

Ken Futernick (host):

Hello everyone. Welcome to another episode of Teacher Stories. This is Ken Futernick and my guest today is Tavis Danz. If you've listened to some of our other podcast episodes on iTunes or on teacherstories.org, you may have come across an interview I conducted with Tavis several months ago. I decided to interview him again because some interesting things have occurred since sharing his first story. Tavis, for those of you who are not familiar with the first interview I did with you, say just a bit about the story you first shared with me.

Tavis Danz:

Yeah. First, it's nice to be back, but you were asking me kind of about this idea of incorporating mindfulness into the classroom. I was sharing about the fact that we do mindfulness in my classroom on a daily basis and we try to kind of practice it throughout the day. Part of me was a little worried about how parents would perceive doing this because it obviously takes away from academic time. That was something I felt really strongly about, but I just wasn't sure how it was going to be taken by the parents of my students.

I had shared with my students a situation in which I had to really practice mindfulness in my own life because kind of an unexpected event occurred that I really could do nothing about. I had to sort of make the choice of whether or not I was going to let it completely ruin my weekend or if I was just going to sort of accept it and try to focus on more positive things. So, I shared that with my students.

Shortly after that I got an email from a parent who I thought was going to be taking issue with the fact that I was doing mindfulness in the classroom, but rather instead shared that their child came home and shared that story with them, and it allowed them to kind of reflect on their own lives and what they are capable of changing, and what they should accept. They were kind of thanking me for incorporating mindfulness in the classroom. I was really surprised because I was worried that mindfulness would maybe be perceived as a little new-agey or not as important as some of the academics, but the feedback I've gotten has really been anything but that. It's been quite the contrary.

Ken Futernick (host):

A few weeks later I had an opportunity to interview someone named Alfie Kohn. Alfie is an internationally known figure. He's written extensively about education, parenting, and teaching. I asked Alfie to talk about the qualities of good teaching because he's written a lot about that. In the interview I described Tavis's story about teaching mindfulness to his fifth graders. I thought Alfie would see that as a really great example of good teaching, but to my surprise he expressed reservations. So when I was done with the interview, one of the first people I contacted when I posted the podcast episode, I thought of Tavis. I thought he would really enjoy hearing what Alfie had to say about good teaching, and also most importantly about mindfulness and his concerns about it. So Tavis, what did you think when you heard the Alfie Kohn response to your story?

Tavis Danz:

I think my first reaction was one of almost being star struck and excited that this person Alfie Kohn, who I'm very familiar with his work, had even become aware of something that I did in my classroom. So the fact that he took issue with it, I didn't even mind as much. I just thought it was cool that I was sort of on

his radar. But I immediately went and listened to the interview because I've always been someone who's tried to be as reflective as possible and operate from a place of knowing that I'm not perfect and I can always get better. I thought, "Well, geez, if Alfie Kohn has some issues with teaching mindfulness in the classroom, I should probably listen to what they are because maybe I'm making a mistake by doing this." So, I listened to the interview and I thought he made a lot of really good points. The big takeaway for me was that he said that he feels as though teaching something like mindfulness, or to use some other kind of trendy words, grit or perseverance, kind of sends a message to students that they have to learn these coping skills to just accept whatever difficult situation that they're in. And that they shouldn't try to change things. They just need to cope with them or accept them. That was kind of what I took away from it. I remember thinking like, "My gosh, I certainly hope that's not the message that I'm sending my students." I would never ever intend for that to be what they leave my class believing or thinking. So, on some level I was a little concerned.

So, I did what I feel like I often do when I'm not really sure about how to go about a classroom issue. I went to who I think are some of the best experts in this field, my students. Shortly after, I shared with them during our morning community circle time, I said, "Hey, I was on this podcast and I shared this, our mindfulness routine, and the following episode was with this guy who's really well-known and has written a lot about education. And he actually had some reason to think that maybe what I was doing was harmful. And what do you all think? Do you feel as though by doing mindfulness, I'm sending you this message that you shouldn't try to change your surroundings or your circumstances, but just rather accept them?" I was just completely blown away with their responses.

