



# EVALUATION OVERVIEW

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Quantitative and Qualitative  
Evaluation of the Program  
*BREATHE in Education*, 2015

Convivencia Productiva  
Bogota, Colombia



RESPIRA  
EN EDUCACIÓN



BREATHE in Education Program  
Evaluation Overview 2015  
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**Institutions**

This *Evaluation Overview* is based on the impact assessment led by Ana María Velásquez and Andrés Molano (Faculty of Education in Los Andes University, Bogota) and a process evaluation led by Mariajosé Otálora, Paula Pineda y Charlotte Greniez (Corporación Convivencia Productiva). Convivencia Productiva led the design and implementation of the program in 21 participating schools in Bogota, Cali, Tumaco and Cauca, in the case of the last two regions in alliance with Save the Children. The implementation and evaluation have been supported by Global Affairs Canada (GAC), Bvlgari, Avina Stiftung Switzerland, Smartpeace Foundation and other partners.



# Program Presentation

RESPIRA en Educación (BREATHE in Education) is an innovative school intervention program that seeks to introduce mindfulness practice into Colombian public and private schools in order to foster social and emotional learning and promote teacher and student wellbeing. The program improves education quality in terms of creating a peaceful school climate as well as having a positive impact on academic achievement, particularly for chil-

dren and youth affected by any type of violence, including the armed conflict. RESPIRA contributes directly to the core objectives defined by Colombia's law regarding School Violence and Promotion of Peaceful Relations and offers a concrete pedagogical tool to support peacebuilding in society. The program was developed by *Convivencia Productiva* in alliance with *Save the Children*.

→ [See General Presentation of the program \(online\)](#)

## Introduction

Following the design of the program in 2013 and its first pilot in 2014, there was an evident need to scientifically evaluate the impacts generated by the program on the participating teachers and students. For this reason, a three-year project (2015-17) was developed with the participation of 21 schools in four regions in Colombia. Two regions are located in conflict zones (Tumaco in Nariño and Tambo in Cauca), and two are in vulnerable urban areas (Bosa and Suba in the city of Bogota and Terrón Colorado in the city of Cali).

An impact assessment was led by the Faculty of Education in Los Andes University in Bogota and a process evaluation was led by the evaluation team from *Convivencia Productiva*. The data gathered during 2015 and its scientific analysis were officially presented in the *Evaluation Report 2015*<sup>1</sup> (in Spanish), which forms the basis of this *Evaluation Overview*. The aim here has been to present the same content in a more concise, direct and accessible form, using less academic language and focusing on the most significant results of greatest interest to the general reader. Also added here is a case study of a school in Tumaco, as well as some longer

testimonies gathered by facilitators as a means of alternative evaluation.

This *Evaluation Overview* brings together the key results of the 2015 evaluation based on the comparison of data collected in 16 schools - eight of which ran the program and eight that were 'control' schools (*impact assessment*) - and investigates the implementation of the program in terms of relevance, coherence, adherence and satisfaction by participating teachers and students (*process evaluation*). Implementation between the pre- and post- tests was a period of seven months, encompassing only the first (of two) years of regular program implementation. This overview also includes some qualitative data from the first five pilot schools that, during 2015, were already in their second year of program implementation.

The presentation is formed of 12 main clusters which group together similar variables in order to present the program's most important impacts in a clear and accessible format for readers. These 12 clusters also represent the key priorities of the program, although not necessarily in their order of presentation.

# 1. Attention (Cognitive Control)

*“The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. No one is master of himself if he has it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.”*<sup>ii</sup>

**William James (1890)**

## Introduction

Attention, or cognitive control, is one of the key skills developed through the practice of mindfulness and the reason why it is also one of the central objectives of the RESPIRA program. As suggested by the opening quote and by Daniel Goleman’s reference of a study conducted in New Zealand (*below in blue*), it constitutes an essential principle for many other objectives and results.

## Findings

The impact assessment found that in the eight experimental educational institutions in Tumaco, Tambo, Cali and Bogota, the teachers that had participated in the program significantly improved their levels of attention compared to those teachers in the control group. Participating teachers also reported higher attention levels in their first to third grade level students and, in the case of Tambo and Tumaco, higher attention levels in their fourth and fifth grade students, too. They reported that those students were able to sustain their attention for longer time periods and were less distracted in class.

In Tambo and Tumaco, there was also evidence that the positive results were generated specifically in those students whose teachers attended a high number of Teacher Component training sessions (four to six sessions), and then went on to lead a more intensive Classroom Component stage with their students.

The results of the impact assessment are supported by the process evaluation. Here, qualitative testimonies from teachers were gathered in which teachers recognized that it was from the Teacher Component sessions they understood that by changing their teaching practices, they could see positive changes in their students, specifically in aspects such as their behavior and concentration. Some also affirmed that they had been able to hold students’ attention for longer time periods through the use of tools they had learnt in the Teacher and Classroom Components of the program.

*“Cognitive control plays a central role in mental skills ranging from plain concentration and focus (on your homework, not that text from your BFF) to calming down after you get upset (say, when you finally read that text). A study published in 2011 tracked 1,000 children in New Zealand after rigorously testing them in elementary school for cognitive control. By their early 30s, their ability to manage attention predicted their financial success and their health better than did their IQ or the wealth of their family of origin. [...] Nobel Prize winner James Heckman argues that teaching schoolchildren such skills would benefit society in several ways: less crime, a healthier populace and an upward shift in a nation’s economy. And since, unlike IQ, cognitive control can be enhanced by the right education, it’s time our schools taught real mental fitness: the ability to focus.”*<sup>iii</sup>

**Daniel Goleman (2013)**



## Participant Testimonies



*“The children are more attentive, they enjoy the activities. They themselves now ask to do the mindfulness practices and remind you to do them. [The activities] help you have greater control over the group and they concentrate more.”*

**Teacher in a focus group (Tumaco)**

*“Now I’ve realized that I can solve one thing at a time with a clear mind and attentive listening, and this enables us to improve as people and give so much more of the abilities we have.”*

**Teacher at the Quilcacé school (El Tambo)**

*“I had tried every possible way to center the children’s attention and I hadn’t been able to do it but with this program I have managed it. Now they ask for it and they say ‘today let’s do RESPIRA, teacher’.”*

**Teacher at La Gaitana school (Bogota)**

*“In the grade I teach, the students before were very undisciplined and impolite. Now they concentrate much more and among themselves they focus better on what they are doing.”*

**Teacher in a focus group (Tumaco)**

## Conclusion

These findings support the conclusion that the RESPIRA program promotes higher levels of attention both in students and teachers and, also, that this effect is valued positively by these groups in that it creates space for other benefits within the classroom, as detailed in other clusters below.



## 2. Mindfulness as a Human Quality

*“Mindfulness is now widely considered to be an inherent quality of human consciousness. That is, a capacity of attention and awareness oriented to the present moment that varies in degree within and between individuals, and can be assessed empirically and independent of religious, spiritual, or cultural beliefs.”<sup>iv</sup>*

David Black (2011)

### Introduction

The RESPIRA program encourages the *practice* of mindfulness, in other words, the intentional cultivation of a presence in the here and now, through simple exercises such as the observation of the breath or the awareness of our thoughts and emotions. This mental practice cultivates awareness, helping to act from a more conscious and proactive place, instead of reacting blindly to the events life throws at us. This new awareness or presence is also referred to as mindfulness, now describing a human quality or mental capacity that is measurable.

### Findings

In the process evaluation, the concept of mental states came up as highly important for the participating teachers in all the regions. Many described mindfulness as the linchpin that helped them understand that they could live their lives in a different way, centered on the now, being more aware of their feelings and emotions, and getting out of their autopilot.

Focus groups with teachers showed that one of the most important lessons for them was to understand the concept of mindfulness from a functional viewpoint and incorporate it into their lives through what they describe as a change in attitude. Teachers were able to identify mindfulness as a way to focus their attention on the present, being more aware of themselves and their relationship with others. To understand the concept of mindfulness allowed

them to focus their attention and to make the most of the positive things each moment brings, no longer living their days automatically but prioritising activities, thoughts, and stimuli in a more conscious way.

The impact assessment did not support these effects quantitatively in the two specific variables measured (rumination and over-generalization). The low reliability of the scale used is one possible explanation, in that it didn't measure what it was hoped it would measure.

