Literacy Instruction and the Learning Disabled High School Student: Ideas and Applications for a Mindful Classroom

Suzanne E. Kos

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Abstract


This thesis suggests that the emergent field of mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy can be a uniquely effective tool for use in the English classroom for learning disabled (LD) high school students. By first exploring definitions of difference and initiating a conversation about how we, as a society, conceptualize difference and how we provide literacy instruction for students who learn differently, this thesis advocates for a more complex and meaningful understanding of the difficult issues surrounding teaching literature and writing to LD high school students. The discussion then introduces some of the central tenets of mindfulness and contemplative practice and explores, first, some of its historical underpinnings and then, secondly, looks to some of its current applications in educational settings. An argument is made that the specific benefits of this type of approach—improved attention, awareness and empathy—are exactly the issues that seem to be most problematic for LD high school students. Because of this, mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy has unique potential as an effective strategy with LD students. Finally, this thesis explores how the high school English classroom, in its attention to both literature and student writing is an ideal site for such an endeavor. By teaching LD students to use reflection and other contemplative strategies while reading literary texts and doing writing assignments, educators can help students make meaningful connections between themselves and what they learn. Ultimately, this kind of attention and awareness fosters confidence and curiosity in students and helps them to engage more meaningfully not only with what they read and write, but also with the world they live in.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Literacy Instruction and the Learning Disabled High School Student: Ideas and Applications for a Mindful Classroom

By

Suzanne E. Kos

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THE LEARNING DISABLED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT:
IDEAS AND APPLICATIONS FOR A MINDFUL CLASSROOM

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Literacy Instruction and the Learning Disabled High School Student: Ideas and Applications for a Mindful Classroom

Introduction

For the past twenty years, my life as a teacher seems to swirl around a particular constellation of elements. First and foremost, I have been deeply interested in—and committed to teaching—a certain type of marginalized student, namely the learning disabled adolescent. The students I teach are legally classified learning disabled and receive at least part of their high school instruction in one or more special education classes. Their programs are guided by a locally developed and federally mandated IEP (individualized education program) document, which entitles them to a host of services and modifications aimed at addressing their individual needs and facilitating their access to an appropriate public school education.

Although not always the case, often my students are considered the difficult or problem students in the larger school community; they are the students who are at greatest risk of not graduating from high school and of not passing the state proficiency exam. They often get in trouble for behavior problems or attendance issues. They rarely participate in extra-curricular activities, usually receive some type of psychological counseling or other ancillary service and typically cost my school district approximately twice as much to educate as regular education students do. It would be fair, I think, to generalize that my students have been marginalized (in varying degrees) by a lack of success in typical educational settings and that they often experience significant behavioral, social and/or emotional problems in addition
to their academic problems. My work as their English teacher has always been concerned not only with helping them acquire the reading, writing and thinking skills they need to negotiate the rigors of a high school English curriculum and to pass the state proficiency exam, but also with helping them to develop the awareness and understanding they need to become confident teenagers in a difficult world.

For me, teaching and advocating for these students is a central element in my larger interest in social justice. Helping these students find and access their own academic and personal power and challenging systems that maintain and amplify existing inequities has been a backdrop to my work in the classroom. In an era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) this work has often meant fighting with administrators who seem myopic in their emphasis on standardized test scores and with my colleagues, who because of an educational climate that holds them responsible for their students’ test performances, have little impetus to teach marginal students. To make matters worse, neither the secondary English community nor the Secondary Special Education community has developed sufficient instructional models to adequately address the full spectrum of issues that affect my students, issues that seem to live in both milieus, but are owned by neither. The dilemma of how to alter educational contexts in ways that promote learning and foster intellectual confidence and curiosity in my LD students, while upholding rigid academic standards which are often at odds with their learning behaviors, has been an immutable concern.

With this thesis, I hope to initiate a conversation about the very specific work of teaching literature and writing to LD high school students. In Part I, I will suggest that any meaningful conversation about this topic must begin with a broad discussion
about difference; how we, as a society, provide education to learning disabled students has everything to do with both how we think about learning disabled students and how we think about the educational contexts in which we teach literacy. By looking closely at a number of theoretical constructs designed to re-position definitions of difference and illuminate issues around the acquisition of literacy, I hope to complicate existing paradigms and to advocate for a more complex and more meaningful understanding of how we think about students who learn differently and, just as importantly, how we think about the educational contexts in which we teach them.

In Part II of this thesis, I will refocus the conversation and explore how the emergent field of mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy holds particular promise for use with LD students. With the ideas outlined in Part I as a philosophical backdrop, I will suggest that any and all effective instructional strategies or practices with LD students must take into consideration the affective needs of these students. Because student confidence and efficacy, particularly at the high school level and even more so with LD students, is inextricably bound to academic performance, it is crucial to develop instructional models that go beyond academic proficiency and work toward true engagement and empowerment of these marginalized students. In this section, I will argue that the specific problems experienced by LD students (poor attention, lack of concentration, self-awareness and empathy) are the very qualities that are enhanced by certain contemplative practices, such as meditation, reflection and journaling.
Finally, in Part III, I will suggest that the secondary English classroom for LD students, in its attention to reading, writing and the individual student, is a uniquely appropriate site at which to implement the idea outlined in the previous section. By introducing LD students to meditation and reflection as a way to engage meaningfully with literary texts, educators can help students learn to sustain attention and recognize important connections between literature, history and themselves. Additionally, writing activities, such as journaling and process-oriented essays emphasize self-reflection and awareness and promote writing as a recursive act, in which students are continually revisiting their own writing for the purpose of revision. By helping students learn to train their attention and to help them experience reading and writing as a confident act of discovery, it is possible to create an academic context in which student understanding and empathy lead not only to increased confidence and efficacy, but also to improved academic proficiency. I will end with a brief discussion of my own modest experiments in the classroom and their implications for further work in this area.
If our nation’s recent emphasis on standards-based reform has taught us anything, it is that too many teenagers in the United States do not read and write at levels needed to be successful in today’s society. In fact, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and writing assessments indicate very little improvement in the development of literacy skills for the nation’s 13- and 17-year-olds in recent years. The most recent data on reading, for example, indicates that nearly a third (27%) of 8th grade students in the U.S. scored at levels below the basic level of proficiency, while a similar percentage (26%) of 12th graders do not demonstrate a fundamental ability to communicate in writing (Perie, Grigg & Donahue; Grigg, Donahue & Dion).

Although data specific to learning disabled students is scant, it is not a huge leap to infer that many of the significant numbers of adolescents who are struggling with reading and writing are learning disabled. For this reason, it is useful, I think, to consider briefly why literacy demands in high school are particularly daunting for LD students. To begin, it is essential to define the term learning disability itself. According to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD): “Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities.” In LD students, these “significant difficulties” usually become more pronounced as curricular demands become more sophisticated. When students move into high school,
academic emphasis in all areas shifts from literal to inferential comprehension and students need to become proficient with increasingly sophisticated vocabulary. Students also need to be able to call on content specific knowledge and to organize and retrieve semantic information, as well as address issues of basic and complex syntax. Additionally, because high school students typically move independently through their school day and, to some extent, guide their own academic programs by choosing their own classes, there is an increasing need for students to advocate for themselves and to seek help and information independently. Research suggests that LD students have metacognitive deficits that affect their self-awareness and self-regulation, inhibiting their own ability to independently troubleshoot and to develop strategies for guiding, monitoring, and directing their own success (NJCLD, 2008). According to this same research, LD students also tend to lack the sustained motivation and perseverance necessary to be successful in school-related tasks.

Clearly, then, these challenges are formidable during high school and they only seem to escalate with time. LD students are often inadequately prepared for the academic and social demands they encounter between high school and post-secondary settings and often drop out of high school at higher rates (32% compared to 9%) than the general population (U.S. Department of Education). Only 11% of students with LD, as compared to 53% of students in the general education population, attended a four-year post-secondary program within two years of leaving high school (National Longitudinal Study II). Because low achievement in literacy correlates with high rates of poverty and unemployment (Wagner), implications for the future for these students can be extremely discouraging.
In thinking about how to provide meaningful literacy instruction for LD high school students, it is crucial, I think, to consider some of the broad social and cultural implications of this work and to interrogate some of the assumptions on which they are based. How we think about teaching literature and writing to LD students is shaped largely by how we think about these students; but, it is also shaped by the conditions in which we do this thinking. How do we, as a society, conceptualize difference? How do we identify academic problems? Are they inherent in the student? Are they specific to the academic situation? Or, do they represent some interaction between the two? Furthermore, in identifying LD students for the purpose of helping them and providing them with individualized instruction, are we actually doing what we purport to do, that is, ‘leveling the playing field’ (by providing them with improved access) or are we simply ‘lowering the standard?’ In essence, how do we open the gate without lowering the bar?

