



Greater Good in Education  
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

## MINDFULLY FINDING AWE IN NATURE

*"In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks."*

—John Muir

### OVERVIEW

Students mindfully engage with an image, sound, smell, or tactile experience from nature, and experience an awe moment. Then, they creatively imagine a dialogue they might have with that component of nature, fostering a sense of meaning and connection to nature.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- As an ice breaker activity, any time you want students to focus their attention, practice mindfulness, curiously engage with something in front of them, or even calm themselves when agitated
- Any time you want to engage students in a creative activity that cultivates their imagination and meaning-making skills, and fosters an openness to diverse thought
- At the beginning of a unit that focuses on nature

#### TIME REQUIRED

- 15 - 30 minutes

#### LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

#### MATERIALS

- Internet to access the following web links:
  - Auditory stimuli from nature: [aspens](#); [bird song](#); [creek flowing over rocks](#); [ocean waves](#)
  - Visual stimuli from nature: [plant in concrete](#); [lake](#); [fireplace](#); [balanced stones](#)
- Projector and screen to project the images in the classroom, and/or speakers to hear the auditory sounds in the classroom

- Printouts of the [Dialogue Exercise pdf](#) for each student
- Writing materials

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Pay focused attention to nature and practice mindfully engaging with sights, sounds, smells, and tactile experiences in nature
- Use their imagination to make meaning of their connection with nature
- Experience awe and an openness to diverse thought in discussion with their peers

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Creativity
- Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
- Curiosity

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused Attention
- Open Awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a few minutes to mindfully experience an element of nature, such as this recording of [bird song](#). What elements of nature did you notice? How did slowing down and paying focused attention to the audio recording expand your sense of wonder and awe? What questions, thoughts, wonderings and/or memories came up for you?
- Next, imagine having a dialogue with this element of nature. What might each of you say? Reflecting on this exercise, what did the dialogue exercise evoke in you? Did you feel more child-like, creatively

charged, curiously engaged, or more deeply connected to nature than before you starting the activity? If yes, how did that feel in your body? Why might that be?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Nature can be a source of [awe](#), and being mindfully present to what one is witnessing or hearing in nature can fuel a sense of meaningful connection to nature, life, and our place within this wonderful ecosystem. Furthermore, using one's imagination to "talk to" elements in nature can not only be fun, but can also elicit reverence for and inter-connectedness with nature.
- Questions to ask yourself before doing this activity with students are: What is the emotional climate in the classroom right now? Are students feeling safe and calm? Is their energy regulated enough to engage deeply with nature, and explore with gentle wonderment how they are relating to it in the moment? If not, how can I create a calm and safe space, and introduce this activity with gentle wonderment?
- Once students begin the activity, remember that there are no right or wrong responses; students' responses may differ based on their worldview, culture, learning needs, mood, depth of mindful engagement, or imagination in the moment.
- As a teacher, consider how you may practice bringing an open awareness as you hear students' responses to the activity, while also being on the lookout for any potential concerning responses such as those related to violence, trauma, discrimination, etc., that may make the classroom climate unsafe for others. Consider how you might respond to a student that gives such a response to ensure their well-being and classroom safety.

### ACTIVITY

- Select any one of the following stimuli at one time:
  - visual: [plant in concrete](#); [lake](#); [fireplace](#); [balanced stones](#)
  - auditory: [aspens](#); [bird song](#); [creek flowing over rocks](#); [ocean waves](#)
  - tactile: bring in a nature element that students can touch (such as a pebble, a tree branch, or a fruit)
  - olfactory: a scented flower or other nature element (such as a lemongrass leaf) that has scent
- Now, guide students to mindfully engage with the nature element for several minutes. Advise them to be totally silent during this time. Tell them that they will be practicing "[slow looking](#)"—the practice of patiently and immersively paying attention to something (and it can be about listening intently as well). You could use instructions such as the following (adapted from [National Gallery in London](#)) to guide students:
  - *Let us bring ourselves into the present moment by opening up our palms in front of us, and staring at the wrinkles silently for ten seconds and noticing the lines.*
  - *Now, look up from your palms. We will be focusing on an element of nature.*
- Show students the nature element. Depending on what you selected, either project the image on the screen, play the audio, or give the nature element to a student and have them pass it around to each other to smell or touch. Ask them to do this silently.
- Continue to guide students:

