

Be the Hero of Your Journey

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Everyone is a hero at birth, where he undergoes a tremendous psychological as well as physical transformation, from the condition of a little water creature living in a realm of amniotic fluid into an air-breathing mammal which ultimately will be standing – Otto Rankⁱ

Overview

Diversity in our city is welcomed and celebrated. At this time, our country is thinking about its policy for accepting new immigrants and what to do with people who live here illegally. Students would benefit from learning about various cultural traditions and where they originated to better understand their similarities and differences. They will learn that in many traditions, there is a hero who has returned from his/her journey to share their experiences and insights. Heroes return from their journey in order to make changes within themselves and share their new insights and experiences with their family and community. Part of this journey includes the journey inward, to know thyself. Many heroes in religious traditions attain enlightenment – insights about themselves and the world around them that will help them to realize their mission in life. Students will connect their own journey with a hero's journey, which includes a cycle of departure, fulfillment, and return back into their everyday life with newfound knowledge.

From these hero's journeys, contemplative practices were developed to share with followers who were interested in reaching their potential as a spiritual being. Practices include connecting with God, Jesus, an Enlightened Master, etc. Students would also benefit from learning contemplative practices that would support their emotional and mental health. Students in Philadelphia are often tired, hungry, and quick to respond in anger. Many resist authority and question every instruction and direction. With the distractions they are exposed to, including technology, poverty, and insecure and changing home environments, students have a very difficult time focusing on their academics.

This unit will look at a few contemplative practices throughout the world, the effect of contemplative practices on the brain, and how to incorporate daily practices into the classroom. Students will learn that heroes follow general steps on their journey, which include the call, assistance along the way, a vision or enlightened insight, and returning back to the community to share what has been learned. Connecting their story with a hero's story will help students to understand that they play a role in overcoming obstacles in their lives.

Rationale

Students are having a very difficult time today in the classroom. Students in high-poverty urban settings have historically struggled to stay on grade level, to stay focused during instruction, to develop critical social skills, and to support their classmates in their learning. What teachers see are students who also struggle with responsibility and accountability. Students would benefit from learning that they can be the heroes in their story. By understanding the role students can play in their own lives, they can make choices in their learning and develop a growth mindset.

“A growing body of scientific research supports what contemplatives have known for centuries: mindfulness and meditation develop a set of *life skills* that allow children, teens, and parents to relate to what's happening within and around them with more wisdom and compassion.”ⁱⁱ

This unit will look at practices that will help students to take control of their bodies and their lives. Using breathing and mindfulness techniques, students will be able to experience the benefits that these practices have on their ability to calm, redirect and change their responses to outside unwanted distractions. It will give students time to reflect on heroes in the world, to practice common breathing and quieting exercises that will help to calm the body, focus their thoughts, quiet the overwhelming emotions, and time to write their own story.

Students in Fourth and Fifth Grade are between nine and eleven years old. They are becoming more and more aware of the world in which they live. Today children hear so much more through their phones and tablets about the world – much more than children did just 15 to 20 years ago. The stress of this knowledge along with having to navigate through their daily lives has had an effect on how they are able to process new information and skills including social skills. Students are quicker to react to what they perceive to be an affront, insult, or attack on their person because they are not completely present. They “half hear” and/or do not process efficiently what is going on around them, which causes confusion, disruption, and suffering. I plan on having students find out who they are and how they can use breathing exercises and mindfulness to improve school climate and culture. I plan on introducing exercises that will help students to understand how to be present in their daily lives and how to use breathing techniques to slow their heart rate and think before responding to others.

Objectives

This unit is intended for students in Grade Four. It can be modified for students in Grade Five. Students spend most of their day in a self-contained classroom. Each period is 45 minutes with a 45-minute lunch/recess period. Recess is approximately 15 minutes each day, weather permitting. They also have a prep or special period, once a day for 45 minutes. Preps included, art, gym, computers, and two literacy periods.

The Objectives of the unit will include the following:

- Students will explore heroes of their own traditions and other traditions throughout time
- Students will identify common hero traits and compare them to their own talents and skills
- Students will create personal stories inserting themselves as heroes using steps learned in the hero's process
- Students will research family contemplative practices through interviews
- Students will explore the effect contemplative practices have on the brain and analyze how they can benefit from consistent practice
- Students will explore contemplative practices for the classroom and for students' personal use
- Students will incorporate successful practices to be established as part of a daily routine
- Students will reflect on how these practices have made a difference in student's life.

Strategies:

This unit will include using experiential learning through breathing exercises, imagery, and journaling. Students will explore heroes in history, some famous and some not so famous. Students will compare and contrast stories and see that heroes generally heed an inner voice that seeks to make a change in their lives. Students will understand the value of taking responsibility for their words and actions.

Students will write their own story about their life journey, beginning with the understanding that they can be the hero of their story. They will experience imagery exercises that will help them visualize their story into the future with the understanding that they can do and achieve anything they want to if they put their mind to it.