A second possible explanation is that, in being more aware of their mental states, the teachers perhaps reported higher levels of 'distraction' or 'mindlessness', precisely the characteristics inherent in rumination (a maladaptive tendency where a person overly concentrates on negative emotional aspects of their past), and in overgeneralization (a cognitive bias where the individual carries the negative consequences of one particular situation and applies it to all similar future situations). This similar or higher level of reporting is not because mindlessness of teachers has actually increased, but because only now are they aware of it. In other words, most likely, they were previously unaware of their levels of mindlessness and only with their mindfulness practice they have become more aware of this reality - an important step, although one that quantitatively results in more negative reporting.

So even if there is a real improvement in terms of awareness, distraction, rumination, etc., it may not be reflected in the quantitative data, highlighting the dilemma in selecting appropriate means of measurement. This dilemma reflects the difficulty in drawing simplistic conclusions about something as complex as human consciousness, and requires more solid research in the future.

## Conclusion

Although no results were found to be statistically significant through the impact assessment, the various stories and testimonies by teachers show that they feel the program has helped foster greater presence and awareness in important aspects of their professional and personal lives and that they highly value the changes produced by the program.



## Participant Testimonies



*“Knowing how to manage or control my breathing, to feel serenity, to have the ability to focus my attention on what I am doing, on my breath, on what I feel, on what I think. In knowing myself, I can get to know another. I can enjoy the here and now more, be more aware of what I feel and think.”*

**Teacher at the Nueva Florida school (Tumaco)**

*“One learns to capture the moment that is, to pay attention to the situation that needs solving, to consider what the child needs, and one ends up being more aware of many things that before were done on autopilot.”*

**Teacher at Garcés Navas school (Bogota)**

*The fifth session of the Teacher Component begins with a discussion about classroom management and a reflection on how they have felt recently as teachers - how they respond to and interact with their students, for example, and their relationship with them. One teacher referred to his son as “the one who challenges me the most as a teacher and that is why I want to tell this story.”*

*“My son had decided that he didn’t want to go back to school. It wasn’t that he’s into bad things, it’s just that he said he was bored of going to school. The disappointment I felt when he told me this was very great. Then I breathed and, for a second, I connected with the flow of the breath as we have done here and I thought more clearly. You always tell us ‘don’t judge’, so in this moment I decided not to do it with my son.*

*I calmed down and quietly asked him the reasons why he did not want to go back to school. We talked for a while, I*

*understood his reasons and we made agreements. I told him that I did not want to see him doing nothing, so he would look for something to do that interested him and that I would support him in his decision.*

*My son looked at me in surprise. I think before RESPIRA, I would have jumped straight into nagging him out of anger and telling him what he should do, probably even getting violent towards him. I am very happy that this program has come into my life right now. I don’t know what would have happened to my son if I had reacted in a negative way.*

*Today I’m feeling happy because I spoke with him again and he thanked me for my support. He said that after thinking about what he would do, he realized that it was important to go to school and finish his studies.”*

**Teacher in Tumaco**

### 3. Perception of Stress & Exhaustion (Burnout)

*“When teachers lack the resources to effectively manage the social and emotional challenges within the particular context of their school and classroom, children show lower levels of on-task behavior and performance. In addition, the classroom climate deteriorates, triggering in the teacher what we refer to as a ‘burnout cascade’. The deteriorating climate is marked by increases in troublesome student behaviors, and teachers become emotionally exhausted as they try to manage them. Under these conditions, teachers may resort to reactive and excessively punitive responses that do not teach self-regulation and may contribute to a self-sustaining cycle of classroom disruption.”<sup>v</sup>*

**Patricia Jennings & Mark Greenberg (2008)**

#### Introduction

Teaching is a very demanding profession anywhere around the world and in many cases generates high stress levels. Although there are few studies of the specific situation in Colombia - and even less for regions directly affected by the armed conflict - the available evidence points to worrying levels of stress in teachers. The practice of mindfulness has proven to be an effective tool for personal stress management<sup>vi</sup>, and stress reduction and more specifically better stress *management* are key objectives in the RESPIRA program.

#### Findings

In the impact assessment of 2015, the quantitative results didn't demonstrate a reduction in exhaustion and perceived stress. As mentioned in the previous cluster, one hypothesis is that when freed more often from a state of 'autopilot', teachers are more aware of their moods and emotions, potentially leading to a higher reporting of perceived stress. On the other hand, the questions in the impact assessment focused on the feelings of stress rather than its management. As expectations and external demands remain the same, it is possible perceived stress levels don't fall, even when there is a feeling of improved handling of them.

However, it should be noted that in 2014, a more basic first evaluation was conducted with 87 participating teachers from Tumaco and Bogota, and one of the principal findings of this assessment was that the stress levels reported by teachers decreased 4%, a statistically significant difference according to test analyses. This difference in results between 2014 and 2015 suggests a need for further evaluation of this variable in the future.

*“Regarding the magnitude of teacher burnout, it was found that a sub-total of 88 out of 238 teachers [currently teaching in state schools in Medellin], meaning 37% of the total, reported emotional exhaustion (16% with high levels; 21% with medium to high levels), and as many as 80 teachers, (34%), had medium to high levels of depersonalization. 56 teachers (23%) reported emotional exhaustion and depersonalization combined ( $p = 0.000$ ) and are therefore considered probable cases of burnout; only one of this subset of 56 presented alterations in all three dimensions. Another 23.4% had positive levels, (high or medium to high) in one of the dimensions of burnout, such teachers are considered as susceptible to becoming probable cases.”<sup>vii</sup>*

**Nadia C. Restrepo-Ayala et al. (2006)**

In the evaluation process, however, there was evidence that the program helped teachers develop better stress *management*; in learning to differentiate between those situations they can control over those they can't, and to be able to stay calm when faced with the latter, recog-

nizing that the situation is not in their hands to change. In other words, the perception of stress does not change, because the demands on the person are the same, but the way in which they deal with their stress and manage it *can* be changed.



## Participant Testimonies



*"I learnt that in those situations I cannot control, I do not despair. I do as much as I can but, if the situation is out of my hands, I no longer get stressed."*

**Teacher at La Gaitana school (Bogota)**

*"When you are practicing the exercises, you feel good, you relax, it feels pleasant and takes the weight off. It generates a total change in you. It helps reduce stress, keeps you relaxed and not tense. You can face problems with greater calm and more naturally."*

**Teacher at the R. M. Bischoff school (Tumaco)**

*"For me, to manage the stress and pressure, it has really helped a lot because you can get weighed down by events that happen, as much at home as at school. I was living through several important situations at that time and it helped me a lot. Now I look for alternatives to solve the situations I face. To the extent that one is calmer, obviously your relationships with others are improving as well."*

**Teacher at the Kimy Pernía D. school (Bogota)**

*"It has been fundamental. We've had a lot of work and a lot of stress, which has put us in a negative mood and that shows sometimes. It has helped us manage our stress."*

**Teacher at the Pueblo Nuevo school (El Tambo)**



## Conclusion

These findings support the conclusion that the RESPIRA program promotes a perception of better management of stress in the participating teachers, helping prevent physical and emotional exhaustion and its related consequences.

## 4. Anxiety & Depression

*“The data suggests a marked problem in children aged 7 to 11 years, requiring intervention before a psychiatric disorder arises [...]. 44.7% of children 7 to 11 present a related symptom – a possible mental health problem such as anxiety - while 17.1% present two symptoms and 6.6% three symptoms, suggesting an even higher probability of developing a mental disorder.”<sup>viii</sup>*

### Colombian National Mental Health Survey (2015)

#### Introduction

According to the National Survey quoted above, mental health constitutes a “national priority, a fundamental right, an obligatory public health issue, a key common interest and essential component of general well-being.”<sup>ix</sup> According to international investigations, the practice of mindfulness has shown to be effective in reducing levels of anxiety and depression<sup>x</sup>, and taking into account the fundamental role of mental health for long term peacebuilding in society, these two variables also constitute key objectives of the RESPIRA program.

#### Findings

The results of the impact assessment showed that in the eight educational institutions that followed the program in 2015, the fourth and fifth grade students whose teachers completed a high number of Teacher Component training sessions (between four and six sessions), reported a significant reduction in their symptoms of anxiety and depression. That is, students perceived that they could stop worrying so much, they felt less nervous and were able to relax more easily. They felt to a lesser extent that something bad was going to happen (anxiety) and increased their interest in doing things. They felt less sad, depressed and tired, and they didn’t enter into bad moods so easily (depression).

In the case of first to third grade students, significant changes were observed in the depression variable (but not anxiety), specifically in groups of students whose teachers had attended a high number of teacher training sessions.

In the process evaluation, teachers mentioned that through the Classroom Component they had been able to start working with their students from their ‘being’ and give them tools for helping them learn how to quieten the mind and calm their emotions, contributing in this way to a reduction in symptoms associated with depression and anxiety. Several teachers mentioned in their testimonies that the practice of mindfulness also helped themselves to reduce or better manage their own anxiety and/or symptoms of depression.

