

# *Mindset Shifts in Public Education: An Evaluation of a Contemplative Program*

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Received September 2024

Accepted for publication September 2024

Published November 2025

## **Abstract**

This article analyzes a contemplative education initiative at a public high school in Tel Aviv from 2017 to the present. It explores the program's development, conceptual foundations, and practical implementation. By prioritizing individual well-being and self-awareness, the initiative enables an evaluation of its impact on the educational environment. Drawing on the authors' experience sustained since its inception, the article contributes to the scholarly discourse on contemplative education by offering insights into the program impact and effectiveness, strategies to cope with challenges and difficulties.

\*Both authors contributed equally to this work

**Keywords:** *contemplative education, educational program, mindfulness-based program, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), educational ecology, mind-body*

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## **Introduction**

Work frequently fails to address individual needs, all these resulting in an environment which fails to support development of listening skills and therefore hindering values such as personal responsibility and mutual care.

In response to these pressures, Dr. Raquel Shaoul<sup>1</sup> proposed the creation of a contemplative space, Etnachta room, initially to support students'

well-being. A place where students could interact meaningfully with staff and have their personal needs addressed. With the support of then-principal Dr. Zeev Degani<sup>2</sup> this modest initiative evolved into a comprehensive, school-wide program grounded in two conceptual foundations: Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Educational Ecology.

## **SEL and Educational Ecology**

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Zeev Degani has been serving as the principal of the Gymnasium school since 2011. He is widely recognized for his extensive and impactful career in education. As an educational pioneer, he supported the launch of the Etnachta program, making it the only one of its kind in Israeli high schools.

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<sup>1</sup>At the time, 2017, Dr. Shaoul, who was the Head of the school's International Relations Program and had six years of teaching experience there, envisioned this dedicated space in response to the needs she identified among her students.

*Social Emotional Learning* provides structured strategies for developing emotional intelligence, empathy, and responsible decision-making—recognized as a critical component of comprehensive education, and essential to both academic and personal success. As such, it provides practical guidelines for embedding into classroom and school culture (CASEL, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2018; Elias, 1997; Hansen, 2019; Jones, McGarrah, & Kahn, 2019). Etnachta integrates SEL principles (Durlak et al., 2011) by prioritizing care and self-awareness.

*Educational Ecology* views education as a system where students, teachers, and their surroundings are all connected. This approach, based on ecological ideas, highlights how social, cultural, and physical environments shape learning. It draws from environmental education, systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979; Watkins, 2021), and cognitive science to support learning spaces that care for the whole student and encourage sustainable practices in schools (Bowers, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). Etnachta emphasizes the mutuality and interdependence within the school environment and personal life. This ecological and relational vision is reflected in Ben's words:

*Through Etnachta, I have experienced significant personal development. Initially, the dialogue felt unfamiliar due to my scientific academic background. However, the positive physical and mental impacts I encountered not only brought me joy but also sparked an interest in areas I had previously overlooked, leading to ongoing personal growth. This growth has also enriched my roles as both a parent and a partner. My ability to navigate daily life has expanded, enabling me to engage with my environment, family interactions, and daily routines with greater clarity. I've become more aware of the energy*

*I bring home from teaching, understanding the balance required between the intensity of my professional role and the exhaustion that sometimes diminishes my patience at home. While maintaining this practice is not always straightforward, recognizing the need for change during life transitions has been invaluable, fostering deeper self-reflection and continued growth.*

### Core Values and Assumptions

A central premise of the Etnachta Program is that systemic change in education begins with personal transformation. This principle is inspired by the philosophy of J. Krishnamurti (1997):

*Systems, whether educational or political, are not changed mysteriously; they are transformed when there is a fundamental change in ourselves. The individual is of first importance, not the system; and as long as the individual does not understand the total process of himself, no system can bring order and peace to the world (p. 19).*