Background

Many religious traditions have a hero. According to Joseph Campbell, a hero is someone who begins an adventure because they either feel that something has been taken from them or because they feel there is something lacking in their lives or in their community.

The person takes off on a series of adventures looking for what was lacking or to discover an “elixir of life.” Once found, he/she returns to their ordinary life bringing back with them new insights and/or the ability to change their circumstances and those around them. It is interesting to note that heroes have similar stories – a similar process that brought them back from their journey with new insights and in some cases, a new way of being. In Hinduism, there is Rama, in Buddhism there is Buddha, in Judaism there is Moses, and in Christianity there is Jesus, just to name some of the major figures in religion.

The hero’s journey has evolved as humans have evolved throughout time. While the actions of early culture heroes included slaying dragons and killing monsters, over time we find heroes like Moses who climbed a mountain, met Yahweh at the top, and came back with the Ten Commandments, which were new rules for a new society. More recent heroes include Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. who overcame many obstacles in the fight for Civil Rights in America in order to bring about change. Harriet Tubman left her home and journeyed North in hopes of finding freedom. Instead of fleeing to Canada to ensure her freedom, she reportedly made many trips back to the South to help over 300 slaves reach freedom.

In teaching students about the hero’s journey, it may be helpful to note the steps a hero takes on the journey:

- The journey begins when the hero receives a call to action. It could be a traumatic event or a direct threat to his safety. It could be as simple as a phone conversation but it ultimately disrupts the hero’s ordinary world and presents a challenge or quest that must be undertaken.
- The hero may have doubts or fear about taking the challenge. If the hero refuses the call, it may cause suffering or inner conflict. It may be that the challenge seems too big to handle and isn’t this the case with most of us? It is important for students to understand that heroes are reluctant and have the same fears they do.
- This is when the hero needs a guide or mentor who gives something the hero needs, a little push to take the challenge. It may be an object that will help the hero on his journey or an insight into the dilemma. This serves to help the hero dispel his doubts and fears about the challenge ahead.
- Once ready to act, the hero goes into the unfamiliar world, away from what he is comfortable with. It could be leaving home for the first time, traveling to a foreign land, or doing something that he was always afraid to do.
- The hero will be confronted with difficult challenges that test him along the way. It may be a person, a circumstance, or a place that become obstacles along his journey. He must overcome these challenges in order to journey towards his ultimate goal.
- Then, the hero confronts an actual danger and must make preparations before taking this leap into the great unknown. Doubts and fears may arise and the hero may need time to reflect in order to find the courage to continue.
- The hero now faces a dangerous test or deep inner crises in order to survive and continue to exist. This could be facing his greatest fear or a dangerous foe. The hero has to summon up all of his skills in order to overcome this difficult challenge.

- Once the challenge is successfully completed, the reward is transformation. The hero emerges as a stronger person, often with a prize (new insights, direction, power, or reconciliation with a loved one).
- When the hero returns home, the journey is not yet over as he returns a changed man to his ordinary world. As he looks forward to begin his new life, he decides what to do with his new found insights, knowledge or power. Should he keep it to himself or share it with others to help or guide them? Joseph Campbell would say this last step is important - what a Hero brings back with him, he shares with others to promote the common good. (Adapted from *The Power of Myth*)

What can we learn from heroes in our traditions, history, and literature? How can we bring their illuminations, insights, practices, and teachings to our students without teaching religion? From these heroes' teachings, practices were developed by followers to emulate their leader. As a teacher, we can focus on the practices, give background information if needed, that were in essence to help people not only find peace, love, and compassion for others, but can also help students gain insights into the role they play in their lives.

What makes a hero a hero? Otto Rank might say that our journey to this Earth is a hero's journey. Heroes are not necessarily just those who start a new society, bring hundreds of people out of bondage, or rescue people from a burning building. Each one of us can be a hero in our own story – we can rise above our circumstances and reach our potential in our lifetime. It takes mindfulness, courage, determination, and an inner knowing of who we are and what gifts and talents we bring with us. This is a powerful message that I want my students to have. Understanding that we have an important part to play in our story may help students take responsibility for their learning and the choices that they make in their lives.

Hinduism

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions that is still practiced today. Hindu teachings were passed down orally from one generation to another. Early Hindu teachers thought that dependence on writing was a sign of a weak memory, so teachings were not written down until the second millennium B.C.E. Today there are approximately 850 million followers, with approximately 800 million living in India. Hindus believe in an eternal spiritual truth called Brahman, from whom all existence comes. They believe the soul is eternal and lives many lifetimes – the soul is reborn lifetime after lifetime, which is called reincarnation. The Wheel of Rebirth is the belief that the soul moves up and down on the wheel as it incarnates. To “get off the wheel” one must solve life's basic problems to be released from karma – or actions. Action and reactions to life are important because they are linked to past experiences. When we accept responsibility for our behavior and learn from our mistakes, we are released from our Karma and gain freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

There has been the misconception that Hindus believe in many gods. Actually, Hindus believe there is one “Supreme Truth” which manifests in many different deities. The three functions of God are personified in Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer. Vishnu incarnates in human form in every age to teach the path

of religion and to show his love. Rama is one of these incarnations, which is very important to Hindus.

