together in one classroom. We had about 70 children and 45 adults in the room, rather than 22 children and 1–2 adults usually. This was overwhelming in itself for some children. Although there were some familiar faces, many students had not seen each other during the summer or had been in different classes in the previous year.

One particular student I had this year, Samir, entered the classroom the first day looking very overwhelmed and teary-eyed, holding his mother's hand. His mother told him to take a seat with the rest of the children. She got him to remain seated, but he was crying as he sat down and continued to call to her. He seemed nervous and would not even look at any other students around him or the teachers. He just continued to look towards his mother and called to her to ensure she would not leave.

While we spoke to the parents, all the children were calm, presumably because they knew their parents were still there. Some students did not even come sit on the

carpet, but remained close to their parents, holding their hands. When we were finished talking to the parents, they were to leave and we were going to keep the children for about another half hour. Many children stayed in their spots on the carpet but looked back nervously and waved at their parents. Samir began to cry once again. I went and sat next to him, and began to try to comfort him. While I was still talking, his mother had made it to the door, and he was still looking at her. She then spoke from the door and said to him in Punjabi that if he does not stop crying, she will not come back to pick him up. That made things worse, and Samir began to cry even more.

I then knew I needed to distract him. I asked him if he wanted to come see my classroom and he said yes so I held his hand and we walked to my room. I showed him around my room. He seemed happy and asked me questions about various objects. He also stopped crying and seemed calmer. I told him that his mother would come back to get him very soon and that she was just outside waiting for him. We then went back to get some more students, and I asked him if he wanted to come back to my room. He said yes, remained with me. We did some activities in the class with all the students together, and Samir seemed happy for the remainder of the time that he was with me. When it was time for the children to leave, Samir could not believe that it was already time to go home. He came up to me and said, "Miss Chadha, I like Grade one. I won't cry tomorrow." Then he gave me the biggest smile and a high five as he was leaving. Samir remained in my class for the rest of the year, as well as the following year. He loves coming to school now and has become very comfortable with his classmates and me. He has actually taken on a leadership role in the classroom now as well.

Another student I had, Adam, displayed anxiety as well. Adam came to my class in Grade one already having a history of breakdowns every time his mother brought him to school. According to his mother, before preschool, Adam was very excited to go to

school because he had an elder brother who he had seen go to school for years. On the first day of preschool, however, he was reprimanded for misbehaving, so he began to cry for his mother. The teacher contacted the mother, and she came to school and took a seat outside the classroom. She told the mother to do this every day to prevent Adam from crying. It then became a habit for Adam to stay at school only when his mother would stay as well.

When he came into my class, he cried profusely the very first day. His mother stayed at school and took him home at lunch. He needed to have his mother sitting in the classroom right next to him all day. This lasted a couple of days, and then his mother and I, along with the school psychologist, decided it would be necessary to deal with his anxiety gradually. We began to try various strategies.

At first, his mother began to sit right outside the classroom. We made sure to have his mother be with him when he began his day: she would come in with him, help him hang up his backpack and jacket, seat him on the carpet and then sit with him for a few minutes. Once he seemed to have settled in and was calm, she would tell him she was going to get a chair and sit outside in the hallway. That would make him anxious at first and I could see him get teary-eyed, but we would explain that she was right outside. He would make her put her feet by the door so that he could see her feet, or at least part of her chair. Then gradually he became comfortable with her sitting in the hallway, but he would at random times go and say hi to her and then come back on his own.

Although Adam would be able to remain at school all day because his mother was right outside, it became difficult for her to stay all day. We offered Adam the opportunity to carry a photo of his mother as a symbol of something comfortable when she was not present, but he refused. Gradually, I began to send his mother home during

lunch. He would get upset, but as time passed, he gradually adapted to this change. Then one day his mother left for a few hours. He cried but he sat with me, and I kept him entertained, so he gradually calmed down. Mom made sure to come and pick him up herself, so he knew that she was going to be there at the end of the day.

After a couple of weeks, the next step we took was for his mother to come in the morning and help him with his morning routine, and then leave. The first day she did that, he tried running after her. He cried for about 30 minutes but then was calm the rest of the day, and actually said he liked school. He did ask me a few times when it would be time to go home, and I set a timer as a visual reminder. He was able to look at the timer at any point and see how much time was left until he would see his mother again. I also wrote his mom's phone number on a sticky note and showed him where I placed it on my desk. I told him I would call his mother at any point if he wanted to speak to her. He would look at the sticky note sometimes but never asked me to call her. Then gradually his mother began to just drop him at the door.

Some days when his mother worked, other family members would drop him off in the mornings and he would cry daily, but only for about 5–10 minutes. I would help him with his morning routines slowly he would become happier. At some point, he would begin laughing, and then he would be alright for the rest of the day. Some days were worse than others where he would cry for a bit longer or come in from lunch crying, but he would feel better shortly afterwards. Slowly but surely, he became more and more comfortable with being at school and being with his friends, so I saw his anxiety decrease tremendously. He told me one day that he loved school and I was the best teacher too.

Samir and Adam are only two examples of many students who come to school on the first day and are extremely anxious, and this anxiety continues for some time. School is a new environment for them, and even those who have been to school previously can feel anxious with a new teacher, a new classroom, and new classroom routines. Although it takes different children different amounts of time, all the students in a classroom build a rapport with the teacher, and when their teacher is away or out of the classroom, they can also become anxious.

Another student in my class who had a difficult time building relationships with others was Ryan. It took Ryan some time to become comfortable with me and even then, there were times when he still would not speak to me. Ryan spoke very little and always looked as if he is afraid or nervous. He did not like being physically close to others and would get overwhelmed quite quickly. He would become distressed when asked any questions, put on the spot, or when he did classwork, even when he knew what to do. When he spoke, he was difficult to understand and spoke very quietly. His first instinct was to cry when he was overwhelmed. He seemed to be anxious constantly and his mood changed sporadically. He rarely laughed or smiled and regularly seemed on edge. Once he was extremely overwhelmed, he would either hide under things, such as his desk or a table, and cry and growl, or stand in the corner of the room away from people.

Another student, Kyle, is designated autistic. He was in my class for the second year. I kept him in my class because in his first year with me, he did not begin to speak until halfway through the year. He was not comfortable with any adult or student, and he spent a lot of time sitting on his own. He would avoid playing with other students and would not even take part in class activities. When working with adults one-on-one, he would turn his back to them the entire time and refused to do some work. After a few

months, he became more comfortable with me and would want to sit with me and hug me all the time. He began to talk in words and was able to sit at his desk during class time instead of running around the classroom.

Sunny, Adam, Ryan, and Kyle have displayed anxiety, but over time I have observed their development as they have become comfortable in the classroom environment. When I was in preschool myself, I had a fear initially, as many students do at the beginning of the school year. I feared that my grandfather would leave me and not return. On the first day of preschool, my grandfather walked me to school holding my hand. He told me I was going to school and there would be a teacher and new students there. Of course, I was nervous to be left alone. When he dropped me off, he explained that he would remain seated on the bench outside my classroom until I was dismissed, and I made sure he sat so that he was visible to me at all times. As the day went on, I would check the bench every so often. One time though, I looked and the bench was empty. So, I turned the doorknob, opened the door, and I ran out of the classroom. I could see the back of my grandfather, as he was walking further and further away from me. I called to him, but he could not hear me. I heard the teacher calling my name, but I needed to go to my grandfather, so I ran to him and finally caught up with him. I told him he was to come back and sit on the bench. He sat on the bench and never left after that. Over time, I became very comfortable at school, in that I was less focused on my grandfather. Every time he was not in my sight, I knew he had gone for a walk and would be back.

Looking back at myself as a child, as well as the children I work with, I can see that many children exhibit anxiety. The insecurities children may have come from various experiences, but as an educator it is my role to enable them to become more comfortable and to understand how to cope with being in the school environment. As a

teacher, I need a variety of strategies to use with my students to see which practices I could implement in the classroom to build a more positive atmosphere for them. I also need to learn how I can structure my classroom so that my students feel more content, and more in control of classroom routines. To begin with, it is important to identify the initial causes of children's anxiety. With children with modest to high levels of anxiety, insecurity plays a substantial role. Most children feel insecure in relation to peers in their school environment. This insecurity provokes anxiety in the classroom or school environment: it can be an academic insecurity with the subjects being taught or a personal insecurity related to other thoughts or fears of being at school due to something which has occurred, or is occurring, in their personal lives.

Social insecurity is what I feel is predominant at the age level I teach. Children at such a young age are unable to grasp positive techniques for building friendships and/or playing harmoniously with one another. Hence, some students are neglected and "favourites" are made. Students who are not a favourite and do not know how to build friendships often feel social anxiety, and they feel uneasiness when surrounded by peers they do not know how to communicate with. It is similar when they feel a lack of connection with their teacher(s). Being in a classroom with usually only one adult means it is crucial for the student to build a good relationship with their teacher in order to feel more secure at school. When the relationship is not established, students are disengaged and insecure being in the classroom.

Another source of insecurity is academics. At the age of six or seven, many students begin to realize what is considered "good" work. They are able to compare their work to their peers and determine how they are doing. For some students, this tends to bring on anxiety because they constantly assume they are not good enough, as they observe that their peers are doing better than them. One student I worked with, Steve,

was constantly aware he was not able to do the work that his peers could do, especially in literacy. When participating in small group activities, he rarely gave his input and would just follow what the others were doing. He was always fearful of being wrong. I noticed that in class, whenever he thought he was wrong about something, he would get anxious and begin to cry very quickly. This lack of confidence transferred over to his numeracy as well. Steve had a better understanding of numeracy, but due to his low confidence, he did not see his strengths and therefore would refrain from participating.

Another student, Robert, was extremely aware of what other students in the classroom were doing. He was low academically so I would modify some work for him, but if he realized that only his work was modified, he would begin to get anxious. Then he refused to do his work and would cry. He printed quite slowly, and one day when the students were writing in their planners at the end of the day, they had very little time because the dismissal bell was going to ring. By the time most of the students were lined up at the door, Robert was still at his desk and was getting anxious because he noticed that he was the only one still writing. I called him to my desk and quickly wrote it for him. That upset him even more, and he stood there and began to point at my writing and cry. He would not tell me what was wrong. I realized his reason for being upset was that I wrote for him. So then I crossed off what I had written and told him he could write it again underneath but that was not good enough. He was only better once I used liquid paper to completely cover my writing so he could write it all with his own printing. This type of anxiety due to classwork, is one I have seen in multiple students when they recognize they are unable to complete the work that other students are able to complete.