This principle drives the program's emphasis on personal development as the basis for broader systemic change. Meaningful educational achievements are intrinsically tied to individuals—whether teachers or students. Therefore, Etnachta encourages educators and students to develop heightened awareness of their emotional, mental, and physical states as a basis for meaningful engagement with others. Teachers consistently report that the program has deepened their ability to teach with patience, attentiveness, and emotional clarity, in Dana's words:

*The practice at Etnachta helped me respond calmly rather than react impulsively. It supported me in setting clearer boundaries in the classroom.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup>Ben's strong commitment as an educator made him a key figure in implementing the program, both during Etnachta

Ben, described the program as offering a space for genuine self-reflection:

*Etnachta provided a setting where I could talk about my teaching practices and mindset—deep, localized, and systemic, yet free of hierarchy or judgment.*

Ben continues:

*The teacher is me, and the students are the people in front of me. Ultimately, education happens between people, not roles. The personal process I underwent through Etnachta is now part of who I am—and it shapes how I relate to my students.*

This emphasis on self-inquiry and presence exemplifies one of Etnachta's core values: the reverberation of personal transformation through relationships. As educators engage in mindful, embodied practice, these qualities naturally extend into their interactions with colleagues and students; as Ben recounted I the program ability to enhance teacher-student relationships:

*The practice enabled me to become an ambassador for Etnachta and its foundational ideas to my students. This was evident in explicit classroom discussions about the effects of stress on learning, concentration, and the lack of movement within the current educational system. My deepened understanding of the body-mind connection and emotional states allowed me to contribute more meaningfully to these discussions and offer solutions and approaches tailored to various student situations. This was apparent in both classroom interactions and personal conversations, whether as part of the daily routine or during crisis management.*

*Additionally, I actively sought, and believe I found, ways to integrate Etnachta's concepts and practices into my teaching. I incorporated 'small' tools learned at Etnachta, such as 'finger coordination exercises', 'listening to the silence of the classroom', integrating relaxation techniques like turning off the lights, and encouraging movement by disengaging from the sitting position. Afterwards, we held a joint discussion to examine the impact of these activities.*

By embodying the core value of reverberation, each individual shift creates a ripple effect that fosters interconnectedness across the school. The program's impact thus extends beyond personal growth, strengthening social cohesion and cultivating compassionate, supportive, and responsive relationships within the school culture. In Gaya's words:

*I only really knew the teachers on my own [professional] team, so the [Etnachta] sessions allowed me to meet teachers I wouldn't have otherwise known. Because it is somewhat personal and intimate, I also got to know different kinds of people on a deeper level. This made school trips and events so much better and allowed me to integrate more fully into the school. Most teacher trainings that I've done are unhelpful and boring and you're just trying to get it done, but the fact that this training was engaging made for a wonderful work environment and built connections between teachers. Teaching in a big public school is very stressful, and teachers are often on edge. Training like this helps create a more positive work environment.<sup>4</sup>*

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sessions and in the classroom. Ben is a math teacher with 17 years of experience. His reflecting writing was originally composed in Hebrew.

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<sup>4</sup> Gaya, is an English and special education teacher with 10 years of experience. Her reflective writing was originally in English.

## Program Outline and Working Qualities

The Program provides structured essential respite and support within the school day for both students and teachers—delivered in separate sessions. It responds to the complex emotional and cognitive challenges prevalent in public schools—particularly those linked to student disconnection (OECD, 2021; Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016; Shochat et al., 2014; Undheim et al., 2011) and teacher hectic work environment and burnout (Greenberg, Brown, & Abenavoli, 2016; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005).

## Etnachta for Teachers

The teacher component of Etnachta offers weekly 45-minute sessions during school hours. These sessions, held in small groups (5–8 participants), focus on mindfulness-based meditation, guided imagery, breathing practices, and gentle movement. The sessions are designed to cultivate attentional flexibility, emotional regulation, and embodied awareness. These qualities are aimed to be adapted for classroom use and integrated into daily life. By prioritizing the well-being of teachers, the program aims to alleviate stress and reduce the physical discomfort associated with prolonged teaching hours.