Rama

Rama is known as the seventh avatar of the god Vishnu, along with Krishna. In the Ramayana, the story of Rama unfolds. Rama's journey has been changed throughout the years. There are a few versions of the story – the one we are going to look at does not begin with Rama as an avatar of Vishnu. He is described as a hero whose virtues are taught and celebrated in the Hindu tradition. In the text, Ramayana, Rama is born of King Dasharatha and has two stepbrothers. Rama wins the hand of Janaka's daughter, Sita, in an archery contest. When Dasharatha makes preparation to anoint Rama as his successor, Kaikeyi, Rama's stepmother, decides to cash in on one of two favors given by Dasharatha. Kaikeyi wants her son, Bharata to be crowned in Rama's place. Rama decides not to seize the throne by force and he, Sita, and Lakshmana (Rama's other brother), settle into life as exiles in the forest.

In the forest, Rama and Lakshmana kill many demons, bringing peace to the area. One day a female demon comes to their dwelling and asks the two brothers to marry her. When they refuse, taunt, and mutilate her body by cutting off her ears and nose, she goes back to her brother Ravana, the demon king of Lanka and demands revenge. In the ensuing battles, Rama has to leave Sita with Lakshmana to fight Ravana. Lakshmana is lured away from Sita and Ravana disguises himself as a mendicant ascetic and kidnaps Sita.

Rama and Lakshmana go on a quest to find Sita and become allies with the monkey-king Sugriva. Sugriva and his lieutenant Hanuman search throughout the country for Sita. Hanuman leaps across the sea to Lanka and manages to find Sita. He makes his way back to Rama and informs him that Sita has been found. A war ensues and Ravana and his brother are killed in battle. After being rescued, Sita has to prove her chastity by undergoing a trial by fire. When she successfully completes the trial, Rama accepts that she has been faithful to him.

In the final section of the Ramayana, which some believed was added to the text later, Rama overhears a washerman abusing his wife for staying out all night. The washerman makes the comment that "he is not as big a fool as their king."ⁱⁱⁱ Again Rama doubts Sita's innocence and sends her into exile. While in exile, Sita gives birth to twin sons, Lava and Jusha and Rama eventually acknowledges them as his heirs. When Rama tries to reconcile with Sita, she refuses and calls on her mother, the Earth, who bears witness to her virtue. Sita sinks beneath the earth, never to be seen again. Afterwards, Rama leaves his body and takes his true form of Vishnu.

Rama's story is used to teach his followers the ways of virtue and right living. The Ramayana is still used as a teaching today.

Contemplative Practices

The Yoga Sutras explain different forms of contemplation, devotion, and ceremonies. There are three yogas or paths to Hindi spiritualism: karma, jnana, and bhakti. These practices include temple ceremonies, home pujas, bhajan singing, and ritual bathing. At

the core of Hindi philosophy is the idea that if we control mental activity through yoga activities, one can still the thought waves of the mind to let on know oneself as one really is – a part of, not separate from, God. One practice used to control mental activity is called Object Meditation. This form of meditation seeks to quiet the mind by bringing one’s awareness to the breath. By counting breaths ranging from longer than normal breaths, to shorter than normal breaths, one begins to quiet the body and the mind. The following chart shows the progression of this meditation:

Number of breaths	Counting breaths	Following the breath	Touching/feeling the breath	Settling
1				
3				
Normal breathing				
6	Change to 6->	Begin following to 6		
9	Start here, then change to 6 breaths ^	Lengthen the following breath to 9 ->	As you continue your practice, you can begin feeling the breath as it enters and exits your body->	Settling, awareness of breath without counting, following or touching- change to 6 counts or back to touching.

Begin by sitting straight with feet flat on the ground. Put your right hand into your left hand and bring your thumbs together, barely touching. Take two or 3 “normal breaths” as you relax your body. Then count to nine imagining your breath going into your body and filling and expanding your abdomen, then as you exhale count backwards from nine to one. After a minute or two of this count, change the breath to the count of six, and then back to a count of nine. Next, mentally follow your breath in filling your abdomen and exhaling out at about the same rate at a count of nine and exhaling slowly again. After a minute or two, change the “rate” to six or you can go back to counting. As you continue your practice, which would start at about five minutes a day, then you would go from counting and following to touching /feeling your breath. This is done by “feeling” where the air (breath) touches the inside of the nostril and feeling the sensation of your breath filling your abdomen. On the exhale, as your breath flows out of your body, feel where the breath touches your nostrils as it flows out. Settling, the last part of the exercise is where one is aware of the breath as it flows in and out but there is no counting, following or touching the breath. It is suggested that you build the practice from approximately five minutes each day to about 15-20 minutes per day. The chart shows you that you can go from counting to following, to touching, back to following, counting, etc.

