



Faith-Ann McGarrell

Annalee Johnson¹ rarely spoke in class. She avoided eye contact and refused to participate in cooperative learning groups, writing groups, or any variation of group work. The day that I put my foot down and firmly insisted that she work with her peers, she burst into tears and cowered in a corner at the back of the classroom. Her keening cries agitated her peers, who in turn directed toward me looks as sharp as daggers. “Ms. McGarrell! You made Annalee cry!” The situation was further intensified by Mr. Johnson, Annalee’s father, who stormed into my classroom shortly after the 3 o’clock dismissal bell rang and announced with eyes glaring and fingers pointing: “It is NOT your job to FIX my child! Teach her to read and write! That’s it!”

Was I wrong to insist on Annalee’s participation? My intention was that every student would be actively engaged *all the time*. As a young student, I rarely fared well when it came to the “participation” assessment on assignments and report-card evaluations. During my teacher training, I learned that participation needed to be quantifiable, active, measurable—not just a subjective, nebulously observed quality. And so, when I finally had my own classroom, I made sure that everyone knew what was meant by “participation” and could be successful. There would be no “silent onlookers” in my classroom. At least, that was my vision until Annalee joined my class.

In my zeal to create a fast-paced, robust classroom environment ripe with conversation, activity, and creativity, I inadvertently conveyed another message—one devoid of grace, mercy, and the acknowledgement that each person is unique and communicates in dif-

ferent ways. Susan Cain, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Quiet*, a thoughtful reflection on introverts in an extrovert society, said the following: “The purpose of school should be to prepare kids for the rest of their lives, but too often what kids need to be prepared for is surviving the school day itself.”² And that survival is not limited to learning how to interact with peers, but also includes learning how to navigate teacher temperaments, unique classroom settings, curriculum demands, parental expectations, and so much more.

As Annalee’s teacher, I believed she needed to learn how to speak up, work with others, and learn how to thrive in an active environment, for this is what society requires and what I had been told repeatedly. For Annalee, such an environment was stressful and made no room for her own wonderfully unique way of giving a well-thought-out response to a question or assignment, or her essential need for time to process before speaking and quiet time to recharge.

Thomas Armstrong in *Mindfulness in the Classroom: Strategies for Promoting Concentration, Compassion, and Calm* addresses what he refers to as “joining the quiet revolution.”³ He observes that students in U.S. schools are experiencing levels of stress never seen before in its history, and that there is need for time dedicated to quiet, non-scripted reflection within each class period.⁴ This lack of quiet time is responsible for several alarming findings such as an increase in the number of early elementary school children in the U.S. suffering from migraines and ulcers for which a clear connection to school-related stress has been established⁵ to a third of U.S. adolescents being depressed or overwhelmed because of stress,

**Speak Up,
Annalee!—
Creating Safe Spaces for
Students to Thrive**

Continued on page 41

with their single biggest source of stress being school.⁶

These challenges do not exist only within the United States. Countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and India report high levels of school-related stress faced by students, most of which comes from the pressures of preparing for high-stakes national testing, the results of which determine the trajectory of students' lives.⁷ Unlike Annalee's source of stress, these students face long hours of in- and out-of-class study and tutoring sessions (some upwards of 12 hours a day), and their families invest time and resources into making sure they do well. And even with that, most universities in these countries can only accept two to three percent of those who do well. For those who do not make the cut, there is disappointment, shame, and, in some extreme cases, death by suicide.⁸

So, what do we do about school-related stress? How do we ensure that students in our care are seen, heard, and understood? Armstrong presents as an answer "the mindful solution to stress."⁹ He notes that schools in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia are investing in training educators in best-practice approaches to integrating mindfulness throughout the curriculum. Findings show that these approaches have the potential to relieve stress in students, boost self-regulation and social and emotional skills, working memory, and executive functioning such as learning to focus, plan, organize—processes necessary to successfully complete daily tasks.¹⁰

Since 1970, more than 3,000 research articles and studies have been conducted on the benefits of using mindfulness to treat stress, anxiety, depression, and many other issues.¹¹ There are several types of mindfulness practices (mindful breathing, walking, eating, etc.) and central to each one is the ability to *focus*. Education researchers are now recommending time in the day, preferably at the beginning of each class period, for deep, focused breathing and reflection. Willard and Saltzman illustrate how to teach mindfulness to students with this example: For an early-morning exercise, teachers have students spend five minutes in focused, deep breathing while contemplating the thoughts and concerns they have experienced since awakening or up to the specific point in the school day; followed by 20 minutes in recall and reflective writing; after which students engage in 20 minutes of active discussion.¹² What is most fascinating is a statement by Saltzman: "[b]ut what teachers find is, if they start class with five minutes of mindfulness—movement, breathing, journaling—most teachers will report ending up with more teachable time."¹³