#### Conclusion

The data from the impact assessment and process evaluation suggests that the RESPIRA program helps reduce symptoms of anxiety and/or depression in specific groups of participants. The testimony in the box (*next page*) also shows that the practice of mindfulness can play a key role in the management of the anxiety experienced by living in the reality of armed conflict.



## Participant Testimonies



*“It has helped me to control and manage my anxiety, my depression, my impulses, anguish, despair. I have learnt to listen and to refrain from saying things that might hurt others, to control my breathing, to really feel what I touch, to feel each sensation more. The daily practice of trying not to judge, has helped me simply let things flow.”*

**Teacher at the Nueva Florida school (Tumaco)**

*“In the mindfulness practice, the exercise of the bottle, which allows us to identify the states of our mind, really caught the children’s attention and allowed them to reflect on their behavior. They were made aware of the situation and the idea of wanting to reach a state of tranquility had a great impact on them.”*

**Teacher at the Huisitó school (El Tambo)**

*“I wouldn’t know where to start in telling you everything that builds up in my mind once the thinking begins. All these thoughts that produce feelings of anguish and then a crisis that even led to me suffer a mild heart attack recently.*

*Of everything, I think I could name two: the sadness I feel that the students don’t study, that they can be so rude to me and to each other. It makes me sad to see them growing up like that, and that is related to the second thing that I can name and that torments me: the violence. It gives me a lot of pain, and enormous anxiety, to have to hide away against the gunshots, the explosions. I think of my students, that they and their parents are also struggling with that same fear, and that my own students are the ones who finally turn out to be violent in the classroom because that’s what they see.*

*If I go deeper, I realize that the violence makes me sad because its traces have come very close to my own life. The murder of my husband by an armed group in 2002 in front of my own eyes is a dark shadow and each outbreak of violence seems to remind me of what happened. An experience which at the same time has been my greatest and most fortunate opportunity to learn, thanks to the wise words of my son, to cultivate forgiveness in my heart.*

*The heart pain started one early Friday morning. I could feel that my heart was beating very fast, my chest tightened up and my hands were sweating. I knew immediately that if I wasn’t able to keep myself calm, my heart would stop. I remember that just the day before I had called my relatives and said goodbye, as if I were about to die. But thankfully it didn’t end like that!*

*In that moment of crisis, I remembered RESPIRA. I remembered what I had learnt about breathing and I turned to my practice. I realized that I wasn’t well and I called my nephew. When he arrived with my father, I was sitting on the bed doing the only thing I could do: BREATHING. They asked me how I was and with a tranquility that surprised myself, I told them that I wasn’t well and that I needed to go to Cali to see a doctor. It was there I would be diagnosed as suffering the initial state of a heart attack.*

*Right as I’m getting off the plane in Cali, I enter into a new crisis. When the doctors examined me, they said, ‘well, at least she knows what to do when she is having difficulty.’ I just breathed. A few days later, I was recovering. I was talking to the doctors and that way I began understanding by myself that what had enabled me to be alert and aware, that which stopped me from losing myself, overwhelmed, in my thoughts and maybe prevented me from dying, was the blessing of being able to focus on my breathing in the midst of a crisis.*

*It has not been easy; I’ve suffered further attacks and my over-thinking continues but each time I manage to calm myself more quickly. I can not change the way things happen in a place like Tumaco, but I can change the way things happen inside me.*

*If this which seems so simple was so vital in a time of emergency, it will certainly be of great benefit to me on other occasions, for my students, for others. For those, too, who read this testimony and then have confidence in the importance of wellbeing and in the capacity for keeping yourself calm that comes from being attentive to the natural flow of breathing.”*

**Teacher in Tumaco**

## 5. General Health

*“Stress, depression, loss of voice, sore throat and back and neck pain are the work-related illnesses that most affect public school teachers in Colombia. Last year, 5,748 sick days were recorded from these causes. Student indiscipline, high workload, noise, lack of teacher training and inadequate working environments are causing stress and fatigue among the official teachers, according to the Ministry of National Education.”<sup>xi</sup>*

**El Tiempo newspaper (2012)**

### Introduction

Improving physical and mental health is a primary objective in the practice of mindfulness and of the RESPIRA program. For example, the most-recognized mindfulness training program worldwide, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), explicitly aims to reduce stress levels, relieve pain and disease, and contribute to the improvement of health in general. While many specific applications of mindfulness practice have been developed for a large range of health conditions, RESPIRA simply aims at improving the general health of participants.

### Findings

In the impact assessment, teachers and students were asked how many times they had stopped attending school due to illness, and how many times they had not wanted to go to school because they had felt sick. According to the analysis of data collected, teachers who attended a high number of the Teacher Component sessions (between four and six sessions), reported to have wanted to miss less work due to sickness, which is an indicator of an improvement in their physical wellbeing.

In the students, no significant differences were found between the control group and the experimental group. However, in further analysis,

there was evidence that those teachers who attended few Teacher Component sessions but had a high implementation of the Classroom Component, negatively affected their students in this variable as these students reported a higher real absence than both students in the control group and those in the experimental group whose teachers had attended a high number of Teacher Component sessions.

The impact on overall health, however, is more evident in the various testimonies in which teachers stated that learning to breathe properly has enabled them to perceive significant improvements in their overall health. The specific case of a teacher in Bogota (*see box on the following page*) demonstrates how the practice helped to improve her health and overcome an obstacle that limited her for over 50 years.

### Conclusion

These findings, along with the data reported in the previous two clusters on the perception of stress and exhaustion and symptoms of anxiety and depression which also constitute important aspects of general health, suggest that the RESPIRA program can promote better overall health in participants through calmer states of mind, a greater sense of relaxation and better management of the body.



## Participant testimonies



*“From the RESPIRA program, I like the relaxation and self-knowledge exercises above all. They ease discomfort in the body and mind.”*

**Teacher at the Kimy Pernía D. school (Bogota)**

*“It has greatly reduced my neck and back pain. I’m calmer and it has improved relations with colleagues.”*

**Teacher at Garcés Navas school (Bogota)**

*“A teacher shared with the group that she couldn’t explain how, only by breathing mindfully in those moments that they remembered to do it, their emotional and physical health had improved.”*

**Program Facilitator (Bogota)**

*“RESPIRA has helped me take better care of my body and my breathing.”*

**Teacher at the R. M. Bischoff school (Tumaco)**

*“I have to confess that I’ve always had great respect and admiration for the sea. From a very young age I wanted to swim, to dive, to get close to a dolphin, but at the same time I had an irrational fear of going underwater and then never being able to float back up.*

*For a whole lifetime, I suppressed my deepest desires to be in the water. I felt that even in my dreams I was breathless. I couldn’t move if I even just thought that my feet wouldn’t be stepping on firm land. I got dizzy and my body trembled when on a family outing once, all because we were near a pool. As the years passed, I believed that I would never learn to swim... my body was already experiencing symptoms of the menopause, high blood pressure, high cholesterol... the doctor thought it was time to start taking pills for this and for that, and start doing exercise to get healthier.*

*The symptoms terrified me more than the water and I made the decision; ‘I will learn to swim, to do a sport that has so many benefits for both my body and my mind.’ I enrolled in a course. An absolute beginners course ... it was hard ... I could not control my reactions. Five times I tried and nothing, I could not do it and I cried. All my swimming group went up to the next levels but I didn’t.*

*One day, by chance, I was told that a special program called RESPIRA was coming to the school where I worked. We began to have mindfulness sessions and in them I discovered parts of my body that I had never been made conscious of. From the daily practice, I started to breathe better, to feel calmer, just by being attentive to my emotions, to what was happening in my body ... I began to relax and I slept better, too.*

*Then, in a free practice of swimming, I paid full attention to what was happening in my body, how I was breathing and, what a surprise! I was able to float calmly, without pressure. I re-enrolled in a course – I had found a teacher who helped draw out many of my fears and helped me manage my body.*

*And you know what? At last I could feel safe without my feet on dry land! Every time I felt afraid or confused, I would breathe, and every practice was better ... I started to advance through the levels, from Beginners, level I, II, learning backstroke, freestyle, butterfly, using fins ... and today I am waiting for a group to advance to learn free diving. Who’d have imagined that?!*

*I’m now like a fish in the water (haha!) ... but, above all, I’m proud of myself; I did it! I learnt to breathe, to practice mindfulness and that has changed the way I view the world. I know I wasted many years of enjoyment for my fears ... but it’s never too late.*

*And now...you know what? I’m scared of flying. I’ve never set foot on a plane. But I’m going to try and you know where I’m going to start? By saving up for the plane tickets, because I’ve decided I’m going with my whole family to just anywhere in the world... by airplane!*

*Thanks to the RESPIRA facilitator for his support and perseverance. Without it I would never have thought all this is possible. A big hug for all and do not forget to make the practices a way of life and never, never stop trying to reach your dreams!”*

**Teacher in Bogota**

## 6. Emotion Regulation & Reactive Aggression

*“Reactive aggression refers to the use of aggression as a response to an offence, real or perceived. It is the insult or physical blow a person reacts with when they feel that another person has hurt them [...]” Generally, “reactive aggression is related to difficulties in managing emotions, especially anger.”<sup>xii</sup>*

**Enrique Chaux (2003)**

### Introduction

As mentioned in the various testimonies presented in the previous clusters (see for example the box on page 7), the management of emotions – and specifically anger management – are key elements for both peaceful coexistence and for our own personal well-being. In many cases, the practice of mindfulness applied in life is presented as the ability to create a space between a stimulus and our response; a space that allows us to consciously *act* rather than *react* on autopilot. In other words, a space that allows us to recognize and regulate our emotions.

