

Ep. 16 Mindfulness

FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

00:00:01;21 - 00:00:14;28

M1: Welcome to Episode 16 of the What's Up podcast I'm your host Frank Bellavia. That means we're going to be talking about mindfulness. We'll come right back in just a second.

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F1: I guess just everybody why I love my job. You love driving the bus. I really do. Well. I love riding your bus Mr. than to tease me. And I'll listen to.

00:00:29;28 - 00:00:43;12

M6: You buddy here grab a tissue. Arlington public schools is looking for bus drivers. If you are interested go to AP As V.A. dodged us for more information. Arlington public schools one hire at a time.

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M3: Welcome back I'm your host Frank Bellavia and today we're talking about mindfulness in the early public schools. What that is and what it looks like in the classroom. And we're here with educators Erin Sonn from Abington Elementary School and Alexander Mindland from drew much Model School. Thank you for joining us. Yes you're welcome. So I think we're going to start out with what is mindfulness. I've heard some buzz about it especially from Aaron recently over last few weeks but what is it.

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F2: So most simply put mindfulness is it's paying attention it's paying attention on purpose. It's just bringing awareness to the present moment. So you know it's. Getting rid of the idea of multitasking and getting rid of this idea that. More is better. It's really slowing down being responsive being thoughtful being compassionate to yourself to others just paying attention being ok with where you are in this moment even if where you are. It's it's not preferential. It's just being there noticing it acknowledging it and kind of moving on.

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F3: And I think as important it is just to define what my fitness is it's also important to define what it isn't because it has a vague connotation and a lot of senses it's not religious it's not a fad it's not a panacea. It's simply just noticing just being aware of the present moment without any judgment without any attachment just just awareness.

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M2: Now how did you get involved in trying to bring this to the Arlington public schools what is it that attracted you to it.

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F9: So I've been doing I've been doing essentially what is is now mainstream considered mindfulness since I've been teaching for about eight years now. So you know I've always really thought of kind of this social emotional piece. It's really a life skill and I've always thought of that as something that's so extremely important to my population. I typically work with K and one. And you know it has this mindful movement piece where you bring connection to your body and you notice your body. And you know with

the little ones that fine and gross motor awareness is so important just noticing where is my body in space and it has this other bigger. More beautiful piece of it as when you yourself are more aware of yourself and you're better to be aware of someone else. And so it starts to bring bring empathy and compassion into it. So I've been doing it with my kids since I've been teaching. I started in New York and then about two years ago. This. Movement of mindfulness started to kind of take take lead with the brothers up in Baltimore with the holistic Life Foundation. And so then I was kind of like oh wow this is actually a thing it's not just something that I'm really passionate about but there are actually other people who are very successful very professional who are doing this. And so I started seeking out actual training certification credentialing making myself more involved. And then from there you know I just. Was kind of like wow I've noticed such a huge difference in my classroom. People started coming to me saying oh my gosh Alexandrite your your community in your classroom is so different what are you doing. And so then. I just kind of started sharing it and the more that I was sharing it the more people were like I want to do this I want this I need this. Even parents. So it just kind of happened very organically and very naturally. But I think Erin and I kind of met maybe because we were running in very similar circles and we had a mom or like oh my gosh we have the same passion project and so we just started moving forward and I've been out of the classroom for quite a number of years now.

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F3: And I've been the testing coordinator at Abingdon and you can imagine how stress provoking that position is not just for me but for the students and watching the students. In many cases not be able to perform. To their full potential because stress is just overwhelming them I knew that I knew we needed a change. I knew the culture of the culture of Arlington is very high stress both from the you know the expectations from the parents who are generally high educate highly educated and high achieving and just the pressures that the teachers are feeling to make certain.

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F11: Scores and this data driven world we live in. And.

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F3: I felt like Arlington did a phenomenal job with offering professional development that helped pedagogy and helped teachers with instructional strategies for reading and math and history and all that but no one was really hitting upon the social emotional piece that is so critical without it without that the kids brains aren't even prepared to be receptive to all the other wonderful teaching that the Arlington public schools is offering. I just knew that something needed to be done. And we have a fabulous and very talented social strt social stoo Student Services staff to the counselors and psychologists. But there was nothing that was being offered on a daily basis as a regular skill to students to help empower them to self regulate and to be to be mindful to be aware of the present and sort of let things go and to build that empathy and compassion through my own self study as a yoga instructor and through my own mindfulness practice that grew and helped me in many areas of my life. I just knew that I knew that there was more. I knew that there was more we could offer. And Alexandra and I like she mentioned came together because we we ran similar circuit circles and the wellness the local wellness industry and we both had the same dream of creating a comprehensive mindfulness program for the county. And. So here we are. At the very beginning of it talking about it sharing it in hopes that we can inspire others out there to adopt the practice and see the benefits in their life and pass them on to others.

