

Teaching a Traditional Yoga Practice in Elementary Schools

Summary

Over the past three years, several yoga teachers from the Teacher Study Program have taught a traditional yoga practice to the students at the Clyde Reeves Elementary School in Woburn, MA. The Reeves Yoga Program has been extremely successful in fostering positive outcomes for the students and has had a positive impact on the school community.

Reeves students have shared their feelings about the “calming” or “relaxing” effects of the practice and talked about how their yoga practice has been useful both in and out of school. Similarly, Reeves teachers have shared that the mindfulness developed through the Yoga Program has been a useful tool in alleviating stressful situations around both academics (tests, etc) and social situations (playground conflicts, etc). The Yoga Program’s overarching theme of “Everyone Is Different, Everyone Belongs” is also aligned with the school’s broader program of fostering an inclusive environment for the increasingly diverse student body.

The Reeves Yoga Program has also become an excellent training venue for teachers in training. The 20-minute class format allows teachers to hone their teaching skills in a repeatable format, and incorporate feedback into their teaching immediately.

About Reeves Elementary School Yoga Program

The Clyde Reeves Elementary School is a public elementary school in Woburn, MA that serves approximately 450 students from Pre-K through the 5th grade. The Program began in 2016 as a collaboration between the school’s Principal, Bobbie Finocchio, Ed.D., and Coeli Marsh, Ed.M., E-RYT 500.

In the first year of the program, participation was mandatory. Today the Yoga Program is an optional activity for teacher to select or refuse. Currently, 17 of the 21 teachers at the school participate in the Yoga Program representing more than over 85% of Reeves students. The practice is held once per week. The program is supported by an \$8,000 budget that has been allocated from the Student Activities fund of the school by Dr. Finocchio and includes 2 teachers in addition to Ms. Marsh that donate their time to the program.

Although the Reeves Yoga Program is relatively new, the roots of the program date back to 2000. Ms. Marsh has a history of establishing long-running yoga programs at Boston-area elementary schools and high schools. Like the Reeves program, each of these other programs follows a similar structure, and overarching theme of “Everyone is Different, Everyone Belongs.” However, each program is tailored to the specific community and learning environment of the respective school. Developing a program begins with several weeks of observation of the school; its student-base, physical environment and lesson planning. Each program includes a specialized sequence of postures and a general thematic focus that aligns with the broader objectives of the school.

At Reeves, this research revealed that the student body was mostly comprised of children from blue-collar families in a suburban community that is becoming more ethnically diverse. We found that the students were eager for “challenge” and faced the idea of challenge as a reward. This idea of “seeking challenge” is a very pronounced and atypical characteristic of Reeves, and was incorporated into the yoga sequencing and teaching style of the yoga instructors. Additionally, the administrator and teachers at Reeves are working very hard to ensure that the school is an inclusive environment for its increasingly diverse students. These efforts fit seamlessly with the cornerstone of the “Everyone is Different, Everyone Belongs” theme of the yoga program.

Given this research, Dr. Finocchio and Ms. Marsh set out to establish a mindful yoga practice for the students with the following general goals in mind:

1. Establish a foundation of mindful practice with the students. Teaching yoga to students at an in-school setting connects the yoga practice to the learning they do every day in the classroom.
2. Promote the benefits of a mindful yoga practice both in & out of the school setting
3. Emphasize the theme of “Everyone is Different, Everyone Belongs” into the program to support the broader themes of school-wide inclusiveness.
4. Use physical yoga poses (traditional asana) to promote body awareness and connect movement to intention and mindful practice
5. Establish the value of the program to students by removing the “playfulness” commonly associated with children’s yoga and promoting the benefits of the practice. By teaching the yoga practice with seriousness, the Program promotes mutual respect and trust between the students and yoga teachers.
6. Establish a high value of the students’ feedback (respect). Students are encouraged to share their experiences of the practice with their yoga teacher and classmates. This serves to promote a dialog among the students about the benefits yoga practice, emphasize the universal nature of the effects of the yoga practice.

To achieve these goals, Ms Marsh established a base-line, 30-minute yoga sequence that aims to balance mindfulness and physical challenge.