### Findings

This is one of the variables in which the greatest changes were evident, both in the impact assessment and the process evaluation. The impact assessment found that teachers in all educational institutions in Bogota, Cali, Tumaco and Tambo perceived that students from first to third grades had decreased the frequency with which they reacted negatively in moments or events that cause anger. These results were among students of teachers who attended a high number of the Teacher Component sessions and made an implementation of greater intensity of the Classroom Component. Students in fourth and fifth grade and teachers in Tambo and Tumaco also reported an improvement in anger management.

These results are amply supported by the many testimonies of teachers and students who noted the effects of the program on monitoring, controlling and modifying their emotional reactions using strategies provided by RESPIRA. Participants reported that after the program they looked for alternatives to deal with difficult events, that they felt calmer and more assertive in responding differently to situations that previously they wouldn't have known how to handle. Overall, when describing the program, participants continually refer to their ability to better manage their emotions; how it has raised their awareness and helped them acquire tools to resolve conflicts and manage adverse situations with their peers, students or teachers, or within their own families.

*“Letting children develop aggressive behaviors is detrimental for several reasons. One is that aggression affects the quality of relations as well as social and academic performance: several studies have shown that students with greater problems with aggression are more likely to drop out of school. Another reason is that aggression is very stable in life, [...] meaning those who are more aggressive in childhood are more likely to be the most aggressive in adulthood.”<sup>xiii</sup>*

**Enrique Chaux (2012)**



## Participant Testimonies



*"The children's favorite activities are the story of Beto and the chime. They identify with the story's characters in different situations and they calm themselves down and develop more control using the practices presented by the characters."*

**Teacher at the R. M. Bischoff school (Tumaco)**

*"Now when one of our classmates gets cross, we try to calm them down by reminding them of the image of the bottle and tell them: 'Clean your water!' To me, it helps a lot to remember the bottle when I'm bad-tempered because I remember that I can breathe to help clean me and like that I don't get involved in a fight."*

**Student at the Candelillas school (Tumaco)**

*"For me, I liked the bottle because it allowed us to control ourselves and with the children it was a success and there were many positive changes in terms of less aggression. It was essential because it gave us important tools for our work as teachers."*

**Teacher at the Nueva Florida school (Tumaco)**

## Conclusion

Both the impact assessment and the large number of testimonies collected during the last two years of RESPIRA's implementation show that, through the practice of mindfulness and other elements such as the image of the water bottle that represents different mental states, the program has a significant impact on teachers' and students' emotional regulation, reducing maladaptive behavior and improving the handling of difficult situations. In several of the groups assessed, this in turn promoted a reduction in reactive aggression.

*"I have a friend and sometimes we fight for no reason but now we make ourselves breathe and we stop fighting. It has helped me to relax when I fight with a friend. I go, I breathe, I do one of the activities like the little worm [stretching exercise] and I go back all calm."*

**Student at the Kimy Pernía D. school (Bogota)**

*"The kids in my class took their bottles home with them. There they have it and every time their parents get angry or are fighting, they go running and shake the bottle. Parents have told me they are fighting less, or at least less so in front of their children. They say that now they realize when they are being angry or fighting."*

**Teacher at the Huisitó school (El Tambo)**

*"It's a very important reference for me in the management of my emotions and the emotional management of the students. It's essential."*

**Teacher at the Huisitó school (El Tambo)**



# 7. Active Listening & Empathy

*“Empathy is when a person accurately communicates that they see another’s intentions and emotional state. It means watching our child’s frustration and focusing on how life feels in that little child’s body, while putting our own anger and agenda into the background.”<sup>xiv</sup>*

**Andrea Nair (2015)**

## Introduction

Listening actively involves being attentive to understanding what others are trying to say and showing them that they are being heard. The practice of mindfulness, to develop the sense of being present in the here and now, helps establish a deeper connection with the person we’re speaking and listening to. This connection also helps us perceive the emotions of others and identify with them, producing higher levels of empathy.

## Findings

The results from the impact assessment found that levels of attentive listening increased significantly in fourth and fifth grade students in all regions (Bogota, Cali, Tumaco and Tambo – this variable was not measured in lower grades), particularly among students whose teachers attended a high number of Teacher Component sessions and implemented the Classroom Component with greater intensity. Empathy was measured in all grades, but the results are inconclusive as one evaluation design in one region lead to positive results, while a different evaluation design in another region resulted in negative results. Thus, more research has to be conducted in order to have more reliable findings about this particular variable. As for the teachers, those who attended a high number of Teacher

Component sessions reported having improved their attentive listening. They reported that they got distracted or lost the thread of a conversation to a lesser extent and perceived that they interrupted others less during a conversation.

In the process evaluation, testimonies were found to corroborate these positive changes in teachers’ attentive listening. Teachers also recognized it as an important tool for improving their relationships with students and other people in general. In particular, they reported that in applying this personal practice in the classroom, they felt more assertive and listened more actively, facilitating interactions with their students.

*“Empathy is a powerful communication skill that is often misunderstood and underused. Initially, empathy was referred to as “bedside manner”; now, however, authors and educators consider empathetic communication a teachable, learnable skill that has tangible benefits [in many areas]. [...] Empathy and confidence are the basis on which any effective relationship, understanding and communication can be built. They are crucial in developing ideas and solutions, in problem solving, effective communication and avoiding or preventing conflicts”<sup>xv</sup>*

**F. Ioannidou & V. Konstantikaki (2008)**



## Participant Testimonies



*"If all of us teachers had the chance to get to know and work with our students through a program such as RESPIRA, I'm sure it would save us a lot of the headaches we have with our students. Because we can not ignore the fact they come from very difficult backgrounds, and many are emotionally unstable and therefore do not advance. RESPIRA gives us the necessary tools to discover and work through those emotions with our students and make the most of them. Now I feel that I am forming integral little beings."*

**Teacher at the Llorente school (Tumaco)**

*"Communication is important. To be continually asking students what they have, what is happening, what bothers them or what they dislike, so you know how to reach them and see how things are in their home environment because that affects them a lot."*

**Teacher at the Roberto Mario Bischoff school (Tumaco)**

*"Now, when the students are upset, I ask them, 'What is it that you're feeling? Are you angry? Or sad? What are you feeling?'"*

**Teacher at La Gaitana school (Bogota)**

*"... also I thank RESPIRA, because it has taught me to listen. I, with all these years of experience as a teacher, only now I'm realizing how important it is to really listen to others. I feel like that's all it takes to get on better with my students, my family, with everyone."*

**Teacher at the Quilcacé school (El Tambo)**

## Conclusion

The impact assessment found an increase in the level of active listening (in both teachers and students in fourth and fifth grade), but there are no conclusive findings about empathy. Some testimonies by teachers gathered during the process evaluation make clear reference to improved communication.



## 8. Interpersonal Relations

*“There is a growing body of evidence that supportive teacher–student relationships play an important role in healthy school and classroom climate, students’ connection to school, and desired student outcomes, both academic and social–emotional. Furthermore, supportive student–teacher relationships provide the keystone to effective classroom management. Indeed, in a meta-analysis of more than 100 studies, Marzano et al. (2003) found that teachers who had high-quality relationships with their students had 31% fewer behavior problems over the course of a school year than teachers who did not.”<sup>xvi</sup>*

**Patricia Jennings & Mark Greenberg (2008)**

### Introduction

By improving emotional regulation, lowering levels of reactive aggression and developing attentive listening skills, it is hoped that the practice of mindfulness promoted by the program also sees an improvement in various interpersonal relationships.