Teachers frequently describe these gatherings as moments of calm in otherwise demanding schedules, in Anne's and Joule words:

*Etnachta was an opportunity for me to take time for myself and set aside the daily chaos. During the meetings I felt both challenged and relaxed. Initially, it was difficult to 'force' myself to put all of my stress and worries aside, but once I managed to do so, I felt a sense of relaxation. The meetings helped me reconnect with myself and achieve a more balanced state.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Anne is an English teacher with 9 years of experience. Her reflective writing was originally in English.

*This year, the Etnachta meetings were scheduled on a particularly busy day for me, and I often arrived feeling stressed, just wanting to rest. The facilitator was very attentive and tailored the practice to the participants' needs, including mine. The repetition of the exercises brought me a sense of calm, and the relaxation techniques helped me release the burden I felt weighing on me.*<sup>6</sup>

Advanced training<sup>7</sup> opportunities in Etnachta have enabled experienced teachers to facilitate sessions for both peers and students, thereby embodying the core value of reverberating relationships throughout school.

## Etnachta for Students

Student sessions are integrated into the weekly school schedule. Groups of 12–16 students attend once a week 45-minute lessons<sup>8</sup> that blend contemplative practices with curriculum-aligned SEL content. Central practices include guided meditation imagery, storytelling, playful movement, and participatory dialogue. Self-awareness is cultivated through body awareness (movement, yoga asana, simple sequences), breath awareness (e.g., Diaphragm,

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<sup>6</sup>Joule is a biology teacher with 11 years of experience. Her reflective writing was originally in Hebrew.

<sup>7</sup>Teachers who found the program meaningful enrolled in advanced training to deepen their understanding and experience of SEL and Educational Ecology.

<sup>8</sup> Etnachta sessions are incorporated into students' regular study schedules, with attendance frequency determined by the school administration based on evolving needs. Some students participate weekly throughout the year, while others attend biweekly or in response to specific circumstances such as conflict, school violence, or other exceptional events.

Fegmented<sup>9</sup> and Full Breath), and mind<sup>10</sup> awareness (e.g., Sensory Withdrawal, Body Scan, and Emotional Awareness). These techniques focus on attention skills—relaxation (and stress management), concentration and self-regulation. Some sessions focus directly on these skills, while others integrate them into curriculum themes like history and literature.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on these skills serves as a foundation for fostering a positive shift in mindset. These sessions are particularly impactful for students facing emotional or behavioral challenges. Etnachta practices extend beyond the classroom as Gaya, a teacher of MABAR<sup>12</sup> students (special education), shared:

*With my MABAR students, it was a journey of ups and downs. The first time I brought them to Etnachta, it was chaotic—students stormed off, yelled, and some left simply because they didn't want to take off their shoes. But as time passed, the practice brought a sense of calm. We made participation optional and allowed them to keep their shoes on if necessary. Though not always easy, the sessions were amazing, and gradually, the students learned a few techniques. Even if nothing else, it got them out of the classroom and into a new setting. During the Matriculation exams, I collaborated with Etnachta facilitators to have the students meet there before their exams. I*

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<sup>9</sup>A technique that is derived from hatha yoga pranayama practices. Gradually dividing the exhalation and then the inhalation into segments. It creates a sense of self-regulation and calms and focuses the system.

<sup>10</sup>By 'mind,' we refer to the aspect of a person that enables consciousness, thought, emotion, and perception. Drawing from the Sanskrit term *Manas*, this concept encompasses both cognition and emotion, symbolically connected to the brain and the heart, respectively.

<sup>11</sup>While the article does not delve into the thematic session content, it highlights body–mind integration as the core mode of learning within academic study.

<sup>12</sup>MABAR- It's a class for at-risk youth or students falling behind as they enter high school. The class typically includes students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, often children of immigrant or minority families, who need extra support and benefit from a smaller class size.