The Practice

Teaching a yoga practice that is focused on both mindfulness and physical challenge to children between the ages of 5 and 11 requires careful consideration to their emotional and physical maturity. While most studio-based (and many school-based) yoga programs offered to children seek to engage student through playfulness, the Reeves Yoga Program is taught to students with a seriousness of purpose. The Yoga Program is not an extension of school recess or part of the physical education program at school. The program does not focus on the “animal” names of the postures or include storytelling to the children. Rather, the yoga classes are taught similarly to adult classes, with a focus on the safe alignment, steady breathing, and the importance of personal experience. In short, the classes are taught with respect.

Although the yoga classes are taught with seriousness of an adult class, designing an age-appropriate sequence and teaching style for students was essential. To this end, the poses were chosen to:

- Allow the students to be physically successful
- Avoid any poses that may be embarrassing for students (e.g. standing forward folds)
- Avoid poses that trigger a negative emotional response (e.g. backbends)
- Offer pose modifications for any poses that may have a cultural sensitivity (e.g. child's pose modified for seated resting pose)
- Avoid deep backbends that cannot be taught within the time constraints
- Avoid strenuous twists that cannot be taught within the time constraints

Furthermore, unlike traditional adult classes, teachers are trained to practice the pose with the class in order to demonstrate safe alignment. Teachers are also trained carefully to use simplified language to ensure that the instruction is clear to the students (e.g. instead of “inhale / exhale”, we use “breathe in / breathe out”).

The general, 20-minute sequence that Ms. Marsh designed balances accessible physical challenges of warrior and balancing poses with more meditative postures. Since “challenge” was identified as an important motivator for the Reeves students, the following sequence has a particular focus on the challenging aspect of the Warrior posture and Balancing postures. The basic sequence includes the following poses (taught in order):

1. Seated Side Stretch
2. Seated twist
3. Kneeling Pebble Pose

4. Mountain Pose
5. Warrior 2
6. Reverse Warrior (optional, older grades)
7. Eagle Pose
8. "Challenging" Pose (Utitta Hasta Padagustasana, older grades)
9. Airplane
10. Tree Pose
11. Pebble Pose (optional)
12. Chick & Egg (younger grades), Childs Pose (older grades)

A video capture of the sequence outlined above can be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lzafy9tXkCA&t=217s>

The two primary mindfulness poses (Kneeling Pebble Pose and Child Pose) are bookends to the more physically challenging Warrior and Balancing poses. All poses are offered with modification options to the students.

Each class finishes by soliciting feedback from the students about their experience of practice. The program's teachers have been carefully trained to solicit this feedback without judgement and to value all feedback as equally important. These feedback sessions at the end of the yoga classes are also an opportunity to reinforce the general principles of inclusion that the school is promoting as the school has become increasingly diverse. The theme of "Everyone Is Different; Everyone Belongs" is connected back to the yoga practice through the various unique experiences of each student and even the variety of expressions that can be practiced in each pose.

Focus on Mindfulness

There is a growing body of research supporting the benefits of teaching mindfulness to children. While many of the studies use small samples sizes and focus on anecdotal findings, most come to similar conclusions:

...(P)rograms that directly train students in mindfulness have collectively demonstrated a range of cognitive, social, and psychological benefits to both elementary (six studies) and high school (eight studies) students. These include improvements in working memory, attention, academic skills, social skills, emotional regulation, and self-esteem, as well as self-reported improvements in mood and decreases in anxiety, stress, and fatigue.¹

Work on mindfulness with young people is popular with both staff and students, has a developing presence and can be effective in promoting a very wide range of outcomes. When well taught and when practised regularly, it has been shown to be capable of improving mental health and well-being, mood, self-esteem, self-regulation, positive behaviour and academic learning.²

Yoga participants showed statistically significant differences over time relative to controls on measures of anger control and fatigue/inertia. Most outcome measures exhibited a pattern of worsening in the control group over time, whereas changes in the yoga group over time either were minimal or showed slight

¹ Meiklejohn, J., Phillips, C., Freedman, M.L. et al. Mindfulness (2012) 3: 291.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-012-0094-5>

² Katherine Weare, (2013) "Developing mindfulness with children and young people: a review of the evidence and policy context", Journal of Children's Services, Vol. 8 Issue: 2, pp.141-153, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-12-2012-0014>

improvements. While statistically significant differences between groups were found for only a few outcome measures, each of these favored the yoga group.³

