

Introduction

“The arts, it is said, cannot change the world, but they may change human beings, who might change the world.” Maxine Greene

In a small school, nestled in the mountains of Appalachia, a second-grade class began every day with a short period of silence and centering. The busyness of arriving, hanging up coats, dropping book bags, and entering the classroom easily

transitioned to silence and stillness as students gathered in a circle on the floor with me, sitting quietly and settling in for the day ahead. This morning centering was a key element of our day, gathering us together in a focused community practice.

Jane Dalton, *Breathe*.
Colored pencil and
gouache and found card.



On one such morning, I led students in a guided visualization, instructing them to imagine a door that led to the interior of their hearts. Once inside, I asked them to look around and see what lived in this repository: emotions, sensations, an experience of loving or being loved? After the guided meditation was over, I allowed a brief period of silence before asking students to gently open their eyes and move wordlessly toward the art materials in front of them. Working with colored markers and white paper with a predrawn circle in the center, students illustrated their experience within and around the shape. Revelatory and insightful, each child's drawing contained unique images that ranged from tangible objects such as beloved pets to abstract swirls of color and shape representing the varied terrain of emotional life. At the conclusion, students gathered in a circle to share their drawings, and, without reluctance, happily provided detailed accounts.²

This story illustrates the richness of combining expressive arts and mindfulness in K–12 teaching to engage the whole student: mind, body, and heart. Every day in classrooms, visual art quite naturally bridges students' inner and outer worlds; materials and processes speak for students in ways words cannot. Images, shapes, and colors reveal students' inner lives; creative experiences strengthen emotional well-being and promote awareness of self and others.



Jane Dalton, *Peace Journal Page*. Photo transfer, gouache, and paint pen.

As many teachers know, art has the power to transform students' lives. Visual art is a powerful tool, integrating the cognitive and affective realms in education, and offering an embodied learning experience that can support students in an increasingly complex world. With the multitude of demands and distractions from the outer world, it is even more fundamental that students cultivate an inner life. By attending to that inner life, they can deepen their awareness and understanding of the outer world.

My Path to Mindfulness Practice

My journey with art began when I was a child. Like most children, I relished creative time without any agenda or end goal. My mother, a painter and potter, was also an avid reader who inspired my passion for the written word, aesthetics, and expressive pursuits. My father, an enthusiastic fan of classical music and choral works, inspired my love of song. Any time I felt the creative urge, I could pick up one of the instruments in our home and make my own music or dabble with art supplies to express my inner world. Whether spending time in nature, playing the piano, singing, or working with crayons, I remember the joy of being totally immersed in the task at hand and fully present in the moment. I experienced the world using all my senses: the feel of soil under my fingers; the unsteady and often off-pitch sounds of my violin or my voice; the texture of clay, paint, or yarn; the free-form movements of dance. Simultaneously, I thrived on silence and even solitude, enjoying the stillness and sustenance both provided.

In 1990, I was formally introduced to meditation and yoga. Both became lasting practices that sustained me through many of life's challenges. Today, expressive arts and meditation are woven into the fabric of my personal life and classroom practice. I have found that engaging in practices that move me toward my own transformation are at the heart of both teaching and living. In my creative practice—whether it is formal, exhibited work or less formal, expressive arts-based experiences—mindfulness is an essential element. Being fully present to materials, process, and intuitive promptings awakens creative expression and enhances well-being.

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”

Thomas Merton

Learning must be transformative. On their own, expressive arts and mindfulness are potent tools that strengthen learning in the classroom and promote well-being; used together, they multiply their potential. Although both practices offer a myriad of benefits documented in research studies, this book is not a comprehensive review of the literature, but rather a practical and accessible resource for teachers that suggests ways to blend these approaches meaningfully into classroom practice.

If the aim of education is to ensure the development of the whole student, then offering practices that enrich the inner life in conjunction with outer experience is not only wise, but also essential.



Jane Dalton, *Garden Journal Page*. Mixed media.

Early in my teaching career, I began to wonder if students would benefit from exploring meditation and creative expression, as I did. This was in the late 1990s, and research showing the educational benefits of mindfulness in K-12 classrooms was not readily available. It was risky to include this practice in my classroom without the evidenced-based research that would give it credibility. Still, I took a chance, teaching an art lesson that included simple breath and guided visualization meditation to a group of high school students. After one such lesson, a student casually walked by me on her way out of class, saying, "Thanks for letting me think about myself today." She had no idea how powerful her words were, nor the impact they would have on my teaching practice for years to come. Here was a teenager who openly admitted the need and value of taking reflective time to look at her inner life and express her experience through art. I knew I was onto something.

That is when my teaching pedagogy changed. Gratefully, and with the full support of administration, I continued teaching high school art with mindfulness embedded throughout my curriculum. Today, I introduce preservice art educators to mindfulness so that they can understand firsthand how the practice benefits not only their own well-being and creative expression, but also the well-being and creativity of their future students. I wrote this book to share the many benefits of mindfulness and expressive arts practice with teachers and students everywhere.



Student work. Emily S., *Mindfulness*.