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Licence to chill: the primary school taking learning to another level

It may sound far-fetched but meditation is helping 11-year-olds to calm down and learn better. Hilary Wilce visits a school where pupils spend an hour a week relaxing

The film-maker David Lynch wants schools to teach meditation and has announced a campaign to support "consciousness-based" education around the world. Last month, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr joined other music stars for a New York concert that raised £2m for his transcendental cause.

Lynch argues that every child needs "to dive into within himself and experience the field of silence – bliss – the enormous reservoir of energy and intelligence which is within us all." And the 600-plus pupils at Latchmere School in Kingston upon Thames would agree. Every child in this busy, successful primary school spends an hour a week in the school's chill-out Blue Room learning meditation and relaxation techniques, including visualisation and massage.

The Year Six pupils are the school's most experienced meditators. They have been doing it for four years and say they will take what they've learnt with them when they move to secondary school. In fact, they already use it in their daily lives. "I had a broken arm and was in hospital and it was all hectic and my arm hurt and so I used deep breathing and it felt better," says Charlie Baker.

Kate Rouvray, 11, also benefits from meditation. "We've had to do a lot of SAT practice tests but I did my breathing and felt really calm," she says.

According to Chris Howden, 11, meditation has changed the whole ethos of the school. "When you're playing games and people are arguing about goals and stuff, they know how to calm themselves down and get on with it," he says.

Over the years, these pupils have become so practised in settling down and turning inwards that when deputy head Kevin Hogston leads them in a short meditation session, they drop easily into a deep and focused calm.

Hogston developed the idea some years ago when looking at ways to encourage creativity and good learning. As well as setting up the Blue Room, he has introduced classroom routines such as a morning handshake, and having pupils post their pictures along a "feelings meter" every day.

"I wasn't a meditator," he says. "I am entirely non-religious, non-anything. My whole focus was simply on embracing the things that would give children the best possible chance of reaching their potential."

But it is clear that in the Blue Room, with its cloud-painted ceiling, fish tank and fountain, pupils are given more than just a calm space in their busy week. "One of the things we talk about is, 'Is everything we think true? Is that person really horrible, or is there a bit of a fault that's coming up?'" Hogston says. Pupils are taught about the importance of living in the moment, and how to use visualisations to switch their brain to feeling alert and good about life.

Meditation is practised by millions, but still seen by many as weird and alternative. "Some people think it's a strange thing for a school to do," he acknowledges. "When we started training the teachers, about 60 per cent

said, 'Great, we do this in yoga,' but 30 per cent said, 'Convince me.'" The school head, Julie Ritchie, stresses that the Blue Room is simply one part of the whole "caring and learning" ethos underpinning the school.

Parents have also been supportive, and some pupils love it so much that there is a popular weekly meditation club. "It is amazing to see children giving up things like football to come to the Blue Room to calm down and meditate," says Hogston.

Jonathan Peers, a Year Six teacher, says the programme gives children skills that are vital for school and life. "That ability to show empathy, to be able to look after yourself and your peers, is very important, and you can see the effect on them."

The Latchmere programme, says Hogston, is based on "common-sense meditation" and its pragmatic mix is very different from the structured transcendental meditation (TM) that David Lynch is promoting in schools.

But Dr Fred Travis, director of the Center for Brain, Consciousness and Cognition, at the Maharishi University of Management, Iowa, says there is strong evidence that TM relaxes and integrates the brain more than any other type of meditation. "With all other methods there is always some sort of striving or focusing, which means the brain is still active and busy. With TM the content of your brain is decreased but the awareness is maintained."

On a recent visit to the UK he spoke to staff and students at Cambridge University and the University of London's Institute of Education about how meditation can act as a buffer against stress, and produce brain activity read-outs that show that beneficial Alpha brain waves flow more strongly in someone practising TM than in meditators using other methods such as Zen meditation. He also wired up an experienced meditator with electrodes to show how the effect of TM on the brain can be marked and instant.

There is growing evidence that today's young people urgently need meditation's beneficial effects, he says. Slides of brain activity demonstrate how alcohol, drugs, stress, poverty and sleep deprivation change the brain so it has a diminished ability to reflect, remember and process. "Everything we do has an impact on the brain and will physically change it."

The David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace is aiming to teach a million schoolchildren to meditate, and heads of schools in the US who have introduced it says it makes students more settled and confident. In the UK a growing number of schools are showing an interest in meditation programmes, and a number of heads and teachers are publicly committed to TM.

At £320-a-head for every teacher and pupil, the TM programme is not cheap, however, although the Maharishi Foundation, which is offering the Consciousness-Based Education programme to UK schools, says this is because it is individually taught by trained meditation teachers.

It claims TM is effective with children suffering from attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and can radically change the atmosphere in the toughest schools. But some critics assert that the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi made a multimillion-dollar fortune from packaging up a simple technique and selling it to gullible Westerners, and even today the image of TM remains irrevocably mixed with memories of the Beatles in their hippie days.

So while ideas about developing calmness and relaxation are now making headway in schools, it remains to be seen whether David Lynch's money will be able to persuade them that TM is the way to do it.



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