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M2: And I want to come back a little bit and talk about some of the how it fits into some of the things that are already being doing. Want to go back to you Alexandra and talk about you said that you've noticed in other stuff you noticed a difference in your classroom since you've been doing this. What sort of differences are or.

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F2: Are your colleagues saying it's a great question. So I also want to point out that essentially since 2012 since moving to the district I have taught in title 1 school. So when I was in New York teaching I was with a very different population. I saw the same kinds of things I'll talk about in a moment there. But the biggest changes that I have seen have been while working with. Students who have these quote unquote high needs. And I think. Honestly Frank the the biggest difference that people see is this really deep sense of community. It's this sense of calm.

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F9: People always come in and they're like your room is so calm it's so Zen whereas I'm like oh my gosh my rooms in chaos right now. But you know it's just something that they think that it seems really calm very kind. And a lot of teachers from from year to year will make this comment. I know when a child comes from your class because he or she is better able to name his or her emotions he or she is better able to regulate the emotions they are kinder and more empathetic with their peers they're more willing to push themselves and try something without fear of failure. And really it's just it comes always comes back to that sense of community. I really see mindfulness as a way of bringing kind awareness to build community because when I like I said one when I am self-aware of myself I am better able to feel what you what you could be feeling. And so when you're going through something I can have compassion for you. And I can be patient I can I can be responsive rather than reactive. Right. And that's you know I try to embody that in my classroom. I try to really live and breathe this sense of calm and kindness and just overall awareness. And fortunately for me when I have 4 or 5 and 6 year olds they emulate whatever I'm putting out there. So torture is like yeah it is you know like if if my response to someone screaming is not to be reactive and to scream back but to just kind of calmly sit and wait. Or you know to have an actual conversation and build relationship with that person. The other children see that and that's the way that they start to respond as well.

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F3: And so I know we're going to get into the nitty gritty and a little bit about how this can look in a classroom. But Talod Sandras point it's so important and it's critical is vital that teachers embody the practice before they try to teach it to their students just as a reading teacher would never be illiterate. Right. You have to understand the ins and outs and the benefits of feel them in an authentic fashion so that you can pass those on. Other people.

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M2: And the toute and the kids sense that you wouldn't necessarily go into teaching somebody French you know that exact same thing. So while we are trying to.

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F6: Obviously pass the benefits along to students not really we're doing a lot of things to help the teachers understand mindfulness like parkour and to start to learn that they can't pick up the practice. And it is a practice it's not something that you go in and you do want to switch oftentimes. I think there are some

social emotional lessons delivered across the county where they they go in and they're done and then you know whoever's teaching wham bam thank you ma'am.

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F8: And this is something that has to be a daily practice. It does not take a long time. But it does take. Brian. Has to take out because it it's taking your attention and your awareness. You mention.

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M3: Building community for years. What exactly do you mean by building community.

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F2: Sure. So for example every morning. So we go back three times a day. We have a set time where we actually practice mindfulness and we actually call it our mindfulness practice. And so we have one first thing in the morning as soon as the children arrive we all sit in a circle and I have a Hoberman Sphere. You know the spheres that come in and out and we use that and we breathe together and we start every single day with three series of different kinds of breaths. And this allows first the children to leave whatever they were coming with at the door and to actually kind of without sounding too kitschy ground themselves to the present moment. So it brings them to this classroom next to them to their classmates right now. And then you know from there we talk about it. We talk about how were you feeling this morning before you came to school. How are you feeling now that we've had our mindful breaths. We also talk about building a mindful body and what that looks like and how even just changing the stature of your body can change the way that you feel in your body. And so the community really comes from holding space for each person. You know it really it ties in so nicely to the idea of morning meeting. Right. Which schools which are still responsive classroom is huge on the morning and this is the way that we do our morning meeting. And it just it gives that space for each person to have a voice if they have something to say we listen to them. We respect them we empathize with them you know. Other students will ask them questions. They'll give them suggestions on ways that they can make improvements. So we do that in the morning. We also do that when we come back from lunch and recess just because usually after they come back from recess or like. So that's a little bit different. After lunch we have a meditation meeting where I just play. It's actually just nature sounds. It's a five minute track of nature sounds and the children just they either sit in a comfortable space or they lie down or they sit on a chair and we just talk about reflecting on the morning and thinking about. What what they can do to continue the positive kind of effect of the afternoon and then again before we come back together we take those breaths and actually in our afternoon meeting the children with the breath so in the morning I lead the whole exercise and then the children for afternoon meeting. They lead it. And again we talk about it quickly. This only takes maybe 10 minutes total. But again it's that time to connect with them to connect with each other. This is a big time where a lot of conflicts at recess are dealt with. You know we're in friendship there are just it's so important for them to be building the social emotional skills and to actually respond thoughtfully to each other. And then we do it once more just before we go home. And that's their way to say thank you for giving your all for the day today like I take my breath in and as I take my breath out I'm done. And I can go in.