Buddhism

An Indian prince, named Siddhartha Gautama, who was born in Lumbini, northern India, in 563 B.C.E, founded Buddhism. The Buddhist teaching is known as Dharma. These teachings include Three Universal Truths and the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths include: 1) everything in life may involve disappointment and suffering, 2) disappointment occurs because we long for things to be different; we want things we cannot have, 3) if we stop wanting these things, and enjoy life in spite of these disappointments, we can achieve happiness, and 4) the way to stop craving things we do not have, is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path, a series of steps that may lead to wisdom, practical action, and mental skill. Today, Buddhism is practiced in many Asian countries. Today there are about 350 million followers around the world.

Buddha

The “Buddha,” which is a title, not a name, gave up everything to seek out the truth about life. Siddhartha Gautama was born to a local ruler of the Shakya clan and grew up in comfort. At his birth, a wise man announced that he would grow up to be either a great ruler or religious leader. Because of this pronouncement, his parents kept him from seeing suffering hoping this would keep him from worrying about humanity’s burdens. He was well educated in the arts and was talented in sports. He married a local princess, Yasodhara, and seemed destined to rule.

He asks his charioteer one day to take him out of the palace to see the sights of the city. The sights he sees shock him: sick and old people, a corpse, and a holy man. He realizes that everyone is liable to suffer from these conditions: sickness, old age, and death. He decides to leave home and seek solutions to the problem of suffering in the world.

He wanders as an ascetic, and after seven years gave up this life because he did not feel he was any closer to finding an answer or solution to suffering. He eventually sat beneath a pipal tree, saying he would not leave until he had found the answer. After a night of temptations, similar to the temptations Jesus had in the desert, he is said to have become enlightened. In his desire to explain what he was enlightened about, Buddha shared his insights over the next 40 years by traveling around northern India teaching and organizing his followers, who then spread his message even further. The Buddha’s aim was to teach the way to understand and overcome suffering.

Contemplative Practices

Buddhists use similar meditation practices to the Hindus – focusing on the breath. Access concentration is called mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati), attainment concentration is known as cessation (samatha). Access concentration begins with the detached observation of natural respiration, without any effort to control the breath. The concentration comes from the mind as it focuses on the breathing in and breathing out of the body in an effort to slow the breath and relax the body. Attainment concentration goes beyond all sensory states – it is the complete one-pointedness of attention, a state of inner bliss and the overcoming of ego.

There are many different types of breathing exercises. The goal of the exercises is to develop a subtle awareness of the movement of the breath – the exact knowing of how

one is breathing in and out. In so doing, one may overcome the five hindrances: tiredness, agitation, craving, aversion and doubt. Then through attainment concentration, “one is pervaded by feelings of happiness and bliss.”^{iv}

Judaism

Judaism began around 1812 B.C., with the covenant or agreement between Abraham and God. Jewish people believe in one God who created the universe and follow the laws as passed down by Moses. Their most holy book is the Torah, which includes five books of the bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Talmud, another holy book, is a collection of writings and general laws of the Hebrew people. Ancient Israelites, the ancestors of the Jewish people, distinguished themselves from other ancient cultures through the worship of one God. The story of Abraham, a nomadic herder, entered in to a covenant with God in which God promises Abraham that his descendants will number the stars and he will possess the land of Canaan. Through sibling rivalry, Abraham’s grandsons, Esau and Jacob fight for their father’s, Isaac, birthright. With the help of Rebecca, their mother, Jacob outsmarts his brother Esau and receives his father’s blessing. It is Jacob (whose name becomes Israel) who became the father of twelve sons, who are the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. These tribes form the foundation of the Israelite nation that enters into a covenant with God, in which the Israelites are freed from Egyptian bondage if they continue observing God’s commandments.

Moses

The Israelites were living in Egypt at the time of Moses’ birth since the time of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers. The Egyptians set harsh rules for the Israelites and they experienced cruelty and hatred. The population of the Israelites continued to grow so Pharaoh ordered the killing of their little children. Moses’ mother, fearing he would be killed, made a little basket, covered it and placed it in the river where she knew Pharaoh’s daughters bathed. Sure enough the little “ark” was spotted and brought to the princess. He grew up among the Egyptians but kept his love of the Hebrew people.

Years later, Moses and his brother, Aaron, were told by God to go to the Pharaoh to tell him to let his people, the Israelites, go. In a series of 10 plagues, the Pharaoh would agree to let them go and then once the plague disappeared, he would change his mind. Finally, he let them go and this journey to their new land is the second journey Moses would take. (The first being placed in the river.) Even when they were let go, the Pharaoh sent an army to kill the Israelites. Moses was told by God to use his staff to part the Red Sea. Once the Israelites pass through, the sea comes back together, killing his army. The Pharaoh’s army was destroyed and the Israelites were finally safe.