### Findings

The impact assessment measured teacher-student relationships as well as the quality of relations among the teachers themselves and among students. Even though changes were not significant in these variables, the process evaluation showed, through testimonies and focus groups, that both teachers and students said they had significantly improved their teacher-student relations as well as relations with their peers.

In Tumaco, for example, many teachers recognized that through their personal practice they could initiate changes starting with themselves to develop more harmonious relations. Several teachers expressed that they had understood that to have a more positive school dynamic required close teacher-to-student relationships, acknowledging that connection to students as special and unique.

Other teachers mentioned that the program also helped them improve as a family member, to achieve greater control over their reactions and to be more assertive in front of people they care about. In terms of their relations with colleagues, teachers felt that after participating in the Teacher Component, they could express their thoughts and emotions more freely and without fear of being judged. From sharing experiences in this space, they began to feel more empathy towards their peers and to understand that they had problems and situations in common, which led them to seek joint solutions.

Finally, the participants also reported in the process evaluation that the program had helped their students to relate better to each other and obtain tools to better manage conflicts, both in and out of the classroom.

### Conclusion

Although the impact assessment didn’t show evidence of improved relations, the various testimonies gathered during interviews and focus groups attest to an important change in this area, which was valued by a high number of participating teachers and students.



## Participant Testimonies



*“They have learnt to respect the words of others. Now everyone wants to participate and, as classmates, they do not make fun of each other or criticize. Instead, they raise their hands very respectfully and tell the person that they may be wrong.”*

**Teacher at the Quilcacé school (El Tambo)**

*“Since we started RESPIRA I have seen that it is me that has to make changes. So, every day, with each session, I come into the classroom with a different attitude. Right now, my relationship with the students is as I want it to be.”*

**Teacher at the Quilcacé school (El Tambo)**

*“I can say that RESPIRA has been a very valuable tool in building an atmosphere of peace in my group. I’ve been witness to a personal and collective transformation. We are learning, the children and I, to strengthen our connections. Together we are building a more democratic, open space with less rigid relations. I feel this process is a breath of fresh air for all of us who have participated in it.”*

**Teacher at the Garcés Navas school (Bogota)**

*“My son had an accident,” said a teacher at the end of the sixth session of the Teacher Component. “One afternoon, we heard a shooting near the house. I looked everywhere for my son but he wasn’t anywhere to be found. I ran out into the streets to find him. The neighbors helped me by shouting his name. When we found him, he was terrified. He did not say a word until the next day. Even today he has nightmares. I had to take him to a psychologist for a long time to help him overcome his trauma.*

*“That afternoon, while he was playing in the street, he witnessed one neighbor kill another with a gun. No one said anything but my boy knew who the killer was. He lived there in our neighborhood and yet my son couldn’t say anything. He lived with that uncertainty and fear for several years.”*

*What happened that day generated conflict between the teacher and her son. The boy, now in high school and*

*“We learn this personal practice so we can apply it with our students. It isn’t easy, but it works. You learn from them and they learn from you. They now manage to resolve conflicts in a better way. Breathing helps them to calm down. Their behavior in the classroom has improved.”*

**Teacher at the R. M. Bischoff school (Tumaco)**

*“I feel that RESPIRA has made me think a lot about the tendency I have to judge others. It may be that I am missing out on wonderful opportunities to be with people by being so distrustful.”*

**Teacher at the Llorente school (Tumaco)**

*rebellious, didn’t seem to have interest in anything and had serious discipline problems. The teacher had grown up in a demanding family with a father who would say to her ‘Learning is written in blood,’ so she herself took the same attitude in educating both her son and her students.*

*“My relationship with my children and students was difficult, now I think it is because I myself am a difficult person. RESPIRA has helped me realize that and to learn little by little how to transform my temper with calmness. It has not been easy but now my son is closer to me, we talk more and on several occasions he has asked me what has made me change so much. I realize that my son and my students need love from me in order to learn and make progress. My relationship with my son and the support he can now feel from me has entirely transformed our relationship.”*

**Teacher in Tumaco**

# 9. Motivation for Teaching and Learning

*“In a study of 353 middle school students, Goodenow (1993) found that belonging and teacher support were related to motivation and that both belonging and motivation influenced classroom achievement. Teacher support explained over a third of students’ assessment of the interest, importance, and value of the academic work in the class. These findings lend further support to the importance of social-emotional competencies of teachers and suggest that students’ impressions of teacher support influence their motivation and classroom performance.”<sup>xvii</sup>*

**Patricia Jennings & Mark Greenberg (2008)**

## Introduction

Armed with more tools to deal with stress and exhaustion as well as difficult situations with other teachers, coordinators or students, it is hoped that there will be greater motivation towards the teaching profession which in turn raises teachers’ commitment to their work and their effectiveness in the classroom. More effective teachers, given their roles as guides and facilitators of student learning, should promote student interest and increase their motivation towards their studies.

## Findings

The above was evident in the process evaluation in which the teachers interviewed reported that the Teacher Component sessions had helped them strengthen their motivation and commitment towards their work. Becoming increasingly mindful and in better control of their emotions, among other benefits, helped them feel they could enjoy their work in the classroom more by focusing on the here and now, and on those issues that had been problematic for their particular classes, such as classroom management, teacher-student relations or helping students resolve conflicts between themselves. This led them to enjoy their work more and feel more at ease in the classroom. Feeling more effective in their

teaching and achieving a calmer, more supportive classroom atmosphere led to teachers reporting a greater sense of motivation in their work.

Students in turn tend to feel more motivated towards learning when their teacher has better classroom management and encourages a more positive classroom atmosphere that allows them to learn and feel safe. Moreover, the specific activities of RESPIRA are perceived by students as interesting, different and useful to help them relax and feel better in school which promotes motivation of teachers and students towards learning.





## Participant Testimonies



*“RESPIRA activities have been useful in managing students and increasing their motivation.”*

**Teacher at the Huisitó school (El Tambo)**

*“It’s because the activities are different from those we have at school and they have helped us with our studies and academic performance. They are fun and they really help us to relax.”*

**Student at La Gaitana school (Bogota)**

*“It helped with my motivation because here you have a lot of pressure and receive a lot of information. With RESPIRA I could express myself freely and I started to feel more secure.”*

**Teacher at the Huisitó school (El Tambo)**

*“Now there is more participation, more enthusiasm. They really like the games and activities and they are more attentive in class. There is more collaboration between them, more unity. The fights have decreased a lot.”*

**Teacher at the Roberto Mario Bischoff school (Tumaco)**

## Conclusion

Levels of motivation were not measured by the impact assessment but the process evaluation revealed that several teachers and students increased their motivation and commitment to teaching and learning by participating in the RESPIRA program.

*“A teacher came to the program very demotivated. During the introductory session, she seemed bored and pulled faces to show how uninterested she was. I was surprised when she then enrolled but later she would tell me she did it because her fellow teachers and the school coordinator pushed her to join.*

*“In the second session, the teacher admitted to the group that she hated being a teacher, that she had really only taken up teaching because she couldn’t see anything else that she could do to earn an income. She continued to attend the sessions, saying that RESPIRA was good for her. Then between sessions four and six, she had a very significant change, and said that the sessions had helped*

*“For me, RESPIRA has been very interesting in the sense that our students are very complex due to challenging situations that occur both at home and in relation to others. With the tools we learned, I have been able to reach them and make changes. I have been able to motivate them to take an interest in their academic process and this is bringing about changes.”*

**Teacher at the Huisitó school (El Tambo)**

*“The RESPIRA activities promote greater creativity and interest in learning in the students.”*

**Teacher at the Kimy Pernía D. school (Bogota)**

*her to see that, although she may not be the happiest teacher in the world, there were strategies she could use to do her job better and, in the process, help not only herself to feel happier, but to make her students feel better, too.*

*Towards the end of the process, and in the last session, her colleagues commented on the changes they had seen in themselves and particularly in this teacher. They noted the affectionate treatment she now had with her students, as well as an interest in her work itself, shown by her now prompt arrival at school and her active participation in teacher meetings.”*

**Program Facilitador (Tumaco)**

# 10. Teaching Styles & Classroom Management

*“There are at least two important dimensions for the classroom environment; care in relationships and class structure. Care in relationships includes, among other things, mutual concern for the welfare of others, warmth and affection in relationships, clear and open communication, group cohesion, constructive conflict management, genuinely taking others seriously and supporting those in need. The class structure refers to the establishment of rules and their consistent application, order in the classroom and in the following of instructions.”* <sup>xviii</sup>

**Enrique Chaux (2012)**

## Introduction

The more teachers manage to listen actively, become more aware of their reactions, manage their stress and physical and mental health, the more tools they have for more effective classroom management. In addition, self-observation through mindfulness practice helps teachers to be aware of their classroom management style, and this consciousness gives indications about how to improve it.