At the heart of these questions is a phenomenon commonly referred to as the ‘dilemma of difference,’ a term which acknowledges the central contradiction between our society’s desire to identify children’s differences in order to provide for their individual needs and our society’s reluctance to label or isolate children and to treat them fairly, i.e.—the same. Philosophically speaking, the dilemma of difference rests on the central assumption that difference is linked to abnormality or stigma (Minow). Thus it has been assumed that “to be equal one must be the same and to be different is to be unequal or even deviant” (50). Furthermore, to acknowledge difference in any way creates the dilemma between preferential or equal treatment, accommodation or neutrality, separation or integration (Minow). It is easy to imagine
how the dilemma of difference has manifested itself in the consideration of many of our most difficult social and cultural problems. In educational contexts, it has been a pervasive tension. In special education laws and practices, specifically, the dilemma of difference can be seen clearly in the pendulum-like position swing in the debate about inclusion over the past decade. Should special needs students receive instruction in separate small group settings where their needs can be addressed individually by special educators or should they be always be included in mainstream settings with additional support from special educators?

Most recently, the problems surrounding these questions have been somewhat eclipsed by the educational practices resulting from NCLB and the national standards-based reform movement. Although intended to protect the interests of academically marginalized students by ensuring that all children in public schools receive quality education and meet appropriate standards, there is little space in its practice to entertain the complex questions surrounding the business of teaching and assessing students who fall outside the realm of typical learners. If we, as a society, want all children in our public schools to be accountable to the same standards, shouldn’t we provide them the same instruction—the same education? seems to be the question. And if we choose to provide students with individualized instruction to accommodate their differences or disabilities, how do we assess them fairly to make certain that they are meeting those same high standards. Educators, parents and the general public are deeply concerned that special needs students are not becoming educated enough and that, in the name of special education, schools are complicit in this problem.
This recent trend in American education notwithstanding, the dilemma of difference seems to be rooted in a very essential and universal problem which can be seen across cultures. In a recent article, Lorella Terzi looks at education in Great Britain and eloquently summarizes the issue: “The dilemma of difference consists in the seemingly unavoidable choice between, on the one hand, identifying children’s differences in order to provide for them differentially, with the risk of labeling and dividing, and, on the other hand, accentuating ‘sameness’ and offering common provision, with the risk of not making available what is relevant to, and needed by, individual children,” (444).

In practice, the questions arising from the dilemma of difference have manifested themselves in many different ways, but as mentioned earlier, probably most dramatically in the battle over inclusion. In my own work in a public school in New Jersey, I have seen dramatic shifts in perception and practice over the past few years. Most recently, for example, there has been a strong push to educate all special needs students in mainstream classrooms. In my public school in New Jersey, for example, this means that LD students are removed from special education classes, where they receive instruction (utilizing the mainstream curriculum) in small groups (eight-eleven students) from a special educator and moved instead to a mainstream setting, with a special education ‘collaborative teacher’ for support.

At times this type of supported mainstreaming is extremely effective, providing LD students the in-class support they need to be successful in the regular education classroom. This seems to be particularly true with history and science classes, especially when the regular education teacher is enthusiastic and innovative.
In this model, the collaborative teacher works closely with the mainstream teacher to modify instruction and assessment so that the learning needs of all students, and especially the LD students, are actively addressed. In the best cases—and there are many examples in my own school—the collaborative teacher and the regular education teacher work closely together to share strategies and information, often enhancing the practices of both teachers.

At other times, however, especially in English and Math classes, LD students are overwhelmed and intimidated in this new setting and instead of inspiring them to strive to be successful in a regular education class, the situation seems to compel them to shut down and reinforces their long-held belief that they do not belong there. Even if, with the help of the collaborative teacher, they manage to pass the class, they often do not engage actively in class discussions and never really seem to master the material—or their own learning issues—in a way that they might in class in which they feel more confident and empowered. In my experience, regular education teachers in Math and English (the tested subjects) are also often less than enthusiastic about the inclusion model. This is probably due to the fact that there is a tremendous amount of pressure on these teachers to standardize instructional practices and assessment in ways that mirrors the state test format, but which are completely antithetical to the innovative strategies and flexibility that seem to be most effective with LD students. In considering the practice of inclusion in my public school setting, my experiences suggest that the best solutions for teaching literacy to LD students involve some combination of these two approaches, with an understood flexibility and fluidity between the two. Because student needs and learning behaviors are rarely
completely linear or predictable, it seems imperative that our schools become more responsive and flexible, even if this means being critical of the most current educational models and ideologies.

Subsumed in the problems arising from the dilemma of difference is another issue and one that is also understood and debated in terms of an unfortunate binary: How do we conceptualize difference and disability? And more specifically, how do we conceptualize literacy disability? According to C.Addison Stone, differences in literacy and language skills are conceptualized within two general frameworks. The cognitive scientific view conceptualizes individual differences as an inherent variation in the linguistic or cognitive processing capacity of an individual (5). Often described as a ‘difference as deficit’ perspective, this framework assumes a processing or cognitive deficit within the student that leads to difficulties in typical educational settings. Most current educational practices and pedagogy are premised, in large part, on this model.

On the other hand, the socioculturalist perspective, according to Stone, asserts that variations in reading, writing and speaking skill acquisition represent a difference in the pattern of cultural practice within communities, suggesting that learning differences say more about a culture than they do about an individual (7). This perspective suggests that while learning problems or difficulties are often ascribed to the learner, the real problems lie in the inability of the school to accommodate difference or diversity. As with the conversation around the dilemma of difference, this debate seems to rage around two diametrically opposed views: one that sees
disability as caused by individual limitations and deficits and the other that sees
disabilities as being caused by the limitations and deficits of schools.

In recent years, thoughtful responses to these questions have begun to emerge
and most are rooted in a kind of broadening of our definitions and a willingness to
entertain the best arguments of both camps. Stone argues that difference is complex
and multidimensional and calls for a more hybrid conceptualization. Instead of
adhering to a strict deficit model when thinking about difference, he argues for
thinking about differences as variability, rather than disability. "One can believe in
the existence of neurocognitive deficits...but choose to focus one's efforts on
identifying and fostering the strengths of an individual rather than lamenting the
weaknesses" (15). This is critical because while it acknowledges that there may be
biological or neuropsychological differences within a student, those differences do
not necessarily constitute a disability. Instead, the disability arises from the
interaction of child and school and only when that difference is not accommodated
does it become a disability.

To illustrate this point, it might be useful to consider how many traditional
high school English classrooms work and to point out how this instructional model
might not accommodate the different learning styles of the LD student. At the risk of
oversimplifying, it is fair, I think to generalize that many high school English
classrooms utilize a traditional model, in which the teacher stands in front of the class
and proffers information about literary texts that students were assigned to read
independently. Students are expected to take notes, participate in discussion and ask
meaningful questions. For this model to work well, students need to be able to read
independently, listen actively, understand and integrate new information into existing schemas, and formulate meaningful comments and questions.

If, like many LD students, a student has difficulty with one (or more) of these cognitive tasks, this model can be extremely problematic. And most LD students do have difficulty with one or more of these tasks; in fact, by its very definition, the term learning disability denotes difficulty with communication tasks, such as listening, speaking and reading. LD students often have documented weaknesses with cognitive functions like ‘auditory processing’ or ‘visual integration.’ If an LD student does not have the cognitive capacity to make meaning from spoken language, how can she be expected to be successful in a classroom which relies almost exclusively on this mode of instruction. Similarly, if an LD student does not have the ability to sustain attention and glean meaning from the independent reading of literary texts, how will she learn anything from a lecture which is premised on the assumption that she has?

But, as Stone suggests, these differences are only disabling if they are not accommodated. English classrooms can utilize traditional lecture formats, but they can also incorporate other strategies into the instructional repertoire. In small-group discussions about a literary text, for example, students rely more on interactive communication, in which they are continuously being required to ask questions, paraphrase other student’s comments and in general, actively seek out the information they need to construct meaning, rather than just trying to make meaning from the one-way processing of auditory information. Another meaningful alternative to the traditional lecture format might be to regularly incorporate oral reading activities into the classroom. In this model, literary texts (or portions thereof) are read aloud with
frequent stops to clarify meaning, check student comprehension and to scaffold critical thinking skills. In this model, the teacher has the opportunity to make her own discrete interpretive processes transparent for those students who do not possess such skills. Furthermore, this approach can be extremely useful in providing effective differentiated instruction. Because student comprehension levels, particularly in public high schools, are never really standard or uniform, it is vital that teachers approach literary texts with an understanding that some students may glean only a literal comprehension of the text, but that this doesn’t necessarily preclude the teaching of higher-level critical thinking skills of the same texts at the same time.

In addition to interrogating the routine use of traditional instructional models and actively incorporating practices that address the needs of diverse learners, there are a number of other ways to transcend the ‘difference as deficit’ model. Like Stone, Terzi looks ‘outside the box’ for new models that blur the lines between existing paradigms and are rooted in positive models of difference, rather than deficit models. The capability approach is a philosophical framework, rather than an educational or psychological model, and was developed by Amartya Sen, an economist and philosopher, as a normative framework for assessing poverty, inequality and the design of social and cultural institutions. According to Terzi, the capability approach “claims that social arrangements should be evaluated in the space of capability, that is, in the space of the real freedoms people have to promote and achieve their own well being” (445). Terzi argues that the capability approach is a meaningful way to reconceptualize disability because it asks us to consider learning problems in the context of the social and cultural arrangement of schools. At the heart of her
discussion are a number of questions, including: How do schools limit or empower students? How can we change them so that they are more socially just and educationally useful for LD students.