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F3: It doesn't take a lot of time. Teachers can't afford not to spend that five 10 minutes a day. It's not one more thing either. Both Alexander and I are in schools where they will use responsa classroom and Sieda and a tie so beautifully into both of them.

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F8: There are mindful moments in seat strategies and just the vernacular talking about controlling your concentration and controlling your body controlling your voice. There's mindfulness kind of planted in a lot of things that teachers are already doing.

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M4: And for those that don't see those changing education your apprenticeship you have arts integration.

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M2: How do you bring this to the students. What do you do. What are some of the things they do. You mentioned breathing. What are some of the other things that you do.

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F8: So I am teaching pretty discreetly through the mindful schools curriculum and I think Alexandras is as well as she has trained in going through this level to certification that program. And so my lessons are everyday that I'm at school. So it's three days a week. And 15 no more than 15 minutes. We always start out with a mindful breath which is getting them into their mindful body sitting up may some tall having their hand placed on their breath anchor whatever that is in their body. And we we've worked up to two minutes sometimes we'll go a little longer than two minutes when I can really see that everybody is into it just to establish the presence so their physical bodies are present that their minds may still be on the playground or are stressed about a task or whatever so just connecting the physical and the emotional bodies and energetic bodies into one. So then we launch into our lesson and everyday a little bit different we might be doing something on mindful seeing we might be doing my foot eating them active. Listening. We may be doing of building compassion or building gratitude or generosity and some of the lessons can sometimes just be where they're using their imagination to envision a situation and we look at what emotions it evokes and we talk about it. Other times we play games so we have this game that my kids love. It's called Mind Body go. We sit in a circle with a little roly ball and we talk about how feelings manifest in many ways your physical feelings and your physical body. And we also have emotions that kind of are driven from our heart and our head. And so when the balls are delivered to them they have to say at that moment how they're feeling. So it just it causes them to identify. Kids don't instinctively can't instinctively. Name their feelings they have to be taught how to identify recognize the symptoms in the body given give a name to it and then be ok with it. Because you know I think there is a stigma against feeling sad. You know feeling angry like don't do that don't be angry be happy be happy. It's ok to be angry. It's ok to be angry. Once the kids are able to identify their emotion they're able to decide whether it's an emotion they want to hang onto. Feel a folk feel that emotion or an emotion that they want to release with their breath or we do you know you can put your emotional emotion in a big bubble watch the emotion float away. And there are lots of ways to deal with it. But identifying the emotion is number one.

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F6: So sometimes we play games sometimes we do role play sometimes we do partner activity where it forces them to make eye contact and give compliments to each other. And. You know it can manifest in a lot of different ways that kids like when it's mixed. They like the consistency and predictability of starting with the breath and the chime. But they like day is new. What are you learning today. No more than 15 minutes.

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M2: And we're down. And is a time away to get their attention. Shine is the way I walk into the room. And no matter what the kids are doing I don't have to say a word I do this.

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F10: And they know that they put everything away.

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F8: Slide back from their chair chair it's back from the table and get into their mind body. And then we move on to our breath. I don't even have to say a word. I usually do say a word I say hello. Sometimes I'll remind them that the breath can be used to recycle those emotions so maybe today I want your focus to be on breathing in anything that you need right in this moment and breathing out anything that you just want to get rid of. Sometimes we'll use other breath cues like trying to draw out the breath you know maybe counting see yesterday you counted to five as you know maybe you count six today just working on elongating deepening the rift. Accessing the full potential of the brand. To help. Them calm because anxiety is really stale air in the lungs. So think about when you're anxious when you're at McDew is firing your breathing shallow and you're just in survival mode. So if we counteract that. By taking this deep breath it calms the nervous system and allows them to be to the other parts of the brain to be accessible for both the activity and whatever they're learning beyond.