Many of my students come from a similar home atmosphere, where they are raised by their grandparents because their parents work. Their grandparents drop them off and pick them up from school. Most of them even have their lunches dropped off by

their grandparents. Although their grandparents may not speak English, the majority of the children speak Punjabi and/or Hindi and can communicate well with their grandparents. Because they are so close to their grandparents, they also have insecurities when coming to school, especially at the beginning of the school year.

Insecurity due to personal experiences seems to impact about 20% of the students I work with. Throughout my teaching career, I have noticed that children from a young age have an awareness of their environment, including their social relationships, and they show sensitive reactions to it, especially if what they experience is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Many parents I speak with do not realize that events in the home can have an impact on their children. Students who observe arguments between family members, perceive various forms of abuse or even experience deaths and illnesses in the family are greatly impacted by these experiences. Some students come from single-parent families, divorced parents, parents who cannot speak English, households with alcohol and drug problems, and many others. Most often, children are unable to distinguish what is right or wrong, or more importantly, they have no adults with whom they can share their difficult and troubling thoughts and feelings. Containing these emotions creates great difficulty because it becomes tough for them to feel safe and positive in their lives, and this can transfer to the various environments they are in, including their school environment.

In the next chapter, I will explore the literature that addresses anxiety in children. I wish to have an in-depth understanding of anxiety in my students: where it stems from, and how to help them overcome it.

Chapter 2.

Anxiety in Children

There are many pieces of literature which examine anxiety in children: what it is, the causes of it, the way children exhibit their anxiety and the tools they use or are given in order to overcome or aid their anxiety. As described in *Anxiety in Children*, anxiety is a universal experience, a complex emotion, and a matter of alertness or watchfulness (Lokare, 1984, p. 73). It is the most prominent component characteristic of various nervous and mental disorders (p. 74). It is an internal state that is entered upon receipt of stimuli associated with punishment or frustrative or novel stimuli (p. 74). Although it can be one of the major sources of human motivation, it can also establish feelings of hopelessness in a potentially hostile world (p. 72).

Anxiety is a natural phenomenon, and the task of education firstly is to provide a safe environment children who are feeling anxious, and to ensure anxieties arising from the very process of education should not be allowed to assume unmanageable proportions (Kurzweil, 1968, pp. 179–180). Anxiety can also be healthy in that it alerts a person to possible challenges and difficulties in matters that are nonspecific, pervasive, and inarticulate (Bigdeli & Bai, 2009, p. 104). Although anxiety can be healthy, it can also become unhealthy, and that is what sometimes manifests in children if they do not build an understanding of it early on. With gradual maturation, the infant learns to expect states of anxiety to occur before the actual onset (Kurzweil, 1968, p. 103). This is because a person who is intimately aware of what is going on in his or her inner environment of mind-heart-body, is the one who has the best chance of preventing an instance of initial stress from becoming distress (Bigdeli & Bai, 2009, p. 105). An inability

to build an awareness of one's anxiety changes a child over time so that they are not content, not interested in new things, not motivated to achieve goals, and not willing to risk social interaction (Lebowitz & Omer, 2013, p. 114). This causes a negative effect on the child's self-image and self-esteem (p. 114).

In clinical terms, anxiety is defined as emotionality, neuroticism or instability, which is one part of a two-dimensional system of personality description, and which claims to have a strong hereditary basis, yet it interlocks with certain social and psychiatric methods of classification (Lokare, 1984, p. 76). It is a complex concept with inter-individual differences accompanied by some psychosomatic changes (p. 77). In the brain when one goes through anxiety, there is stimulation of the motor cortex and the hypothalamus increases activity in the sympathetic nervous system, resulting in an increased heart rate, increased atrioventricular bundle conductivity, and contraction of the heart muscle, which leads to higher blood pressure and muscle blood flow (Bigdeli & Bai, 2009, p. 105).

Although anxiety can appear at any point during one's life, for many, it develops during childhood experiences. There is a strong influence of upbringing, and social and cultural learning, on anxieties in an individual (p. 74). Therefore, a full understanding of a child's anxiety is possible only after understanding the family system of which he or she is a part of (Barker, 1984, p. 89). Some adults I have come across, feel that anxiety in children is not actually that serious. That skepticism would be warranted if anxiety is relieved and does not become chronic and compounded. This is why it is important for caregivers and educators to pay attention to children's anxiety and help and support them to work with anxiety before it becomes too serious.

Where Does the Anxiety Come From?

Culture is organized and has relatively persistent patterns of habits, ideas, attitudes, bodies of knowledge, skills and values in society, which are passed on to the individual, and which the individual imitates, intentionally or unintentionally (Lokare, 1984, p. 73). A child is born into a society made up of people dependent upon one another, which is essential for the survival of the group. It is therefore important for every child to learn the ready-made pattern of behaviour and thinking that exists in society and which is transmitted from generation to generation within a continuing society (p. 73). These patterns are what make up a child's initial culture and impact their upbringing; hence, they also are important to take into consideration when learning about a child who faces anxiety (p. 72). Teaching in the community that I am part of, it is vital for me to first understand the community and families so as to better understand the children I work with. In order to do this, I establish relationships with the families of my students early on in the year. I build an understanding of the history of my students and their families, what their cultural background is and how it builds who they are, as well as how they exhibit themselves.

Anxiety in children and/or adults may stem from a variety of experiences and how they exhibit it is also varied. One individual, John, as described in *How We Heal and Grow* (Smith, 2014), had grown up with alcoholic parents so had learned to fear weaknesses and neediness, and he yearned for someone to take care of him (Smith, pp. 34–35). As a child, he had no one to turn to, so he became dedicated to avoiding his feelings (p. 35). Avoiding pain is one of the most basic drives for all living beings (p. 36). They have little control over their environment and have no choice but to absorb much of the discomfort they encounter. The need to deny or cover up things that cause emotional pain is an important part of survival (p. 36).

Some children tend to feel separation anxiety at school. When children's separation anxiety is not attended to and becomes exacerbated and compounded, we have such a disorder in the making. I have provided examples of schoolchildren's separation anxiety earlier in Chapter 1. Many children naturally fear separation from their home or their caretakers (Lebowitz & Omer, 2013, p. 6). At first, this is quite natural, as coming into an unfamiliar environment and around unfamiliar adults can be quite worrisome. It becomes separation anxiety when the child continues to feel anxious even after the school routine has been established and practised. Children who exhibit separation anxiety tend to worry that negative things could happen to them or their parents during a time of separation (p. 6). Many children may fear that their parents will disappear and never return, and therefore school avoidance is a common outcome of this fear (pp. 6–7). Others may go to school but find it hard to focus on classwork due to persistent worrying (p. 7). This, in turn, could disrupt a child's individual functioning and family functioning (p. 7).

The idea of Separation Anxiety comes out of Attachment Theory, which helps us understand the reasons behind the anxiety. Many psychologists have studied attachment theory, and it is evident how a lack of attachment at a young age precipitates anxious experiences, and therefore, anxiety manifesting behaviours. Mary Ainsworth studied attachment patterns, and she observed that children with avoidant attachment patterns experienced routine rebuffs, specifically when they needed tender care from their caregiver, and later on these children were dependent on their school teachers (Sroufe & Siegel, 2011, pp. 3–4). John Bowlby suggested that not only would these relationships provide the foundation for personality development, but they would also do so by affecting the child's capacity for emotional regulation and the formation of mental representations of self and others (p. 5).

Another type of anxiety is Panic Disorder, in which a person tends to experience panic attacks (Lebowitz & Omer, 2013, p. 7). Physiologically, children may begin to sweat, their heart will be racing, they have shortness of breath, they tremble, and they may experience chest pain or feelings of choking (p. 7). Cognitively, children may have terrifying thoughts about losing control or going crazy, fear of dying, or a feeling like reality has “shifted” or detached from themselves (p. 7). Children may also interpret normal physical discomfort as a sign of something catastrophic. One of my students has a rash on his hands all the time, and the minuscule sign of blood creates anxiety, He becomes so fixated that he needs to put a bandage on it or he cannot continue with his day. A fear or avoidance of situations in which one experiences panic associated with crowded or enclosed places (p. 8). Parents are often at a loss regarding how to respond to a child during a panic attack. When their parent seems lost and confused about how to respond, it confirms to the child that something is terribly wrong (p. 9).

A further type of anxiety is Social Anxiety or Social Phobia. This is the fear a child has of social situations in which they are subject to potential scrutiny by others (Lebowitz & Omer, 2013, p. 11). They feel as if they are constantly being judged by others around them and therefore are afraid of being in social environments, especially unfamiliar ones. In some students, this may cause Selective Mutism, which was the case for my student Kyle whom I referred to earlier. Kyle was unfamiliar with the new classroom, and he was unfamiliar with me as his teacher. He was familiar with the school because he was in the same school when he was in kindergarten. I was a kindergarten teacher at that time as well, so for him it was confusing that I was now teaching him in Grade one. It took him half the year to become comfortable with me, his classmates, and the classroom. He did not speak until February of the school year. Even after that, he only spoke in the classroom or when he played with his classmates outside. When he was around a new

adult or was in other areas of the school, he still would not speak. When he began to speak, he spoke only in single words. It was only a couple months later that he began to speak in sentences, but even then, it was rare. He would only speak when spoken to and would respond using as few words as possible.

Furthermore, some children may have Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), in which they are persistently worrying (Lebowitz & Omer, 2013, p. 16). They may worry about things that are beyond their control. This may include family situations between the adults in the household that the children witness and about which they feel distressed. This type of anxiety results in feelings of tension, restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, or sleep disturbance (p. 15). I have worked with students who feel this due to various family experiences. Some students come from abusive homes, where they are not abused, but they observe abuse between adults, and this worries them. Three students I have worked with over the years worry because police were called to the house during violent incidents. They are now afraid their loved one may be taken away from them.

In some households, divorce is also something that many children worry about and feel may be their fault. They worry that they will lose a parent. Finances, or lack thereof, causes anxiety in children as well, especially when the talk of money arises before them at home. Some parents speak about finances in front of children, so they see how stressed their parents are, and it becomes a worry for the children as well.

As mentioned previously, in a school such as the one I teach in, the majority of the students are first generation Canadians. Their parents immigrated to Canada in the last 5–10 years. These parents do not speak much English and are not really able to be engaged in their child's learning at school. School and home become two separate

areas of a child's life then, with minor or rare overlapping. Teaching in this kind of community, I come across parents who want their children to become westernized but also maintain their cultural identity. What many fail to understand is that the identity of these children is that they are culturally Canadian as well as Indian. The children then become sandwiched between these two cultures and at times this identity confusion brings about anxiety. Children try to fit into the Canadian culture, while at the same time trying to fit into the Indian culture as well. Where I work, there are so many students going through the same mixed cultural identity issues that students feel a sense of relief to see others going through the same thing, and that alleviates the anxiety a bit, but at times it is still there.