The capability approach explains how individuals achieve their own happiness in terms of "functionings" and "capabilities." Functionings are explained as the "beings and doings that individuals have to value" (Terzi 449). Examples of functionings are things like reading, being well-nourished, being educated or having self-respect. Capabilities, on the other hand, might be understood as the real opportunities or the agency people have to achieve these valued functionings.

When applied to the understanding of impairment and disability, Terzi maintains that the capability approach yields two main insights: First, it repositions disability as just another aspect of human diversity. Students who learn differently should be considered and understood in terms of a broad spectrum of personal heterogeneities, rather than in a right/wrong or good student/bad student dyad. Secondly, in evaluating disability or impairment, there should be an increased awareness of a student's relative advantages or disadvantages and, just as importantly, an understanding of the relevant freedoms that that student possesses or needs to possess to achieve her own success. Viewing the issue through the lens of the capability approach enables us to think of this as a matter of social justice, Terzi believes.

What this suggests for our discussion of conceptualizing difference is that disability emerges from neither the functionings an individual may possess nor from the capabilities an individual exercises, but rather from the interaction between the
two. In terms of educational practice, this is the space where a student interacts with school and the space at which that student has the capability (freedom and ability) to convert resources (instruction) into functionings. Underlying the entire enterprise is the idea that none of these elements is fixed, not the student’s difference/impairment, nor the resources she is exposed to, nor the ability she possesses to utilize these resources. Instead there should be a flexibility and responsiveness that is rooted in the understanding that all these elements are equally important and that their interrelationship is critical to any positive outcome.

In her discussion, Terzi offers the example of dyslexia. She makes the point that dyslexia, when considered independently meets the criteria of an impairment that could affect functioning and constitute an identifiable disadvantage for a student, i.e.—a disability. She also makes the point, however, that this impairment is not an absolute disadvantage and that when an educational setting is reconfigured to address dyslexia, it becomes a relational limitation rather than a permanent disability. The capability approach requires us to consider how schools are guilty of turning impairments into disabilities if they do not work actively toward practices that address these impairments. On its own, dyslexia should not be considered a disability, but rather an example of the endless diversity of the human condition. It only becomes a disability when schools are unable to accommodate its presence and help student’s unlock the freedom and capability to convert resources into functionings.

Like Stone’s notion of difference as variability rather than disability, Terzi’s use of Sen’s capability model works to resituate the conversation about how we conceptualize difference and disability and in doing so, argues for more complex and
meaningful definitions. Both authors lament the strong divide between the social theorist and the cognitive scientist perspectives and advocate for research and practice that works across theoretical, epistemological and methodological boundaries in an effort to tie together existing knowledge and theory.

To this point, my conversation has focused on how we, as a society, define and conceptualize difference and disability, particularly with regard to literacy. I have moved between the central questions and problems that surround this issue to the broad conceptual paradigms that frame it. Now I want to shift the conversation and focus more closely on the theoretical concerns that surround the specific business of teaching literature and writing to LD students.

Again, the conversation probably begins with a binary. Although there are a great number of pedagogies and theoretical constructs designed to answer the pragmatic question of how to teach LD students, most fall into one of two major categories: First, there is the reductionist model or direct instruction model, which basically assumes that most information or learning processes can be broken down into specific skills, which can then be taught, drilled and assessed. Many of the strategies and materials used with basic skills and special education students in contemporary education models are created with this premise in mind. Materials like abridged literary texts simplify language and abbreviate chapters so that students can glean content without having to negotiate the author's original language, which may be too difficult for them. This approach assumes that there are gaps in student knowledge and ability or differences in their processing speed and that by breaking
down these complex processes and problems into more manageable steps, in a more manageable time frame, these gaps can be eliminated and proficiency achieved.

The direct instruction model or reductionist model has been criticized for not taking into full account the complex nature of learning and of not being interested enough in true engagement and in student-constructed knowledge. Mary Poplin, an author and professor of education, who has written extensively about marginalized students and educational theory and practice suggests: “A diet of primarily reductionistic teaching is a poor one because while we are drilling too much on things that can be reduced, (a) students may not be connecting these small skills to anything they already know (schema or funds of knowledge) and (b) students are not being engaged in issues that cannot be reduced, such as purpose, justice, ethics, goodness, sacrifice and commitment” (Recollections 159).

The second theoretical paradigm framing the ‘how to’ question of teaching LD students is the constructivist model, which emphasizes utilizing a student’s prior knowledge and understanding to create new knowledge. Constructivism can be thought of as a descriptive theory of learning and suggests that students construct their own new understandings, based upon the interaction of what they already know and believe, and the phenomena or ideas with which they come into contact (Richardson 3). Poplin describes a constructivist approach as “working from what our students bring” but emphasizes that “while that is appealing and necessary, it is not nearly enough” (Recollections 160). Poplin warns against an oversimplification of the controversy over whether to teach students a specific set of skills or concepts or to teach them to construct their own meaning and advocates, instead, for a blend of the
two pedagogical stances. She writes: “Students need both. Teachers teaching primarily skills can leave students functioning at a low conceptual level; however, overemphasizing the construction of personal and political meanings leaves students without necessary skills and common knowledge. Students may have creative ideas, but they must also be highly skilled in the mechanics of spoken and written languages to communicate them effectively” (Merging Social Justice 32).

In my own experience teaching English to LD high school students, I have noticed a paradox surrounding this issue and it is one that makes my work both much more interesting and much more complicated. The students I teach often have interpretive insights and inferential comprehension skills that far transcend their mechanical reading and writing skills. A brief example, and one that I have seen dozens of times over the years, is when I have a student with far-below-grade-level reading fluency and word attack skills who slowly and clumsily reads a text aloud, but then demonstrates (in discussion) extremely high-level inferential comprehension or surprisingly original and intuitive insights about the text. I have seen a similar disparity in the different aspects of my students’ writing. Oftentimes, their mechanical skills are extremely underdeveloped and yet the quality of their actual content and organization far exceeds grade-level expectations. Although I’m not certain of the reason for this paradox, I am certain that it informs my work in the classroom by reminding me of one of Poplin’s central points and that is that literacy is not built on a predictable or linear skill continuum and that the best instructional practices probably incorporate both constructivist strategies, as well as direct skill instruction.
Like other aspects of this conversation, it is useful, I think, to broaden this debate to consider it in terms of social justice. Without embarking on a full-scale discussion about the conflated issues of racism and classism, it is well documented that children of color are overrepresented in special education (Artiles; Cousin et al.; Ortiz; Poplin), which means that it is impossible to consider what approach is best for the LD student without considering what is best for students who have also been marginalized by other factors such as race and class. Lisa Delpit, among others, has suggested that all marginalized children, but particularly children of color, need to have explicit skill instruction to participate meaningfully in the dialogue taking place in a constructivist setting. Poplin elucidates this point when she writes: “A lack of balance, in either direction, results in much more serious consequences for children of the poor. Where as middle-class students tend to learn some of these skills implicitly from parents and others, poor children often lack opportunities afforded those with more resources” (Merging Social Justice 32).

In my own experience in the classroom, I realized some years ago that, despite my personal aversion to direct skill instruction and more specifically to the kind of direct skill instruction that might be called ‘teaching to the test,’ the state test was a reality for my students, many of whom are also marginalized by other factors, and that the best way I could help them was to teach them the skills they needed to pass it. This has sometimes meant choosing direct skill instruction over what I consider to be more meaningful literacy activities, but it has also meant that most of my students pass the test. Ultimately, like Poplin, I have chosen a pragmatic course in which I am constantly trying to balance my commitment to real learning with the practical
business of test preparation. And, while the questions of whether direct skill
instruction or constructivism is best or whether testing is a sociopolitical construction
or not are valid, ultimately, to the students in front of me, they are just hurdles to get
over so that they can work toward their destinies. One of Poplin’s student teachers
probably said it best with this poignant remark: “You know what, it is not oppression
to teach children their alphabet” (Merging Social Justice 29).

But what does this all mean for the LD student? And more importantly, what
does this all mean to the LD student? Oddly enough, there have been very few studies
devoted specifically to exploring the perceptions and experiences of the LD student
from the perspective of those students themselves. A recent study, however, utilized
the internet as a way to access the ‘inner voices’ of children with LDs (Raskind,
Margalit & Higgens). Premised on the notion that children would exchange honest
communications about topics of personal significance and interest in the relatively
safe and anonymous space of the internet, this study created a ‘virtual, but authentic’
online community and invited LD children to share insights. In all, 164 self-identified
LD participants wrote nearly 5000 e-mails to each other. According to researchers,
six major themes emerged: LD identity, disclosure of academic difficulties, disclosure
of emotional attitudes, disclosure of social/interpersonal issues, asking for help and
positive LD (259). Although much of the data in this study reflects what has already
been well-documented about LD students (that is, that they experience a host of
difficulties in addition to their learning problems) researchers suggest that because of
the firsthand nature of the data, as well as the method by which it was collected, it has
several implications for practice.
First, according to the authors of the study, it is clear from the messages written by the children that they struggle with more than just academics and that those ‘voices’ might be particularly potent in educating and sensitizing educators and counselors. Secondly, research has suggested that individuals with LD are more likely to have positive life outcomes when they seek and accept support offered by others (265). The authors of this study point to some children’s hesitancy or unwillingness to ask for help in the school setting contrasted with their apparent willingness to request and receive help on this website. And this, researchers suggest, might be invaluable for a myriad of reasons. Alluding to research on peer tutoring (Topping) that documents that providing help may be as beneficial to the helper as it is to the person receiving help the authors of this study contend that LD students, because they are often the recipients of assistance, rarely experience the pleasure and satisfaction of assisting others. The study has positive implications for future educational projects that explore the possibility of using the internet as a safe and appropriate site for LD students to provide support and help to other LD students (265).