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F7: Our mind from this lesson. How does this tie into some of the things that.

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M2: The schools are already doing. Before we started as we talked about in terms of Singapore kind of walking through that.

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F2: Sure. So our our counselling service or our counselors rather they have actually they're using the mind up like Ulum which is it's a nice kind of like a starter base but kind of what Aaron and I were saying is. Or maybe this was before the tape was on but it's one of those. Put your own oxygen mask on before you see someone else. So that's kind of like a prepackaged curriculum that you can essentially give and you just read a script. It's fantastic. It's great that it's being done at all. But you don't have to be mindful to teach it. We also have practice. And it's and it's not practiced based practice based. So it's it's skill based which is fantastic. And then there's also. A Level Up level watching what is the day into Billings. Yes stepped up a step up. There's an anti bullying one. That's being used. So again it's it's the social emotional piece. So there are some things that are happening but again you know it's very inconsistent. Some counselors use some counselors don't use it some counselors use it preventative some counselors use it after a situation has occurred in a way to address something afterward. So you know I think Erin and I are really trying. To be proactive about this especially kind of in the wake of everything that happened last week not just in Florida but within our own school district. Mindfulness is needed now more than ever. Not only are students need by our teachers need. This world is so overdone with everything they're so anxious. Everything has to the extremes and this is a way to be proactive to give humans the ability to take pause and to realize being upset feeling this way as part of the human condition. I am not alone in the way that I feel there is. I can take a simple breaths and and that can take me out of this.

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F3: So we're hoping to start a countywide mindfulness. No that would be offered as a Level 1 support within the CFS model so that eventually it slow to roll out but eventually all students are offered the opportunity to have mindfulness instruction and mindfulness moments.

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F11: Given the space and time for their mindfulness practice to continue every day in terms of personalized learning initiative you know that big pushes create your own path right seeking out ways to connect your learning be innovative be creative and my Fanis not only has all these great social emotional pieces but there's a huge cognitive component as well because when like we mentioned when the more primitive parts of the brain are quieted their prefrontal cortex the hippocampus and parts of the brain that are involved in and learning new skills problem solving executive functioning and storing information they're readily available. Because my phone has sort of ignited and opened up those parts so kids through their self awareness will realize what they already know and what they still need to know. They will find themselves more creative more able to connect to what they're learning because again the. Cognitive benefits are very strong.

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F2: Or simply just connect with their interests so they can drive their own learning. How can. Teachers.

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F12: Teach teachers. We love teachers.

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F11: Teachers are the gateway to this being successful. So teachers have to embody that practice so that they can be solid and stable in the classroom so the students feel safe. So the students feel connected to the students trust that this is something that's actually working. If if we are teaching mindfulness in a classroom. Or if we're observing someone else teaching mindfulness in the classroom and the teacher isn't being mindful. It's not going to work. So the teacher has to adopt the you know the solid presence the authentic voice the calm nature so that the students will in turn realize that that sort of the culture of the classroom we don't raise our voices when we have something we need to talk about. Use a nice calm voice you know when we're speaking to each other we show courtesy by by turning our bodies to one another and make eye contact so we know that. We are present. This teacher is present for me. I trust the teacher. I know the teacher cares about me.

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F2: Yeah. Also just in terms of of what it can do for the teacher. It just makes our jobs easier and more enjoyable I can reconnect us to that passion that so often we lose touch. Exactly and it reconnects you at least it has reconnected me to my purpose. And you know there have been a lot of studies. Mindful schools specifically just had one that says that burnout rate significantly reduces when when teachers are given opportunities to practice mindfulness. So just imagine what it would be like if we had time in the day not to teach mindfulness. But for us as educators as humans ourselves to take that moment to reflect to breathe and then how powerful that could be to come back to the classroom. In that present state of mind can I use this as a plug.

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F3: Can I slip in here because we are so fortunate to be well resourced in Arlington County in the professional development offerings are unbelievable probably unparalleled across the nation. I'm assuming. But they always hit at.