*believe the calmness and time together helped them focus on learning and facing challenges. This experience also taught them life skills they can carry into the future. Additionally, it provided a safe place during Ramadan<sup>13</sup> for fasting students who weren't feeling well. The fact that they had a quiet, safe space to retreat to was incredible.*

### **Working Qualities of the Program: Listening, Trust and Support**

The core working qualities of the program—Listening, Trust, and Support—serve as foundational conditions that enable both students and teachers to explore their inner experiences and cultivate self-awareness. Although these qualities may appear subtle, their influence is substantial. They function both as guiding principles for facilitators and as criteria for selecting session practices and techniques. In this way, the working qualities operate simultaneously as means and ends: they inform pedagogical choices and are enacted through practice.<sup>14</sup> Rather than being explicitly taught, they are embodied in facilitators' actions, allowing each participant to develop a personal understanding of what "Etnachta" represents.

While a formal method for assessing the impact of these working qualities on participants' experiences has not yet been developed, reflective inquiry is embedded into each session's design. Facilitators may prompt participants to reflect on their internal state at the beginning of a session through inquiries such as, "notice the atmosphere around you" or "observe your current mood" and invite them to revisit this self-inquiry at the end with prompts like, "Have any new qualities

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<sup>13</sup>Ramadan is a holy month in Islam marked by fasting from dawn to sunset, prayer, and reflection.

<sup>14</sup>The distinctions between the working qualities—Listening, Trust, and Support—are primarily analytical, as these qualities are deeply interconnected. Each quality arises and evolves within the others, making them inseparable and mutually reinforcing in practice.

emerged following this brief practice?". Participants are also encouraged to observe and describe the atmosphere in the room. Notably, even those who do not actively engage in the practice often report perceptible shifts in the collective mood—suggesting that the space itself fosters emotional resonance and relational attunement.

The following section examines each of these working qualities in greater detail.

### Listening

*Listening*, as a fundamental skill, is significantly challenged by various external and internal distractions, which affect individuals differently. To cultivate effective listening, the program emphasizes practices that develop awareness of one's mood, disposition, and intention. These practices aim to foster a nuanced attentiveness to subtle internal and external cues, forming the basis for personal situational awareness. Through the embodied experience of this awareness, participants gradually strengthen their capacity to apply it across various contexts.

Sessions also serve as a reminder of the importance of self-listening by offering a deliberate pause from routine demands, as illustrated by Tamara's reflection:

*The break, in the middle of a busy and stressful day, was very significant, as it was a session where I was attentive to myself without distractions (like my phone, which is usually with me all day) and focused solely on my needs and listening to my body, in contrast to the unhealthy 'autopilot' of daily work routine and life in general... At the end of the sessions, I felt much more peaceful, calm, and relaxed, and it was noticeable to others.*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Tamara is a History and Civics teacher with 22 years of experience. Her reflective writing was originally in Hebrew.

Moreover, creating conditions that foster self-listening opens the possibility of deepening one's ability to listen to others, as Dana<sup>16</sup> commented:

*In Etnachta sessions, I met new teachers, was exposed to new perspectives, and opened up by sharing and listening. Learning to listen and accept different opinions without judgment and criticism strengthened my sense of belonging to the community and highlighted the power of relationships.*

### Listening with teachers

Listening is cultivated not only through intention, but also through structured reflection practices. The following example illustrates a method commonly used in teacher training sessions. Our study suggests that deeper listening awareness can be developed using three self-diagnostic questions.<sup>17</sup> These questions help both facilitators and participants assess their current state of mind and decide how to proceed.

At the start of each session, teachers are invited to reflect on their physical and emotional state using the following questions:

1. What is the most suitable body position for me right now—standing, sitting, or lying down? Adjust accordingly.

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<sup>16</sup> Dana is a computer science teacher with 5 years of experience. Her reflective writing was originally in Hebrew.  
<sup>17</sup>This practice originated from the yoga therapy tradition of Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (KYM) that was founded by T.K.V. Desikachar. The diagnostic questions mentioned are a variation that has developed in program session to help attune to teacher's needs.

This question helps participants become aware of their energy levels and physical needs, emphasizing individual comfort over uniformity.

