

Calm in the classroom: yoga geared to schoolchildren

BY ANGELINA IRINICI, THE STARPHOENIX JUNE 26, 2013



Shelly McGrath teaches yoga to Bonnie Semenoff's Grade one class at Buena Vista School Friday, June 21, 2013. Bridges photo by Greg Pender

Photograph by: Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix

Imagine getting 24 six- and seven-year-olds to remain still and quiet all at once. Now, imagine doing this while you're keeping them active and stimulating their brains. The task sounds virtually impossible, but Shelly McGrath managed to find a way. McGrath teaches half-hour yoga classes to elementary school students through a program that was developed in New Hampshire called Yoga 4 Classrooms. It uses a combination of yoga postures, breathing exercises, classroom building and brain boosting activities that work together to create a calm and productive atmosphere where children can take time to re-focus while learning about physical and psychological wellness.

"Kids intuitively know that these are things that their minds and bodies are seeking; kids are naturally intuitive to their inner needs," says McGrath. "They just need time and space to get reacquainted to themselves."

A former Kindergarten teacher, McGrath travelled to New Hampshire last February to take part in a four-day training course and now she is one of three certified Yoga 4 Classrooms instructors in Canada. Although there is a cost associated with the program, McGrath volunteers her time at Victoria and Buena Vista schools. In the fall, the Greater Catholic School Board will be implementing the program. She's been going to Buena Vista for about six weeks, plenty of time for Bonnie Semenoff's Grade 1 class to get excited for yoga Fridays. Traditional yoga poses and language are tailored toward students; downward dog is called "desk puppy" and mats are replaced with desks.

"Let's start in our sitting mountain," McGrath begins the session. Immediately, the

students sit up tall and begin their yoga breathing.

“Does anyone feel different after those breaths?” she asks.

Almost all of the little hands shoot up in the classroom.

“I feel calmer,” one little girl says.

The program incorporates flash cards that discuss things like nutrition and conflict resolution and are created for teachers to use on their own as well.

“Grade 1s are like sponges,” says Semenoff. “They pick it up and they all start to use it. I can just see that some of them are just so into it already.”

Semenoff says that she incorporates what they learn every day into the classroom.

“They like the one (exercise) when we have our breath and we are powerful, we are strong. So, we find that confidence within them. (We use it) before we do spelling and we want to activate our brain — we want to find that power and that strength.”

McGrath teaches yoga to every class, except the Grade 8s (due to scheduling), and the school’s principal Darrin Sinnett isn’t the only one who finds it “extremely beneficial.” When he sent out a newsletter to parents outlining the programming he was flooded with only positive responses.

“We have a multitude of students at various levels, different medical conditions and diagnoses. Everybody can do yoga. It’s a community building thing within the school,” he says.

The entire staff participated in a workshop about the program and Sinnett says it’s beneficial that staff can use the same language and exercises outside of their own classrooms. Breathing and calming techniques have solved conflicts on the playground and some poses have given children an outlet when dealing with traumatic experiences. McGrath recalls a time when one child (who was coping with a death) began to cry during “imagination vacation” or savasana. That’s the goal of the program — to go beyond the classroom and educate the child as a whole.

“Learning can’t happen with a busy brain,” says McGrath. She adds that children today can lead stressful lives; a busy schedule of activities, issues at home or at school or the pressure of always being “on display.” A study done on Yoga 4 Classrooms by the University of Massachusetts found that after 10 weeks of yoga, teachers’ surveys said that students made improvements with specific behaviour including: controlling anger and behaviour, dealing with stress and

anxiety, confidence and self esteem, attention span and academic performance.

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