

The Benefits of Yoga in a School Setting

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Even before a global pandemic impacted on our lives, there was a growing sense in education that the school leavers of today are often ill-equipped to enter life outside the school gates in terms of managing their own wellbeing. The now familiar term of "snowflake" to describe a generation of youngsters struggling within the "real world", as well as educational initiatives to teach "mindfulness" and "soft skills" are all manifestations of this concern. With the arrival of Covid-19, the worry for the mental wellbeing of our teenagers has rightfully moved to the forefront of educators' awareness. One underexplored area of equipping young people with practical techniques and skills to address their physical and mental wellbeing is the ancient system of Yoga.

What is Yoga?

Common perceptions range from "sitting in a circle chanting om" to "a bit of stretching". Traditionally, a Yoga practitioner should engage with eight different aspects of Yoga training (as defined in the term Ashtanga, or the eight limbs of yoga). Attending a Yoga class today will largely embrace only two key elements of ancient Yoga philosophy, the focus on the breath and the idea of consciously, and in tune with that breath, putting the body into specific shapes. The postures are designed to challenge the body for flexibility, strength and balance, and although different types of Yoga attach different significance to these shapes, the aim of

working the body through these postures is ultimately to quieten the mind – or as the founding father of Ashtanga, Patanjali, put it: Yogas citta vritti nirodha: The restraint of the modifications of the mind-stuff is Yoga (Satchidananda, 2012).

Yoga in a School Setting

There are numerous specialisations a Yoga teacher may bring to a class, such as Yoga for athletes, restorative Yoga, or Yoga for anxiety. Most Yoga classes today are structured along a combination of standing poses, seated poses, reclined poses and what is broadly termed as "relaxation" but can be anything from breath exercises to guided meditation. The instructions of moving on an "inhale" or "exhale" are designed to place the body into positions with awareness, whilst focusing the mind on the breath thus eliminating distractions from the outside world. Another core element of most practices is drsti or finding a focal point for the eyes. At a very basic level, spending an hour or two a week in a yoga class can give pupils the opportunity to switch off from the rest of the school day, to focus on the present, and to calm the mind away from an often heightened state of anxiety over exams, assessments and deadlines.

Yoga and Athletic Performance

The Welsh Rugby Team famously made the headlines when they announced they were using Yoga as a preparation technique for their matches (BBC News, 2011), and many professional athletes have turned to Yoga as a tool for improved performance, injury prevention and injury rehabilitation. A study testing a group of college athletes over a 10-week period looked at defined performance measures such as shoulder flexibility and joint angles. Increased range of motion and flexibility are achieved in Yoga through the incorporation of gentle, static postures held for several rounds of breath, thus safely lengthening muscles and tendons. After introducing weekly Yoga sessions to the test group over the 10-week period, researchers concluded that "Yoga as part of traditional training methods enhances the components of fitness that are the essential components of sports performance" (Polsgrove, Egglestone & Lockyre, 2016). Which seems to suggest that in a school setting, far from being an option for those "not keen on competitive sports", adding Yoga to some of the performance athletes' training might bring tangible benefits.

Yoga and Mental Wellbeing

Increasing studies are being undertaken to prove the effect Yoga has on stress, anxiety, PTSD, ADHD and other areas of mental health. A vast amount of academic literature on "Yoga and Stress" is available, but even to a lay person a very simple explanation as to the benefits of Yoga can be found in what the modern Yoga



student experiences as conscious deep breathing. By practising postures with breath instruction, students are encouraged to deepen and slow down their breathing thus tapping into the parasympathetic nervous system, the rest-and-digest system, and moving away from the sympathetic nervous system, the heightened state of fight-or-flight so many of operate in as a matter of course. A parasympathetic response lowers breathing and heart rate, decreases blood pressure, lowers cortisol levels and increases blood flow to the intestines and vital organs (Woodyard, 2011).

Executive function refers to working memory, emotional control, organisation, problem solving etc., all skills required in a classroom setting and potentially attributing to enhanced academic success (Hagins & Rundle, 2016). The part of the brain responsible for executive function is the prefrontal cortex, and it works In more complex terms, a Yoga practice can engage not in co-ordination with the limbic system. If the limbic only with our proprioception (our sense of where our system is overactive, the prefrontal cortex, our cognitive body is within space), but also with interoception (our function, is unable to make good decisions. Or, in very awareness of what is happening inside our body) and simplistic terms, if we are stressed, we cannot think exteroception (any sensation we experience in response straight. An implicit hypothesis therefore might be to external stimuli). Studies have shown that there is a that improved regulation of the limbic system should link between atypical body awareness (that is decreased result in increased executive function, and by extension or increased proprioception or interoception) and many academic performance. Studies looking at Yoga and disorders such as anxiety and depression (Bulbena-Cabré academic performance are still rare, and the conclusions & Bulbena, 2018). We can train our proprioception from those carried out appear inconclusive. Whilst some in Yoga through aligning our bodies into the specific have found significant effects (Kauts & Sharma, 2009), postures and drawing awareness to where we are placing others reported mixed results (Smith et al, 2014). Either our body parts, but we can also train our interoception way, even if a Yoga practice currently cannot be linked during posture practice by ignoring alignment cues and conclusively to academic performance, it stands to instead focusing on the sensations in the body as we reason that a pupil with tools to relax and regulate their put it through the postures. The same caveat applies to mental wellbeing will perform better overall. Yoga and mental health concerns as it does to Yoga and

injuries: Yoga will never be a cure for either of these, but evidence clearly suggests that Yoga can provide techniques to improve self-regulation and general wellbeing as a result.

Yoga and Academic Performance