The Israelites traveled for months and when they reached Mt. Sinai, Moses went up to the mountain to talk to God. He was given directions for the people. He went back up the mountain and stayed for 40 days and 40 nights. (Moses’ third journey.) God gave instructions on how the Israelites should live. Among these instructions were the Ten Commandments, rules for the Israelites to live by.

Contemplative Practices

Some of the Jewish Mysticism or contemplative practices include meditations by reciting hymns or psalms, by saying combinations of letters, which spell sacred words such as YHWH, Adonay, and Elohim. There are also breathing exercises in the Jewish tradition using letters of the Tetragrammaton. One must take each one of the letters of the Tetragrammaton, "...and wave it with the movements of his long breath (!) so that one does not breathe between two letters, but rather one long breath, for however long he can stand it, and afterwards rest for the length of one breath." ^v Breathing exercises are also used along with Hebrew letters, where one pronounces one Hebrew letter during the length of one breath and then through a series of steps, one extends the breath in accordance with the strength of the length of one breath or as much as you are able to extend it. Then one takes a breath between each of the letters.

Christianity

Christianity began with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary (Miriam in Hebrew) and Joseph (Yossef in Hebrew), a carpenter. Some sources say that Jesus was born towards the end of the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 BCE. Like Rama and Buddha, Jesus did not leave any written texts of his teachings. It would be left up to his followers to recount his teachings and record them in the Gospels. Jesus and his family were Jewish and Jesus was raised in this tradition. When he began preaching, his message was not to comply with Law but to love one's neighbors and enemies. He spoke of the coming of God's kingly rule and loving thy neighbor (and enemies) as thyself, not of following the strict Jewish Laws. Because of this he made many enemies and eventually was arrested, imprisoned, and executed by hanging on a cross. Christianity was born when his followers spread the news of his message and his miracles. Today it is one of the world's biggest religions, with about 2.2 billion followers worldwide.

Jesus

Jesus began his ministry when he was about 30 years old. After being baptized by John the Baptist, he began preaching about the kingdom of God approaching and the importance of repenting for one's sins. He journeyed for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert where it is said that he was tempted by the devil. He continued preaching and gaining followers throughout the region.

When he travels into Jerusalem, Jesus was not well received by the Jewish community. The Sanhedrin (the Jewish Court) wanted to execute him because he was a controversial figure – a troublemaker who threatened public harmony. The Romans, who wanted to promote a good relationship between the Romans and the Jewish people, arrested him. They took Jesus to the Sanhedrin, where he was charged and convicted of blasphemy and condemned to death. The Sanhedrin did not have authority to put someone to death, so Jesus was sent back to the Romans who ordered Jesus' execution.

Today Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead after his crucifixion and appeared to his disciples. They believed that Jesus was the Son of God and that he showed them there is, indeed, another life with the one, eternal, loving God.

Contemplative Practices

Christian contemplative practices do not deviate that much from the three religious practices we have looked at so far. There is the rosary, which are prayers that are said using a series of beads in groups of ten and are used to count the “Hail Mary” prayer to Jesus’ mother. In the late eighteenth century, the *Philokalia*, a collection of spiritual writings was published in 1782 in Russia. It included the Jesus Prayer, which is “(T)he union of the mind and the heart achieved through prayer, which often involved a particular posture and breathing techniques...”^{vi}

The Centering Prayer, which was traced to the contemplative prayers of the Desert Fathers of early Christian monasticism, encourages silence and a deeper connection to God. The Prayer includes sitting quietly, relaxing the body with eyes closed, choosing a word that supports an intention for the prayer, using it like a mantra-returning to the word when your mind wanders. The contemplative prayer is similar to the Centering Prayer in that they both choose a sacred word or sentence that promotes stillness, centering and opening to God. Included in the prayer are instructions for synchronizing your breath - breathing in while saying (in your mind) the first part of a sacred phrase or sentence, and breathing out while completing the sentence.

Mindfulness and Breathing Practices

The point of bringing to light the contemplative practices of these four religions is to show that throughout time, people have used breathing techniques to quiet the mind and become present in their surroundings. With advanced technology, scientists have been able to pinpoint the function of each part of the brain and what areas of the body and mind are affected by the brain’s ability to process and handle our fast paced society. In a 2016 study, researchers found that a group that practiced respiratory breathing exercises for 30 minutes were able to retain a newly learned motor skill better than a group that rested for 30 minutes. The study included testing subjects again after 24 hours – and the results showed that even after a day, the group that practiced the respiratory breathing exercises retained this information better than those that rested after learning a new motor skill.^{vii}

In an article entitled, “The Profound Effects Breathing Has on Our Body,” Tyler Ardizzone writes that how we breathe affects almost every part and process in our body including memory. He explains that our breath has an impact on our nervous system. Our nervous system communicates directly and indirectly with every cell in our body. Stress releases hormones called glucocorticoids that impair our ability to form and retrieve memories. I know that when my principal is observing me, I sometimes “go blank” or can’t remember what I was going to do or say next due to the high level of stress. Ardizzone explains that these hormones prepare the body to fight or run, not to come up with content information that was a part of my lesson. When we are stressed out and anxious, taking slow deep breaths will improve our brain function. When we are relaxed, our brain can access information and form new memories.