Ken Futernick (host):

As it happens, we have five of Tavis's students sitting with us for this interview and it's really great to have them. I think it's the first time we've actually had students, several students in on a Teacher Story podcast. So I just want to see if any of you recall that day and what your initial reaction was when he came in and said, "There's this guy out there that is an expert in education and he has concerns. He doesn't think mindfulness is necessarily a great idea." Do you remember what your reaction to that was any of you?

Student 1:

I remember that I immediately disagreed because I find mindfulness really not that way. It's more just about not accepting what it is, but accepting it until you can do something about it.

Ken Futernick (host):

Thank you for that. Anyone else want to ... Sure.

Student 2:

I also at first, when my teacher said that, I'm like, "Oh my gosh, we like ... Alfie Kohn knows who we are or something and he like knows that we do mindfulness and stuff." Then when I heard that he disagreed with it, I was like, "Hmm, that's a good perspective on things. And maybe he just doesn't know the whole thing of like what we do." So I also agree with them. Just to do change, you can't right away go, "Oh I want to change this," then just jump right into it. You have to calm your brain and just take a

breath, and then that's how you have to accept things and know your situation, and then that's when you can make that change.

Ken Futernick (host):

What I'm hearing, and Tavis, you can say more about this, is that what a couple of you spoke about was that it's not just about accepting the way things are, but mindfulness provides an opportunity for you to calm your mind and think about what it is that you might want to change, and perhaps even how you might go about doing that.

Tavis Danz:

Yeah, that's essentially the conversation that we had, and we sort of co-constructed this understanding of mindfulness that morning, that it was not exclusive to making change but inclusive to that. Kind of in order to effectively make change, it has to start from kind of a calm, collected place. I love what some of them said about you have to kind of understand your current situation before you can go to make a change about it. The change often takes time and it's not quick and it's not instant. So much of the world that we live in is about instant gratification. I think mindfulness helps sort of combat that and understand that change isn't going to happen overnight. It might take a little bit longer than that.

Ken Futernick (host):

Then what I heard from you, Tavis, was that later in the day students came to you with a concern they had, and they wanted you to do something about it. Share that part of the story.

Tavis Danz:

Yeah, it was the coolest thing. We had this wonderful conversation that morning about mindfulness and then just as a little background, we were about halfway through the school year and the fourth graders and fifth graders both have lunch and recess together. The way that it had been structured for the first half of the year was that the fifth graders would eat lunch first while the fourth graders played on the playground. Then the fourth graders, they would switch, fourth graders would eat lunch and fifth grade would play.

Just kind of be fair about things, at the midyear point, that switched. So now the fifth graders who had been eating lunch first and then playing the entire year went to then suddenly playing first and eating. so I think they were a little uncomfortable with that change. Everyone had just kind of gotten used to the way things were. So a few of my students came to me that very afternoon and were really not happy about this. They said, "We want you to go to the principal and talk to him and see if you can get this changed, because we liked it the way it was before where we ate first and then played."

My response was, "You know, you're making some good points, but I don't know that I should be the one who go to the principal. Like this honestly doesn't affect me at all. It doesn't matter to me when you eat versus play. I think that it might be more powerful if you went to the principal. I have a feeling, knowing our principal, that he's more likely to listen to something that's coming from the students than coming from the adults." So several of them ... I sort of reminded them about that conversation we had. I said, "Remember change ... as we talked about this morning, change takes time and like we're going to need to sort of operate from a place of clarity and calmness and mindfulness."

So, what ensued was several students with clipboards, who went out and kind of informally polled all the fourth and fifth graders to get a gauge on whether most of the students affected by this liked or did not like this change. Then they were able to take that to our principal who then asked them to create like an official Google Form that then the fourth and fifth grade teachers could formally give to all of their students who could actually collect quantifiable data. Then there was student representatives that were chosen from each class to meet with him.

