

Introduction

“I Just Breathe”: Stories of School Yoga

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Yoga is a process of replacing old patterns with new and more appropriate patterns.

—Sri T. Krishnamacharya

When I’m really mad and like ready to explode, I just breathe. And every time I breathe out I just let all the anger out.

—William, yoga student

High school youth trail into the basement classroom at 9 a.m., yawning as they tease each other or look at their phones. William sweeps one half of the classroom where chairs and tables have been pushed aside. The classroom teachers direct students to the free breakfast of packaged muffins and orange juice, and then to the computers lined up against the wall, where students log in to their individual plans. When Janine, the yoga teacher, arrives, bike helmet still on, the hum in the room gets louder. Students jostle each other as they move to unfurl their yoga mats into an uneven circle. “Miss, can I ring the chime?” Miguel asks. Janine hands him the chime, and class begins. When students are lying on their backs for the final resting pose 50 minutes later, the room is quiet and still until

the morning announcements blast suddenly from the ceiling speakers, interrupting the peace. David, eyes still closed, gives an obscene salute to the disembodied voice.

This kind of scene (with or without the salute) occurs in hundreds of K-12 schools across the United States. The yoga-in-schools movement, along with the mindfulness in education movement, has gained momentum over the past several years as adult practitioners realize the benefits of yoga in their personal lives and want children and youth to have the same opportunity to experience them.

Because yoga attends to both mind and body, it supports student overall well-being, which has led to its use in schools across the country. Teachers use yoga-based mindfulness techniques to provide mental breaks and physical activity during instruction and as part of their classroom management approach to help students become more aware of their emotions and actions and, in turn, to self-regulate their behavior. ESL teachers show their students how yoga poses are universal across diverse languages. Counselors teach mindfulness practices to support self-calming and stress reduction for students with behavioral issues. Schools adopt yoga and mindfulness to enhance social emotional learning (SEL), health and physical education, and anti-bullying programs. Educators also use yoga-based mindfulness practices to support principles of inclusive classrooms as well as academic content standards for second language acquisition, development standards for Early Childhood, and universal ethics. Mindfulness and yoga also appear in higher education, as yogi-academics, including teacher educators like ourselves, use the practices in their classrooms to support learning and well-being.

Yoga and mindfulness in K-12 environments coincide with increased awareness of the stresses associated with teaching and learning in public schools, chiefly those that are underfunded and populated by students from low-income families who now make up the majority of public school children (Jiang, Ekono & Skinner, 2016). While these families may be loving and stable, with adults who value education, poverty carries a host of stress-inducing and time-consuming challenges in addition to financial deprivation. Poverty contributes to children's mental health problems with as many as one in five students showing some signs or symptoms of mental, emotional or behavioral disorders (Freeman & Kendziora, 2017, pp. 2–3). Meanwhile, an estimated one in four children suffers from some sort of abuse or neglect in their lifetimes (CDC, 2018).

The resulting trauma can have negative emotional, cognitive and physical health effects, often resulting in learning and behavioral issues. In order to address these issues, some schools have amplified their services, functioning as 24/7 community centers that provide mental and physical health services, adult education, and food supplementation. Some schools have resource professionals such as counselors, social workers, nurses, and behavioral specialists who, along with teachers, can support children and families. Many do not, however, placing additional demands on the primary school personnel. Although special education and language learning programs are required by law, many schools remain chronically underfunded and, arguably, the laws themselves come up short.

Even well-resourced public schools are controlled by state and federal mandates which dictate a curriculum insufficient for the well-being of many students. We are concerned that the current emphasis on narrowed curriculum and high stakes testing is also having a negative effect on public school students (Johnson & Richer, 2015). This general lack of autonomy limits teacher effectiveness and creativity, as teachers must often choose between meeting mandates and attending to their students' needs.

Our work as teacher educators and researchers focuses on compassion, empowerment, and social justice. As yoga practitioners and teachers, we experience and witness the power of yoga to transform, and believe that yoga should be available to everyone. We believe that students and teachers in public schools can benefit from the breathing, mindfulness, and movement techniques inherent in the yoga practices described in this book. We vigorously support public schools as one of the last spaces where people from different backgrounds gather to learn the principles and practices of democracy, which include critical thinking, group and individual human development, and creative academic and technological pursuits. We are encouraged by the latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA, 2015), which provides funds that can be used for social-emotional learning and health and wellness programs. While states have discretion on how the money is distributed, some districts have used it for school yoga programs.

As the school yoga movement grows, so does the need to understand how yoga works and its effects on individuals, groups, and school culture. However, few studies address the actual experiences of people involved in yoga programs because only a handful of qualitative studies on school yoga exist. Missing are the thick descriptions and stories that capture the

conditions that lead to schools adopting yoga programs, how programs are planned, introduced, and implemented, what yoga teachers encounter in schools, and how they encourage students and school staff to embrace yoga practices. This book narrows that gap in the literature by focusing on the stories of those who bear witness not only to what happens during yoga, but what comes before and after, making meaning from yoga practices within specific school contexts.

The stories that yoga teachers tell about their experiences, observations, and interactions with children and adults have much to offer the growing field of yoga in schools, in addition to research on school climate and student engagement. The bulk of this book is written by contributors from a variety of K-12 contexts who share their discoveries and questions, joys and tensions in teaching yoga in schools. We asked them to write about what various stakeholders—from students to yoga teachers to school personnel to parents to policymakers—should know about school yoga. Their narratives illustrate the complexities of the school-yoga field, supplementing, questioning, and reframing current findings from more traditional, quantitative research. This provides crucial information for school personnel and yoga service providers planning to offer yoga in schools, while providing support for those already doing so.

