

Chapter 17

Overview of Yoga for Teenagers in the UK: The Rationale, Evidence Base, and the Application

Charlotta Martinus

Teen Yoga Foundation, UK

Nicholas A. Kearney

Teen Yoga Foundation, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the current state of affairs of yoga provision for teenagers in the UK. It looks at the history of yoga in the UK among young people, the research and the application in school contexts, as well as prison and Pupil Referral Units. It outlines the results from the Hippocampus project, an EU-funded 2 year project evaluating the impact of yoga on disadvantaged youth in five countries. The chapter also takes a look at the current financial support for yoga in schools and the possibilities of taking it forward.

BACKGROUND OF YOGA FOR TEENAGERS IN THE UK

The history of yoga for young people in the UK is relatively short. Although there have been pockets of yoga being taught as after-school clubs dotted around the UK, yoga had never been taken seriously as something that might actually change health, performance or behaviour until in the last few years.

In 2011 Sport England started to recognise the importance and relevance of yoga for young people, contacting yoga deliverers to become more engaged in schools. Some forward-looking schools saw it as an alternative to Physical Education for those who needed something a bit gentler and less competitive. They continued to invest in yoga for young people within the school framework, developing programmes to lower the barrier to entry and include less advantaged young people in yoga as they found that 75 percent of 14 year old girls in the UK were no longer exercising (Sport England, 2016), primarily due

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3254-6.ch017

to lack of desire for competition. By 2016 25 percent of schools across the UK offered yoga in some form or another (Teen Yoga Foundation, n.d.), either funded by Sport England or funded by the parents or the school itself.

Furthermore, in 2016 Sport England invested £50,000 in an innovation project called Yoga Girls Can (Sport England, 2016, Martinus, 2016), which actively reached 700 young women between the ages of 14 and 21 through delivering a large “Yoga Yurt” to spaces, together with a yoga teacher and an assistant who gave impromptu 20 minute classes to suit the young people in their daily lives. This was considered a huge success with great follow on results, where the students were given free USBs if they completed 6 sessions. The USB had a video on it with yoga sessions they could continue with at home. They also received a yoga mat after 3 sessions to incentivise them to carry on.

However, in 2018 the funding from Sport England was redirected to Primary Schools and Secondary Schools were no longer supported in the provision of yoga. Nonetheless, many schools continued with yoga, finding funding in their budgets. This was surprising as all secondary schools have seen a budget cut of approximately 30 percent in the last 10 years (Young Minds, 2018a). Schools voted with their feet, they were starting to see the relevance and utility of yoga in a school environment.

Yoga has not only been available in schools, but also within the Pupil Referral Units (PRU) across the UK, these are institutions for pupils who cannot manage regular school, either for mental health issues or academic issues. The PRU often has much smaller classes due to the behaviour management issues, ranging from 6 – 12 students per class, which is a perfect number for yoga.

Moreover, Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMHs) units across the country have also been offering yoga within various contexts, such as in outpatient and inpatient centres. Psychologists and psychiatrists take an add on course to train to deliver yoga within their professional capacity as an add-on to allopathic care.

Another area of interest which has grown in recent years is within the area of youth justice. Here is an outline of one individual who is implementing it and the rationale of why she is trained to deliver yoga within this context:

At the moment, I am working within a Youth Justice and Preventions Service (YJPS), in mid-west Wales (From June 2014 until present). The YJPS is a multi-agency team including social workers, probation officers, substance misuse workers, project support workers and volunteers. The service accepts referrals for children and young people aged from 8 to 17/18 years old. These children and young people are assessed and classified as being at risk to themselves or other people, as well at risk of anti-social or offending behaviour.

My role within the team is to recruit, train, manage and supervise the project support workers and volunteers. Project support worker and volunteer opportunities arise within the YJPS, Team around the Family, the Looked after Children’s Team, the Pupil Referral Team and Schools. At times, project support workers and volunteers work with/volunteer with, children and young people who are perceived as having challenging behaviour(s). Taking a focused approach, I am proactively in engaging with learning and development opportunities that could facilitate evidence-based, effective practice. Recent examples of this include ‘Non-violence resistance. A new approach to violent and self-destructive children’ by Haim Omer and ‘Connective Parenting’ by Sarah Fisher (Omer, 2004; Fisher, 2017).

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