In another study, this one an action-oriented qualitative study based on the high school and college experiences of a small sample of learning disabled students, researcher Catherine Luna also sought to put the voice of the student at the center of her conversation. In conducting intensive interviews with five students and writing about the specific experiences of two of those students, Luna hoped to focus her conversation on the real experiences of students who have been labeled deficient but have succeeded in certain academic situations, suggesting that they may hold the key to illuminating needed changes in literacy teaching and assessment practices.
Students in her study described frustrating and demoralizing encounters with random external time limitations and narrowly defined assignments, practices that did not allow them to demonstrate their learning strengths. "The assumptions that inform these practices are equally problematic," Luna writes, "These include the notion that the same instructional and assessment practices are appropriate for all students and the idea that when students do not succeed with these practices, the fault lies entirely within the students" (602).

One of the most powerful ways to help diverse learners succeed, according to the students in her study, is to challenge the standardization of traditional academic practices—that is to remediate academic contexts—rather than label, remediate or even accommodate students. By employing pedagogy and practice that regularly value diversity and embrace a wide array of learning behaviors and activities, teachers can help students avoid, from the start, a mismatch between their talents and academic expectations. A student’s struggle with certain academic demands—such as narrowly defined assignments or externally imposed time limitations—should not be interpreted as a symptom of student failure but rather as an indication that there is a need for a thoughtful interrogation of the teaching and learning going on in that classroom.

Another way to remediate the academic context instead of the student, is to create and employ more flexible grading practices and to try to re-imagine assessment altogether. Students in this study expressed great frustration about grading practices that seemed to be more rooted in competition and convenience than in learning. They noted the rare instance of grade flexibility in their own academic experiences and
viewed the educators who they identified as flexible as being much more invested in student learning than other less flexible teachers.

As discussed earlier, the standardizing practices that seem to accompany NCLB mandates create significant challenges for educators who are trying to re-imagine their own grading practices. As alluded to earlier in this discussion, the high school English classroom, in particular, where the always-looming state proficiency test seems to impel teachers toward assessments that replicate the state test format, there seems to be little space for more creative and meaningful grading practices. Nonetheless, to teach LD students effectively, educators must prepare their students for the test and marshal the freedom and confidence to incorporate nontraditional instructional and assessment practices into their own pedagogies. Examples in the English class for LD students would include abandoning multiple-choice test formats, (except when working on explicit test preparation), in favor of more meaningful essay or short answer tests and eliminating external time limits for writing assignments. As mentioned earlier, educators can interrogate the way they deliver instruction and try to incorporate day-to-day practices that acknowledge that all students do not learn in the same way. If educators can keep the broad learning goals, such as comprehension and writing competency, in mind at all times, it is not necessary to adhere strictly to the kinds of traditional practices that alienate LD students and undermine their confidence and success.

Finally, students want to have a voice and in the Luna study, indicated that the single most important strategy for remediating contexts is for educators to listen to learners. Educators often make the mistake of thinking they must have formal
systems that use predetermined individual instructional strategies for each LD student. Instead, the findings of this study suggest a more realistic and productive—and ultimately more empowering—approach might be for educators to simply make room for student voices in the classroom dialogue. By inviting marginalized students to simply talk to educators and articulate what they think they need to succeed, educators can learn from diverse learners and hopefully expand their own definitions of what constitutes learning and maybe even re-imagine new ways to demonstrate that learning.

Luna’s findings suggest that the term learning disabled is a social category indicating a mismatch between a student’s ability and specific academic demands (597). Luna suggests that conventional notions of academic literacies are conflated with literacy in general and that, as Lisa Delpit (1986) points out, reflect the norms and practices of the culture of power; thus leaving out in the academic cold a large number of non-mainstream individuals and cultures. In high schools and universities alike, Luna asserts, this thinking of difference as deficit ends up locating the need for change within the student, rather than in the institution. This results in an unfortunate limiting of “the diversity of abilities and backgrounds of high school and college graduates, thus constraining our societal vision and potential” (597).

Although this study is limited in its narrow sample size, it offers a couple of important insights: first, that students—and especially those who are academically marginalized either by a learning disability or by some other factor—benefit greatly from believing they have a certain degree of power over their academic experiences and confidence that they can succeed in those experiences; and secondly, in thinking
about how to conceptualize disability and develop both pedagogy and practice that is effective and appropriate, it might be useful first to think of these learners as *different* instead of *deficient*. To be invested in helping these students reach their potential is to be invested in a more diverse—and more dynamic—learning community. When we stop labeling and remediating and accommodating these students, we relocate the problem to the site of our own institutions, our own classrooms—our own pedagogy. If we, as educators, can own the problem, we can fix it. Some useful ideas for this remediation include altering our instructional practices and classroom activities to embrace a wider variety of learning styles and behaviors, reimagining evaluation practices and creating space in our own pedagogy to learn from academically marginalized students.
Part II
Mindfulness and Contemplative Practice

Although there are a number of explicit instructional strategies and techniques used to teach writing and literature to LD high school students, all seem contingent on one important element: facilitating a student’s ability—and willingness—to engage with and sustain attention to the work in the classroom. Sometimes this is a matter of helping a student overcome a neurological or cognitive condition that prohibits that student from adequately attending to academic tasks. Other times, it is a matter of altering the educational context—the way we provide instruction—in a way that makes it more compelling or meaningful to the student. Most often, however, it is some combination of the two.

My interest for this part of the discussion is twofold: First, I’d like to suggest that any meaningful discussion about how to teach literature and writing to LD high school students must first take into account the full range of affective issues experienced by these students, issues that often lead to a number of very specific learning and social problems. Secondly, I’d like to explore how the emergent field of mindful pedagogy, because of its unique and specific benefits, might be a singularly powerful tool in addressing some of these issues.

Although the problems experienced by LD students are by no means identical in all students, there do seem to be a particular constellation of learning and social behaviors that are common and pervasive, and are often described in the academic literature as “enduring and unique” (Deshler). Those behaviors include: poor attention and concentration, impulsivity, underdeveloped problem-solving ability, poor
organizational skills, weak knowledge base and a pervasive lack of confidence, motivation and insight. Additionally, children with LD experience lower popularity, more peer rejection, and increased neglect by peers than do their non-LD classmates (Bryan; Wong). Significant associations have also been consistently obtained between learning disabilities and behavior problems and various studies have supported this view (Johnson).

For many reasons, some obvious, some not, LD students may also be at particular risk for what educational psychologists have come to term achievement stress. The emotional and physical discomfort of a stress response, especially in LD students, can manifest itself in many problematic learning behaviors. Unpleasant sensations of anxiety (cold, sweaty hands, butterflies in the stomach, fidgeting) distract attention from cognitive tasks and can cause a student to feel panic and anxiety. Stress can also trigger a flight response leading to “rushing errors” or can create an avoidant response in which the student chooses not to do something rather than to fail at it (Rubenzer).

Other researchers discuss this set of learning behaviors and social function from a neurological standpoint. The question of how neuro-biological conditions and educational interventions interact within a student is one that has important implications not only for that student’s competence in learning situations, but also for that student’s long-term psychological health. Research suggests that students suffering from LD are often at greater risk of developing neuropsychiatric disorders later in life. Factors that contribute include: behavior problems that are the result of abnormal brain activity, heightened exposure to failure, anomalous personality
development, adverse family reactions, negative self-image and treatments that restrict normal activities and socialization (Anand). Other research confirms that the pervasive problems experienced by LD adolescents during school years usually continue into adulthood sometimes causing psychological or psychiatric problems as well as a perceived lack of satisfaction with their lives (Baum et al; Polloway et al; Spreen).

When one looks closely at the LD high school student, then, it seems clear that the cognitive difficulties they experience in acquiring certain academic skills and knowledge is only a small part of the problem. I would like to suggest that the enduring and unique characteristics of the LD adolescent learner, many of which I alluded to here, are often amplified or maintained by current thinking and practice. If schools are to adequately address the full spectrum of issues impacting the LD student, educators need to develop instructional strategies that take into account the problems experienced by these students.

