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## **Practice Note: Using Yoga for Emotional Regulation in Intermediate School Teenagers**

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## Practice Note: Using Yoga for Emotional Regulation in Intermediate School Teenagers

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**Background:** This paper examines techniques used in yoga, including breathing techniques, various forms of meditation and physical postures that can impact youth diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) learning to regulate their emotions to enhance their academic performance. **Methods:** The intervention was administered to teens at an intermediate public school for six weeks. Seventeen participants were chosen by mental health counselors and worked together with a yoga facilitator to better serve teens struggling with emotional regulation. **Results:** Pre- and post-tests show that meditation was the overall preferred technique chosen by students as a method to aid with emotional regulation. The intervention proved to be a step in the right direction. **Conclusion:** Moving forward in assisting students labeled with emotional and behavioral disorders including ADHD and ODD, it is imperative for educators and caregivers to be educated in childhood experiences as the leading cause of EBD. Simple techniques can have a great impact in helping them heal and live more fulfilling lives.

*Keywords: yoga, meditation, education, emotional regulation, program evaluation*

The campaign to teach yoga and meditation to intermediate school teenagers for the purpose of emotional regulation began as a proposal to find a catalyst for change within the community. The concept was brought to the attention of a mental health counselor at the intermediate school, one of two mental health counselors within the school working with children who primarily experience emotional and behavioral issues regularly. The facilitator had experience working with these vulnerable populations while volunteering for a non-profit organization a several years ago called the 'NYC Yoga Project,' teaching yoga to underserved New Yorkers as their mission statement indicates. The intervention facilitator taught yoga and meditation to teens (average age 12.36) with emotional issues while volunteering for the NYC Yoga Project in low-income neighborhoods. The student participants targeted for this yoga program were labeled with EBD, the umbrella under which lie diagnoses including ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and Mood Dysregulation Disorder. A high percentage of students with EBD drop out of school and within five years, 78% of them end up in prison while 48%

of students with EBD who do *not* drop out of school still ending up in prison (Martin & Wienke, 1998), creating a need to intervene for the purpose of better outcomes.

The leaders of the intermediate school who were present during the interview process were the principal, assistant principal, dean, and mental health counselors. Each school leader had compiled their lists of five to ten students whom they felt would benefit from yoga and meditation. Three students appeared on all of the compiled lists, while five others appeared multiple times. Students who appeared on all of the lists were defined as the most problematic students, struggling with behavioral issues diagnosed through their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) (fifteen students), conduct disorder (CD) (twelve students), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (nine students), three of the more prominent disruptive behavior disorders in childhood and adolescence. According to Ghosh and Sinha (2012, p. 1), these disorders affect “approximately 1 – 15% of all school-age children, constituting a major proportion of referrals to mental health clinics.” Using yoga techniques, social workers worked with students of the intermediate school in efforts to improve symptoms of hyperactivity and disruptive behaviors.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social workers employed conflict theory and empowerment theory to get a holistic approach of students’ backgrounds and current marginalized status. The educational system reinforces and perpetuates social inequalities that arise from differences in class, gender, race, and ethnicity, as coordinators of this campaign, social workers believed that the fulfillment of one’s education is closely linked to social class. According to Chernoff (2013, p.146), conflict theorists state that “schools are a primary and crucial site of social reproduction. Class conflict, racial stratification, and other social inequalities are maintained through various sorting and legitimizing mechanisms within and among schools.” Students of low socioeconomic status are generally not afforded the same opportunities as students of higher status, no matter how great their academic ability or desire to learn. Social workers worked with students to counteract their feelings of powerlessness through the facilitated yoga program.

It was imperative for school faculty to empower the students involved in both activities in order to fairly evaluate progress, the yoga facilitator used empowerment theory to build on students’ strengths and competencies instead of their deficits. By creating a safe and collaborative environment with roles and responsibilities, students were able to focus on self-empowerment and growth. According to Hariprasad et al. (2013), instructional yoga and empowerment techniques positively impact emotional regulation and self-efficacy with students that have behavioral issues. These techniques can further their level of motivation toward academic success.