2. What is the desired effect of the practice—relaxation, balance, or wakefulness? Communicate this to the facilitator.

This promotes mood awareness and allows participants to tailor the session to their current state—for example, choosing more active techniques to enhance alertness or gentler ones for relaxation.

3. How would I prefer to practice today—through movement, breathing, or meditation? Inform the facilitator.

This question supports intuitive decision-making, particularly for those familiar with various mind-body techniques, and introduces a basic typology of contemplative practices.

This reflective sequence supports embodied awareness and intuitive engagement, helping teachers select practices that meet their immediate needs.

Concluding each session with a reflection on mood changes—such as feeling calmer, more tired, lighter, or happier—offers insight into the collective impact of contemplative practice. These observations highlight the tangible emotional and physical effects, reinforcing the potential of such practices to enhance well-being and effectiveness in educational settings. As Ben described:

*The practice at Etnachta allowed me to recognize, understand, and internalize the impact of stress on my teaching practices. Previously, my [teaching] experience was that lesson quality seemed random. The practices and techniques provided clarity on how my inner state influences the teaching experience. It's not random or solely dependent on*

*external factors; it is deeply affected by my mental state and mood when I enter the classroom. As a result, I was able to significantly improve the "self" that arrives at the lesson, understanding that I have control over the event and the ability to guide it to positive outcomes.*

### *Listening with Students*

Promoting the conditions for, and inquiry into, listening is equally vital for students. In large, overcrowded classrooms, effective communication is often compromised, placing strain on student–teacher relationships. Under such conditions, students may perceive teachers as indifferent or even antagonistic—especially when disciplinary measures such as expulsion or shouting are employed. Furthermore, when curricular content appears disconnected from students' interests, it often leads to boredom and a sense of irrelevance. Teachers also report that students frequently exhibit short attention spans, are easily distracted by mobile devices, and tend to interrupt rather than listen attentively. These challenges raise a critical pedagogical question: how can effective listening skills be cultivated among students in such environments?

Etnachta's practice meetings respond directly to these challenges by creating a safe and supportive space where students are encouraged to express their thoughts and emotions openly. The small group format, combined with a flexible and non-hierarchical structure—distinct from conventional classroom norms—fosters open and authentic dialogue.

Facilitators utilize a range of mindfulness- and yoga-based techniques, including practices of sensory withdrawal and attention regulation, to emphasize the individual's capacity to intentionally direct attention. These practices may involve randomly focusing on specific sensory experiences, such as sensations in the palms or

ambient sounds, or adopting a more systematic approach, such as body scanning or sequential exploration of sensory faculties—hearing, sight, touch, taste, and smell.

Through practicing the ability to shift attention smoothly and deliberately from one sensory object to another, students gain a sense of agency and self-regulation. Facilitators refer to this skill as the "superpower of attention," which stands in stark contrast to the habitual distractions that fragment awareness in daily life. This practice offers a transformative way of engaging with the world and often serves as an accessible entry point that motivates students to explore more demanding techniques for cultivating concentration and relaxation. Moreover, the experiential integration of these practices within a SEL framework encourages emotional engagement and underscores the fundamental interconnectedness between school experiences and life beyond the classroom.

### Trust

Fostering trust is particularly vital when working with students. For this reason, trust is examined here as a core working quality, primarily in relation to students, based on observations accumulated over several years.

Establishing trust between facilitators and students presents a particular challenge, given the relatively limited number of Etnachta sessions in comparison to regular academic subjects. This challenge is further heightened by the sessions' thematic focus on personal, emotional, and value-oriented issues—topics that typically require a pre-existing sense of safety and relational trust in order to encourage meaningful engagement.

Therefore, within Etnachta sessions, trust is nurtured through a consistent ethic of non-coercion and respect. To ensure

social-emotional safety, facilitators intentionally avoid employing techniques as disciplinary tools. Instead, they emphasize a "freedom to choose and explore," encouraging even non-participating students to remain present and rest quietly. Facilitators routinely offer at least two options when introducing a technique, enabling students to choose what aligns best with their comfort and needs.