In the English classroom, how do we develop instructional strategies that go beyond explicit skill instruction and effectively help LD students cultivate and sustain attention? How do we help build confidence and curiosity in these students? How do we undo years of damage to their self esteem and help them to become both academically proficient and socially adept? These questions have pervaded my work with LD high school students and while I realize that there are no simple answers, I do think there are some promising ideas to be gleaned from alternative approaches. Mindfulness and contemplative practice, in particular, seems to hold unique promise for use in settings with LD students. For numerous reasons, many of which I will
outline in the pages to come, mindfulness practice may be uniquely appropriate for use with LD students in the high school English classroom.

Mindfulness or contemplation is the act of consciously attending to the present moment without purpose or judgment and has been a crucial element in many of the world’s wisdom traditions for centuries. Despite this, its applications in the West are very recent and in the Western classroom, even more recent. If one had to locate a point at which these ideas first intersected with mainstream American culture, one might begin with Jon Kabat-Zinn, whose work with medical patients in the late 1970s illustrated a dramatic point: Meditation can help reduce stress and improve health. Kabat-Zinn’s work at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and his subsequent founding of The Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare and Society gave clinical credibility to an approach that, despite its thousand-year-old tradition in most of the world, was still considered unconventional here in the United States.

Although many of the terms used to describe this work are used interchangeably, mindfulness seems to be the overarching principle and is defined by Kabat-Zinn as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally” (2). Sylvia Boorstein, prominent in the field and the author of a number of books on meditation and mindfulness, writes that “mindfulness, seeing clearly, means awakening to the happiness of the uncomplicated moment” (3). Subtly different definitions abound but I choose to understand mindfulness simply as paying complete attention to the present moment. Likewise, contemplation can be understood as “a third way of knowing that complements the rational and the
sensory” (Hart 28); similarly, contemplative practices are techniques or acts involved in practicing mindfulness. For the purposes of this discussion, the terms mindfulness and contemplative will be used interchangeably and will be interpreted broadly to include any approach which seeks to cultivate a capacity for understanding or knowing through an increased inner quiet or stillness.

At the center of most mindfulness approaches is the act of silent meditation, in which individuals close their eyes, concentrate on their own breathing and attempt to eliminate external distractions. During this type of primary meditation, the goal is to consciously stop thinking, and move, instead, toward a state of physical and mental relaxation, and ultimately to a place of heightened awareness. Tobin Hart describes this process as a way to “quiet and shift the habitual chatter of the mind and cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration and insight “(28). Proponents of meditation believe that it engenders qualities such as acceptance of experience, non-reactivity, a positive attitude toward self and others, as well as the ability to regulate emotions (Zylowska et al.).

The idea of using mindfulness techniques such as meditation in educational contexts is not a novel one, although to my knowledge, there are no programs devoted specifically to LD adolescents. There are, however, dozens of programs around the U.S. that utilize mindfulness and contemplative strategies in public school settings, according to The Garrison Institute, whose 2005 mapping report provides the only extensive overview of this work. There is also a strong tradition of mindfulness and contemplation in a number of private educational contexts; private schools who embrace the vision of mindfulness through a specific lens, such as the Buddhist,
Quaker and Waldorf Schools, have been utilizing contemplation and mindfulness for decades and although their work might be outside the realm of this conversation, the educators who have worked in these settings have valuable experiences and insights to share with public school teachers. For this discussion, however, my goal is to explore how mindfulness and contemplative strategies are currently being used in public school settings and to consider how these same approaches might be adapted for use with LD high school students.

The Garrison Institute defines the term *contemplative practice* as a broad range of approaches drawing from a number of Eastern and Western traditions and includes, but is not limited to, techniques for attention training and refinement, as well as meditation and reflection. For their mapping project, the Garrison Institute defined their goals broadly to explore programs that utilize pedagogical approaches that focus primarily on developing and deepening contemplative awareness or mindfulness. In all, their report examined more than thirty programs and found that although there were varying methodological and pedagogical approaches, all programs shared a common set of outcomes including: enhancements in student learning and academic performance; improved social climates in the school; and an increased emphasis on emotional balance and social well-being. Many programs also shared long-term goals or ultimate outcomes such as the development of *noble* qualities such as peacefulness, internal calm, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, patience, generosity and love (4).

Many of the adolescent programs surveyed in the mapping report are aimed at helping educators and students understand the vital link between mind and body.
Various techniques are used but many are premised in one way or another on Kabat-Zinn's work at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare and Society. His 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program was originally designed to help medical patients integrate contemplative practices into their treatments in an effort to reduce stress and improve health outcomes. With an eye to applying these same principles to educational settings, a number of educational programs in public school settings have emerged. One such program involves utilizing Kabat-Zinn's MBSR techniques to train public high school teachers to use meditation and other contemplative strategies to combat stress, improve the quality of attention and develop increased empathy and equanimity with their students. Although this particular program was directed toward faculty and staff, students benefited indirectly; teachers reported being more alert, attentive and patient, as well as less reactive and judgmental (Garrison Institute Report 8).

Another program based loosely on Kabat-Zinn's model utilizes highly trained community-based presenters to teach strategies directly to students. During sessions over a six-week period, trained facilitators provided instruction to students on simple breathing techniques, body awareness and walking and sitting meditations. This approach, which incorporates discussion and exercises rooted in cognitive therapy practices, not only helps students develop awareness of the crucial links between thinking and feeling, but also provides them with useful techniques to make these connections more readily available (Garrison Institute Report 8).

Other programs, such as the Lineage Program in New York City and Youth Horizons in San Francisco utilize the MSBR approach to address the needs of at-risk
and adjudicated teenagers. By teaching at-risk and incarcerated urban teenagers awareness-based practices such as yoga and meditation, these programs seek to help adolescents consciously manage stress and increase self-awareness. Other proponents of this approach have utilized meditation and attention training techniques to help young urban boys focus more effectively and harness control so that they can become better athletes (Forbes).

A key assumption underlying much of this work is that many of these adolescents suffer from pervasive attentional problems such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and that these problems can be mitigated dramatically by mindfulness practices. Because attentional problems and learning disabilities often coexist (Mayes et al.; Seidman et al.), it is useful for our discussion, I think, to consider the small body of research that has been devoted to the specific work of using mindfulness techniques with individuals with ADHD.

In a recent feasibility study, researchers at UCLA hypothesized that mindfulness training may improve attention and emotion regulation in ADHD. Although the study was aimed only at exploring the efficacy of future research in this area, its findings were promising. The majority of the twenty-four adults and eight adolescents who participated in the study reported a high level of satisfaction with the eight-week mindfulness training they received and perceived significant improvements in their ADHD symptoms. Additionally, participants performed better on tasks measuring attention and reported improvements in anxiety and depression symptoms (Zylowska et al.). In addition to this research on ADHD, there has been a good deal of scholarly interest in the use of mindfulness-based treatments for stress,
depression, and other psychiatric disorders (Baer; Segal et al.) and again, the results are promising.

While attention-training seems crucial in the work of cultivating mindfulness in educational and instructional settings, other programs use similar approaches for the explicit goal of helping students achieve emotional balance and well-being. The Education Initiative at the Mind Body Medical Institute (MBMI) at Harvard University trains teachers in specific practices to help their students reduce the emotional and behavioral effects of stress. This K-12 public school curriculum utilizes mind/body tools to promote stress awareness, effective use of relaxation response techniques and strengthened coping skills. Research suggests that students exposed to this curriculum demonstrated multiple benefits including: higher grade point averages; increased self-esteem; decreased psychological distress; less aggressive behavior; better work habits; and improved attendance (http://www.mbmi.org).

Interest in mindfulness-based techniques has also crossed into the commercial realm with a number of companies marketing tools to help students identify physiological symptoms of stress and anxiety so that they can focus more effectively on school-related tasks. The HeartMath Company, for example, sells monitors that help students identify uncomfortable or stressful situations, generate a pause and shift the focus to what they term “heart-centered” breathing and finally to generate a positive feeling. According to the company’s website, high school seniors who received the 3-week training and utilized the monitors demonstrated improvements in academic test scores and reported significant reductions in hostility, depression and
other key indicators of psychological distress (http://www.heartmath.research summary).

Finally, there is also a growing trend toward mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy in higher education (Duerr, Zajonc & Dana). The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, in collaboration with the American Council of Learned Societies, for example, has granted hundreds of Contemplative Practice Fellowships to professors over the last ten years. The fellowships support the design of new college courses that include contemplative practice as a pedagogical strategy (www.contemplativemind.org). Courses and programs that teach mindfulness as a tool for pre-service teachers, as well as a vehicle for renewal for veteran teachers, also seem to be increasing in number. Since 1994, Parker Palmer’s “Courage to Teach” programs have utilized mindfulness strategies to help teachers connect with what Palmer terms their “inner landscapes.” Thousands of teachers have participated in these programs and evaluation of the work suggests that there is a ubiquitous perception of rejuvenation and renewal by teachers who have participated (Garrison Institute Report 33). The Contemplative Education Department at Naropa University is also at the forefront of this trend and advocates for the widespread use of contemplative techniques as a meaningful way to transform both teachers and classrooms (Garrison Institute Report 33). Other teacher educators believe that mindfulness can help educators become more cognizant of and sympathetic to the conditions which affect their student’s lives: “Establishing compassionate classrooms—steeped in both high expectations and caring community—can prepare
students to be competent in affective as well as cognitive domains” (Adarker & Keiser 247).