When I was growing up, I was in the same position as my students. I was a first generation Canadian, from parents who had immigrated to Canada from Punjab, India, only a year before I was born. My parents were learning to "fit in" to this new culture, and it was difficult for them to lead me as I went through it as well. I remember one morning when we had a prayer at home and my grandmother put a red dot on my forehead after the prayer. I liked the red dot, and I wore it to school. I walked into my class, and the other students looked at me oddly, some confused and some laughing and pointing. I could not understand why. Then one student said, "What's that red thing on your forehead?" He began laughing as he said it. I could feel my face turn bright red and I was embarrassed. I realized that day that I was a part of two different cultures and most of my classmates were not, so they did not understand. From then onwards, I became very cautious as to what was "appropriate" and what was not, because I did not want to be bullied. Sometimes I went against my parents because what they considered normal was something for which I could be made fun of at school. It was not until I got older that

I began to accept both my cultures as my identity, and I understood completely what this sandwich of two cultures meant.

Many of my students experience similar anxiety to what I had as a child. As *Anxiety in Children* describes, this anxiety comes about due to the fact that the individual has difficulty forming and maintaining their own cultural identity, and this struggle with identity creates feelings of insecurity, leading to anxieties and worries which are reflected as feelings of uncertainty and insufficiency (Lokare, 1984, p. 71). Parents have these anxieties and worries as well when they are bringing up their children, giving them rules, norms, and traditions to follow (p. 71). These children's struggle to attain cultural identity gets mixed up with their ethnic identity and becomes entangled in problems of discrimination (pp. 71–72).

Lastly, another type of anxiety I notice in the children I work with is fear for a loved one. Some of the children come from abusive homes. While they may or may not get abused themselves, they see their loved one(s) getting abused. Therefore, children do not only fear being attacked or punished themselves but can also suffer anxiety on behalf of the people they love (Elmhirst, 1984, p. 12). Unfortunately, some have encountered these abusive environments so much that to them it is seemingly normal. I have observed some children at school abuse another student, and when condemned, they are confused as to why they are even in trouble. They are unable to distinguish inappropriate behaviour due to what they have observed outside the school environment. Also, some children face disorganized attachment, which is when abusive parental behaviour places the child in an irresolvable conflict in which they are conflicted between the desire to move toward the caregiver and also flee from the source of fear (Sroufe & Siegel, 2011, p. 7).

Causes of Anxiety

After researching what anxiety is, I gained knowledge as to the causes of anxiety in children. Many of the causes stem from an attachment or connection that children have with their friends and the adults in their lives. Children are entirely dependent on the older people in their lives for their very survival (Smith, 2014, p. 40). Therefore, they fear a loss of connection, especially when they feel they are getting the connection they would like from the adults around them. (p. 44). They crave connection and depend on it, just as adults do (p. 44). Attachment theory details the process of emotional bonding between parents and children, including when such bonding does not take place in attuned ways. For example, anxiety in children is associated with when they experience marked or excessive, and in general ineffective caregiving by the person to whom they are bonded (Barker, 1984, p. 100). This ineffectiveness can come about in a variety of ways. Some children desire more attention and more attachment to adults around them; therefore, their anxiety in the absence of that attachment tends to onset quite quickly. In *Anxiety and Education* (Kurzweil, 1968), attachment, separation, and anxiety are discussed, as is the fact that children who are anxious will seek their parents' protection, but in the parents' absence, they will often be less anxious (p. 124). Children who have experienced ineffective bonding often act less capable in their parents' presence because they are accustomed to using their parents as a proxy for their undeveloped coping mechanisms (p. 124).

As time goes by and children mature, their own abilities will ripen to the point that they are able to handle more and more of the environment independently (p. 125). We are born "programmed" to respond to a threat by seeking the protection of those who not only care about us but are also developed enough to keep us safe. Unfortunately, there are times when parents are not capable of keeping their children safe, and the children

continue to feel insecure. This insecurity is then carried into the classroom. Yet, in reality, many children experience insufficient or ineffective bonding with their caregivers, and this can happen even at schools with teachers. In understanding this, teachers can play an important role in supporting both students and their parents by creating secure environments and being models and practitioners of secure bonding.

I have also seen that, for some children, coming to school is something that brings about anxiety because they are afraid something might happen to their loved one at home while they are at school. Many have grown up around adults and have not left home very much at all, other than to visit family. If they have grandparents who live with them, they have more of an attachment to them as well. One student I worked with, named Johnathan, had parents who worked fulltime, and hence he was raised mainly by his grandmother. His amazing grandmother was a frail, old woman who walked him to and from school and brought his lunch to school during lunchtime. During the time he was in my class, his mother one day told me he was going to India for a few weeks with his whole family. When he came back, his mother told me how anxious he had been in India every time they tried to take him out somewhere without his grandma. The parents would want to go touring around the city and because the grandma was quite frail, they did not want to take her out that much. They would try to ask Johnathan to come with them, but he would always refrain from going and want to stay with his grandmother. Even the odd time that he did go, he would want to come home quickly, so he could be with his grandmother once again. His mother told me that once his grandmother had become quite ill, and it had impacted him. Ever since then, he never lets grandma out of his sight.

Students such as Johnathan feel anxious when something has happened to their loved one and become afraid to leave their loved one in case something happens to

them again, or they lose them. Children tend to show levels of distress that are in sync with the emotional reactions of the caregiver (Smith, 2014, p. 42). As Barker (1984) states, there is something about the way we become attached to people and things that does not allow our losses to heal all at once (p. 45). Children may not only be anxious about injury and loss of a loved one but also may feel anxious when they get injured themselves. With a shaky sense of their bodies and little knowledge of what might happen next, children can be terrified by an injury (p. 42). Even a small injury can be frightening, and since they cannot judge for themselves, children watch their caregiver's emotional reactions to assess the seriousness of the situation (p. 42). Many times, when my students fall or hurt themselves, they look at me right away and can tell from my reaction how serious their injury is, so their anxiety goes up or down based on my reaction.

Injury to others may also be due to a violent environment at home. Children may have traumatic experiences of fear if they witness physical violence at home, violent quarrels between parents, or death of a parent, and they are directly precipitated into a state of anxiety (Kurzweil, 1968, p. 109). Children, like adults, want to avoid pain, but "they have little control over their environment and have no choice but to absorb much of the discomfort they encounter" (Smith, 2014, p. 36).

Another cause of anxiety could be that the children are given responsibilities that are too much for them to handle. I have noticed that usually children who are the eldest in their family take on a large responsibility. They assist their parents and grandparents in many areas of life, thanks their English being better than the adults in their family. However, because of this, children are sometimes also involved in stressful family situations and, even though they may understand the language, they are not yet mature enough to understand the content of the situation. Therefore, taking on the role of a

peacemaker, mediator, or ally/support, or detouring conflict may be too much for the child (Barker, 1984, p. 94. The system functions to infantilize the child, so emotional development and negotiation of appropriate emotional milestones are delayed (p. 95). The pressure brought to bear on the child to shoulder responsibilities is too great for the child's current age and level of emotional development (p. 95). The child is forced into a pattern of prematurely "grown-up" behaviour (p. 95).

Sometimes the school environment itself can cause anxiety in children, especially children who are new to it. School can be a scary place at first, especially when a child is so adapted to their small, home environment. Now being around hundreds of children, new adults, and a huge building, many children feel quite anxious. Many parents are also anxious when their child goes to school, or even at other times of the child's life before that, so initially it could also be via empathy that the mother's fears and anxieties are easily transferred to the baby (Kurzweil, 1968, p. 101). With gradual maturation, children can learn to expect states of anxiety to occur before their actual onset (p. 103). Many children, though, are still building this understanding as they enter the school environment. Some find school intolerable at first, but with proper and adequate support, they will grow the capacity to handle the level of stimuli and stress that are part of the school environment (p. 116). Often, the child has difficulty making a transition from the home to school life because the home seems to contain the warmth and intimacy that only family can provide, whereas in the school environment the child finds him or herself hemmed in at all sides by strict rules of behaviour (pp. 116–117). Children also have an inner conflict when first arriving at school. They wish to go to school and behave like normal children, yet the fulfilment of this desire is blocked by a fear of assuming a more adult role marked by a greater measure of independence and

accompanied by new demands which often require competition with other children, as well as gradual severance from home life (p. 120).

How Children Exhibit Anxiety

Although there may be a variety of causes for anxiety in children, every child exhibits anxiety differently. Anxiety disorders tend to be chronic, but there is an impact of the anxiety on physical and mental health, social functioning, academic achievement, family relationships, and overall quality of life (Lebowitz & Omer, 2013, p. 4). When asked their feelings, “children lack the language to describe what is happening” (Smith, 2014, p. 37). Some children will express their needs, but then they are rebuked or even punished for bothering their parents, who are preoccupied in their own lives (p. 39). This creates a terrible feeling of helplessness and fear (p. 40). In turn, children may show outrage at their loved one in order to get attention, but most just end up getting punished for their outrage (p. 43). Then these children exhibit a lack of connection, either by pretending they do not need the person or clinging to the person and being willing to sacrifice their important personal needs to maintain the connection (p. 44). They internalize hurtful and depriving attitudes towards the self and model the negative attitudes expressed by the person with whom they yearn to stay connected (p. 44).

Children tend to manifest their anxiety in ways that are often similar to adults. They say they suffer, they want to run away or escape somehow, they quake, tremble, weep, wet themselves, or may vomit or go very pale (Elmhirst, 1984, p. 1). People who cannot see that children behaving in one of more of these ways are suffering from fear are going to be in greater difficulty when it comes to the more subtly revealed manifestations of a child’s unconscious anxiety (Elmhirst, 1984, p. 1). There are very few parents who can tolerate having their offspring’s most intense feelings revealed to them

(p. 5). Parents are normally most distressed by their own child's suffering (p. 5). They may find it hard to see the impact of their behaviour on those they love most. A failure to recognize what one cannot bear to perceive is a well-known human defence mechanism (p. 5). Children learn that what they can do is what will or will not earn them love, belonging, and fulfilment in life (Cohen, 2015, p. 155). When a relationship has been unsatisfying for a child, we cannot expect them to display an attitude of trust and security in inter-personal relationships (Kurzweil, 1968, p. 104).