The effort to build trust is also carried out by creating conditions that foster a supportive atmosphere in which each individual is accepted as they are. Each session begins with a simple ritual designed to set the tone for the space: students remove their shoes, stow away mobile phones, and sit on cushions or mats. One common trust-building practice is a consistent reminder: "No need to impress. No need to please. Respect your own and others' space."<sup>18</sup> This message aims to foster acceptance and allows students to explore their inner experience without judgment. While seemingly modest, this practice of reinforcing acceptance significantly contributes to cultivating trust—especially for students who enter the space with a sense of distrust towards the school environment and its teachers.

The program views students as whole individuals, beyond academic performance or behavior. This holistic orientation fosters mutual respect, encourages personal responsibility, and promotes a learning environment grounded in reciprocity.

This orientation toward trust also manifests in student–teacher interactions, as illustrated in Shani's<sup>19</sup> experience:

*In one meeting, a student seemed nervous and said he couldn't stop thinking. I remembered a calming Etnachta exercise involving thumb*

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<sup>18</sup> This reminder is given by Etnachta's facilitators at the beginning of each lesson.

<sup>19</sup> Shani is an art teacher and therapist with 16 years of experience. Her reflective writing was originally in English.

*movements. We did it together, and after a few minutes, he was able to start creating art.*

Shani's account reflects how trust cultivated through personal practice extends into professional settings. Teachers who engage in Etnachta, intuitively integrate its principles into their relationships with students. As Joule explained:

*During Etnachta, I learned a concentration exercise. I used it for myself and with students. Some connected deeply, and I felt they trusted me not just as a teacher, but as someone who cared about their emotional and mental well-being.*

Despite the challenges, the program's impact is evident. Students voluntarily return to the Etnachta space during breaks—to reflect, seek support, or simply rest. Some even fall asleep, a sign of deep emotional safety. These behaviors suggest that when offered with care and consistency, Etnachta creates the conditions for trust to take root and flourish.

## Support

The program exemplifies the working quality of support by offering tailored services that address both individual and systemic needs within the school community.

### *Support for teachers*

Etnachta sessions integrated into their workday offer firsthand experiences of the calming and uplifting effects of contemplative practices. From a systemic standpoint, the timing of these sessions is crucial. Scheduling them during regular working hours—not outside of school—acknowledges the challenges teachers face and reflects the school's commitment to improving their working conditions. This approach underscores the importance of teachers'

mental and emotional health, which directly impacts their quality of life and, ultimately, the quality of their teaching. By addressing these needs, the school fosters trust and mutual respect, demonstrating genuine appreciation for the teachers' contributions. As the school Principal noted:

*In the program's early years, practices such as meditation and yoga were offered almost daily before or after teaching hours, but teachers' participation was minimal. It was only after these sessions were integrated into the regular workday schedule and curriculum that teacher involvement increased. By 2021, more than one-third of the school's teachers were actively engaged in the program, with many reporting significant benefits.<sup>20</sup>*

Etnachta's consideration of teachers' needs and workloads has enabled the program to address cases like Tamara's. In her words:

*My initial reason for participating in the Etnachta sessions was solely to earn credits.<sup>21</sup> I was convinced that sessions like these would not suit my temperament. However, I soon realized that the sessions held significant added value for me, and I made sure not to miss any of them.*

Other teachers have expressed that the program fosters a sense of belonging within the school community. Practicing in small groups allows teachers to form meaningful connections, in contrast to the typically brief and task-oriented interactions that occur in the staff room. This approach cultivates a community based on mutual care, particularly beneficial for new teachers. In Shani's words:

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<sup>20</sup>Interview with Dr. Degani, May 21, 2024. In 2021, around 70 teachers took part in the Program.

<sup>21</sup>Credits refer to courses for earning professional development credits towards rank advancement and rewards.