As evidenced by this discussion, mindfulness and contemplative strategies are currently being employed in a myriad of academic settings. Despite this, there is still a certain reluctance about this type of approach that seems to be precipitated by fear. First, there is the fear that bringing any type of spiritual tradition into the public school classroom will violate or threaten the separation of church and state. When confronted with this concern, proponents of this type of approach emphasize the inherent neutrality of contemplation: “Inviting the contemplative simply includes the natural human capacity for knowing through silence, looking inward, pondering deeply, beholding, witnessing the contents of our consciousness, and so forth,” according to Hart who emphasizes that this type of approach cultivates “an inner technology of knowing…without any imposition of religious doctrine whatsoever” (29).

The other fear that seems to pervade any discussion about this type of approach is more nebulous and seems to be rooted in a reluctance to embrace ideas that are not objective or that are difficult to quantify. Educators are often afraid that the discipline is not academically rigorous enough or that it is tainted by a new-age or self-help sensibility that is not appropriate in serious educational contexts. Furthermore, our country’s current obsession with accountability and testing seems to leave little room for such pursuits. In spite of these hurdles, or maybe as a reaction to them, many educators are finding answers to difficult questions in the possibilities suggested by mindfulness and contemplation.
But, how might some of these ideas be put to use with LD students in a public school classroom? In an article in the *Journal for Transformative Education*, Tobin Hart argues that contemplative strategies can be integrated into mainstream education if two requirements are met: 1) there is a rationale and evidence that contemplation can address the very practical concerns of contemporary education and 2) there are a range of simple, secular methods that can be adapted to various classroom situations (29). Through a summary of current research, Hart suggests a rationale for the use of contemplative strategies in the public school classroom and provides meaningful evidence that this type of approach can have a positive and transformative effect on learning and behavior. Although Hart was not concerned specifically with the classroom for LD students, I believe that the insights his framework provide are particularly useful to this conversation. Using mindfulness and contemplative practice in the high school English classroom for LD students does meet both his criteria; furthermore, his astute discussion about both the practical and ethereal concerns of contemporary education seems especially relevant to any conversation about teaching the LD high school student.

In exploring the broad concerns of education, Hart identifies three general dimensions for consideration: performance, character and depth. For reasons which will become evident in the pages to follow, it is useful and legitimate, I think, to adapt his conversation to consider the specific concerns of the LD student. How might mindfulness and contemplative practice help LD student perform better in school? As discussed earlier in this paper, a student's ability to perform well in school is inextricably bound to that student's ability to direct and sustain attention. In
considering the specific learning and social behaviors of LD students, many of whom are among the 4-6% of students diagnosed with attention difficulties (Attention Deficit Disorder Fact Sheet), it seems clear that attention problems are probably the central issue for this type of student. Whether due to neurological, emotional or cognitive issues, LD students have difficulty with attention and concentration in class. The fundamental promise of contemplative practice is to nourish the quality of one’s attention. Numerous studies suggest that mindfulness training and contemplative strategies can improve a variety of perceptual and cognitive abilities related to attention (Murphy et al; Jha et al). Hart even speculates that among students with diagnosed attention deficits, many of whom are on medications, contemplative practice might provide effective enough attention training so that the need for medication is diminished (30).

Another performance issue for LD students, discussed earlier in this essay, is stress and anxiety. Probably due to a consistent cycle of failure in educational situations, the physiological and emotional responses triggered by stress and anxiety seem to be amplified with LD students, having a lasting and profound effect on their ability to perform. There are literally hundreds of studies on the positive effects of contemplative practice, particularly meditation, on the body. According to the research, among the short term effects are physiological relaxation and slowed metabolism, a heightened sense of awareness and feelings of calm. The changes over time include improved concentration, perceptual acuity, empathy, decreased stress and anxiety and improved performance in a variety of different forums (Murphy et al.).
Earlier research even suggests that meditation, and specifically, Transcendental Meditation (TM) can be particularly effective in interventions with special education students. In an article for *The Journal of Special Education*, Phillip Ferguson summarized his findings: “It is possible that TM may offer a technology which can provide the nervous system with a uniquely profound state of rest. The regular experience of this coherently restful and nourishing psychophysiological state seems to provide purifying normalization process which can dissolve, release and normalize the tensions, disorders, and stresses of the nervous system,” (218).

Although there has been little subsequent research to support the positive effects of meditation specifically on special education students, Ferguson’s early work—like this discussion—seeks to make a vital connection between a student’s ability to control their own neurological underpinnings and their ability to perform well in school.

The physiological calm and coherence created by contemplation and mindfulness approaches may also work to help LD students take pause before reacting to difficult situations. As suggested by the perceived benefits of a number of contemplative educational programs discussed earlier in this essay, providing students the explicit tools to respond—rather than react—to difficult situations can help them control their impulsivity and develop the skills and confidence to form and maintain more productive and meaningful relationships.

In addition to performance, Hart suggests that both character and depth are also crucial dimensions in the practical concerns of education. Regarding character, he suggests that, “the life tools of social and emotional management, civility and
compassion are increasingly part of the responsibility of schools” (29). This charge becomes even more complicated if the students in question are predisposed to having difficulties forming and maintaining social relationships, as LD students often seem to be. How can contemplative practice help nourish the character of LD students? If opening the contemplative mind means opening to an appreciation—or at least a better understanding—of what is in front of us, be it an object, idea or person, as Hart suggests, we bring a new quality of attention to that object. This new way of seeing or attending to an object can lead to increased intimacy with that object and ultimately an increased empathy toward that object. It is this empathy, many believe, which is the basis of most moral and character development and probably the quality that makes us most human (Hart 31).

To create a space where students feel heard and valued is to create a space where students are empowered to hear and value. It is in this space, Parker Palmer believes, that we, as teachers, can steer our students toward an understanding of the power of what he terms “the grace of great things.” Palmer explains the great things as being everything from the ecosystems of biology to the artifacts of anthropology to the shapes and colors of music and art (107) and suggests that it is a mindful attention to these things that can provide the classroom with its greatest power to transform individual students—as well as the world. Ultimately, he writes simply, “we cannot know the great things of the universe until we know ourselves to be great things” (110).

Hart’s final dimension, depth, is probably the most subtle concern of contemporary education and probably has the most profound implications for the LD
student. In this climate of high-stakes testing and an emphasis on superficial skill-based academic proficiency, how do we promote creative higher-order thinking and problem-solving? How can contemplative strategies help LD students, in particular, engage more deeply and meaningfully with knowledge? The answer to this question requires one to believe what is difficult to prove: Reflection and silence have the ability to alter the environment of the classroom and to transform the very essence of the learning community. If, through meditative silence or journaling or deep listening exercises, students begin to believe that they have the attentional and cognitive tools to engage with, produce and respond to knowledge, and the teacher comes to understand that her role can be that of learner and facilitator, as well as teacher, the classroom becomes more democratic, more compassionate and ultimately, I believe, more deeply productive.
Part III
The English Classroom

To this point, I have tried to paint a reasonably accurate picture of the learning disabled high school student and the often-challenging educational contexts in which that student engages in the business of literacy. I have suggested that the success of this endeavor has as much to do with the way schools operate as it has to do with the learning and social behaviors of that student. Mostly, though, I have argued that it has everything to do with the interaction between the two. As an educator, I now want to address the question of how to change this interaction so that my marginalized students not only learn more effectively in my classroom and live more effectively in the world—but also feel better in their own skin.

There are no simple answers to the questions posed in this discussion but, as noted here, I have identified a number of interesting possibilities in the relatively young—and promising—field of mindful education. For reasons outlined in the previous section, the specific benefits of mindfulness practices are uniquely appropriate—and effective—for use with LD high school students. With this part of the conversation, I hope to address the question of how to apply and adapt a range of simple, secular methods in the English classroom. In considering how the principles of mindfulness might inform pedagogy and how contemplative strategies might be incorporated into everyday instructional practices, I hope to advocate for a more mindful approach to teaching English to LD high school students in a public school setting. Finally, in an attempt to illustrate some of these ideas and demonstrate how a
few simple practices can alter the learning environment in meaningful ways, I will share some of my own modest experiments in the classroom.

I have noticed that talking about mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy with other educators is not always easy, especially in our current educational climate where standardized test scores always seem to be the bottom line. Ironically, in my mind, it is these exact conditions in our schools which create a pronounced need for mindfulness. Nonetheless, as a group, teachers are busy and pragmatic and, now especially, almost universally overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the material they are expected to cover. The idea that learning might be enhanced by time spent “off task” is almost impossible to embrace and maybe even more impossible to talk about. I have recently begun to think that sometimes the best way to talk about it is to let people experience it firsthand.

A few weeks ago, I had my regular yearly evaluation and with that a classroom observation with a school administrator, and one who, coincidentally, had never been in my classroom and knew nothing of my instructional methods. When we began the 10th grade American literature class with our customary meditation, she seemed surprised and slightly uncertain, but was willing enough to participate by following the breathing prompt, closing her eyes and relaxing into our three minutes of collective silence. After a short journaling exercise and a few students volunteering to share their writing, we settled into our work reading and discussing John Knowles’ novel, A Separate Peace. My students, who at times perform in situations where outsiders are observing, did not on this day, but simply had a typical reading and discussion period. I didn’t think it was my most exciting or engaging class ever, but
everyone seemed reasonably awake and thoughtful—business as usual with this particular group.