After about a week of this process that was entirely student-driven, the change was made and it was switched back. All of the students, the fourth and fifth grade students all kind of agreed that they liked the way that it was before. I don't know if it was related to that conversation we had that morning, but I just found it interesting that the very same day that we talked about how mindfulness can be used as a way to affect change in the world, they were presented with a situation that they could have just sort of shrugged their shoulders at and been disappointed with, but instead they went about making a change and successfully doing so. It was just, I mean, gosh, talk about being inspired by your students.

Ken Futernick (host):

Actually, it turns out Paul Stewart, the principal, joined us in the interview and he's been listening in to what the students and one of his teachers, Mr. Danz is saying, and let's hear what he has to say.

Paul Stewart:

What was really interesting is a lot like what Mr. Danz said, is the students came prepared and they didn't just give a reason like, "Well, I want to, that's why." They really thought about the reasons why. One of the challenges that we put forth to the fifth graders who wanted it was they had to understand the fourth graders' perspective. So I would send them back to the classroom and I had to make sure they understood what their feelings were.

Paul Stewart:

So they would go back and talk to the fourth graders because we had to make sure that they were okay with the switch. A day later, they came back and like Mr. Danz said, it was a week long and we took it back to the fourth graders and I met with them and some of the reps from fifth grade came with me, who pointed out what are the advantages of going back to the old way. Then we took a vote and we did switch it back. But one of the cool things about the whole process was having the fifth grade lead the younger kids, the fourth graders, in the whole process of looking at it from different perspectives. Then what I told the fourth graders, I said, "Hey guys, if you don't like to switch next year when you're fifth grade, we can do the same way, but you just have to lead from what you think when you're in fifth grade." So it was neat to see that whole student-led process.

Student 3:

I was actually one of the students that liked it, like the new way of how it was going to be. So I wasn't part of the change, but I liked how they took full responsibility and did it themselves, and then just accept it, and because I didn't like it and they changed it.

Ken Futernick (host):

I have one more question for the students here and perhaps even for Mr. Danz, but Alfie Kohn says that school should be a place that encourages kids to be questioners, he says, and to sometimes challenge their teacher on the way they're teaching, or the curriculum, what's taught. Or school rules like the lunch recess policy. Do you agree with Alfie Kohn that schools ought to be encouraging you to be questioners and to challenge things?

Student 1:

I think that we should, because some of the greatest people in the world with discoveries, they would not have figured that out or found those things out if they hadn't questioned if it was possible. Because I'm sure that like lights and technology, lots of people probably would have said, "No, that's not possible. Like you could never do that," but they questioned if it was possible and they worked hard to do that. It's the same in school. It's a little bit different but it's the same concept of just you will learn some things but you won't learn what you could if you don't question things.

Ken Futernick (host):

How do you feel about questioning Mr. Danz and the way he teaches? Do you ever feel like you can raise a question about that and say, "Mr. Danz, I don't really like the way you do that. I think it would be better if you did it this way"?

Student 1:

Mr. Danz is a pretty great teacher, but I guess like teachers in general, I could, I would definitely do that. Maybe I wouldn't tell it straight to their face but I would definitely tell my parents and try to change it. Because if someone's teaching me and I don't ... Good, yeah.

Ken Futernick (host):

Good, okay, thanks. Anyone else want to talk about challenging Mr. Danz and whether you think students ought to be able to do that, and whether you have done that?

Student 3:

I think we should be able to do that because if we just keep quiet and keep to ourselves, we will still learn things, but we won't probably learn as much because we would probably not say what we feel or what we think, that, how any teacher says or do something wrong in their teaching.

Ken Futernick (host):

Tavis, I want to thank you for sharing a second teacher story. I hope all of our Teacher Story listeners will go back and listen to the first episode, and perhaps the interview I did with Alfie Kohn. If you enjoyed this story, please hit the like button if you've viewed it on Facebook, and share it with your friends and colleagues. You might also want to go to teacherstories.org and tell us a bit about your own teacher story if you have one. This concludes another teacher Story Podcast. Thanks again to my guest, Tavis Danz. Bye everyone.