For many children with anxiety, school can create a sense of fear. Some who refuse to go to school turn each morning into an ordeal (Lebowitz & Omer, 2013, p. 269). School becomes a place where children have to face other children, interact with them, and be judged by them (p. 270). Therefore, some children try to avoid coming to school. They have social anxiety and they become worried about the questions that their classmates may ask them when they return to school after a long absence (p. 273). Avoidance is natural response to anxiety and will almost inevitably lead to more anxiety and more avoidance (p. 272). As a child misses more school days, effects on overall wellbeing, self-esteem and general level of functioning accumulate (p. 273). It then becomes a cycle, where children dive deeper and deeper into low self-esteem and it hinders everything they try to do. Although school may create more anxiety for some children, responsibilities towards children are being shifted from home to school now (Kurzweil, 1968, p. 186). Schools have to compensate for the cultural impoverishment of the home and have to foster the habits of reading, correct and articulate speech, and art of communication (p. 186).

Some hindrances children have are beyond their control, such as a learning disability. Throughout my teaching career thus far, I have worked with many children with special needs. At a young age, students do not always have an awareness of being

different than their peers. As they get older, though, they are able to notice if their peers or teachers treat them differently. Other students also begin to notice that the child is not like the others and at first they try to accept, but some do make fun of the child or treat them differently. There is one student I worked with named Alan who had a chronic health designation. Alan was unable to complete simple tasks easily, such as putting on his jacket, writing his name, and kicking a soccer ball. When he was in kindergarten and Grade one, he did not think he was any different and would always try to do what the others would do. He did realize that he would get different classwork than others, but it never impacted him.

As time passed, he began to realize and become frustrated. One day I gave him work that was the same as the others, but he noticed that others around him would finish quite quickly, or they would know all the answers before him. He also noticed that when he played outside, he was not as fast or as strong as the others, and slowly but surely this began to impact his self-esteem. Others in the class noticed he was different too. Some would offer extra help, while others would laugh and make fun of him. I noticed that over time his anxiety began to increase to the point that he stopped trying at school. He would give up quite easily and also began to tell his mother that he did not wish to come to school. Many students like Alan go through similar experiences, even if they do not have a designation. Not being able to fit in socially impacts all children and tends to cause a great deal of anxiety in them. Overall, anxiety is an increasing phenomenon that I notice more and more in the students I teach. Throughout my teaching journey, as well as my journey in the Contemplative Practices in Education program, I have learned more about this connection between anxiety and our education system. In the next chapter, I will turn towards looking at how contemplative approaches may benefit my students.

Chapter 3.

Anxiety and Contemplative Practices

In this chapter, I will review the contemplative approaches to learning and teaching in order to assess its applicability and merits in working with school children who experience anxiety. My focus will now be on how individual teachers can better cope with children with anxiety through contemplative methods or on how children with anxiety can cope better with or overcome their anxiety through learning skills and exercises. In my coursework through the master's program, along with all my learning in the elementary school environment, what I learned is that it is our embodied practice that we share with our students which makes a difference to their learning. When teachers allow their students to practise whatever it is that they are learning in the context of lived curriculum, student learning becomes transformational. As a graduate student of contemplative ways of education, I had first-hand embodied knowledge of this transformational education: I experienced it within myself. It is this context of experience that made me want to fully participate in whatever skills and exercises we were learning (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 71). A lack being a part of the learning myself, would have turned me away or created a misunderstanding of the exercises. Having experienced this myself, I was ready to provide my students with the lived context of the contemplative skills and exercises.

Another important learning for me throughout my journey in the Contemplative Inquiry program is the power of inner work. This was a substantial shift for me from the usual view of *teaching to* students to the contemplative view of teaching as practising with students. From the latter perspective, I came to see that my work with the students

emerged from within. As Avraham Cohen, the author of *Becoming Fully Human Within Educational Environments* (2015) explains, we as educators are effective to the extent that we can help and support our students to gain self-knowledge, which grows from attention to and work with their inner lives. However, for us to be such educators, we ourselves need to gain self-knowledge through inner work. One of the fruits of such inner work and self-knowledge is the ability to be fully present in the moment (Cohen, 2015, p. 26). This idea of being fully present really resonated with me. To me, being fully present means giving full attention to the person(s) in front of you. Especially in my context of working with children suffering from various forms of anxiety, it means offering a safe and relational space to them and inviting them into the space. If I was unable to be fully present, I could not create such a space. In this space, we can truly offer a listening ear to those who need someone to talk to.

Inner work can consist of “reflective practices conducted under the gaze of consciousness, which depends on a developed capacity to self-observe, to witness experience” (Cohen, 2015, p. 29). Inner work is a way of working on and with perceptions, sensations, memories and cognition, all of which constitute a person's experience (p. 29). The inner experience refers to the

living experience in the emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual lives of exceptional educators. Inner work practice is the capacity to attend to and, in some meaningful way, work with these experiences that are in response to inner and outer experiences occurring in their classrooms. [The inner work is the] practice of recognizing the personal and transpersonal roots of the human dimension. (Cohen, Porath, & Bai, 2010, p. 7)

In Western culture, the separation between inner and outer life and the privileging of the outer world over the inner world seems to be accepted and largely unconscious. Emphasis on grades, test scores and intellectual achievement in educational environments with no acknowledgement of the emotional and physical life of students is a prime example (Cohen, 2015, p. 30). This separation has become so embedded in consciousness that few seem to notice their lives have become an unending series of tasks (p. 30). The idea of taking time for reflection, stopping and actually attending to experience as it is unfolding instant by instant and attending to life as it is now is not even deemed worthy of the time it would take to declare the project unworthy (p. 30). The education system and the mainstream culture within which I grew up quietly and perniciously insinuated a separation between inner and outer experience and this has indeed caused me, and multitudes of others, difficulties. Not only do we separate the inner and the outer, but we also privilege the outer over the inner (p. 30). A consequence of this separation of the inner and the outer is a deepening sense of disconnection.

Today, it seems we are disconnected, although we seem to believe the opposite due to all our technologically advanced media and communication devices. As Bai, Scott, and Donald (2009) explain, we treat our (and others') bodies as if they were objects we can push around, punish and reward, neglect, or manipulate to get certain results (p. 320). We perceive the world to be separate from one's self (p. 320). Students are regularly plunged into worry about grades, job future, greed, and anxiety over competition, and other stressors, which all have the effect of taking the self away from itself, preventing this inner experience (p. 325). As hard as we try as educators to treat our students with care, we are still fundamentally treating them as if they were machines in the service of obtaining products, as opposed to validating their intrinsic beingness

and inherent worthiness (p. 332). Therefore, we need to find ways to reflect on relational connection and disconnection in ourselves and on our feelings, beliefs, and perceptions in relationship with others (p. 332).

This inner work can lead to better personal relationships with students (Cohen et al, 2010, p. 8):

If educators are unaware of what is happening inside of them that affects their way of being in the classroom, then they are likely to, at best, create a numbing and dull atmosphere and, at worst increase the scope of the wounds that already exist within classroom community members. On the other side, if educators are aware and growing by way of their own inner work, they will model aliveness and offer a classroom opportunity that is full of attentiveness, excitement and curiosity. (Cohen, 2015, p. 35)

Quoting Richard Moss, Cohen states that presence is equivalent to love. Giving full presence to another is the greatest gift a person can offer: equate presence with full attention (Cohen, 2015, p. 37). Children love full attention, and they need it to thrive and flourish. They are little beings who love to know that what they are saying or doing is given importance. They like to know that they are being respected and loved.

This inner self is difficult to grasp, and throughout my learning journey in the contemplative inquiry program, I learned how strenuous it is to work with the self. We are so caught up in the busyness of our lives that even taking time out for ourselves becomes difficult—not only the lack of time, but also the difficulties in sometimes accepting everything that will arise when we give time to the self. The vulnerability and soft core of being that was wounded a long time ago are being shielded and protected, and it takes time to expose that self even to yourself (Cohen, 2015, p. 49). Involvement

in the process of exploring and understanding my inner life and finding ways to translate this into practice that includes increasing my capacity to be fully present is an ongoing and essential part of my life as an educator (p. 55).

The ability to do this inner work comes from a place of being able to self-reflect. Sometimes a guided reflection is needed, especially when one finds it difficult just to pause and reflect. In this regard, I found Tara Brach's notion of "radical acceptance" to be helpful. "Radical acceptance" illustrates the ability to reconnect with the present moment, however painful or difficult it is (Brach, 2003, p. 71). The practice of radical acceptance is best supported by weaving "the sacred pause into your daily life by pausing for a few moments each hour or as you begin and end activities" (p. 71).

In the Classroom Setting

Self-regulation takes place when one brings one's nervous system to a state of equilibrium after an event has disrupted its functioning (Kurzweil, 1968, p. 23). It is the ability to respond to the changes in a way that can stabilize one's system and restore balance in oneself (p. 24). More specifically, emotional regulation speaks to regulation of our emotional life that can become disregulated as when something happens to disturb our inner emotional state of being (p. 25), and we become overwhelmed and go into anger, panic, and the like, or "underwhelmed," as when we feel abandoned, rejected, and depressed. Students and teachers can learn how to work with emotions and should be given encouragement and the means to become more self-aware (Bigdeli & Bai, 2009, pp. 112–113). Through such contemplative practices as rhythmic breathing, listening to soothing music, yoga or dance movements, and being listened to with full attention by another person, we can return to feeling regulated and positive again:

“Individuals can influence which emotions they have, when they have them and how they experience and express those emotions” (p. 25).

Although self regulation comes from within, some children will come to rely too exclusively on their ability to mobilize others to help them achieve regulation (Kurzweil, 1968, p. 26). Children always prefer running the risk of losing out on a good thing rather than taking a chance and exposing themselves to a potentially bad one (p. 31). In the classroom, children look to this external regulation in order to feel regulated and positive again. I do not give preferences to giving objects as rewards, but I do find that giving students a job, allowing them extra time to do something they enjoy, or even just verbal positive reinforcement, can be very beneficial.

Parker Palmer stated that “We teach who we are.” Who we are, that is, the quality of our presence, so deeply affects our students that it is no exaggeration to say that they learn not so much by what we tell them, but actually by how and who we are as educators (Cohen et al., 2010, p. 8). In order to become a teacher who can be present and open with her students, I learned that it was important for me to develop myself first through the inner work practices that I referred to previously. The development of the whole person is basic to the approach and includes the emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual dimensions (Brach, 2003, p. 63). Support for the emergence of a person’s true nature is an intrinsic part of the educational experience (p. 63). This emergence will allow me as an educator to not only build closer relationships with my students, but also to gain a more thorough educational experience. An “exceptional educator takes his or her classroom experience as personal and professional feedback that is part of a personal growth process aimed towards personal development” (Cohen et al., 2010, pp. 3–4). Exceptional teachers can “facilitate meaningful connections between students on personal and curriculum learning levels. The connections between students on a

personal level are crucial to a sense of belonging to the classroom community and being an integral part of its ongoing development” (pp. 8–9).