What surprised me most, at the post-observation conference with this administrator, was her surprise. As are most of my classes, this one was comprised of ten LD high school students, the majority of whom were boys. Many of the students in this class were known to this administrator, either because of discipline or attendance problems. She was amazed, she said, first, that these students were willing to participate so unselfconsciously in the meditations and secondly, that they were so interested in *A Separate Peace*. She marveled at the almost-instantaneous calm in the classroom immediately following the meditation and asked if I had instructional materials about this approach that I might share with my colleagues. Although her appreciation of my mindfulness practices was certainly in response to the immediate effects she witnessed in my classroom, I feel confident that she had, in some subtle way, opened up to the idea of it. Had she had the time or inclination to spend more time with us, I think she might have embraced some of the larger transformations that I believe this approach makes possible. In the end, it was a serendipitous encounter because as I work on this thesis project, I am increasingly compelled me to think about effective ways to share this approach with others teachers who do the work I do. This fortuitous accident suggests that it might be most effective to demonstrate the dramatic—and surprising—power of a few minutes of silence in the classroom, before launching into a more abstract discussion about the broader and more profound benefits of contemplative learning.
As noted throughout this paper, there are many ways to think about and practice mindfulness—many directions from which to approach this work. Kabat-Zinn’s work in the medical field roots mindfulness practices in some vital connection between the mind and the body and it is a useful starting point to consider the practical applications of mindfulness in the classroom, I think, because it demystifies the practice of meditation and suggests that, in its most primary form, meditation can simply be a physical act to cultivate health and well being. About this, he writes:

“It turns out that in the past thirty years, medicine has come to know, from a remarkable blossoming of research and clinical practices in the field variously known as mind/body medicine, behavioral medicine, psychosomatic medicine, and integrative medicine, that the mysterious dynamic balance we call “health” involves both the body and the mind (to use our awkward and artificial way of speaking that bizarrely splits them from each other), and can be enhanced by specific qualities of attention that can be sustaining, restorative, and healing.” (Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses* 7).

To believe that contemplative practices, such as meditation, can be useful to adolescents in the high school English classroom is to believe that meditation can be a tool for cultivating, nurturing and refining attention in a way that improves the physical health of our students. When I teach my students to meditate, I teach them to utilize their own internal resources, like breathing and concentration, to alter their physical and emotional state. I believe that the calm positive energy my students experience after a brief silent meditation is both a neurological and psychological condition and that their perception that they feel better enhances both our learning environment and their actual ability to engage in the learning process.

A less practical but perhaps more profound way to think about mindfulness might be to speculate that contemplation actually increases our consciousness and it is
this increased consciousness that enables us to engage more meaningfully with knowledge, and more importantly, with our own relationship to knowledge. But how and why is this so? What exactly is consciousness? To consider this requires us to probe more deeply. Webster defines consciousness as “the state of being conscious; awareness of one’s own feelings” (New World College Dictionary online) but with this deceptively simple definition comes some very weighty implications. One is that consciousness is self-referential, that is, it contingent upon our own awareness of our place in the world and furthermore that it requires us to integrate and process information from both without and within. Similarly, consciousness is often thought of as the very thing that separates us from other species and has been described as the “uniquely human capacity to reflect on the subject, process, and object of knowing; it is the capacity for self-knowledge” (Sarath 1822). Meditation, reflection and contemplation all become vehicles for us to investigate our own consciousness; to expand our capacity for knowing and learning. Qualities such as mental clarity, calm, insight, compassion and creativity are not random human traits that are either present or not, but rather the natural outgrowths of an expanding awareness—an expanding consciousness.

For so many reasons, the secondary English classroom is a perfect site for such expansions. This is especially true if we believe that mindfulness not only has the power to expand our consciousness, but also the power to change the way we engage with knowledge. Contemporary schools emphasize a certain type of knowledge that is based on both rational and sensory knowing. The rational involves fact-based calculations and analysis, while the sensory is more concerned with
experiments of measuring and observation. Together these types of knowledge comprise the rational-empirical approach to education that characterizes most instruction across the disciplines. Mindfulness promotes another kind of knowing that is distinct from the linear, analytic and product-oriented kind of learning that is often emphasized in contemporary education (Hart 30). Mindfulness emphasizes looking at the whole of things rather than its parts and understanding and investigating the connections, intersections, overlaps and nuances of and between those things.

Parker Palmer suggests that good teachers possess an innate capacity to see the connections between things and that this capacity has nothing to do with methodology, but rather with what is in the heart of the teacher. To describe this, he writes:

Tips, tricks and techniques are not the heart of education—fire is. I mean finding light in the darkness, staying warm in a cold world, avoiding being burned if you can, and knowing what brings healing if you cannot. That is the knowledge that our students really want, and that is the knowledge we owe them. Not merely the facts, not merely the theories, but a deep knowing of what it means to kindle the gift of life in ourselves, in others, and in the world. (in O’Reilley Radical Presence, forward)

In my own brief experience with this approach, I have noticed how a burgeoning understanding and awareness of mindfulness has helped me to actively work toward being present and in this way has enabled me open to the possibilities in my own classroom. For me, this has meant slowing down to really listen to and engage with my students; after all, what good is it to get through Chaucer if I don’t take my students with me. To tap into—and value—the intuitive and creative talents of my students is to privilege a different kind of knowledge and understanding than is emphasized in a traditional classroom and paradoxically, a type of knowledge and
understanding that sometimes comes easier to the kinds of students I teach. Because they are typically not working to maintain a long record of stellar academic achievement, my students are rarely seduced by the external rewards of academia, such as grades or class rankings. Instead, their impetus to do well is largely situational and is usually guided by their own internal values and experiences. For me, being mindful means nurturing and expanding the internal values and experiences of my students and recognizing and putting a distinct value on the type of knowledge that they bring to the table.

Some have described this creative and intuitive type of knowledge as being contingent upon certain gaps or spaces in the learning and inventive process (Spolsky) and contend that is these spaces between things—the cognitive gaps—that make possible a certain type of conceptual flexibility and creativity. In the literature classroom, these gaps might be encouraged by giving students the time and space to reflect thoughtfully about a text without imposing upon them a specific interpretation or a structured assignment. Providing students time to ponder big questions or muse about something without a specific goal tends to create an spectacularly unpredictable atmosphere in the classroom in which students sometimes have valuable—and unexpected—insights. Marilyn Nelson, a teacher and writer who has used contemplative pedagogy in a number of academic contexts, describes her use of what she terms “musings” while teaching poetry to a group of West Point cadets: “Musings follow no agenda and have no goal, no text, and no ground of reference except what we bring. We agree to be honest and non-judgmental; we will go out on the limb of communal pondering” (4). Nelson believes that these musings enable students to
wonder about things in a way that few academic situations do and that they foster empathy and understanding between students which creates room for curiosity and real learning.

In the high school writing classroom, too, there are many opportunities for opening up this type of reflective space for students. Some years ago, a professor in graduate school, who has since become a mentor, taught me the significant value of putting down a draft and returning to it after a certain period of time. Her point was that the time we spend not thinking about our writing is a valuable element in the larger writing process. I have found her advice profoundly helpful in my own writing projects and have appropriated it for use with my students by urging them to not think about a piece of writing for a period of time and then return to it with fresh eyes. In a sense, this approach to writing mirrors some essential truth about the way the mind works; the writing process, like the way we think, is not necessarily linear or predictable, but rather a recursive act in which we are alternately thinking and not thinking about our work, changing or expanding an idea, adding or eliminating one—going back and forth between our thinking and our writing. It is an approach, I think, that works well not only in the English classroom, but in any classroom. In de-emphasizing the quick reward or simple solution, we are cultivating the kind of sustained attention that characterizes deeper learning—deeper understanding.

Richard Brady, a math teacher at a Quaker school in Washington, D.C., who has been utilizing mindfulness meditations in his classroom for over thirty years, also advocates for opening up this type of space in the classroom. An excerpt from a poem he uses in class (4), illustrates the idea with metaphor.
Fire

What makes a fire burn
is space between the logs,
a breathing space.
Too much of a good thing,
too many logs
packed in too tight
can douse the flames
almost as surely
as a pail of water would.

-Judy Brown

To believe that contemplation and mindfulness can transform the classroom is to believe that there is a powerful benefit to the space between things. In contemporary public school education, there is a huge emphasis on breadth, rather than depth of material. Most English teachers are rushing to get through the curriculum, usually at the expense of more sustained and meaningful thinking about the texts. Mary Rose O’Reilley, a teacher and author of a number of books about mindfulness and teaching, writes simply: “Calm Reflection is the radix of contemplative practice. In a literature classroom, silence makes us face the consequences of our texts” (xiv). O’Reilley suggests that there is a dangerous honesty that is possible when we open up our classrooms to the possibility of mindfulness. This also has the consequence of de-centering the authority in the classroom, or democratizing it in a way that gives agency and power to students. O’Reilley poses a question which seems at the very center of the discussion: “If you are willing to allow that your students might have a rich and authoritative inner life, how do you nourish it rather than negate it?” (ix). In the literature classroom, this type of practice can undermine the authority of a standard interpretation of a text or the idea of an
objective truth about a text in a way that is antithetical to most standard practices and unnerving to many teachers. It also can open up space in the classroom for other types of possibilities; it is some of these possibilities that I want to explore next.