Sound familiar? Well, it should. While mindfulness may be the popular trend in education right now, this is what many Adventist educators have done in their schools and classrooms for years. School-wide morning worships where students sing, share, and pray; classroom devotions and prayer time in small groups led by a committed educator; or

opportunities to engage in reflective writing and participate in small groups or prayer bands are all activities found in most Adventist schools. And we should do this more often and more consistently. We must teach our students to cling to reassuring promises such as "do not be anxious about anything," and to claim the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:6, 7, ESV).¹⁴ We can also share words from inspiration, which remind us that "Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. . . . Prayer brings the heart into immediate contact with the Wellspring of life."¹⁵ And beyond that, we must take active steps to ensure that students know we are interested in how they navigate the challenges and pressures from peers, home, and school. Do we carve out significant movements of time in our day to listen to them? Pray with them? Or do we plow ahead with our plans—dragging them along, kicking and screaming, all for the greater good of preparing them for this world?

Annalee's outburst led me to engage in moments of deep reflection. With humility I changed my classroom environment, providing more time for students to decompress, work independently, and experience more balanced instruction. Cain recommends strategies such as using Think-Pair-Share, using wait time effectively before calling on students, involving the student and his or her parents in discussing how best to address the student's anxiety, or using groups effectively, as helpful ways of integrating extra support into the classroom environment that benefit all students.¹⁶

Several articles in this issue address the importance of creating safe spaces for students to grow into the unique, one-of-a-kind individuals God created them to be as we select curricular content, approaches to instruction, grading and evaluation practices, and so many of the other teacher-driven decisions that are made each day. Janie Daniel Hubbard writes about making curricular decisions that are culturally responsive, the final article in this series (page 9; see also *Culturally Responsive Teaching in Adventist Schools* for additional articles), and Ramona L. Hyman shares several strategies for encouraging young writers to express themselves through poetry (page 34). In "Feedback as a Conversation: The Power of Bidirectional Feedback," Julie Cook addresses effective ways to not only give feedback to students, but also receive feedback from students, to ensure that understanding takes place (page 4). And Jerome Thayer explores how to use the principles of justice and mercy in assessment and grading practices as a way of modeling how God interacts with everyone (page 27). John Wesley Taylor V continues the discussion on creating a biblical foundation for research in "Research and the Search for Truth" (page 14), and in the final article in our *Boards* series, Robert Crux writes about "When a School Board Member Goes Rogue" (page 21; see also *School Boards* for additional articles).

We hope the articles in this issue provide food for thought, and we look forward to your feedback. Consider submitting

a letter to the editor here or by e-mailing mcgarrellf@gc.adventist.org. Or, share your own reflections by submitting an article to our *Best Practices at Work* feature section, a space created specifically for classroom teachers to share what works. Visit <https://jae.adventist.org/en/for-authors> for more on how to submit. Or for shorter, more reflective themes, consider writing for our Adventist Educators Blog (<https://educators.adventist.org/submission-guidelines/>). We look forward to hearing from you!

Recommended citation:

Faith-Ann McGarrell, “Speak Up, Annalee! Creating Safe Spaces for Students to Thrive,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 81:4 (October-December 2019): 3, 41, 42.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Pseudonym.
2. Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (Portland, Ore.: Broadway Books, 2013), 253. Several other useful articles, books, and blog posts are available on this topic, such as: Jessica Lahey, “Class Participation: Let’s Talk About It,” *Quiet Revolution* (2019): <https://www.quietrev.com/class-participation-lets-talk-about-it-2/>; Susan Cain, “Help Shy Kids: Don’t Punish Them,” *The Atlantic* (February 2013): <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/02/help-shy-kids-dont-punish-them/273075/>; and Katherine Schultz, *Rethinking Classroom Participation: Listening to Silent Voices* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009).
3. Thomas Armstrong, *Mindfulness in the Classroom: Strategies for Promoting Concentration, Compassion, and Calm* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2019), 7.

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5. Vicki Abeles, “Is the Drive for Success Making Our Children Sick?” *New York Times* (January 2, 2016): <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/03/opinion/sunday/is-the-drive-for-success-making-our-children-sick.html>.
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9. Armstrong, *Mindfulness in the Classroom: Strategies for Promoting Concentration, Compassion, and Calm*, 18.
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15. Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1930), 249-250.
16. Cain, “Help Shy Kids: Don’t Punish Them.”

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