The classroom space can be made emotionally safe for the children to bring their troubled and troubling thoughts and feelings. A teacher may invite feelings that the child may have but is shy or scared to share. Through such sharing in a safe space, children can learn to modify the patterns of their mental life that trigger anxiety. This is how healing begins to take place. But to modify one’s patterns, one will first have to uncover them. One way in which those patterns that negatively affect people—in our case, students that we work with—can be uncovered is by building together a narrative framework: storytelling is closely tied to our deepest motivational systems (Smith, 2016). By helping our students to change negatively affecting stories they tell themselves, they may make changes to their motivational system.

This concept of storytelling proves to be a strong motivator, especially in primary classrooms. Allowing for students to share their stories in the classroom space, allows not only a safe place for students to be open, but also allows peer relationships and teacher-student relationships to be built. Story telling gives students the opportunities to connect with one another and hearing a peer going through similar life experiences, also becomes a motivator.

As an educator, I do find that what can come in the way of our helping our students build supportive relationships and having educational experience is the education system itself. Through discussions with teachers, I have seen how the need to teach to the curriculum is so potent in the education system. The curriculum is important of course but many teachers find that after teaching the academics, room for social/emotional learning decreases. Although recently I have noticed that there has

been a shift in the teaching styles of many teachers, I still find the expectation of curriculum absorption and production is quite high in comparison to attending to human experiences. As the curriculum is shifting though, it is visible that the awareness of community and cultures is beginning to become a stronger part of some subject areas.

When speaking with my students' parents, I find that many of them are focused on the academic capabilities of their children, and the emotional or personal growth is not considered as important. Of course, it is relevant for children to learn and gain knowledge about all subject areas taught in our school curriculum, but at the same time, this personal development and building of the self and relationships is just as important, if not more. Surely, we have to question the pressure we put on children to perform cognitive tasks for which they may not be developmentally prepared or have interest (p. 153). We need to be deeply concerned about the time taken away from learning that is crucial to their development as vibrant human beings, who are alive with the wonder and joy of experiencing the world through their senses and emotions, and who are becoming compassionate human beings capable of relating to others with love and care (p. 153). Education that centralizes human beings and their experience in the classroom as a first priority, and that has curriculum learning as a secondary priority may be beneficial (p. 155). As Bai et al. (2009) explain, the "student's intersubjective experience, a gold mine of opportunity for learning, securely anchored in meaning, is passed over in the race to teach curriculum content" (p. 323). Education therefore may not allow or help people to fully inhabit their bodies, senses and feelings, but in fact prevents them from such inhabitation (p. 323).

As a teacher, I see the idea of cultivating compassion, developing relationships, and emotional learning as being accepted more and more in school, but the space and time for their practice are still difficult to find. As Cohen in *Becoming Fully Human* (2015)

explains, there are four reasons for failure of humanistic education: teachers are not prepared for this kind of teaching; the movement to get back to the basics has discouraged the humanizing of the classroom; in some places, poor judgment has been used by school personnel in selecting materials for values clarification classes; and those who object to any consideration of values or the personal or affective emotional development of children in the schools are often affiliated with conservative religious groups (Cohen, 2015, p. 157).

Humanistic educators address students directly as human beings, create conditions where personal transformation is possible, work with the classroom as a community in development, and address curriculum content as part of a transformative learning process (Cohen, 2015, p. 158). This would allow students to learn from a position of agency and offer a way of thinking beyond the seeming naturalness or inevitability of the current state of things, challenging assumptions validated by “common sense” soaring beyond the immediate confines of one’s experiences, as well as entering into a critical dialogue with history and imagining a future that would not merely reproduce the present (p. 155). Now, knowledge is not simply received by students but actively transformed, open to be challenged, and related to the self as an essential step towards agency, self-representation, and learning how to govern rather than simply be governed (p. 156).

An evolving education system aids in decreasing anxiety in that it provides children with the space where their experiences and opinions matter and they are able to take charge of their own learning. Personal experience becomes a valuable resource that gives students the opportunity to relate their own narratives, social relations, and histories to what is being taught (Cohen, 2015, p. 157). It also signifies a resource to help students locate themselves in the concrete conditions of their daily lives while

furthering their understanding of the limits often imposed by such conditions (p. 157). Each classroom will be affected by the different experiences students bring to the class, the resources made available for classroom use, the relations of governance bearing down on teacher-student relations, the authority exercised by administrations regarding the boundaries of teacher autonomy, and the theoretical and political discourses used by teachers to read and frame their responses to the diverse, historical, economic, and cultural forces informing classroom dialogue (p. 162).

Another source of inspiration for me, in addition to the contemplative program I was doing and exposure to Cohen's inner work was Karen Meyer's idea of understanding place as inquiry. A fertile curriculum emerges within the shared investigations of the narratives, histories, and realities into which we were born and now live and work (Meyer, 2010, p. 86). Giving attention to place as inquiry heightens our senses of both physical and social textures of our surrounding environment, natural and artificial (p. 86). Self and place are inextricably connected, as are identity and home (p. 86).

Living inquiry provides a space for young students to openly explore and begin to understand their own relationship with the world and, in doing so, conceivably push back the notion that they are always already determined and fated by it. (Meyer, 2010, p. 88)

Living inquiry is an inquiry into how to live with the quality of awareness that sees newness, truth, and beauty in daily life (Meyer, 2010, p. 96).

Creating a classroom atmosphere like the above would enable students to take charge of their learning. In this atmosphere, teachers can then adopt gentler attitudes, and increase their awareness so as to be engaged with their students. Such a classroom

has no place for ignoring or shaming, ridicule and sarcasm, all of which evoke anxiety in the child. As *Anxiety and Education* (Kurzweil, 1968) explains, education should foster courage: the courage to face difficulties and endeavour to overcome them (p. 180). In order to foster confidence, the educator can carefully adjust educational demands to individual capabilities, and if necessary, temporarily lower required standards to eliminate the sharp and injurious sting of failure (p. 180). This “inclusion” allows for a space where the teacher is fully aware of the effects of their teaching on their student(s) and has a good understanding of the students’ backgrounds and character (p. 181).

Mindfulness

In the classroom, there are also some practices teachers can use with their students to help alleviate the anxiety a child may be having. One of these is mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is a practice that teaches us to be present by simply paying attention to our bodies, breath, actions, speech, and every aspect of our lives (Ergas, 2014, p. 59). As Ergas states, mindfulness becomes a hub that unifies science, healing, education, and religiosity, depending on its application and social scaffolding (p. 68). In the classroom, these practices can look like yoga, mindful walks, mindful meditation, mindful sketching, and other grounding activities (Siegel, 2009, p. 147).

Mindfulness practice has been shown to be beneficial for anxiety relief. As Bigdeli and Bai (2009) explain, our mind’s engagement with the past and preoccupation with the future, which is what anxiety is essentially about, leads to a lack of awareness of the here-and-now experience and blocks the flow of energy (p. 111). Mindfulness or meditation, focusing on the here and now, can release this blocked energy (p. 111). Hence, mindfulness practice can be helpful for one to get to know their experience of

anxiety in the most intimate and substantial way, which is what is required for one to change from within one's experience of anxiety (p. 111).

Mindfulness enables us to sense the reality that awareness is not a unitary process but may have distinct layers (Siegel, 2009, p. 154). As Purser and Loy (2013, n.p.) explain, "mindfulness is a *distinct quality of attention* that is dependent upon and influenced by many other factors: the nature of our thoughts, speech and actions; our way of making a living; and our efforts to avoid unwholesome and unskillful behaviors, while developing those that are conducive to wise action, social harmony, and compassion."

One common practice is mindful breathing, which many teachers do with their students during the school day. They start with the breath because the breath has several important and universal features (Kurzweil, 1968, p. 149). It is an interface between the internal and external, boundary between the involuntary and the voluntary, the automatic and the effort (p. 149). The breath is also rhythmic, and rhythm is important in the way the nervous system functions (p. 149). As a teacher, the simple, yet useful practice of mindful breathing can help engage the whole body and continue to build that connection with the inner self. It can do the same for students. Mindfulness reduces stress by allowing students to be more fully present in the moment, learning to respect and pay close attention to this important but difficult information (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 99).

In my classroom, I have also used Mindfulness breathing to help students be present in the classroom. I usually use a chime or have instrumental music playing. I turn off the lights so there is just natural lighting in the room. Students are able to either sit at their desks or they may have free choice to sit anywhere in the room. They find a

comfortable position to sit in. It does take some time though, as it is difficult for children to sit still for a period of time. Although some students do tend to find it funny, and it takes them longer to be silent, most students are able to participate quite well. Sometimes I will ask the students how the breathing made them feel. I have had students tell me they feel relaxed, energetic, calm and even tired and sleepy. I once also had a student tell me they notice more sounds outside when they are sitting silently. Even at ages 6-7, it is interesting to see how breathing techniques can allow students to feel more calm and at ease.

Mindfulness practices enhance and support self-knowledge, self-regulation, and freedom to co-create with others' internal states and interpersonal relationships that are coherent and emotionally regulated (Bai et al., 2009, p. 332). They intensify awareness, presence, and compassion, and deepen emotional and spiritual experience (p. 332). This sort of training helps disengage from the constantly moving, sporadic events in the mind, and mindfulness practices allow one to practise anchoring this mind to steady, rhythmic breathing (Bai et al., p. 332).

Finding One's Sanctuary

As mentioned above, the idea of rhythm, such as the inward and outward breath, creates a sense of peace and grounding. Another rhythmic activity one can find grounding is dance. Dance is a mindful practice that teachers can implement with their students in the classroom. Dance is a practice I find to be personally grounding, and I like to incorporate that somehow into my classroom.

Bajaj and Vohra (2011) describe the impact of dance well when they state,

dance is the best medium to emote feelings of joy, sorrow, anger, bliss, being calm and collected in times of turmoil and emotional disturbance...Bharatanatyam offers a private space to the dancer in which she can relate with what is deeper and beyond the obvious...The ego dissolves completely and...it can be equated to a high form of meditation. (p. 56)

This is exactly how I feel when I dance. It is difficult for me to sit in meditation because my mind does not stop racing. On the other hand, when I dance, I find it easier for me to control my mind.

I have taken various types of dance since I was a child, ranging from Bollywood dance to Punjabi Bhangra, to Hip-hop and now to Classical Indian. I have always loved dance and do my own choreography in my spare time as well. I began Bharatanatyam almost four years ago, after being inspired by a woman in India who taught a few classes to my field school group. For me, dance has always been a part of my life, but it has been the way in which I relax and de-stress, hence why I also had the same approach with the dance form, Bharatanatyam. As time has passed, I have realized that Bharatanatyam is, in fact, a different form of dance that is not only much more difficult for me, but also has a spiritual aura around it.