*The practice in Etnachta [...] seemed to increase my capacity for empathy, enabling me to better understand and connect with my co-workers' perspectives and needs, which fostered a deep sense of trust and support. For instance, one day during a break, a colleague approached me in the hallway, expressing that she felt an anxiety attack coming on. I listened to her, held her hand, and supported her. [...] After the break, she told me she was able to enter her next class, and I felt grateful that she felt comfortable enough to ask for my help. I realize that my familiarity with the practices in Etnachta enabled me to express compassion that I hadn't fully accessed before.*

In Anne's words,

*I'm not sure that the program directly affected my relationship with colleagues, but I definitely formed deeper relationships with the teachers I did Etnachta sessions with. We shared a lot about ourselves with each other and were very vulnerable with one another.*

Head of school, Dr. Degani has added a broader perspective regarding the supportive role of the program:

*I view the program as a catalyst for transforming the school's culture. Although we have experienced and dedicated teachers, many still adhere to a dogmatic approach that is increasingly out of step with the current era. I also see teachers collapsing under the weight of their responsibilities, with emotional distress often being the most pressing issue. After several years of the program's operation at the school, its ability to persist, despite the school's constraints and ever-changing challenges, stems from its adaptable and supportive nature—support that is rarely found within the rigid educational system where I have worked for over forty years.*

### *Support for students*

For students, support involves being seen as whole individuals beyond their academic roles. Support refers to reinforcing and strengthening relationships through encouragement, assistance, and emotional backing. Effective support involves being present for one another, paying attention, expressing appreciation, and collaborating to overcome challenges.

Etnachta provides practices for both receiving and cultivating support. Embodiment exercises distinguish between passive and active forms of support:

For instance, students may be guided to observe the sensation when the head is supported—such as when lying down or leaning against a wall—versus when the head is aligned with the spine. When the head is supported, it encourages passive listening, introspection, and rest, fostering relaxation. In contrast, when the head is aligned with the spine, promoting an elongated back, it enhances active listening, alertness, and concentration. This distinction embodies the notion of support, helping students develop awareness of the differences between being supported and self-supporting. This quality becomes crucial to help students cope with class conditions where personal assistance is less accessible.

Under unique circumstances the program has also demonstrated responsiveness to crises, conducting sessions during events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or in response to panic-inducing situations like wars or missile attacks. The program offered spaces of stability and calm, reinforcing its role as a responsive, caring presence in school life.

### **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

#### *Initial Resistance*

The introduction of the Program into the school setting was gradual. In its early stages, some educators perceived it as therapeutic or psychological rather than educational. This perception created hesitation and limited initial participation. However, the program's relevance to actual classroom challenges—such as stress, burnout, and disconnection—helped shift attitudes over time. As teachers experienced its personal and professional benefits, broader engagement followed.

### *Missteps and Revisions*

Several early implementation strategies proved ineffective. Initially, teacher sessions were offered before or after regular school hours, resulting in low attendance. It was only when sessions were formally integrated into the school workday that participation rose substantially.

A similar adjustment was necessary in the student program. In its initial phase, students were removed from English or Arabic lessons to attend Etnachta sessions, disrupting academic continuity. When Etnachta was later integrated into the official timetable, its legitimacy grew, and its regularity supported smoother integration into the broader curriculum.

### *Not Universally Effective*

While many teachers and students reported meaningful transformation, not all participants engaged deeply or experienced lasting benefits. Some remained skeptical or disengaged. As John reflected:

*I think it is very difficult to point to the impact of the practice on relationships with students for several reasons: I believe that greater dedication and long-term consistency are required in order to observe change, and that identifying such change necessitates more substantial practice (more than half an hour*

*per week). That said, I do not rule out the possibility that I came out of such a session more centered and encountered my students with a quieter and more inward-focused presence.<sup>22</sup>*

He added, regarding the program's influence on his private life:

*I don't believe the practice had an impact.*

*The "signal-to-noise ratio" (pardon the use of terminology from the world of technology) in matters of emotion and inner experience does not allow for a reliable or precise assessment. On second thought, the very fact that I paused to reflect on this may itself indicate something.*

The program acknowledges this diversity of response and deliberately avoids imposing uniform expectations. Instead, it fosters a culture of openness and voluntary exploration, allowing each participant to engage at their own pace and according to their own readiness. Notably, despite his critical stance, John chose to re-enroll in the training for the 2025 academic year—marking his third consecutive year of participation.