What does breathing practices have to do with heroes and their journey? What each hero had to do, what each hero seem to understand was the importance of the event or

situation they were confronted with. They had to take a look at what was going on inside and outside of their bodies. They had to decide they were not happy with their present condition and do something about it. Breathing and mindfulness practices, when used consistently, help to bring one's conscious mind to the present. It helps to quiet the mind and focus on an object such as the breath that brings our attention to the present moment.

Our students can learn how to use their breath to help quiet themselves and understand that if they can use their minds in order to quiet the body and help their brains function, these practices can have a positive impact in their learning and future lives.

Along with this new information, many books for adults and children have been written about the power of the mind, the importance of staying present in the moment (mindfulness), and the ways we can use our breath to help control our bodies and minds. One such book for children is entitled, *Master of Mindfulness: How to be Your Own Superhero in Times of Stress*. This book is written by fifth graders from the Reach Academy in East Oakland, California. It is a great book that explains what mindfulness is and techniques students can use to bring their awareness to the present moment and reduce stress in their lives. Just as they have made the connection between mindfulness and the breath to being your own superhero, so through my lessons, I hope to provide my students with the opportunity to understand the role they play in their life story.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One

Objectives: SWBAT identify character traits of known heroes IOT compare and contrast hero's stories.

Materials:

Journal books

Chart paper

Markers

Articles from local paper on heroes

Introduction:

Ask students to Think-Pair-Share: What makes a hero a hero? Share out answers.

Record on a chart the characteristics and traits that students share. Use accountable talk to allow students to discuss each other's ideas.

Model/Guided Practice

Find stories of "regular" people in your city or town who were called heroes because of their actions and share with students. Check the Hero chart – do they match or are they different? Discuss similarities and differences.

Independent Practice

Students start their journal book by reflecting on the heroes in their lives (family, relatives, friends, teachers, coaches, etc.) Share out either in small groups or partnerships. Identify any additional hero traits that come up during this discussion. Homework: Students will interview a family member to find out about heroes in their culture or religion.

Lesson Two

Objective: SWBAT find similarities and differences about heroes IOT identify hero's traits.

Materials:

Journal books

Chart paper

Markers

Post-it notes

Concept Web graphic organizer

Introduction:

Review first lesson and what students learned about hero's traits. Review list of traits that were identified in the first lesson. Ask students to work in pairs and have each student tell one of the stories they recorded from their family interview while their partner records it on chart paper. Post charts around the classroom.

Model/Guided Practice

Model for students reading a student's chart and using post-it notes to record a hero trait they see exemplified in the story. For example, if a hero saved someone's life, the teacher could write "courageous" on a post-it note and put it on the chart.

Independent Practice

Depending on student numbers, students could work in groups of 3-4 to identify traits on each chart. Develop a time limit for students to spend at each chart. If time is an issue, students could visit half of the charts. Students create a Hero's Traits web to identify traits.

Lesson Three

Objective: SWBAT explore how the breath helps to regulate their bodies IOT complete breathing mindfulness practices.

Materials:

Journal Book

Soft bell

Master of Mindfulness: How to be Your Own Superhero in Times of Stress
Introduction

Discuss/describe situations that heroes find themselves in – what words would you use to describe these situations? (scary, confusing, upsetting, stressful). Ask students to think-pair-share “How do you respond to stress?” Read aloud *Master of Mindfulness: How to Be Your Own Superhero in Times of Stress*.

Model/Guided Practice

Ask students to write a reflection of the book. Share out responses. Complete Script 1 on page 40, “Getting Ready to Practice Mindfulness.” This exercise is called, on page 6, “Calling in your Superhero.”

Independent Practice

Ask students to write about how this exercise helps them to call in their superhero. How could this practice help to become quiet and aware of their surroundings? In small groups, students share their experiences.

Lesson Four

Objective: SWBAT to use specific details and descriptions of their talents and skills IOT create a personal shield.

Materials:

Journal book

Soft bell

Master of Mindfulness: How to be Your Own Superhero in Times of Stress

Construction paper

Copy of shield outline

Scissors

Markers

Introduction:

Introduce the concept of using your breath as an object to focus on during a mindful practice. Share how many traditions use breathing exercises to quiet the mind and body.

Model/Guided Practice

Practice taking two or three mindful breaths. Model how students should sit during the exercise. (sit up straight, sit still, sit silently, shut eyes, soft breathing). Complete Script 3 – “Mindful Breathing Instructions” on page 43 of *Master of Mindfulness*. Students journal write their experience of this mindful breathing practice. Students will think-pair-share: what are the talents and gifts you bring to the world? Create a list. Introduce and show a model of a shield – symbols that reflect strengths and talents of a person.

Independent Practice:

Using construction paper and copy of an outline of a shield, students design a Personal shield of their strengths, interests, talents, and future dreams. Assess shields, which are divided into four sections, on student showing a talent, strength, skill or future dream.