Tanvi Bajaj and Swasti S. Vohra, in "Therapeutic Implications of Dance" (2011), describe Bharatanatyam dance in a way that I can connect with but that I did not know I was feeling. They state that "the stamping of the foot, movement of each limb, the mudras, the rhythmic breathing and the activation of chakras, all imply a holistic effect of Bharatanatyam on mind, body and soul" (Bajaj & Vohra, 2011, p. 54). Unlike other types of dance, in which dance is just a medium of expression, this dance has also developed as a form of spiritual expression (p. 54).

This is something I never really thought about until now, and now that I have, I realize that dance is in fact my sanctuary and where I am at my greatest peace. It is where I am the most relaxed and where I am about to emote whatever feelings I desire. Dance for me is a “healing art,” in which my mind, body, and spirit can all connect and find my happy place. It is the contemplative practice I use to ground myself and reconnect with myself on all levels (Bajaj & Vohra, 2011, p. 54). Therefore, it is this contemplative practice that is my sanctuary, and I find this sanctuary in movement more than through stillness. In my classroom, it is important for me to help guide my students so that they can find their sanctuary as well.

After researching the locations of where sanctuary can be found, I realized that this in fact differs from person to person. Each finds sanctuary in a different place. Some find it in a church or temple, some in their own home, some in their bedroom, some in themselves, and some in a different country. Jean Valentine, in her poem “Sanctuary” (2004), defines sanctuary as being “safe inside my own skin.” Although the meaning of her poem can be perceived differently from reader to reader, I perceived it as being safe in solitude and finding this sanctuary in being alone rather than with others. In this case, the place where this sanctuary was acquired did not seem relevant; rather, it was about being alone and finding that sanctuary within one’s self.

Finding that sanctuary, along with doing the inner work, helps create a sense of belonging. On the other hand, separation from those around us tends to create a sense of loneliness. This loneliness can also bring about a sense of anxiety. Finding one’s happy place does increase one’s sense of self and helps decrease anxiety. Also, for students I work with, along with being happy in a place, being compassionate with one another helps too.

Compassion and Care

During my master's program, compassion, kindness, and care were topics discussed regularly. When thinking of compassion and being compassionate, one realizes just how interconnected everything is and how interconnected we are as human beings. I went to India in 2009, and at one point during my trip, I was staying with my aunt and taught at a school there. The town I was staying in was very small, so everyone knew each other. In one area of the town, there were many tents and shacks where a group of people lived. These people lived in horrible conditions, and when I asked who they were, I was told they were the people who were of lower caste. They were the "Untouchables." They had the "lower" jobs in the city, which included cleaning houses and taking care of the town's garbage. Every so often, the women would come around to collect the garbage from every household, and every day, women would come to clean people's houses, including my aunt's. Although my aunt would talk to these women with respect and would even give them gifts during special occasions and festivals, she would never have any physical contact with them and advised me to do the same.

One day, my aunt told me to give the garbage to the woman at the door. I was told to put the bag on the ground, and the woman would pick it up. I should not hand it to her just in case I touch her hand. I was very taken aback by her comment, but I understood because I knew these were the societal norms of this society. The woman called for the garbage, and I went to the door and passed her the garbage. I purposely held the bag instead of placing it on the ground and purposely touched her hand when I passed it to her. She looked up at me in shock and I could tell she was surprised that I had touched her.

I was reminded of this story when the topic of "in-group shunning" came up in class on November 14, 2014. The caste system is an evident form of in-group shunning

which is displayed in my story above. Another example of this in-group shunning is the male favouritism I have seen either in my own life or with the students I teach. Due to many reasons, such as being an heir and a daughter being married off and therefore having to provide a dowry for her, male favouritism is a part of some East Indian families. Although over the years, many families have stemmed away from this idea of neglecting females, many other families still abide by this mentality. In my own family, I was the first child and was a female, but since I was the first child, it was not worrisome for family and relatives. On the other hand, when their second child was a girl, many relatives felt sorry for my parents. Later on, when my parents had a son, everyone was thrilled. The three of us are treated the same way and have been educated and taught the same values. On the other hand, this distinct separation of females and males can still be seen in families who share the mentality of shunning girls to the extent that I have even heard of some who will marry their girls off as soon as they legally can, or will avoid educating their daughters more than what is required. Furthermore, although it is rare, some also give their daughter away to a relative or an orphanage, or in extenuating circumstances, they perform female infanticide.

This relates to the idea of anxiety in that, for girls specifically, being treated differently than her male counterparts, can cause much stress. In my classroom, I once taught twins, a boy and a girl. The girl was always quiet and would not even try when asked to perform tasks, because she was nervous. She did not believe in herself and when I communicated this with her parents, I learned that at home the siblings were treated differently. Only the boy was allowed to take part in certain activities, the grandparents only wanted to spend time with the boy, and the girl was constantly told she was not good enough. School therefore, became a sanctuary for her because it was

the only environment where she was treated equally, and I saw that throughout the year, her self-confidence began to increase.

My contemplative inquiry into compassion includes some reading that I have completed. *The Practical Neuroscience of Buddha's Brain: Happiness, Love and Wisdom* states that "In order to be truly compassionate, you must first feel something of what the other person is going through" (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 165). In other words, you must have empathy, which cuts through "automatic tendencies of the brain that create an 'us' and a 'them'" (p. 165). Therefore, without empathy, it is difficult for one to have compassion. "To be clear, empathy is neither agreement nor approval. You can empathize with someone you wish would act differently. Empathy doesn't mean waiving your rights; knowing this can help you feel it's alright to be empathetic" (p. 166). I think this is the most important part of compassion. The inequality between people and their difference of beliefs is what prohibits empathy and inhibits pity in individuals, which in turn does not show compassion.

In our world, it is evident that many times it is difficult for people to be compassionate to those of other castes, cultures, or religions. In my classroom, I see my students being compassionate and uncompassionate towards each other and I try to help them better understand the reasons why being compassionate is beneficial for other individuals as well as for your own wellbeing.

Along with the importance of compassion in our own lives, as well as in the classroom setting, the idea of care is also important. The concept of care was one that came through many times in the duration of the contemplative inquiry program. As educators, we have a motivation to care, but we are not fully capable because the self-care piece may be missing, and without caring for ourselves, it is difficult to care for others. Being true to ourselves allows us to be true to our students. Real, true care for

others expects nothing in return because care is authentic. As Nel Noddings (2005) states, it is vital to build a community where everyone is caring. A sense of belonging is related to feeling cared for, and each student requires different forms and amounts of care. As an educator, it is important to understand what the needs of each student are in order to understand how they get a sense of belonging. As Noddings states, care is relational in that it is a connection or encounter between two human beings: a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for (2005, p. 15). Caring in an educational environment involves reciprocity and receptivity, addresses students' needs, and alleviates other educational limitations. Also, when students feel they are cared for, their anxiety decreases as well.

What children who are feeling anxious truly need is the continuing compassion and presence of adults in their lives who represent constancy and care (Noddings, 2005, pp. 58–59). Caring for students is fundamental in teaching, and developing people with a strong capacity for care is a major objective of responsible education (p. 59). It can be seen that teachers can be very special people in the lives of children, and it should be legitimate for them to spend time developing relations of trust, talking with students about problems that are central to their lives, and guiding them towards greater sensitivity and competence across all domains of care (p. 61).

In today's education system, finding spaces for caring becomes difficult when covering the curriculum is all that is the object of teaching. Noddings argues that "the primary aim of every educational institution and every educational effort much be the maintenance and enhancement of caring...[this aim] establishes a lens through which all practices and possible practices are examined" (Noddings, 2005, pp. 172–173). In schools, caring is cultivated when teachers and school administrators model caring,

engage in meaningful dialogue with students, confirm and applaud caring, and provide opportunities to practice care (Cassidy & Bates, 2005, p. 4).

Throughout the contemplative inquiry program, it became understood that these various practices help with the disembodiment one feels due to the world around them. Feeling embodiment helps one feel more grounded and decreases anxiety about what is happening or is going to happen. The meaning of disembodiment is when our “sensory awareness moves into the mode of semi-consciousness or even unconsciousness” (Bai, 2001, p. 89). This disconnection results in not having intuitive and embodied understanding and knowledge with respect to the object of disconnection, which triggers anxiety (Bigdeli & Bai, 2009, p. 106). Anxiety is signalling a need to connect (p. 106).

Increasingly, human beings are disconnected from each other, from the earth, and from the larger dimensions of being, which seems to be what is behind people having distressing experiences of anxiety, because they may be continually in fear of abandonment, anomie, and annihilation (Bigdeli & Bai, 2009, p. 107). For these reasons, we need education for embodiment, which is about disciplining ourselves through contemplative practices to see rather than to look at; to hear rather than just to listen; to feel rather than to react (Bai, 2001, p. 96).

Chapter 4.

Contemplative Practices in My Classroom

As Barbezat and Bush (2014) write in *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, “there is no effective way to teach contemplative practices without practicing them yourself (p. 67). Guiding students from many backgrounds within the context of our own discipline is not simple (p. 68). Without a solid grounding in my own practice, I may be unable to respond in ways to help my students learn (p. 68). After learning about what anxiety is and how children exhibit it, I have been thinking about, and increasingly implementing new ideas into my classroom. I have now been adapting my classroom and my teaching style to the needs of my students. During my journey through the contemplative inquiry program, I was able to build a grounding for myself and learned to begin with myself before I tried to make changes in my classroom and amongst my students.

As a teacher, there are many practices that I have included in my day with the children in my class. I notice that even when students are willing to participate in various exercises, having a sense of how they are feeling is extremely helpful so that I can adapt the exercises to the situation (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 69). The best way to develop this awareness is through the practice of cultivating attention (p. 69), a major understanding that I return to again and again. After completing this research on anxiety, I am now quick to notice when children are not in the state of mind to be able to sit in class, and most may not have the attention span, because even at the ages of six and seven, they are bombarded by many thoughts and feelings, many of which they are not able to communicate or comprehend. The inability to comprehend is what causes

anxiety. As a teacher, I need to be able to see, respond to, and interact with children who experience anxiety in school.

Throughout my research, instead of just looking at the children and the way(s) in which they experience anxiety, I have also turned the focus on myself as a teacher. I acknowledge that I am an adult, with whom my students spend the majority of their days. By reflecting on myself as educator, I am working now on observing how my responses, reactions, and interactions with the children help diminish their anxious feelings.