### *Systemic Transformation or Subcultural Practice?*

A key question remains: does Etnachta represent a systemic shift, or does it function as a culture within a culture that coexists with conventional educational structures?

While the program is widely supported, it still exists alongside dominant norms that prioritize academic performance over holistic well-being. For instance, during exam periods, some teachers choose to cancel Etnachta sessions to cover test material, reflecting the persistent tension between

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<sup>22</sup>John is a Computer Science and System Engineering teacher with 11 years of experience. His reflective writing was originally in Hebrew.

contemplative values and institutional expectations.

An additional tension stems from the fact that the sessions are scheduled as part of the formal curriculum, meaning students attend not by choice but by requirement. This lack of agency can feel like a cost. Despite thoughtful pedagogical efforts to design practices that speak to a broad range of students, only a few report a deeply resonant experience—a moment of personal insight or inner spark. The majority are affected more subtly: by the shift in atmosphere created by those who engage deeply, or by the intention that underlies the session itself.

Despite such tensions, the program continues to expand due to its responsiveness to the lived realities of the school community. This adaptive quality has enabled it to gain sustained acceptance and influence.

## Conclusion

After eight years of sustained implementation, the Etnachta Program has become an integral component of Herzliya Hebrew Gymnasium's school culture. Initially developed as a support mechanism for students, it has evolved into a holistic, educational initiative that addresses the emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions of both students and staff. Its integration into the official schedule and curriculum reflects school leadership recognition and its institutional relevance and impact. This article has explored the fundamental assumptions, working qualities, and pedagogical implications of the program. The integration of contemplative practices into Israel's public educational system, aligned with the specific needs of the school community, has been challenging—particularly within a system characterized by a one-size-fits-all, behaviorally oriented approach. However, this challenge is central to the program's *raison d'être*: encourage individuals self-understanding to ultimately

transform the system itself. Grounded in Social-Emotional Learning and Educational Ecology, the program has developed working qualities and practices that apply to both students and teachers, emphasizing the individual rather than their social roles. Over years of practice and adaptation, two main key conclusions have emerged as follows:

### *Embodiment and Reverberation*

The program's core qualities—Listening, Trust, and Support—are not abstract ideals but embodied practices cultivated through lived experience. Reciprocity is central to this process. As teachers and students embody these qualities, their effects reverberate across the school community. This process begins with facilitators guiding both teachers and students; over time, participating teachers become mentors who introduce these practices to their students, while students increasingly take on the role of co-learners and, eventually, peer facilitators. This organic and reciprocal dynamic fosters the conditions necessary for lasting cultural transformation.

### *Systemic Impact*

Etnachta responds to a fundamental question raised by scholars of contemplative education: can mindfulness-based practices shift not only individual behaviors but institutional patterns? While the program undeniably functions as a coping resource—offering tools for stress reduction and classroom resilience—it also invites broader inquiry. It challenges the normative structures of public schooling by emphasizing presence, mutual care, and a slower, more reflective pace.

By integrating contemplative practice into daily routines, Etnachta fosters a more empathetic, human-centered, and sustainable school culture. It

presents a viable model for those seeking to embed holistic values in formal education.

Further research could examine the long-term impact of the Etnachta Program on student and teacher well-being, including burnout, emotional regulation, and relationships. Comparative and longitudinal studies could assess the program's scalability and its influence on students' social-emotional development, agency, and engagement. It would also be valuable to explore how its emphasis on compassion and trust contributes to shifts in school culture.

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Dr. Shaoul founded the Etnachta Program to address the shortcomings of public education, integrating her Zen meditation practice with Educational Ecology. She advocates a holistic educational philosophy fostering reciprocity and compassion, enabling both students and educators to thrive in harmony. She is a Research Fellow at the Mandel Center for Public Humanities at Tel-Aviv University.