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F11: Helping teachers be better teachers help so that the students can be strong learners and good citizens and very few if any offerings in the catalog hit upon helping them grow the whole Teacher.

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F5: Teacher wellness teacher emotional social development and so Alexandra and I are fortunate to have we we received the green light earlier in the year to offer professional development for teachers to help them grow their mindfulness practice. And we did our first session standing room only. My wife had last October during one of the countywide professional development sessions and the teachers were so grateful that someone finally. Did something.

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F4: For them for them. This wasn't even about the kids we were talking about and I hear something new go do this in your classroom. This was simply here's something for you to be a happier healthier human right. So the takeaway was you go home and practice this on your own and you know certainly if they wanted to try students that could but that was not our message and it was so well received. And there was a call for more so. On March 14th during the elementary countywide service we're going to be offering that session again I'm going to be teaching the level once which is just to repeat for those who missed it the first time around and Chandra has a level one as an intro to mindfulness.

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F2: What it is what it does not what it looks like and then I'll be leading the level to which is really building and embodied practice of building going deeper into your personal practice.

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M2: And I was going to ask that question out more teachers get involved. So yes to sign up for our for March 14th workshop I believe it's not.

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F11: Quite ready to launch yet the Iorio but it'll be available soon. Please make sure you stay in touch with Alexandra and me through our email addresses which will probably be on the website Postum. There is an ATV episode coming out next week. Snap snap shot me out the next week or so it's in final production now where you can see me teaching my finance lesson to fifth grade classroom with whom I've been working all year. Very high needs group that is just absorbing every benefit and running with it. It's amazing. We look out for our.

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F4: Our article and the Department of watching and learning newsletter and feel free to talk to your principals about bringing mindfulness to your class classroom to your school we're happy to come speak we've spoken out a few staff meetings already and talked about it school workshops if you want to get involved in the project that we've put together then emailed happy to have more hands join forces in this very important work.

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M5: I know we only have a few more minutes before Alexandra's class comes back in my day. I did have one additional question from the parent perspective. I've got two kids seven and a half and four and a half and they come in and they are just wound up and it's difficult to calm them down and a first reaction for parents will turn on the TV give them and I've had calmed down that way. How can parents use this to help at home.

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F9: So I do I want to like kind of put the kibosh on something really quick. Mindfulness is not the call. So like don't walk away from this thinking that like oh I'm going to start practicing mindfulness with my kids and suddenly they're just going to be like moms on little body. There's still there's still for seven. Mindfulness is not being calm sometimes mindfulness is being really active in and you know engaged but mindfulness is being present. So some things that I would suggest and this is kind of what Aaron was speaking to is just having those activities so he's going to mindful coloring you can do mindful walking mindful do cleaning the dishes and mindful that yeah you really really can be aware of what you're doing as you're doing. Yeah. So you know it's it's really about. Slowing down and it's taking the time to be present in this moment with what you're doing how your body feels as you do it. What sensations are in your body what thoughts are in your mind what feelings are in your heart. And just being there. So my. My suggestion for you is if you have wound up kids then let them move their bodies like get them outside and move with them. Like go on a mindful walk put them on a trampoline and let them jump for 30 minutes and then come back and talk about it. What did that feel like before. What did it feel like while you were doing it. Now what do you feel like.

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F5: And this is a topic for our next podcast. You know the digital distraction and how that plays into. The mindfulness culture that we're trying to grow but. Just being present for your kids yeah looking at them having conversations sharing and experience and talking about it.

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F6: As they're washing their hands when they come in I always make my kids wash their hands when they come and tell me how. Tell me about the temperature of the water. How are the. Heart of the bubbles look. Are they iridescent or are they are they transparent. You know just bring in all the language that they may or may not have heard in school. Make it an expert make everything experience of interaction and discovery through awareness.

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M4: That sounds great. Easy enough right. I may be calling your comments for you. I'm not for it. I want to thank you both for taking time to join us and if you can see us now we're all sitting on the floor in a corner of Alexander's classroom.

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M7: Thank you again for joining us.

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M3: Just like my plate. Yes mindfully. Yes. You have any questions for them or put their e-mail addresses in the show notes description that goes along with this episode. You can also email apsnews@apsva.us if you have any additional questions for future topics and send us a tweet

@APSVirginia. Virginia. And let us know what you think and if you are interested in using this in your classroom. And thanks for joining us.

00:33:54;08 - 00:33:54;27

F13: Thank you.