## Findings

In the impact assessment, the teachers’ own perceived capabilities in classroom management were evaluated, as well as any change in teaching styles (permissive, authoritarian or democratic). The assessment gathered opinions about the use of shouting to maintain class discipline, classroom rules, negotiations, punishments, and the importance of teacher-student relationships for classroom management, among others. Comparing these variables, the only significant difference found was among the fourth and fifth grade students who reported that their teachers had a less permissive classroom management style than the control group. This difference was found

among teachers who attended a high number of Teacher Component sessions.

The process evaluation found that the program provides practical and simple tools to teachers to allow them to manage classroom situations in an assertive manner without resorting to coercive measures. Some teachers mentioned particularly that by applying the strategies presented in the Classroom Component, they had managed to improve their classroom management and encouraged more democratic spaces within it, strengthening the school’s own rules and agreements more generally.

*“Promoting a classroom environment that is consistent with the development of citizenship skills [by students] requires specific classroom management strategies. According to many studies that have interviewed teachers, the vast majority consider that knowing how to create a constructive atmosphere in their classrooms is one of the most important skills for their work, but it is also something that is almost never concretely taught in their teacher training.”* <sup>xix</sup>

**Enrique Chaux (2012)**



## Participant Testimonies



*"I had managed to reach out to a student with significant discipline problems, seeing him start developing a really positive attitude, when I started to observe how other children began copying his behavior. It was something like a shower of stars that was motivating them to continue the RESPIRA practices with greater frequency. It has been gratifying... I have managed to have classes with good levels of work and attention that I really did not expect to have so soon."*

**Teacher at the Garcés Navas school (Bogota)**

*"Some of the results in the classroom are that the group respects their classmates' opinions a little more, that they work more attentively on daily activities, the classroom environment is more pleasant and I'm calmer in different situations, whether facing conflicts between students or when they are overly excited."*

**Teacher at the Isaías Gamboa school (Cali)**

*"I think RESPIRA has been useful for both students and teachers because sometimes as teachers we do not have the tools to handle discipline in the classroom. Now we have strategies to sustain attention in the classroom and improve discipline."*

**Teacher at the Huisitó school (El Tambo)**

*"By helping us to improve as people, it has influenced my classes and greatly improved my work as a teacher and in my community and family."*

**Teacher at the Pueblo Nuevo school (El Tambo)**

*"In terms of classroom management, it has helped with discipline. It has helped me to know how to talk things through with students and reach agreements, how to handle situations or when to do activities."*

**Teacher at the Huisitó school (El Tambo)**

## Conclusion

While the impact assessment produced significant results in only one variable and in a single group of participants, several testimonies were collected from teachers who stated that they had improved their classroom management based on personal practice and the tools learnt in the RESPIRA program.



# 11. Academic Performance

*“The school atmosphere is the variable that has the greatest influence on student performance. Therefore, generating a respectful, welcoming and positive environment is essential to promote learning among students.”<sup>xx</sup>*

UNESCO/LLECE (2008)

## Introduction

Given the improvements shown in the variables mentioned in previous clusters, such as higher levels of student attention or more effective classroom management by the teacher, one hopes that there would also be an improvement in academic performance. A study in the United States showed that a daily mindfulness practice of 10 minutes significantly improved students’ scores in reading and science<sup>xxi</sup>, while another study in Canada showed that a mindfulness-based program improved maths scores by 15%.<sup>xxii</sup>



## Findings

Although this variable has not been directly measured in our evaluations, there are testimonies that point to the fact that as a result of the program, a more positive school atmosphere is created that enables a better academic performance.

At the Llorente school in Tumaco, students performed better in the government’s standardized tests from one year to the next. Even though there is no evidence to prove that it was an effect of the program, teachers commented that, thanks to RESPIRA, student attention had improved significantly, something which coincides with greater learning. In addition, in this and other educational institutions, they used mindfulness practice before the exam to reduce exam nerves, as one of the testimonies shows. In future scientific evaluations of the program, more explicit ways to measure academic performance as a variable will be sought.

*“In 2012, the OECD analysed the performance of 510,000 15-year-old students (9,073 of them Colombians) from 65 nations in Mathematics, Language and Science. According to the results, Colombia ranks 62, a drop of ten places compared with 2009. In fact, it was the nation that regressed most in the ranking. Colombia obtained 376 points in Mathematics, 403 in Language and 399 in Science, in contrast to 2009, when it achieved 381 points in Mathematics, 413 in Language and 402 in Science.”<sup>xxiii</sup>*

El Tiempo (2014)



## Participant Testimonies



*“Teacher, we have thought a lot about you in these last few days! We are presenting the State tests in maths and we are breathing a lot! Before we begin to answer the exam we breathe and observe if we have a cloudy mind. We wait a little until we are calmer and then we respond. It has helped us a lot to think more clearly and feel better because those exams scare us a lot!”*

**Students at the ITPC school (Tumaco)**

*“They become more aware and just the desire to get to a calmer state has had an impact. This has contributed to improving academic performance in the classroom. It is a gradual process but just the fact they are aware is already a gain.”*

**Teacher at the Huisitó school (El Tambo)**

*“Now we have strategies to sustain attention in the classroom and to improve discipline. This has helped us obtain good results in terms of academic performance.”*

**Teacher at the Huisitó school (El Tambo)**

## Conclusion

It cannot be concluded that the BREATHE in Education program improves the academic performance of students simply because this variable has not been scientifically evaluated during implementation. However, by improving other variables such as student attention and learning environment, an impact on academic achievement is also expected. This relationship was demonstrated by at least two independent studies of other programs that teach the practice of mindfulness to primary students.



# 12. Relevance, Coherence, Adherence & Satisfaction

## Introduction

The process evaluation also assessed the relevance, coherence, adherence (fidelity) and satisfaction of the program for teachers and students.

## Relevance

It was sought to establish how well the program's intervention responds to the needs of the population and the context in which it operates. Evaluating the Teacher Component sessions, teachers reported that the program was relevant to their personal and professional development and that, through the spaces opened by the program, they were able to reduce their stress levels, be more aware of their actions, sensations and thoughts, as well as maintain a more assertive and calm attitude towards everyday events. Teachers also reported that the program had been adjusted to their needs, mainly because they felt they were being valued as individuals, which has had a positive influence on their work, with their family and community. In regions of conflict, such as Tambo and Tumaco, some teachers felt the program was pertinent because it was perceived as useful in handling certain emotional situations that occur in that particular context.

## Coherence

The process evaluation sought to determine whether there is a common thread between sessions and whether the different sessions allow the general objective of the program to be fulfilled. Participants reported that they perceived a common thread between sessions and that in general the program felt very coherent to them. The time between sessions was judged differently at each institution, according to the particular dynamics of each.

## Adherence

The evaluation sought to assess how faithfully the program adheres to the issues and objectives proposed in its original design during implementation. The focus groups with teachers highlighted that the element most adhered to in meeting the program's objectives was the appropriation and understanding of the concept of mindfulness. It was widely evidenced, for example, that teachers perceived improvements in their teaching work, which led to higher levels of concentration and attention among their students, as well as in more harmonious relationships with other teachers and students. Teacher testimonies and recordings provide further evidence that the program's initial objectives were adhered to in its implementation.

## Satisfaction (Teachers)

High levels of teacher satisfaction were registered, mainly through focus groups, with teachers reporting that the program provided them with multiple tools for their personal and professional lives. They reported feeling satisfied with the dynamics and atmosphere of their group because they were able to develop greater confidence and closeness towards their fellow colleagues, to get to know them better and to exchange ideas. The teachers expressed their appreciation for the work materials which enabled them to use the activities in other contexts. Teachers also reported being highly satisfied with the work of the facilitators.





## Satisfaction (Students)

Students reported feeling very comfortable with the activities of RESPIRA because thanks to the program they learnt to breathe and to understand their emotions. They also mention-

ed among other things that the program helped them to concentrate more on school work and that they considered the activities to be fun.