### **Methodology and Data Collection Techniques**

The principal of the intermediate school, after consultation with her leadership team, makes the final decision on all matters. The initial interview was held in the principal’s office with school leaders and the yoga facilitator, all speaking on behalf of the proposed intervention. The observed culture of the administration indicated that decisions were made as a team, with no staff member left out. The impression was that staff felt comfortable voicing their opinions and feelings with the principal and everyone appeared to be heard and respected. Each leader was

very familiar with potential student participants' behavioral and emotional histories given their experience working with these students in the past. The yoga intervention facilitator felt at ease and assured that the school leaders supported this campaign.

The major allies of the pilot yoga program were the leaders of the school. Once established that leaders were in full support of the campaign to teach yoga and meditation, the details of how this program would be funded was handled next. The party who became both ally and opposition was the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) union representative, who works directly with the intermediate school, handling all of the paperwork and funding details for the yoga and meditation program in addition to delivering the facilitator's invoices to funders, 'Community Center for Learning.' Initially, the UFT representative met with the mental health counselor and the yoga facilitator to learn about the program's intended goals, including who the program aimed to serve and why it was necessary, with the intention of providing the information to the funders. She expressed that the funders would need trackable data of the program's success and worthiness of funding in order to remain implemented after the six week trial period. The UFT representative told the facilitator that another program would have to be cut for this yoga program to take place, making data vital for justification. Attendance would also be tracked to see if student participants had better attendance on the days they had yoga and meditation class.

Although the program was approved by the principal and school leaders, beginning November 1, 2018, it did not launch until January 28, 2019. A background check is a requirement to be eligible to be inside of a public school and the yoga facilitator was scheduled to be fingerprinted on October 25, 2018. However, when she arrived to get fingerprinted, she learned that her social security number was incorrectly entered by the UFT representative, resulting in this setback. The yoga facilitator needed to be 're-nominated' for the position by The New York City Department of Education, which took some time.

It was essential to receive feedback from student participants in order to learn what they found beneficial and if the intervention was, in fact, yielding positive outcomes. To determine this information, a pre- and post-test survey was developed through the input of academic professionals. The mental health counselor was notified and received approval from the principal to administer the surveys to the participants.

When the program started, another unforeseen obstacle was the environment where the classes would be held. Due to lack of space in the school, the first six weeks of yoga and meditation classes were held in a regular vacant classroom. The yoga facilitator's schedule was Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, three 45-minute periods per day. Only one of those days did the full session take place in one room for more than one period, all other days, she moved around the school to various classrooms on different floors while carrying approximately eight yoga mats. The facilitator needed to move desks around at the beginning of each class and end the sessions a few minutes early to straighten up and move desks back to the original setup. With periods being 45 minutes long, by the time students arrived and settled in it sometimes only allowed for 30-minute sessions, a clear limitation. Another obstacle the program faced were the teachers whose classrooms were being used, many times lingering around their classroom well after their period had concluded, causing sessions to start late. On one occasion, before one of the sessions were to begin, the yoga facilitator had to ask if a teacher who had been lingering could kindly leave so she could begin the yoga and meditation session, creating some tension between the teacher and the yoga facilitator.

The obstacle of payment for services remained another concern throughout the campaign. The amount to be paid was agreed upon by the principal, yoga facilitator, and Community Center for Learning. The facilitator was instructed to create an invoice each month to receive payment, along with the attendance sheet, then deliver both documents to the UFT representative on the first of each month. Five weeks passed without payment after the facilitator delivered her first invoice to the UFT representative. She inquired with the UFT representative, who informed her that she had regretfully delivered the invoice two weeks after the facilitator had dropped it off to her (invoices usually take up to four weeks before payment is rendered). This situation created some conflict between the yoga facilitator and the UFT representative as the UFT representative had difficulties with travel, a clear limitation. The yoga facilitator had to advocate for herself and express the importance of her role at the school and why she expects payments to be on time moving forward. Following this conversation, all future payments were on time.

There were some minor issues during the beginning of the 6-week program, as the UFT representative had stated, encouraging the yoga facilitator to obtain a tax ID and file what would be known as 'Yoga for Resilience' as a business so the Department of Education would fund it moving forward instead of the United Federation of Teachers funders, 'Community Center for Learning.' During the fifth week, knowing the pilot program was coming to an end, the facilitator learned that the principal had requested she continue for another six weeks based on the feedback she received from student participants, thereafter carrying the program through to the end of the school year with the program being funded again through the 'Community Center for Learning,' which was contrary to what the UFT representative had exclaimed.