Modern yoga practice has deep roots in fitness culture. In his book, *Yoga Body: The Origins Of Modern Posture Practice*, Mark Singleton explains, “The pervasive message is that asana is an indigenous, democratic form of Indian gymnastics, requiring no apparatus and essentially comparable in function and goal to Western physical culture – but with more and better to offer.”⁴ Most adult practitioners are introduced to yoga practice through fitness instruction and through time & practice develop a connection to the mindful aspects of yoga. While the “mind & body connection” is an appealing concept to new yoga practitioners, the physical aspects of the postures are presented as a method to access mindfulness. Similarly, most children’s yoga programs are offered through traditional yoga studios and seek to connect with children through physical “play.”

From my own experience, studio-based children’s yoga programs failed to connect with my young children. My boys expressed an interest in joining me in an activity that had become an important part of my day. However, the focus on play and story-telling in these programs was not engaging enough to keep their interest. When my children reached the age of 8, I began taking them to adult classes. They immediately connected with the mindfulness aspects of these classes and used them as a refuge from the challenges of their lives. It was clear to me that offering children a yoga practice with the same seriousness that we offer adults; acknowledging that children face challenges in their lives and helping to lay a foundation through practice to help them deal with those challenges was a very powerful idea.

The Reeves Yoga Program puts this powerful idea into action. While the classes are relatively short 20-minute sessions and they follow a simple pose sequence, they are taught with the same seriousness of purpose and respect for the students as an adult class. Since the classes are taught in a school setting, the program has de-emphasized the physical fitness aspect of the practice that is common in studio-based yoga programs and amplified the mindfulness of the practice. While pebble pose and child’s pose are overtly focused on mindfulness, the other more physically challenging poses are taught to emphasize the mindful intention of expressing the posture.

Over the course of a few months of weekly practice the students can practice the meditative poses of the sequence for several minutes with quietness and calm steadiness. By the end of the school year, even the kindergarteners at Reeves are able to quietly meditate for more than 3 minutes. Additionally, the students are focused during the physical challenge of the warrior poses and practice the other postures with an awareness and purposefulness of their movements

As noted above, the teachers in the Reeves Yoga Program established that the students’ ideas and experiences (even the negative ones) in the yoga classes were valuable and worthy of sharing with their classmates. The respect that the teachers offer to the students has been reflected; not out of some expectation of obedient behavior, but from an expression of mutual respect. Students have shared their feelings about the “calming” or “relaxing” effects of the practice and talked about how their yoga practice has been useful both in and out of school. Other students have shared that the practice is both physically challenging but also has challenged them to focus.

The teachers at Reeves have also shared their observations about the calming and relaxing aspects of the yoga program. Despite some initial resistance, the program has achieved broad support from the teachers and administrators at the school. Reeves teachers have shared that the mindfulness developed through the Yoga Program has been a useful tool in alleviating stressful situations around both academics (tests, etc) and social situations (playground conflicts, etc).

³ Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine Volume 2015, Article ID 345835, 17 pages
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1155/2015/345835>

⁴ Singleton, Mark, 1976-. *Yoga body: the origins of modern posture practice*. New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2010. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.30676.0001.001>.

Training Teachers

The Reeves Yoga Program has proved to be a powerful training venue for teachers in training. The 20-minute class format allows teachers to hone their teaching skills in a repeatable format. Feedback from lead instructors can be delivered to teachers in training immediately following a session and adjustments can be made in real time for the next class. The rapid frequency of classes during the day allows for a continuous loop of in-class teaching, feedback and adjustment.

The short, 20-minute class format and the fixed sequencing of the postures serves to de-emphasize the focus that many newer teachers place on “the poses.” In fact, many yoga teachers training programs focus on asana alignment and pose sequencing but provide limited in-class teaching practice to develop the essential skills of class pacing, essential language, developing the teacher’s “voice.” The simplified language used to teach to children provides an important reminder to teachers to maintain simplicity when teaching to any age group. The Reeves Yoga Program provides a powerful model to augment traditional teacher trainings with supervised in-class teaching practice.

The Reeves program has been instrumental in the 200-hour training program for 2 Teacher Study Project teachers and in the 300-hour training for me and 2 other teachers that have used the program as the focus of their “practicums.”