For the past two years, I have been utilizing a number of contemplative practices in some of my special education literature classes in a public high school in Northern New Jersey. I did not learn meditation in any formal context and my own practice is based on my readings and my own informal habits. I have no desire to teach formal meditation techniques to my students, but strive, instead to share strategies that are simple and easy to practice both in class and on their own. Although I have been increasingly drawn to readings that are steeped in certain spiritual ideas, I have deliberately kept my teaching of contemplative practices away from any formal spiritual or clinical tradition and in some ways I think this has made the work in the classroom less controversial in the context of my particular public school and also more amenable to my students, most of whom have had no exposure to spiritual ideas outside of a Christian-Judeo tradition.

The contemplative techniques I employ include: daily (1-5 minute) contemplative silences or meditations; low-stakes journaling activities; group ponderings; and out-of-class nature musings. My special education classes are comprised of eight to eleven classified students who receive instruction in English in what the state of NJ terms a pull-out replacement or resource center setting due to one or more diagnosed learning disabilities. Although these students are mainstreamed for most of their academic programs, and are accountable to all state testing standards, as well as to the mainstream curriculum, as mentioned earlier in this
paper, they often have pervasive or subtle behavioral and affective problems in addition to their learning problems.

In each of the four classes that I am presently utilizing these techniques with, I began the school year with a short explanation of mindfulness and explained how I hoped to employ contemplative strategies in our literature classes. I then told students that we would be trying a short silent meditation at the beginning of each class period and that we would often follow that up with a journal writing activity. I asked for their patience and cooperation and allowed them to decline to participate, as long as they were quiet and respectful to their classmates during the period of silence. To date, every one of the students in those classes is participating. As part of my own contemplative strategy and evolving goals in the classroom, I have actively committed myself to creating a kind and compassionate space within my classroom. As part of this goal, I consciously try to connect with my students on a daily basis and be as responsive as I can to their individual needs, not only as students of literature, but also as teenagers in a difficult world.

After greeting my students and making a conscious effort to make them feel welcome, I announce that it's time for our meditation and invite them to sit in their chairs comfortably with both feet on the floor. I then use a breathing prompt, such as: “Let's all take a deep breath in, release, and now another, hold it, exhale, close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so...and relax.” Initially, what followed were a few nervous giggles and sometimes a paper or two being shuffled and finally, silence. Now, the silence comes almost instantaneously and often when I end the meditation
with my customary, thank you, there are a few groans of complaint that it's over so soon.

After the meditation, I try to take advantage of the calm positive atmosphere in the room and have them do a short journal writing assignment. I emphasize that the journal writing is for them and is what I call a "low-stakes" assignment in which they do not have to be concerned with grammar or mechanical issues or with being assessed. I try to give them journal assignments which inspire personal engagement, creative insight about the text we are reading or group pondering about some topical social issue. Recently, while reading *Lord of the Flies*, I asked them to choose an unlikable character in the book and write a sympathetic journal entry from that character's perspective. Another time, while reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, my students wrote extensively about some of the feelings they experienced when we encountered the "N" word in the text. This particular assignment spawned a series of meaningful discussions, but also gave students another venue to investigate some of the difficult race issues ignited by this book. On more than one occasion during the unit, students opted to write, rather than talk, about certain issues and I noticed that the quiet discomfort that often seems to accompany discussions about race in a (mixed-race) high school classroom, seemed to be mitigated to some extent. Given the time, space and privacy to articulate their own thoughts about a difficult topic, they seemed to feel much more comfortable and secure really engaging in a thoughtful and sustained way with some of the issues.

Examples of other topics include: writing about a time when students made a terrible decision; writing about a time when they experienced sexism or ageism;
explaining the difference between a clique and a social group; writing about a place they feel safe and happy; or describing their best quality. At times, the journal exercises initiate class discussions that extend far beyond the planned literature lesson of the day. In these instances, I practice my own ability to be mindful and instead of lamenting the loss of instruction time, I try to be responsive to my students and push them to think more deeply about the subject at hand—even if it was not a part of my formal plan.

Recently, for instance, at the end of class, a student of mine began complaining about another teacher and a number of students chimed in. Before I knew it, most of the class was engaged in a full-blown discussion about bad teaching. Instead of following my first impulse and immediately extinguishing the conversation, I opted, instead, to redirect it in subtle ways. I urged the students to think more broadly about what elements constitute bad teaching. Students seemed excited to have the opportunity to articulate some of the ways that teachers sometimes inadvertently undermine their learning. They also seemed genuinely surprised and happy to have me listening so attentively to them. Soon after, the conversation naturally shifted to a discussion about the characteristics of a good teacher, which we resumed the next day in class. Students reflected on the conversation at the end of class and then for homework wrote "portraits" of a teacher they admired. The assignments were unusually thoughtful and many students chose to work further on them when given a choice about a piece to revise.

I also use journaling to urge my students to engage more actively with nature. Sometimes at the end of class, I will say that the homework that night is to spend
exactly three minutes studying a tree, or the sky or the smell in their backyard. In this exercise, which I call nature musing, students are not allowed to write anything down, but following the meditation the next day, they will write in their journal about what they saw, or heard or smelled. This exercise inspires attention and appreciation of the natural world and on more than one occasion, I have been surprised and delighted when a student came to me with an unprompted observation of something beautiful they noticed.

Most recently, and perhaps because of some of the work I’ve been exposed to while working on this project, I have expanded my repertoire of mindful strategies to include the sharing of parables, stories and poems, that are outside the realm of our literary studies, with my students. Often I will read a short poem or story following our meditation and ask my students to reflect on it in their journals. I have been surprised at how amenable my students are to these simple little stories from Zen masters such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Shunryu Suzuki or Taoist sage Chuang Tzu, especially since, as I noted earlier, most of my students have not been exposed to any of these types of spiritual traditions. In some ways, the brief length and the simplicity of language inherent to the stories makes them highly appealing to my particular students, who feel they can master the material in a way that they don’t always feel with more formidable literary tasks.

Although, I have not conducted formal research about how these contemplative practices are affecting the learning of my LD students, I feel certain this new approach is helping to create and maintain a calm and positive atmosphere in my classroom and is helping to foster deeper more sustained thinking and learning. I
notice that my students tend to listen more attentively and speak more thoughtfully following our meditations and that in general, they are kinder to each other and more responsive to me. Most importantly, though, is that they perceive this work to have a positive effect on their learning and performance. Recently, I asked my students to write about the meditations in their journals. Only two students (out of the forty who are participating) wrote anything even slightly negative. (Both said they didn’t mind the meditations, but they didn’t really care about them either.) Every other student expressed positive feelings about the meditations. Following is a representative sample of some of my 11th grade students’ journal comments:

“IT’s very soothing when you meditate. You learn to hear new sounds an you realize that there are sounds that you just can’t hear when people are talking or laughing in class.”

“I feel like it brings out the good in you—and calms you down.”

“It helps me feel confident and awake.”

“After we meditate, I feel clearer and can concentrate better on my work.”

“The meditations are very peaceful, which is good, because I don’t worry about things and just listen to what’s going on outside, like the birds or sometimes a plane flying by.”

“When I come to school angry, the meditations help me calm down a little.”

“I find the meditations good for reducing stress—my mind works hard and it needs to relax.”

“The meditations we do every morning are very peaceful and nice—they should be done in every class.”

**Conclusion**

Despite the fact that there is very little empirical evidence to prove that mindfulness and contemplative practices have positive effects on learning in
educational settings, there are currently dozens of educational programs employing these ideas. Most utilize contemplative strategies in hopes of promoting increased attention, awareness and empathy in their students. These programs range from classes at universities, to techniques in kindergartens and elementary schools to programs for at-risk adolescents. Educators involved in these programs report that this approach produces positive cognitive, social and emotional benefits for their students and that it provides a compassionate and meaningful counterbalance to an increasingly difficult and dehumanized educational landscape.

Although this work is gaining momentum in mainstream educational settings, few educators have applied these ideas to the specific problems of the learning disabled high school student. As presented in this discussion, LD high school students often suffer from significant problems with confidence and self-esteem—and frequently display a unique and enduring set of negative learning and social behaviors. I have suggested here that mindfulness, because of its specific potential to improve attention, awareness and empathy, is a uniquely appropriate approach to utilize with LD high school students. Furthermore, because of its attention to both literature and writing, the English classroom is an ideal site for such an endeavor. By creating a space where students can habitually stop to reflect on the connections between themselves and what they are learning, the mindful classroom promotes confidence and curiosity and, in the best cases, helps students engage more meaningfully not only with their writing and with the texts they read—but also with the world they live in.


Mind Body Medical Institute website. [www.mbmi.org](http://www.mbmi.org).