Lesson Five

Objective: SWBAT evaluate symbols and descriptions of their personal shield IOT create a mind map.

Materials:

Journal Book

Soft Bell

Master of Mindfulness: How to be Your Own Superhero in Times of Stress

Student's personal shields from Lesson four

Introduction

Allow students to complete their shield, if extra time is needed. Ask students to write a description of their shield and why they chose their symbols. Students will share shields and descriptions in small groups. Post shields in classroom.

Model/Guided Practice

Complete Script 4 on 46 of Master of Mindfulness – Body Scan Instructions. Students will journal write their experience. Discuss how students felt about creating their shields. Students will create a mind map in their small groups. Model how to create a mind map by showing an example on chart paper or a Smart board. Like a concept web, students will **silently** create a web using “talents/skills of a Hero” as the center circle and each student will add a talent/skill.

Independent Practice

Ask students to begin to work on their mind maps. In their small groups from Lesson four, students will add to the web and respond to each entry that is made until the group feels it is complete. Post charts and discuss the variety of talents and skills that make up the students in the classroom.

Lesson Six

Objective: SWBAT identify steps in a hero's journey IOT organize their hero's story in a logical order.

Materials:

Journal Book

“My Hero’s Journey” graphic organizer attached
Hero’s stories from newspapers or history

Introduction

Introduce the Object Meditation under Hinduism-Contemplative Practices above. Have students sit straight, sit still, feet flat on the floor, and close their eyes. Explain to students that you will be counting in breaths and out breaths as they imagine filling and expanding their abdomens with their in breaths and imagining their stomachs contracting and emptying on the out breath. Do this for two to three minutes. Have students journal about their experience. The Object Meditation should be practiced each day in order for students to increase the time they focus on their breathing from 2 minutes to 5 minutes.

Model/Guided Practice

Introduce steps in a hero’s journey/stories of famous figures in religions (like those above) and/or stories of today’s heroes– compare and contrast. Using steps listed above, show and discuss common steps of the heroes’ journey. Introduce “My Hero’s Journey” graphic organizer and model how to complete it (you could outline a real experience you have had or a famous person has had to show students). The steps in the Hero’s Journey graphic organizer have been modified for 4th graders.

Independent Practice

Students complete “My Hero’s Journey” graphic organizer, which serves as an outline for student’s story. Allow time for students to complete.

Lesson Seven

Objective: SWAT identify steps in a hero’s journey IOT organize their hero’s story into a personal narrative.

Materials:

Journal Book

“My Hero’s Journey” graphic organizer attached

Master of Mindfulness: How to be Your Own Superhero in Times of Stress

Introduction

Complete Script 3 on page 43, *Master of Mindfulness* - Mindful Breathing Instructions. Students journal write their experience.

Model/ Guided Practice

In small groups, have students share their graphic organizers on their story. Discuss what steps of the Hero's journey they see in each other's stories. Share out in class. Students will use their graphic organizer to begin writing their story. Review elements of a personal narrative. Model how students will use their outline (My Hero's Journey graphic organizer) to write a draft of their journey.

Independent Practice

Students will begin working on their personal narrative of their Hero's Journey. Using their journal book, ask students to write a draft of their story using elements of a personal narrative.

Lesson Eight

Objective: SWBAT use elements of a personal narrative IOT write their Hero's Journey.

Materials:

Journal Book

"My Hero's Journey" graphic organizer

Chart paper or Smart board

Introduction

Choose one of the mindfulness/breathing practices introduced so far and complete with students. Have students journal write their experience and write about which exercise they liked the most.

Model/Guided Practice

Model using the "My Hero's Journey" graphic organizer to write a personal narrative. Elements of a personal narrative are: characters, setting, beginning, middle, ending, problem, and solution. Use your own story or a local hero's story to read aloud. Then complete one together on chart paper or Smart board. Keep model posted while students work.

Independent Practice

Students continue working on their Hero's Journey. When complete, ask students to share their story with the class.

Extension lessons:

1. Make a plan – How will you integrate the practices that worked for you in your daily life? Have students write how they will implement their "plan" each day. Share out in class.
2. Make a plan with students including how they will implement breathing/mindful exercises in their classroom, which exercises they will use, and how many minutes each day. Post in classroom.
3. Use Google Classroom to allow students to post their story. This will allow students to view each other's stories and comment on their stories.

4. Students will teach another classroom a contemplative/breathing practice including sharing personal experiences with their practice.
5. Introduce imagery to students – after a minute or two of Object Meditation, guide students to imagine what their life will look like five years, ten years, fifteen years from now. Ask students to journal what they imagined and discuss with a partner.

