



GARRISON INSTITUTE

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AWARENESS AND CONCENTRATION IN TEACHING™ (ACT) PILOT PROJECT

Spring 2007

May 19th was a beautiful Saturday morning in Denver, the kind of morning that beckons everyone outside. Instead — and very much by their own choice — a diverse group of K-12 Denver Public School teachers attended the second weekend of Garrison Institute's Awareness and Concentration in Teaching™ (ACT) training. This two-weekend professional development training for teachers reduces teachers' stress and increases teachers' classroom efficacy by improving their awareness and concentration skills, with a particular focus on emotion understanding and regulation.

ACT was developed under the leadership of Patricia A. Jennings, M.Ed., Ph.D., Director of Garrison Institute's Initiative on Contemplation and Education and Professor of Child and Adolescent Development at San Francisco State University, ACT faculty and trainers Richard Brown, MA, Chair of Contemplative Education at Naropa University, and Christa Turksma, Psy.D., co-developer and trainer of the PATHS social and emotional learning curriculum, as well as Deborah Schoeberlein and David Rome of the Garrison Institute. The presentation of the Denver training was funded by the Impact Foundation and co-sponsored by the Colorado Education Association and Denver Public Schools. We are particularly grateful to the support and participation of Charles Elbot, M.Ed., the Director of the Denver Public Schools Office of Character and School Culture.

Envision the scene that Saturday morning: the teachers sit comfortably and fully focused, speaking and listening in small groups. They discuss how the awareness and concentration methods they learned during the first weekend helped them make positive changes in their life and work; they feel less stress and an improved sense of overall well-being. They share how the training helped them take control of their time — whereas they used to feel victimized by the constant demands of administrators', colleagues' students' and the students' parents, the teachers now recognize that they can make choices about how to spend their time. By relieving the feelings of pressure, stress and being (or feeling) overwhelmed, they are now more professional, responsive and effective. Rather than automatically reacting to challenging situations, they can now respond with awareness. By increasing their ability to recognize and regulate strong emotional responses, these teachers are learning to reduce emotional exhaustion and improve relationships with their students, colleagues and the school community at large.

The ACT Approach

ACT is unique in that it focuses on how the teacher teaches rather than on what he/she teaches. Thus, the approach generalizes to all academic content and infuses the ongoing social and emotional learning that occurs at school. Instead of adding on to teachers' responsibilities or students' work, the ACT approach provides teachers with concentration and awareness skills to maximize the benefit already present in their existing curricula. Practicing awareness and concentration facilitates self-regulation skills and the capacity for a calm, focused mind — a mind with the openness, responsiveness and sensitivity for optimal teaching, guiding, and learning. These resources can provide the inner strength to be powerfully present and emotionally responsive. As a result, teachers become more effective guides, and influential models of healthy social and emotional behavior.

ACT is designed to help teachers cultivate inner resources supporting their ability to deal with daily stresses and giving them the tools to provide the support their pupils need to overcome difficulties and flourish, socially, emotionally, and academically. The ACT training has the potential to dramatically improve classroom and school climate that we know from research contributes to positive developmental outcomes in children including academic achievement. The evaluation results of

the Denver training indicate that ACT supports teachers' enjoyment of teaching, thus enhancing their commitment to the profession and preventing burnout.

Because emotional exhaustion is a major contributor to teacher burnout, the ACT training introduces emotion skills training drawn from the most current understanding of the neuroscience of emotion and the work of Dr. Paul Ekman, a renowned emotion researcher and project advisor. ACT incorporates didactic instruction with experiential activities to help individuals understand, recognize and regulate emotional responses.

To support emotion regulation and to help teachers be fully present, ACT also introduces awareness and concentration activities developed by Professor Richard Brown of Naropa University. This series of activities begins with simple sitting meditation and develops into activities that bring awareness and concentration into the activities of daily living such as standing, walking, being present in front of a group and greeting others. Through these activities, teachers learn to bring this presence into the classroom and to curricular implementation.