*“When they told us about the project, I didn’t feel particularly motivated to participate and the first thing that came to mind was... ‘More work!’ But, so as not go against the headteacher, I signed up for the course despite my misgivings. When I arrived for the first session of RESPIRA, I wasn’t very enthusiastic because, as I said, I was just doing it because I felt I had to rather than for the program itself. But the magic of the program, of the facilitator, or maybe everything that the program involved, well, it was like ‘love at first sight’! I got fully caught up in it, looking forward to every next experience. I thought, ‘At last! A project created for me.’”*

*Such practical sessions, the patience of the facilitator, the little gifts, being listened to, the sharing and all the other things that escape my mind right now, they made RESPIRA a truly significant experience for me in my personal life. But it doesn’t finish there: the second part of the program, the work with my students, that’s been a whole other story...*

*RESPIRA was brought into my classroom in the best way, in the way that children love, through story-telling. With this activity, the students began appropriating the program for themselves in a really active and participatory way, to the point that now it has become part of our daily routines. Now our school day starts with a welcome, a prayer and RESPIRA. At the beginning, it was a bit difficult. It made the students laugh, they couldn’t connect with the silence and although the bottle [activity] was a real novelty, it was also a cause of distraction and even some minor quarrelling between them.*

*Some of my students tell me that they practice their breathing at home before they go to sleep, or when their mum is scolding them.”*

**Teacher in Cali**

# Case Study: Llorente Educational Institute in Tumaco

## Discovering the school and its context

Llorente is a village about an hour from Tumaco, and it is well-known for episodes of escalated violence due to the armed conflict. *“If Tumaco is ‘hot’ [violent or dangerous], Llorente is three times hotter,”* one of the teachers said to me as I started going to the school. *“It’s like a different world.”*

The Llorente Educational Institute has five satellite schools spread out across the Panamerican highway, a road that, as it enters Llorente village, is full of shops and businesses. There are significant money laundering activities and the place suffers from all the problems associated with the cultivation of illicit crops for drugs. *“The biggest problem that my students have is wanting to be like the gang members they see. The only dream the girls have is to be a gang member’s girlfriend. How can things improve if these are your hopes and dreams in life?”*, said one teacher.

I led an introductory session with the teachers of primary school to present the program to them and 22 of the 22 that attended signed up. It was entirely voluntary but the overwhelming majority felt that the program was bringing something important, something that would be useful to them personally.

In the midst of roadblocks, strikes and protests, which on many occasions made access to the school impossible, we started the Teacher Component sessions. Due to one of these roadblocks, only eight teachers turned up for the first session. From then on, I had to repeat almost every session for a second time to be able to work with all the teachers interested.

That first session demonstrated clearly what characterised the school: fractured relationships and divisions between teachers and all kinds of tensions: from the conflict, from the workload and exhaustion, from the frustration caused by the situation in Tumaco, from the students. There was also the overwhelming

heat to contend with, classrooms full of students crowded into tiny spaces, the dust, the main road with heavy traffic right in front, the presence of military tanks on the road and then, as you crossed the last police control into the village, the lack of those very tanks marking the entrance into guerrilla territory.

I found myself facing a bleak situation with even teachers accepting that they hated being teachers, that it was what they had been forced to do to put food on the table for their children. But, amidst all of this, there was also the hope among many teachers that they could offer a better future to their students.

## Working RESPIRA with teachers

Working within this reality, we advanced with the sessions of RESPIRA, introducing the practice of mindfulness with the main intention of ‘softening’ this hard exterior that seems to develop in people and their relationships under such tough conditions.

The third session of the Teacher Component, focused on emotions, was strongly marked by the way in which these teachers and their students were living with this daily violence. One of the teachers drew something that looked like an intensive care heart-monitor, putting his life in high and low peaks. *“It’s never in the middle,”* he said, *“not only because in the middle there is death, but because here it’s the only way you can live. If there is fear, there is a lot of fear and, if it drops very low, it is not because there isn’t fear but because the fear is hidden ... and then, bam! ... it comes back and rises. This also happens in relationships with colleagues and with our family.”*

In these sessions, two things would happen: the development of the practice of mindfulness and the circles of attentive listening, where the teachers could connect with their own stories and experiences and those of others. The mindfulness practice prepared the body and mind, while the practice of listening and sharing in a

circle made the need to develop their own emotional self-control and regulation particularly useful. In moments when sharing in a circle became emotional and difficult for some, it became necessary again to return to the sensations in the body, to the breath and the present moment and anchor themselves from that place of wellbeing (what we called 'the soft space') in order to express these difficult emotions in a safe space. This way mindfulness practice turned into our main strategy to deal with whatever came up from within the group.

Between the fourth and fifth session, a bomb exploded in the middle of the night. I was asleep but found myself suddenly sat upright in bed. Immediately, another bomb sounded. I was scared. After a while, the neighbours came out of their houses. I stayed curled up under the bed and called a friend. "What happened?" I asked her. "Well, a bomb went off!" she replied. "And what should we do?" She responded, "Well, nothing. Go back to sleep because we have to work tomorrow." That night, the explosion

would leave a young boy deaf, a little girl would be left without a face and a whole family would be left without a home. I tried to understand. I couldn't. I felt an enormous pain and nobody seemed to share that pain with me.

We then had the fifth session and I asked the teachers how they felt about what had happened and whether they had spoken with their students about it. They told me they hadn't: "What for?" At that moment, we stopped what we were doing and instead did a long session of a guided "good wishes" practice, remembering the young girl and boy, and the affected family to send them good wishes and compassion. It was a very emotive and transformative experience where we were really able to integrate the different practices because the emotions felt by all were very evident. A teacher concluded by saying: "I thought that what I didn't let affect me would make me stronger but the reality is, those things just make me tougher and sadder on the inside. As though the roots have been dried up of the tree that I am."





## Implementing the Classroom Component

During the Classroom Component, the teachers take the practice of mindfulness to their students. This is made possible thanks to the teachers' development of their own practice during the Teacher Component and through the use of three student curricula designed according to age-group: Preschool, 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

However, the implementation of the classroom practice has begun well before the second semester. Teachers from the very first session of the Teacher Component told me about the activities they did with their students, and we began exploring the elements that the Family Component would include as well. As of this second semester, they possessed the curricula to introduce the practice more formally.

Every time I returned to the school I was able to gauge any advances in the classroom, seeing a significant change in the students. *"I feel like I see lights, getting more confident in this idea that we can have different classrooms even though our students live such difficult things outside. The fact that my students ask me for RESPIRA has made me believe more in the process and also in being able to do things with families. I have already started working with interested parents on Reports Day and also with some of my neighbors,"* said a teacher.

That second semester though was full of complications, particularly in relation to security, and only six of the 22 teachers were able to formally complete the Classroom Component with the full eight sessions. However, faced with the situation, it became increasingly clear

that the course curriculum was an 'excuse'. *"I'm not interested in the curriculum, throw it in the trash if you want,"* I would tell the teachers. Actually, what we were betting on was a short daily practice, giving the children some 3-5 minutes of mindfulness practice each day to provide a space of calmness and introspection.

But beyond this practice, what most likely had most impact on the students was the renewed ability of their teachers to connect more deeply with them. It meant very simple elements such as giving affection through touch, or a word of validation instead of demanding to know who was guilty for whatever had happened in the classroom, thus not simply opting for a quick fix. Everything made more sense now. The practice of mindfulness consisted mainly of this new presence, which generated great transformations in the classroom. Teachers understood their students better and what was behind their behavior.



## The second year of implementation

The second year of RESPIRA began during a very tough escalation of violence in Tumaco, including a period of almost three weeks where bombs were exploding daily. The area of Llorente was further filled with illegal businesses and, with them, the town was flooded with large peso bills. There was no small change in the shops and teenagers were prostituting themselves much more than before: the full range of drug trafficking dynamics.

During these months, teachers were seeing how this conflict was reproduced in their classrooms. *"It is as if they have forgotten everything they did with RESPIRA,"* teachers said. The children became more and more aggressive, the girls talked about clothes, money and cell-phones. *"I haven't seen anything like this in my career,"* said one teacher. *"They are crazy – it's impossible to have class."*

During this period, I accompanied the teachers a lot with the objective of helping them to deepen their own mindful practice and to support them in the continuation of their work in the classroom. The practice helped them to develop a certain strength to be able to face the harsh reality they were living, and also motivated them to even facilitate the practice with their own relatives who they sometimes brought with them to our sessions.

For the beginning of the second year, the secondary school teachers also asked to be enrolled in the program. RESPIRA does not have material for this age group but such was the teachers' insistence that I opened a space for them. I had a group of 25 secondary school teachers plus those from the first year. I found there to be a large divide between the primary teachers - mostly Afro-Colombian teachers from the coast - and the teachers of secondary - almost all white and from the mountainous

interior of Colombia. Fundamentally, the problem was a lack of communication, understanding and appreciation of the other's work. I decided to work separately with each group, hoping that the practice would eventually allow them to meet, interact and connect as teachers and members of the same school.