Strategies and styles of approach were altered based on student participants' needs along the way. Initially, the 'prescription' was to teach yoga poses and incorporate meditation. The mental health counselor expressed those certain poses could be challenging, thus helping participants regulate their emotions while holding such poses, a common reason many people practice yoga. The yoga facilitator remained skeptical about this approach, ultimately realizing that her style of teaching needed to be tailored to each individual in order to satisfy the goal of emotional regulation and relaxation. Since beginning with yoga postures would not work, a visualization meditation technique was employed, requiring participants to lie on their backs, close their eyes and listen to the facilitator's voice as she guides through the relaxation technique.

A hybrid intervention was used with the students at the intermediate school. The intervention consisted of a combination of yoga postures, meditation, yoga nidra (yoga sleep), visualization meditation, and breathing techniques (pranayama). The first week was spent going over what the meaning of yoga is and why this intervention was chosen, along with the benefits it can have on participants. Terminology was discussed and questions were always encouraged. During the second and third week, simple traditional yoga postures were introduced, including Sun Salutations and balancing postures like Tree Pose. Meditation was consistently practiced with all classes throughout the six weeks, anywhere from 3 to 10 minutes, guided or in silence. When meditation was guided, participants would lie on their backs with their eyes closed, or sitting up cross legged, then guided through a mindful meditation that brings awareness to the body by doing a full body scan intended to acknowledge presence and calm the nervous system by focusing on sensations in the body. Partner poses like the Dancer's Pose were also introduced to foster positive connections between students. Students were encouraged to offer suggestions for music each week and express what they wanted to do for the sessions.

## Data Analysis

The data was analyzed from the aforementioned pre- and post-test questionnaires. During both the pre-test and the post-test, students answered four multiple-choice questions. One of the chief advantages to questionnaires is that they are a “useful background screening tool in providing assessment information on clients in a simplified manner without requiring long interviews” (Jordan & Franklin, 2016, p.63). The questionnaires assessed how students were feeling and their thoughts on what was most useful.

Seventeen students participated in the intervention; the average age of the students was 12.36. During the pre-test, six students reported feelings of both happiness and sadness. Four students reported they were feeling joy and five students reported they were excited to be in yoga. Twelve students reported they felt calm and only four students reported to be tired. One student reported to be feeling disappointed and none of the students reported to feeling angry. In reviewing the post-test, there was an increase in happiness levels to 59% from 35.29%. Levels of joy increased for five students, with their disappointment levels diminished to zero. There were no statistically significant changes in energy levels, though 8 students reported feeling full of energy towards the end of the intervention.

82.35% of the students reported that they needed meditation during the pre-test. Five students reported that they were looking forward to deep breathing exercises and six students reported that they were looking forward to doing yoga. 58% of students reported that they liked yoga during the post-test. 47% of students reported they enjoyed yoga and deep breathing exercises equally.

76.47% of students reported that they used meditation during the week to make themselves feel better. 35% of students reported that they began practicing yoga at home, while 41.17% of students reported that they began practicing deep breathing exercises. One student reported not using any of the activities learned. 70.58% of the students reported that they feel confident using meditation as needed. 35.29% of students reported that they will be practicing yoga poses and deep breathing exercises moving forward. All seventeen students reported that they look forward to attending sessions.

## Discussion and Recommendations

In order to benefit and support students in continual behavioral and emotional regulation and development, it would be best for educators and caregivers to have some understanding of how experiences impacts the brain, thereafter learning techniques geared toward the healing process, including meditation, mirroring positive behaviors, and breathing techniques in the classroom. The student participants targeted for this yoga program were labeled with EBD, the umbrella under which lie diagnoses including ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and Mood Dysregulation Disorder. Being labeled with childhood trauma can often lead to these diagnoses (Van der Kolk, 2014). Students are spending too much time in classrooms with teachers who lack the necessary resources to understand them. One study found that disruptive students receive a higher amount of negative attention from teachers, who pay more attention to inappropriate behavior over appropriate behavior (Rubow et al., 2019). Another study found that a high percentage of students with EBD drop out of school and within five years, 78% of them end up in prison while 48% of students with EBD who do *not* drop out of school still ending up in prison (Martin & Wienke, 1998). Education is imperative for teachers, school staff and

caregivers to understand the childhood experiences and how to treat it properly, yoga is just one of the many approaches to emotional regulation in intermediate school teenagers.

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