The Organization of this Book

As an informational text, this book focuses exclusively on yoga programs operating in public schools. Yoga also happens in private schools, but we chose to bind the project's scope to the economic, political, and social public school environment, with its unique goals and constraints. While yoga is our central object of study, it also informs our methodology. Indeed, as a critical text, this book argues that a yogic approach to research, an approach like ours that focuses on feminist relational theory and narrative inquiry, is suitable for a wide range of qualitative research projects and evaluations of programs, yoga-based or not, especially programs serving historically marginalized populations. This approach, which we will describe at greater length in chapter 2, values participants' experiences and stories, particularly when participants serve as narrators of their stories, creating a reciprocal relationship between researcher and participant. It upends the traditional subject-object relationship in which the researcher

holds all the power, and as we hope this demonstrates, can yield richer, more dynamic findings.

This book contains multiple voices through two distinct but related languages: one academic, one practical. We begin with the academic in chapter 1 by defining yoga and outlining the current state of school-based yoga research. We then contrast qualitative research with traditional scientific research, demonstrating how qualitative research methods are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of school yoga. In chapter 2, we outline our theoretical lens: yogic-ethical/feminist-relational, and explain how we are using narrative inquiry. We also acknowledge the particular challenges and limitations related to qualitative research in this context.

The heart of the book contains the voices of teachers, counselors, and yoga service providers who have developed programs and do the actual teaching of yoga in schools. They are experienced, knowledgeable educators, and some have advanced degrees in education or allied fields and/or national followings via their publications, trainings, and websites. By inviting our contributors to tell their stories, we mark their work as academic and practical knowledge production.

We organized these chapters based on how contributors situated themselves in their stories. Section I offers chapters by school-employed educators who have introduced yoga into their everyday school lives. Helene McGlaufflin is a school counselor in Topsham, Maine, who details her move from focusing on diagnosing and treating student pathology to teaching children resilience and wellness through a yoga class she calls *Calm and Alert*. Inspired by the benefits of her personal yoga/mindfulness practice, Helene decided to explore whether an “inward focus, unity of mind, body and breath, and emphasis on wellness [could] adequately augment [her] mental health training” in teaching social-emotional development. Debra A. Krodman-Collins, a school psychologist from Broward County, Florida, describes how she developed S.T.O.P., a yoga-based curriculum for students with autism. She offers students stability and support in a world that can seem “mysterious, disjointed, and potentially dangerous.” Lindsay Meeker, an ESL director in Illinois, shares how she changed her classroom management design to include yoga and mindfulness and shared these skills with colleagues. She developed breathing and movement exercises to work alongside her language arts skill-building to create a welcoming classroom environment for immigrant and refugee families.

Section II highlights three contributors who have developed national organizations. Lisa Flynn, based in Dover, New Hampshire, founded Yoga4Classrooms, a yoga and mindfulness program that promotes social, emotional, and physical wellness, learning readiness, and positive school climate. Lisa describes how she came to teach school yoga through painful personal struggles, founded a yoga service organization, and developed a train-the-trainer model of professional development to implement yoga and mindfulness practices schoolwide. Carla Tantillo Philibert, with co-author Peggy C. Collings, focuses on professional development programs for educators to grow students' social emotional learning (SEL) competencies with yoga through her company, Mindful Practices, which provides programs to students and teachers in mostly urban schools in Chicago. Dee Marie offers the origin story of Calming Kids, in Boulder, Colorado, which she founded to address bullying and to teach youth how to practice ahimsa, or nonviolence, through a classroom-based student yoga program. Dee details the initial resistance she encountered in the early 2000s to the present day, where Calming Kids's success enables her to offer teacher professional development workshops across the globe.

Section III focuses on yoga service providers who have extensive experience working with marginalized populations. Michelle Brook discusses the joys and challenges of working with youth in Title I (at least 40% of students receive free or reduced lunch) schools in Jersey City, New Jersey. Inspired by personal tragedy, she teaches children how to "build self-confidence and awareness to live happier lives by knowing how to regulate their own emotions." Joanne Spence, a yoga-based therapeutic social worker and founder of the nonprofit Yoga in Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, began by creating yoga programs for health and physical education (HPE) classes on a district-wide scale. She describes her initial experiences with HPE teacher professional development and her move to teaching yoga as a holistic behavioral support in alternative schools. Peg Oliveira, a psychologist and child advocate in New Haven, Connecticut, teaches yoga as a way to raise consciousness for low-income, disaffected youth. Through her nonprofit organization, 108 Monkeys, Peg adapted her yoga teaching to urban high school students' strengths, needs, and expectations.

While we created these sections for easy navigation, readers will note plenty of overlap among the authors. All are white, middle class, cisgender women—a point we address at length in chapter 2. Moreover, all share an unyielding commitment to the profession and to students, even as they

work in various contexts and with diverse populations across the country. There are also some key differences in how they approach their work, which we highlight in the codas and conclusion. We believe these variations showcase the necessary ambiguities of approaching and implementing this work in schools. The stories here demonstrate the importance of context when deciding on what form yoga programs will take, who should be the focus of instruction, and who should be the teachers.

Our final chapter is grounded in our feminist stance, in which we contextualize school yoga within the larger framework of social justice education and the ethical responsibilities of this work. We reflect on the entire project: our goals, the process of working with each other, and the use of narrative as a mode of inquiry to explore the current state of school yoga. In so doing, we explicate key themes from the chapters, and note what is absent or left unsaid. The most salient theme of this project is that *yoga in schools is about positive change*. We unpack this with a summary statement called “This is What We Know about Yoga in Schools.”

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