To generate empathy and compassion, ACT introduces loving kindness practice and deep listening. During the loving kindness practice one offers well-being, happiness, and peace — first to oneself, then to a loved one, then to a neutral colleague or acquaintance, and finally to a person who one finds challenging. Deep listening is a powerful component of ACT developed by David Rome, Director of Initiatives at the Garrison Institute. An extension of Dr. Eugene Gendlin's focusing work, deep listening involves practicing listening deeply with the bodily felt sense, rather than with the mind that wants to analyze, interrupt, and offer solutions.

Results

The teachers completed an evaluation survey form at the conclusion of the training. The results of this evaluation were very positive. All of teachers rated the training as beneficial to their professional lives. According to one, the training was "the most valuable, personally rewarding and important class that I have ever taken."

The program evaluation results indicate that the training succeeded in helping teachers deal with the emotions of teaching:

“I will have the tools to stay calm, reflective, appreciative, joyful and grateful everyday which will help me interact positively with my students and colleagues.”

“Able to control my emotional demeanor with students, able to impart positive emotions to students.”

“Learning to recognize my emotion profile and emotional triggers.”

They also shared how the training helped them be more calm and present in the classroom:

“Being present with students, staff and self.”

“Being more grounded and focused – able to deal better with situations that arise that are uncomfortable.”

“Feel calmer about circumstances I cannot control.”

“I am learning to slow down – WAIT – respond rather than react. I am also taking better care of myself.”

One recognized that the activities were actually rather familiar:

“I found that I was already doing many of these things but not consistently and I was not paying attention to why and the possible benefits. Now I am more aware and paying more attention!”

They reported that the training improved their personal lives in many ways:

“I had a personal issue which seems to have resolved itself.”

“Able to better handle negative people and memories.”

“I learned to deal with my emotions and feelings in a more positive way. I believe that the loving kindness meditation will change my life completely in the long run.”

“Being able to meditate, not get upset easily, and calm myself down and I sleep better when I am calm.”

“Increased awareness – mindful and emotions.”

“I am a better listener to my family members.”

While the teachers reported all the training components as useful to their personal and professional lives, the highest rated activity was the loving kindness practice. Many teachers shared how this practice had changed how they related to the challenges they face while teaching. According to one:

“I am amazed how the exploration of loving kindness has changed my relationship with students. After focusing on the most challenging students in my “bad” class, things have started to change. This was the class that I used to dislike, grudgingly waiting for it to come every day, hoping that the challenging students may be absent. These feelings began to diminish as I used the loving kindness technique in private, and I think the students noticed the subtle change. I have been in a much better mood when this class arrives, instead of immediately being on the defensive and anticipating a problem. This has increased my use of humor and personal talk with the students. I am looking forward to using this technique more in the future.”

Next Steps

Clearly, the Denver pilot of Awareness and Concentration in Teaching™ was very successful. We are exploring opportunities to implement ACT more broadly in Denver and in other locations such as New York, Pennsylvania and the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition, we will present the training in a retreat setting at the Garrison Institute in Garrison New York this coming fall and spring. Finally, a research team from the University of Pennsylvania invited us to collaborate on an intensive neuroscience study to examine the effects of the ACT training on teacher and student cognitive function and school climate in a K-12 private school.

These projects will complete the field test phase for ACT and poise us to conduct a controlled randomized field trial to examine the effectiveness of ACT in improving classroom and school climate, teacher and student pro-social behavior, and student academic achievement. Our long term goals are to collaborate with school districts, teachers' unions and schools of education to fully integrate this type of training into teacher in-service training and teacher preparation.

Deborah Schoeberlein and Dr. Patricia Jennings are co-authoring a book entitled *The Contemplative Classroom* (Wisdom Publications, 2009). This book will serve as a companion to the ACT training and is poised to become the definitive work on the role of contemplation in K-12 school settings. Unlike any other resource, this book orients teacher renewal in the applied context of classroom teaching, promotes awareness and concentration at the interface of practice and science, and sets the ground to significantly enhance student-centered curricula. The *Contemplative Classroom* combines the lived expertise of mainstream educators with the most current research on attention and emotion and will support ACT participants in their continued application of awareness and concentration in their classrooms.

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