## The school in shock

One night in September, the family of the top student in the school was victim of an armed attack. The boy's parents were murdered and he was left disabled. The Red Cross immediately took him out of Colombia as a refugee.

Faced with this situation, the boy's 11<sup>th</sup> grade classmates were heavily affected, as were the teachers. The secondary school coordinator came look for me, we talked and in tears he told me that it hurts so much, that he is tired of watching his students die. He had hit rock bottom and no one at the school had the will nor energy to work. His gaze lowered to the floor and his collapsed posture spoke volumes of an enormous need to be heard, to be cared for right at that moment because that was the nourishment that he himself needed to be able to then do the same with his students. This was also the only thing I was able to offer. We cried together for a long time and I remembered an ancestral metaphor that says that to weep is to make the flowers of the soul grow.

We agreed to hold special workshops with the 11<sup>th</sup> graders, which presented me with a particular challenge. The emotional containment work to be done was enormous.

The students talked about fear, violence, and the different ways in which they, too, have been both part of the violence and have reproduced it. We gave space to the sadness, to say words about their classmate, to hear the emotion of each person present in the circle. We worked with putting our attention in the body and gradually the mind became calmer. In the following sessions, we talked about the brain, our emotions and the manifestation of sadness. We performed mindfulness exercises and then safe, healing circles among themselves, guided mostly by the school counsellor.

Afterwards, there was a different feeling in the air and the students themselves thought of facilitating moments of practice with the younger students. I gave them a chime and they were enthusiastic, wanting to facilitate a practice every morning. It was this new energy brought forward by the students that managed to unite teachers as well. The primary and secondary school teachers saw the boys of 11<sup>th</sup> grade engaged, different, eager. They willingly lent their own chimes so the 11<sup>th</sup> graders could visit each classroom. The whole school began to practice together.





For the next session with the secondary school teachers, several primary school teachers were invited to participate as well and facilitate some of the practices. In some cases, it turned out that secondary teachers asked for the support of the teachers from primary to give them guidance on how to work with their students. It had profoundly changed the way they related to each other. Obviously, the situation was not perfect, but the school had rediscovered a way of working despite the disheartening reality that surrounded it.

### Harvesting the fruits

After two years of work in the school, the implementation of RESPIRA came to an end. There was a different energy and every teacher felt it. They had something, a presence. Many of them do not practice daily but trust in the potential of their practice in everyday life and know how to turn to it in times of need.

In the closing session of RESPIRA, the teachers gave an account of the personal, family and work changes that had taken place for them, such as the teacher who at first admitted to be hating her teaching work, and who, with RESPIRA's help, was able to resolve her issues with her work and students (*see page 21*).

Teachers also commented that among their students the changes were evident. Children who had had serious problems with aggression were finding ways to relate differently to themselves and others. The use of a plastic bottle containing water with glitter, representing our different mental states such as agitation and stress (the “messy” water when the bottle is agitated) or peace and calmness (the clean water when the glitter has settled down) was a key teaching and learning tool for almost all classrooms. It allowed students to picture and put into practice the great potential of mindfulness to generate response rather than reactivity. And this same image was also of great importance when it came to improving levels of attention in the classroom, which greatly favoured learning.

Finally, one of the most skeptical teachers contacted me a few months after the external intervention of the program had ended. She had been reading about Japanese gardens and decided to have a garden in the courtyard of her house in Llorente. Today, it is a place where students and teachers meet once a week to sit together in a circle and share the practice.

**RESPIRA Facilitator**

# Conclusions

## Broad range of benefits

Both the impact assessment and process evaluation demonstrate that the RESPIRA program – through the practice of mindfulness, the spaces it promotes and the concrete strategies it provides – improves a broad range of intra- and interpersonal variables in both teachers and students (and potentially other members of the education community). These in turn have a positive impact on both their personal and school lives, largely responding to the short- and long-term goals established in the program's theory of change.

## A single set of processes

These variables, although presented separately in this present report, were perceived by teachers and students as a single set of processes which for them led to greater emotional and physical wellbeing, to a classroom climate more conducive to learning and to more assertive and peaceful relationships with others, among other benefits.

## Intensity of implementation

It should be noted that one of the most important findings of the impact assessment from the moderation analysis was that these positive effects were mainly found in those teachers who had attended a high number of the Teacher Component sessions and then, in turn, had implemented the Classroom Component with a higher intensity. It was also found that teachers who had attended a low number of Teacher Component sessions but then implemented the Classroom Component, had some negative and counterproductive effects on their students. This suggests that for the program to generate the desired results, an implementation of relatively high intensity (the original inten-

sity defined by the program's general structure and contents), is required, since a 'light' version could fail to produce the expected results or even generate counterproductive effects.

## Capacity building of facilitators

The findings of the impact assessment and previous conclusions also suggest that the training and capacity building of the facilitators who implement the program in the educational institutions is fundamental. By supporting teachers to transform important aspects of their professional and personal lives, facilitators require a wide range of personal resources to accompany them in this process. This is thus another key indicator when it comes to the good use of mindfulness practice in the educational field; that such programs should be facilitated by highly qualified professionals, which requires high-quality training programs, both for initial as well as continuous training.

## A contribution to peacebuilding

Beyond 'just' preventing school aggression and violence, RESPIRA directly contributes to urgently needed peacebuilding processes on a societal level. We believe that, by creating a more compassionate, empathic and more conscientious education, we can gradually move towards lasting peace, towards an education that is more inclusive and that promotes well-rounded citizens who know how to relate to each other, to communicate, be tolerant and seek strategies to resolve conflicts peacefully. If the children in our schools learn how to recognize the validity and importance of their emotions, understand how they work and how to relate to them, the path to peace for them and future generations will become much clearer for everyone to follow.



Teachers participating in the first pilot implementation in 2014 (Bogota and Tumaco) describing RESPIRA with one single word or expression after finishing the Teacher Component.

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- i The *Evaluation Report 2015* (in Spanish) with the original statistics from the impact assessment and the process evaluation can be requested by writing to the following email address: [info@respira.co](mailto:info@respira.co)
- ii William James in “The Principles of Psychology”, 1890.
- iii Daniel Goleman, quoted from this [article](#) and referencing the following [study](#).
- iv David Black in “[A Brief Definition of Mindfulness](#)”, 2011, p. 1.
- v Patricia Jennings & Mark Greenberg in “[The prosocial Classroom](#)”, 2008, p. 492.
- vi The most recognized training program in mindfulness worldwide is Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR), with dozens of scientific studies published per month. See for example <https://goamra.org/>.
- vii Nadia C. Restrepo-Ayala, Gabriel O. Colorado-Vargas y Gustavo A. Cabrera-Arana in “[Desgaste Emocional en Docentes Oficiales de Medellín, Colombia, 2005](#)”, 2006, p. 68.
- viii [National Survey of Mental Health](#), 2015. This is a summarizing quote created by the authors (see p. 129 in particular).
- ix *Ibid.*, see p. 31.
- x See for example, Hofmann et al. in the following [study](#), 2010.
- xi See this [article](#) in *El Tiempo* newspaper (our translation), the statistics quoted refer to the year 2011. It wasn’t possible to find more recent data but there are no indications that the situation has improved in the last five years.
- xii Enrique Chau in “Agresión reactiva, agresión instrumental y el ciclo de la violencia”, 2003, p. 49-50 (our translation).
- xiii Enrique Chau in “Educación, convivencia y agresión escolar”, 2012, p. 44 (our translation).
- xiv Andrea Nair, found in [quotesgram](#).
- xv F. Ioannidou & V. Konstantikaki in “[Empathy and emotional intelligence: What is it really about?](#)”, 2008, p. 1-2.
- xvi Patricia Jennings & Mark Greenberg in “[The prosocial Classroom](#)”, 2008, p. 500.
- xvii *Ibid.*, p. 503.
- xviii Enrique Chau in “Educación, convivencia y agresión escolar”, 2012, p. 83-84 (our translation).
- xix Enrique Chau in “Educación, convivencia y agresión escolar”, 2012, p. 88 (our translation).
- xx UNESCO/LLECE in “[Los aprendizajes de los estudiantes de América Latina y el Caribe](#)”, Executive Summary of the First Report of Results of the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE), 2008, p. 178 (our translation).
- xxi A study that refers to the *Inner Explorer* program, see [original paper](#).
- xxii A study that refers to the *MindUp* program, see [article and original paper](#).
- xxiii *El Tiempo* in various articles, e.g. [here](#) and [here](#).



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## Mindfulness for Peacebuilding

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