- *Begin by making yourself aware of it in the context it is in. What is it and where does this nature element typically exist?*
- *Look silently for a couple of minutes. Is there a pattern in what you are observing? Is there something specific that really hooks your attention? Have you seen/ heard/ smelled/ touched this before? What are the various aspects of it that you notice in the present moment?*
- *Imagine where you might find this element of nature in reality. What sights and sounds might be in the surroundings?*
- *Spend a few moments noticing what thoughts, feelings, and sensations come up for you. Notice them patiently and in depth. We are in no hurry.*
- Give students a few minutes to share their responses to these questions with their peers. Encourage them to describe their responses in depth and detail.
- Next, give each student one printout of the [dialogue exercise](#). Ask students to name the nature element they observed and imagine a dialogue with it. Ask students to complete their printout over the next two minutes. If needed, model by sharing your own dialogue exercise done with a different nature element.
- Once all students have finished the dialogue exercise, invite students to share with a partner, in small groups, or with the class the dialogue they imagined with the nature element.
- Ask students:
  - *What surprised you when you heard the different dialogues imagined by your peers? How come we each looked at/ heard/ touched/ smelled the same element of nature, but imagined ourselves having a different interaction with it?*
  - *What was a source of awe, wonderment, and connection for you in this session?*
- Encourage students to appreciate the richness and elegance of nature, the connection they have fostered to themselves and to nature through the slow looking and dialogue exercise, and the diversity of thought and imagination of their peers. Nudge them to consider why and how nature offers so much awe, a sense of inter-connectedness and wonderment simply through the process of “slow looking.”
- Next, ask students:
  - *Have you noticed that when we spend time noticing nature, whether we are closely looking at clouds or fire, or keenly hearing waves or the sound of birds, or closing our eyes to focus on smelling flowers or fruits, or feeling the sand running through our fingers or touching the cold water of a waterfall, we often feel a sense of awe?*
  - *Think of a moment this week that you spent interacting with nature. It could be a tiny moment of noticing something in nature, or it could be a few minutes long. Talk with your peer sitting next to you, and discuss what that moment was, and how your body and mind felt while you were having that moment with nature.*
  - *What gift would you be giving to your body and mind, if you created a moment with nature everyday? How might you make a daily ritual of it?*
  - Allow them a few moments to discuss with each other, and take a few share-outs.
- Encourage students to set a time and place to pay attention to nature everyday—such as on their way to school, when they enter the playground, or when they look at the moon before bedtime.

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## EXTENSIONS

- Ask students to notice one thing in nature for the rest of their day or week, and take a picture of it. Invite them to bring it to the next class, where their picture could be projected on screen and the same dialogue exercise could be done with the class.

- Ask students to identify an element of nature in their surroundings and think about how they might care for it. Encourage them to channel their sense of awe, connection, and wonderment to care for their environment.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Nature can evoke awe, a sense of inter-connectedness, peace, harmony, calm, curiosity, wonderment. What feelings and thoughts came up for students? How can these feelings be brought into the classroom more often?
- How did the students respond to the slow looking and dialogue exercises? Did any students struggle with being patient in observing the nature element? What might have been barriers to them doing so?
- Similarly, did students struggle with imagining or writing a dialogue with the nature element? If yes, what other ways might you do the exercise next time—such as asking students to do a short role play about the imagined dialogue with the element of nature?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Scientists](#) describe awe as an emotional response that is often elicited by powerful and vast stimuli that makes the person experiencing it feel small in relation to the world around them and makes them rethink how they understand the world.

Results from [four studies](#) (currently under review) conducted with a diverse group of children (ages 4-9) found that the vastness of nature (as seen in a [video](#)) elicits awe in children, to which they responded with surprise, fear, and happiness. The same studies showed that awe made participants feel they were unique and that they could improve their lives. They were also motivated to explore and to think beyond themselves (self-transcendence).

A [U.K. study](#) of children ages 7-11 examined the experiences of children doing mindfulness activities in local nature reserves. The researchers found that children reported feeling a sense of wonder and awe, along with feeling calm and relaxed after mindfully spending time in the nature reserves.

[Another study](#) conducted with a racially diverse group of 100 Southern California university students (ages 18-24) revealed that 15 minutes of solitary time in nature (vs. a man-made environment) in which the respondents were instructed to “Look at all of your surrounding features and pay attention to all of its details....Use all of your senses to take in everything around you” led to significantly greater experiences of awe and increased positive emotions such as joy.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The process of asking students to focus their attention on nature provides a wonderful opportunity to [cultivate connectedness](#) to nature and [reduce negative emotions](#). Connectedness to nature has been [shown](#) to have strong positive associations with both psychological and social well-being.

Additionally, reducing students’ negative emotions has important academic and social impacts. In one study, [researchers](#) found that when students were experiencing negative emotions, they not only perceived themselves as being less academically competent, but also in fact got lower academic scores. Other [research](#) has also shown

that negative emotions have a strong association with low social competence. Thus, activities that promote mindful attention, awe experiences, and connection to nature can help improve students' academic self efficacy, social skills, as well as psychological and social well-being.