Prior to this master's program, I had never heard of or used the terms *contemplative inquiry* and *contemplative practices*. During the first semester, I learned about various contemplative practices and the benefits they could have. I already performed some practices in my own life, but my intention for implementing them has now been altered. There were also practices I had not tried before, but was open to learning about. I feel that being present and aware is the most important aspect of mindfulness. Although I know mindfulness practices are beginning to support me in my personal life, I now realize how they are also spilling over into my professional life as well. I find that my role as an educator and my relationship with my students have changed as well. I speak and react to my students with much more compassion, and my teaching is more regulated.

How am I teaching my students to live in this continuously changing world? As children mature and begin to adapt to Western culture, they learn ideas that are more modern and different. They find themselves now questioning what is right and wrong. They learn one thing from school and then go home and may learn something different. They do not know which side to choose, as the sides are not always the same, which

can create some anxiety. Children come from a variety of families, today more diverse than ever. How do we teach such a diversified group of children?

We want an education that embraces every dimension of what it means to be human, that honours the varieties of human experience, looks at us and our world through a variety of cultural lenses, and educates our young people in ways that enable them to face challenges of our time (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 20). We want an education system that teaches not just an academic curriculum, but a social, emotional curriculum as well. I understand that the origin of anxiety is usually due to a lack of a sense of belonging. Hence, it is important to create an environment of belonging and showing the child that they are not alone in facing life's difficulties and challenging, and suffering from them, and that they are loved and supported when facing these challenges (Lebowitz & Omer, 2013, p. 279).

Sharing of Personal Experiences

My interest in engaging in contemplative practices in the classroom stems from my own journey and education in adopting them in my own life. I feel that doing these practices in the classroom will give students the opportunity to make sense of their own experience for themselves (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 78). As teachers, we practise to be fully present in the moment, listen deeply, refrain from judgment while exercising discernment, and act from our deepest source of knowing (p. 91). The teacher's presence is the heart of teaching (p. 91).

Along with trying to practise being fully present with students, I have learned through my master's research on anxiety to identify some important aspects of my classroom environment that could help alleviate my students' feelings of anxiety. First,

children's personal experience needs to be considered important. Their personal experiences impact their classroom atmosphere, as well as their peer relationships. In today's classrooms, students come from all over the world and their life experiences differ. Building a safe classroom atmosphere that allows students to be comfortable in sharing who they are helps alleviate their anxiety because it allows them to be themselves instead of having to fit into their environment. Of course, it is up to the educator to initiate the steps to creating a classroom environment like this.

Students in the presence of exceptional educators feel that they are truly recognized, that they can be themselves, and that they have permission and great encouragement to be and express what is in them that truly wants emergence. They feel their own sense of groundedness and connection. (Cohen et al., 2010, p. 8)

Sharing of personal experiences also helps a child feel included. Inclusivity allows children to build relationships with teachers and peers and to feel as if they are a part of a group or class, and not alone. For the educator, having an inclusive classroom minimizes students' temptation to stay home. One way that I enable all students to feel included, whether they participate in class or not, is through creating a Community Circle. As Kay Pranis (2005) states, peacemaking circles are being used today in neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, social services, and justice systems (p. 4). It is a storytelling process, which believes that every person has a story and every story has a lesson to offer (p. 4). The circle honours the presence and dignity of every participant and values their contributions (p. 6). A community circle is beneficial in a classroom setting as well. It allows my students to have an equal voice about whatever we may be addressing. Many young children enjoy speaking in class, but in my classroom, I also have some shy students who wish to share their ideas but are always interrupted or not

heard. A community circle allows these children to get a chance to speak up and be heard. It is our responsibility, as educators and peers, to hold each other up and hold that space together in a circle.

The community circle in my classroom enables students to share their stories and understand the importance of storytelling: "Storytelling employs a different kind of listening...this different kind of listening allows information to be exchanged more thoroughly, leading to much greater understanding between people" (Pranis, 2005, p. 39). By sharing our individual stories, we open places for others to connect with us to find common ground with us and know us more completely (p. 40). Through this sharing of stories, we feel more connected to one another (p. 40). On a social level, building a space where all children are included and able to share their personal experiences helps decrease social anxiety in children. Academically, too, it is up to the educator to provide a positive learning environment.

Accommodating Teaching to Student Needs

It is important for me as an educator to look at the learning needs of my students in order to understand how and what they are able to learn. Each child can be guided to find the type of education that is most suited to their abilities and interests (Kurzweil, 1968, p. 190). Adapting the curriculum in ways that enable every student to succeed is another dimension of caring and is vital to the growth and comfort of the child in the classroom (Cassidy & Bates, 2005, p. 16). In my classroom, I encourage students to work hard to accomplish their own goals for themselves, not to compare themselves to others. When students compare themselves to others, it tends to demotivate them, because if they are comparing themselves to someone who has different learning capabilities, they put pressure on themselves. Every child learns differently, hence it is

important for me to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each child, so that I allow them to be successful. Children who are always given goals that are difficult to attain will feel anxious and lose the motivation to reach their goals. Setting specific and appropriate expectations is, therefore, very important.

In my observation, the scope for imagination has certainly decreased in my classrooms. I have seen how students have great difficulty imagining. They are so anxiously focused on the right answer, or the correct method, that it feels “wrong” to some to imagine different possibilities. According to the authors of *Treating Childhood and Adolescent Anxiety* (2013), imagination can have great power in alleviating anxiety (Lebowitz & Omer, p. 66). Doing guided imagery in class can allow students to attempt to fix the problem and decrease their fears (p. 66). I sometimes use guided imagery to allow my students to calm their bodies and let their thoughts flow out and float. One guided imagery I use is a floating worry balloon. I ask the children to put their worries, or things that make them sad or scared, in a balloon and watch it float away. Then I ask them to concentrate on their breath and breathe in and out with their hands on their stomach, feeling the in and out of the breath. Similar to what I described earlier, students really enjoy these activities and even state that they feel more energetic and relaxed afterwards.

Children also love to play and through play, they let their imagination run wild and forget their anxieties, worries, and fears. While playing, they can pretend to be whatever, whomever, and wherever they want to be, and that makes children very happy. In my classroom, I find free play absolutely vital. Along with a host of other benefits, it helps decrease anxiety. Some students also love to draw or colour. In my classroom, I have sketchbooks for each child, and during quiet time, I give them time to do some free drawing in their sketchbooks. Some children tend to let their imagination flow through

their drawings. This time to themselves, whether through drawing or playing, is needed in the education system, since it allows children to feel more positive.

Generally, the majority of the learning that occurs in our education system prepares a person for “tangible, reducible, measurable, definite, and predictable outcomes” (Bai, 2005, p. 45). Children are taught and asked questions that have definite and correct answers (p. 45). Bai explains that this type of learning, when demanded of children in excess, may be associated with increased anxiety and distress, since they would not be prepared to meet life’s uncertainty, complexity, unpredictability, and mystery—in short, life that has no definite answers, let alone right or wrong answers (p. 46). Therefore, having students do more inquiry is important, as this way will help them ask questions and see things differently for more enriched and deeper meanings (p. 46). Inquiry allows students to ask open-ended questions and gain perspective into life. Through this inquiry, “one looks inwardly into one’s own thoughts and feelings, while facing the world” (p. 46).

Along with becoming more engaged and involved in what they are learning, children can become more comfortable in the classroom environment through the relationships they build. Creating a safe and empathically attuned relationship is not only key to children’s motivation to be curious and try new patterns, but also allows negative affective responses to heal (Smith, 2016). It offers a way to challenge and invite the changing of dysfunctional patterns of thought, values, and behaviour. Modifying these patterns accomplishes the dual aims of improving functioning and uncovering feelings that need to heal (Smith, 2016). This aspect of relationship building is vital to the success of children in the school system.

As Cohen and Bai (2012) illustrate, “human existence, let alone flourishing is not possible without the collective effort of well-bonded individuals caring for and nurturing each other in all dimensions of beingness: physical, social, energetic, volitional, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual” (p. 258). I have noticed in my teaching that more and more students are coming with a background of wounds, and this is usually as a result of the “insufficiency of early relationships that did not and could not provide the loving, caring, and nurturing that was needed” (Cohen & Bai, 2012, pp. 258–259). Hence, the most powerful and authentic transformative agent of teaching is not the individual teachers, but rather the relationships that they create and the relational encounters they both represent and facilitate (p. 261).

Children should experience the joy of discovery: “The discovery which he has to make, is that general ideas give an understanding of that stream of events which pours through his life, which is his life” (Whitehead, 1959, pp. 193–194). For many students, the curriculum is engraved in their minds before they even enter the school system. It is already taught to students that school is an institution where students only come to learn academics. This becomes so engrained in their minds that many children are not able to think outside of the box. This inability to open their minds to think creatively disposes students to think only in the academic mindset, thus comparing themselves to others academically. As Whitehead (1959) states, “no more deadly harm can be done to young minds than by depreciation of the present” (p. 194). Education plays an important role in this joy of discovery, because “what education has to impart is an intimate sense of the power of ideas, for the beauty of ideas, and for the structure of ideas, together with a particular body of knowledge which has peculiar reference to the life of the being possessing it (Whitehead, 1959, p. 202).

A student's hope and sense of agency are often dependent on her belief that there is something she can do that is of value to others (Ornstein, Pajak, & Ornstein, 2011, p. 131). This value can only be seen via the curriculum if the educator helps transform the curriculum in that direction. A curriculum full of impersonal and abstract content will teach young people that important matters of sensitive living have everything to do with hard, substantive, and often agonizingly painful thought (p. 132).

Learning mindfulness practices through my journey in the Contemplative Inquiry program has enabled me to bring embodied and enlivening learning into the classroom to drain the anxiety that my students were facing. It is very difficult at any age to get deep insight into oneself, but it can be beneficial at a young age to begin to build this self-awareness. Self-knowing awareness allows children to become self-reflective about themselves and understand how they are in the environment they are in (Siegel, 2009, p. 138). Mindfulness appears to change how we see ourselves in the world (p. 146).

Contemplative practices create a balance between reflection and action within the classroom for exploration by awakening the experience of compassion itself (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 176). Compassion is generated through attachment relationships in which you learn to love people, like one's family and friends (pp. 155–156). I work with my students on building a classroom environment where children are compassionate towards, and inclusive of one another. Students learn how to read the body language of their peers and learn how to respond to the emotions their peers may be displaying. They begin to understand that compassion is a mental state that is focused on others' pain or suffering and includes a wish or an aspiration to see that person relieved of that pain or suffering (p. 175). They also learn that compassion is not pity for another, since pity rests on a judgment of the other as weaker, and compassion is without judgment (p. 175).

