

Yoga in Schools

by Irina Kazakevic

As an elementary school teacher, long term yoga practitioner and a yoga teacher, I have been doing yoga with my students for many years. Relying on my experience and training, I aim to structure and design my own classes to make them age appropriate as well as fun.

I have tried many various approaches, methods and programs, but always felt that somehow they were either incomplete or did not have a strong curriculum connection. This new school year I started equipped with a new yoga program called Yoga Ed. K-8, which consists of a comprehensive 36-week curriculum, where the practice of yoga is age-appropriately integrated with an active, playful, and scientific exploration of the body, mind, and self. The success I am experiencing now with my grade one students is a result of embodying its philosophy and methodology, which empowers me and my students to excel.

It is widely known and scientifically proven that yoga is one of the best exercises for the human body. The benefit of yoga practice goes far beyond the actual time we spend in the poses. One of the most common reasons why people begin practicing yoga is to improve their health and well-being. Yoga means union. It is a union of the mind, body, and breath -- so all aspects of our life are impacted by our practice. Some of the physical benefits of yoga are improved flexibility and balance. The stretching that we engage in during every practice helps lengthen and stretch muscles, which in turn helps reduce the risk of injuries. The majority of yoga practices include some type of balancing in the poses. Regular practice of yoga tones the muscles, builds endurance and stamina as well as increases the level of energy. Carrying tension in our body takes an enormous toll on our energy reserves. By learning how to relax through yoga practice, we benefit from enjoying higher levels of energy so we can enjoy our daily activities. Most people breathe high in their chest. This does not allow them to get sufficient oxygen and also triggers the stress response, which contributes to feelings of anxiety. Breathing deeply, as practiced in yoga, helps relax the muscles and also brings much needed oxygen to the cells. The deep sense of relaxation also leads to better quality of sleep. One of the great mental benefits that yoga can provide is that it clears the mind and improves our ability to focus. Tools and techniques provided by yoga are great for reducing stress, the worst enemy in our modern world. Deep breathing helps reduce the hormones that are released when we are feeling overwhelmed, overloaded, and frazzled. The internal focus that accompanies the poses helps create a relaxation response in the body. Yoga can also help us deal with stuck emotions. By regularly practicing relaxation techniques we gain a sense of peace and tranquility.

The benefit of yoga has far reaching effects in every area of our life and the life of our students. There are many uses for yoga in school. Yoga is an effective classroom management technique as it helps to create an environment for learning and to improve students' behaviour. Yoga is an appropriate and interesting way to achieve the recommended 20 minutes of daily physical activity during the school day. Also, yoga can be used as an opening exercise at the beginning of the day, or a restorative transition between subjects and activities. Yoga offers valuable and effective practices to minimize the stress of testing and supports students in shifting back into a positive and healthy state. It could be smoothly incorporated into Visual Art, Drama, and character education. Furthermore, yoga could be introduced in Health units on healthy life style and healthy eating. It is an excellent recourse for preventing bullying and violence among the students. Use Yoga activities to wrap up a school day as an important acknowledgement of shared contributions and individual efforts. In classrooms that practice yoga activities, such as conscious breathing, basic yoga poses, kinesthetic play and relaxation/visualization, teachers report that the time spent on yoga is well worth it. Both teachers and students feel, behave, and perform better and the class environment is more calm and harmonious.

As mentioned earlier, this year I decided to make yoga an important part of our daily schedule in my grade one classroom. I incorporate yoga in our twenty minutes of Daily Physical Activity (DPA). We begin every day in acknowledging everyone as a friend thus setting positive intentions for the day. We conclude with the "thank-you" exercise acknowledging both individual and collective contributions. Something amazing happened in our class this fall. By that time, we have been practicing yoga for a couple of months as short breaks between the subjects, and the students were actively involved. They have been telling their parents about our yoga breaks and their new poses. One October morning I went outside to greet my students and saw one of them standing in line with a yoga mat under his arm. He said that his mom had sent it with him hearing that we were doing yoga at school. I showed the mat to the class, and we all had a chance to sit on it, to feel its softness and non-slippery texture. We decided that it would be great if we all had yoga mats. The next morning another boy came with a mat and then another, and then, of course, I brought in my mat. In a month, I had a class set of yoga mats stacked in the corner of my classroom. Now, in addition to our daily short yoga breaks, my

students could actually take their shoes and socks off and have a proper yoga class once or twice a week.

Absolutely loving what was happening in my class and asked by other teachers, I conducted a short PD on Yoga Tools for Teachers in my school. In addition, the school purchased the resources, consisting of two Yoga Tools for Teachers manuals and a stack of yoga cards for teaching yoga classes, to be used by all interested teachers in the school, and we became a "Yoga Educated" school. I am a strong believer, and now I am getting evidence from other teachers, that when done on a regular basis, yoga brings greater harmony and ease to the learning environment for teachers and students by giving the mind-body system what it needs to perform more optimally.

After observing and experiencing the benefits and transformative powers of yoga in my students, I became convinced more than ever that our children need it, our schools need it, and we as teachers can benefit greatly from doing yoga ourselves and teaching it to our students. As teachers, we take care of our students the each day and every day. We know how demanding and challenging that can be. No matter how tired, upset or unbalanced we are, we have to present ourselves to our students as confident, receptive and patient, setting the tone and the conditions for productive learning as well as positive student behaviour and attitude. A teacher's most effective method to promote a positive and lasting behavioral shift in their students is to embody and portray the desired behaviour in themselves. By "becoming the change" you desire to see in your students, you become a powerful and inspirational model. When teachers regularly relax, balance, and support their own mind-body state, they become less stressed and more effective. The value of yoga is its ability to shift your physiology, literally change how you are and your state of being. If you are calm, alert and focused, you will encourage the same state in your students. Yoga enables you to achieve specific mental, physical, and emotional states quickly and effectively. Using yoga on a daily basis is a simple, quick, and a pleasant way to meet the challenges of our profession. By experimenting with breathing and movement activities, you can activate your awareness and align, open and centre body and mind. Yoga can transform your inner state from chaos to calm, frustration to finesse, tired to energized, tense to relaxed, or distracted to integrated in just a few minutes.

Naturally, a question arises: "How can I teach yoga if I am not a trained and certified yoga teacher or a long term yoga practitioner myself?" In response to that question, there are training programs available for teachers. One that I can recommend is Yoga Ed. Tools for Teachers professional development workshop for school teachers, which is accompanied by a teacher's manual. Yoga Ed. Tools for Teachers are simple yoga-based practices that anyone can do in 10 to 20 minutes and experience immediate and long-term positive results in focus, energy, concentration, learning readiness, fitness and productivity. All Yoga Tools activities are designed for the classroom and require no previous yoga experience, extra equipment, or space.

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