Annotated Bibliographies/Works Cited/Resources

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- Buck, Harry Merwyn. *Spiritual discipline in Hinduism, Buddhism, and the West*. Chambersburg, PA: Anima , 1981. Print. This book highlights some of the practices of Hinduism, Buddhism and more current western practices.
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- Greenland, Susan Kaiser, and Annaka Harris. *Mindful games: sharing mindfulness and meditation with children, teens, and families*. Boulder: Shambhala, 2016. Print. This book includes 60 fun activities that help children of all ages develop practices for quieting, focusing, caring and connecting.
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- Kohn, Livia. *Meditation works: in the daoist, buddhist and hindu traditions*. Magdalena, NM: Three Pines Press, 2008. Print. This books looks at the power of meditation

- through different traditions and the benefits to the mind, body, and soul.
- Lochtefeld, James G. *The illustrated encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Vol. 2. New York: Rosen Publ. Group, 2002. Print. This volume contains entries that define terms and concepts of the beliefs, practices and history of Hinduism. It includes the art, architecture, social groups, and geographical centers of the religion.
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- Salzberg, Sharon. *Loving kindness: the revolutionary art of happiness*. London: Shambhala, 1995. Print. This book shows readers how the Buddhist path of lovingkindness can help us discover the joyful heart within each of us, including guided meditation practices and breathing exercises.
- Snel, Eline, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and Mirjam Roest. *Sitting still like a frog: mindfulness exercises for kids (and their parents)*. Boston: Shambhala, 2013. Print. Simple mindfulness practices for children to help them deal with anxiety, improve concentration, and handle difficult emotions.
- Yadav, Goldy. *Deep Breathing Practices Facilitates Retention of Newly Learned Motor Skills*. 1st ed. Vol. 6. N.p.: Scientific Reports, 2016. Print. 11/14/2016. Page 37069. This study looked at the ability to retain a new skill with a control group and a group that completed deep breathing practices.
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Student Resources:

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<http://www.patheos.com/Library/Judaism/Origins/Beginnings> This website provides information on the beginnings of Judaism, along with information on sacred texts and historical perspectives.

http://www.ancient.eu/Jesus_Christ/ This website provides historical information on the life of Jesus of Nazareth, a religious leader who became the central figure in Christianity.

<http://www.primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk/religion/christian.htm> This website provides information on World Religions in an easy to read format.

<http://liveanddare.com/contemplative-prayer-and-christian-meditation/> - This website contains an article on different types of Christian Contemplative Prayers.

Appendix/Content Standards

The School District of Philadelphia is aligned to the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. The Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Social Studies/History for Kindergarten through Fifth Grade are integrated into the Reading Standards. Therefore, what are listed below are the standards that this unit will touch on:

CC 1. 2. 4. C. Explain events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in a text, including what happened and why based on specific information in a text.

CC 1.2.4. B. Refer to details and examples in text to support what the text says explicitly and make inferences.

CC 1.2.4. E. Use text structures to interpret information (e.g., chronologically, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution).

CC 1.2.4. L. Read and comprehend literacy nonfiction and informational text on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.

CC 1.4.4. M. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events.

CC 1.5.4. A. Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience in an organized manner, using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes. Speak clearly with adequate volume, appropriate pacing, and clear pronunciation.

ⁱ Campbell, Joseph, Bill D. Moyers, and Betty S. Flowers. *The power of myth*. Place of publication not identified: Turtleback , 2012. Print. Page 240.

ⁱⁱ Greenland, Susan Kaiser, and Annaka Harris. *Mindful games: sharing mindfulness and meditation with children, teens, and families*. Boulder: Shambhala, 2016. Page 1.

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- iii Lochtefeld, James G. *The illustrated encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Vol. 2. New York: Rosen Publ. Group, 2002.
- iv Kohn, Livia. *Meditation works: in the daoist, buddhist and hindu traditions*. Magdalena, NM: Three Pines Press, 2008. Page 42.
- v Eifring, Halvor. *Meditation in judaism, christianity and Islam: cultural histories*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2013. Page 104.
- vi Ibid, page 200.
- vii Yadav, Goldy. *Deep Breathing Practices Facilitates Retention of Newly Learned Motor Skills*. 1st ed. Vol. 6. N.p.: Scientific Reports, 2016. Print. 11/14/2016. Page 37069.

My Hero's Journey

Steps in the Hero's Journey	My Hero's Journey
1. Think of a time when something happened in your life that was very upsetting or dangerous. What was it?	
2. Who did you look for to help you? Was it a family member, relative, friend, teacher, or other adult? What help or advice did you get?	
3. Before you confront the situation, you must make preparations before jumping in. What steps did you take to prepare yourself for this challenge?	
4. The hero confronts the actual danger and faces his/her greatest fear. He remembers to bring with him his talents and skills in order to be successful. Describe how you confronted this situation and faced your fears. What talents and skills did you use to confront your fear or danger?	
5. Once successful, the hero is rewarded with his new insights, strengths, power and/or skills. What made this experience successful for you? What strengths, skills, or power do you feel you now have because of this experience?	
6. The hero goes back to his every day life and shares his new insights or knowledge with others. Who did you share this experience with? How has it helped them?	