Comfortability in the Classroom

The idea of care and its importance in the education system was described earlier, but to further understand care is also to understand how to develop it in a classroom. Cassidy and Bates (2005) share research done by Cummins, which illustrates that children of disadvantaged groups in all societies perform poorly in school in ways that are directly linked to the unequal social relationships in the society as a whole, and teachers can help redress these inequities by creating alternative situations in their classrooms that disrupt, rather than reflect, these dynamics (Cassidy & Bates, 2005, p. 6). The “school’s commitment to care influences how teachers and other staff members respond when students are upset, acting out, or being disruptive. The teachers look beyond the students’ behavior to uncover underlying problems or triggers” (p. 17). In order for students to feel cared for, they needed to feel welcome, acknowledged, understood, and respected, be receiving needed help, and having teachers who are like friends (pp. 18–20). This in turn impacted the children in that their attitudes towards school and learning became more positive, school helped students cope with their emotional issues as well, their perceptions of adults changed, they began to care for themselves more and their futures were improved (pp. 20–22).

Another facet that allows children to feel more comfortable and overcome their anxiety is movement and being physically aware and comfortable in the classroom. I have already talked about my propensity for movement, and how dance for me was a mindful practice of choice. “Physical Mindfulness” evokes the interconnected realms of embodied knowledge and critical thinking (Barbezat & Bush, 2005, p. 159). Physical movement enables children to learn more about their own bodies and be present with themselves. Being comfortable in their body increases a sense of self-worth in students

and may help alleviate anxious feelings. Physical movements can vary from dance to running, to yoga and deep breathing. In my classroom, I do a variety of physical movements with my students. Throughout the day, I offer my students a few “brain breaks” at intervals, in order to alleviate stress and anxiety, as well as to help them focus and be attentive. Sometimes they go for runs or walks outside and get some fresh air. We may sit in a circle and do some stretches. Sometimes I ring a chime or bell and we work on our deep breathing and centring ourselves. Dance was also something I introduced into my classroom. Whether it be a dance or a video they can follow, or a dance routine they learn as a class, students find that grounding and feel their body do various movements.

Any movement can be performed as a meditation, such as walking meditations, yoga, running, and dance. One activity I tried with my students was a mirroring activity. I asked them to be attentive to how their body was feeling and how they felt with their partner. Working in pairs, both children stood facing one another with their palms up facing each other. They were asked to not let their palms touch at any point, nor have them too far apart. I explained that the idea was to be one unit moving together. Letting the body move in its own manner was something that was difficult for the children, of course, as first they found it difficult to do and found it really funny. As we tried a few times, some were able to get past it being funny and were actually silently moving with their partner.

Walking meditation is another practice that can be done with students. It is not thinking or contemplating while walking, but being mindful of the muscles of the body, the movement and placement of the feet, balance, and motion (Barbezat & Bush, 2005, p. 161). Similar to the grounding feeling of dance, walking meditation helps one feel fully

present on the earth (p. 161). The object of this meditation is not to get to some other place, but to be fully aware of what you are doing and where you are.

Furthermore, yoga is a practice many children love because they get to use their bodies in different ways. Yoga is a practice continuing from thousands of years ago, and today it connects the movement of the body and fluctuations of the mind to the rhythm of the breath (Barbezat & Bush, 2005, p. 168). Similar to the other practices, yoga connects the mind, body and breath, which helps to direct attention inward to the cultivation of awareness (p. 168). It helps students clear their minds, which leaves openness to new and creative ideas (p. 168). In order to establish a comfortable setting in my classroom for the children I work with, it is vital to connect and work with their mental, emotional, and physical capabilities.

Chapter 5.

Shifting My Teaching Practice

In this final chapter, I return to where I started: working with school children who experience anxiety. As an educator, it is vital to understand that anxiety is not an illness that needs to be gotten rid of, because it is actually just a part of our existence (Bigdeli & Bai, 2009, p. 108). It is not a possession or burden that we can set aside for a while but is a part of being in this world as well (p. 108). As Bigdeli and Bai (2009) suggest, human life would be meaningless without the experience of anxiety—but not excessive and chronic anxiety—because meaning and meaningfulness are about our struggles for and against significant life challenges and overcoming them (p. 108). Implementing the strategies listed above, we can allow our students to think about what is troubling them and scaring them, and they can explore its nature and characteristics to better understand their anxiety. This kind of learning and its process are what inner work is about, as I detailed previously.

While working on myself throughout this journey, one question I kept returning to is the one that Thomas Falkenberg (2012) articulated: “How can I move from sitting in a room by myself engaged in a practice that is focused on my personal development to a practice of being actively engaged with a group of students in a way that is focused on my students’ development?” (p. 26). Although, as I stated at the beginning of this thesis, I felt that I was already actively engaged with my students, I never related it to being engaged in a practice for my personal development, as I never actually viewed them as related to one another. Now I can see the two strands—what I do with my students and

what I do with myself in the way of contemplative practices—intersecting and supporting each other.

From my two years of studying in my Masters degree at Simon Fraser University, I would encapsulate the essence of contemplative inquiry as exploring and discovering this holistic inner life space of mind-body-heart-spirit through practices that raise the level of self-awareness and self-reflection. I recognize more and more that this inner life and awareness I am trying to practise is my contemplative inquiry. It is also something that is becoming an integral part of my professional development and also part of the growing awareness within my classroom and among my students. During my Master of Education program, I began to introduce my personal practices, such as breathing and yoga, into my teaching. Although I do not yet feel that the integration of my personal practice with my professional practice is complete, I definitely feel that I am heading in that direction. It is also something if becoming a part of my professional development and awareness within my classroom and among my students.

As Falkenberg (2012) says, “In the Western tradition, teaching has always been seen as a moral endeavour, and...at the core of the conceptualization of teaching has always been the recognition that teaching is properly done for the betterment of others” (p. 27). I agree with this in that I do believe I teach for the betterment of my students so that they may become good human beings. Falkenberg, also states: “If as Palmer (1998) suggests, we indeed teach who we are, then we better get to know ourselves, which means particularly to get to know and work on our inner life” (p. 29). I feel as if I am at a place where I have begun to realize that my inner life does have an effect on my teaching practice and therefore I do need to understand myself better so that I can be a better teacher. Interestingly, Falkenberg also describes this connection by saying,

the teacher's inner life that is linked to such decisions, acting and behaviour is an important aspect of teaching as a moral endeavour, and working on one's inner life is a way for teachers to be responsive to the moral purpose of teaching. (p. 27)

The internal states and processes that we can be aware of and the "content" or "objects" of our awareness (including thoughts, motives, feelings, emotions and our sensual and perceptual stimuli) all can affect one's teaching (p. 27).

Falkenberg (2009) writes about the ethical and noticing components in teaching as a contemplative practice. "Teaching as a contemplative professional practice is *the ethical imperative of teaching being a moral endeavour for the betterment of all living beings embedded within a holistic view of human living* (the ethical component)" (p. 30). This ethical component provides the normative orientation needed to move from *understanding* our inner life to *improving* our inner life and professional practice (p. 30), practice in which the teacher is *using noticing in a disciplined way to change her knowing to act in the moment in order to change the functioning of her inner life and her professional behaviour* (the noticing component) (p. 30). Interestingly, although I do notice some situations that arise in the present moment, I am becoming more and more aware now.

As stated above, the concept of mindfulness and being present is still fairly new to me. Being a person who wears many different hats, I find it very difficult to be present, especially when I am around others. I find myself constantly planning for the future, thinking of the past or just rushing in what I am doing presently, and I rarely stop and just be. Recently, as I have read and learned more about this idea of mindfulness, I have begun to see what areas of my life I need to work on, and I have started with my inner

life. It is noticeable just how much self- and another-judging I do. Falkenberg (2012) states,

The value of non-judgmental awareness lies in its capacity to help us “observe” what goes on within us (our inner life); whenever we move into judging what we become aware of in the sense of it being good or bad, helpful or not, we move away from attending to our inner life (observing) to thinking about (judging) ideas, experiences, feelings and so forth. (p. 30)

I feel as if I have at most times moved into this “judging” rather than this “observing.” Am I running the risk of becoming more unaware than aware of myself? This feeling of being unaware comes from the fact that even when I am simply being aware, I judge how I am doing and if I am doing it well enough, when in fact, I should just be observing. What I am understanding, however, is that I am not becoming more unaware, but that I am becoming more aware of my tendency to be judgmental and critical, which I know to be common to most people.

Falkenberg (2012) gives a step-by-step process of how this inner life and teaching practice can be connected successfully:

First, I need to identify types of teaching situations that are linked to the inner-life experiences in question...the second step is to develop alternative, more desired ways of experiencing and responding...third, I work on developing the sensitivity to notice those professional situations or experiences as they arise...the fourth and final step, is to draw on our knowing to act in the moment to actually change our experiencing or acting in the situations in question. (p. 31)

As I read through these steps, I understand what is required to reach the level of complete awareness while teaching, and I can also see that it is doable. I am still in the early stages of this.

Falkenberg's (2012) article has aided in the realization that mindful awareness in teaching as contemplative professional practice provides the practitioner with the awareness of her inner life *while teaching* (p. 31). I thought that my awareness of my inner life is only seen when I am alone and when I am not doing any other activities but just sitting. Now I understand, though, that "mindful awareness of the inner life while being engaged in teaching is important because the content of one's inner life is, particularly, a response to one's engagement with the external world as it is shaped within one's teaching. For example, emotions arise during one's teaching in response to what one experiences while teaching, and thoughts (also inner objects), arise in response to the feeling of those emotions" (p. 31). I now understand better that I need to observe and be aware without being judgmental of what may arise, and that will allow me to connect this inner life with my teaching practice.

The subjects we teach are as large and complex as life, so our knowledge of them is always flawed and partial (Ornstein et al., 2011, p. 62). The students we teach are larger than life and even more complex (p. 62). The inward teacher is the living core of our lives that is addressed and evoked by any education worthy of the name (p. 70). Listening to the inner teacher also offers an answer to one of the most basic questions teachers face: how can I develop the authority to teach, the capacity to stand my ground in the midst of the complex forces of both the classroom and my own life? (p. 71).

In today's modern world, as we collectively face the global problems of poverty, gross inequity, racism and other forms of prejudice and intolerance, environmental degradation, and climate change, we have little hope of surviving without unprecedented

levels of cooperation and care for each other. Education at all levels must foster this connection if we are to use the tools and techniques that are being developed to foster human and ecological flourishing on our planet (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 188). It is true that anxiety cannot be entirely purged from our lives and in milder manifestations it has a stimulating effect on us (Kurzweil, 1968, p. 197). We have to live with our anxieties, and it is the task of education to help us bear them (p. 197). Therefore as a teacher, I do feel it is also my task to provide aid to my students so they can bear them. Throughout this journey, I have observed that including contemplative practices into my teaching style helps create a more positive classroom atmosphere, and alleviate the anxiety my students may be feeling.

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