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## Young Children's Experiences with Yoga after School

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### ABSTRACT

Currently, little is known about the lived experiences of children who participate in yoga, particularly using their own words. This study provides insights into how young children aged 6 to 10 years old were able to understand their bodies within a yoga space. The purpose of this study was to investigate young children's lived experiences of yoga through qualitative interviews. Parents of children engaged in yoga were also interviewed to gain a sense of their point of view about the experiences of yoga for their children. Results indicated yoga had assisted children to find, and express joy, and fun by moving their bodies into different shapes. The physical and psychological difficulty of some of the yoga shapes assisted children to develop a persistent mind-set which enabled them to transfer knowledge to different contexts, such as difficulties at school, and finding ways to relax, and be with themselves. Yoga as an activity after-school develops strategies such as resilience, and assists in other contexts such as school, and family. The parents' described how they were looking for techniques to help calm their children, and how challenging this was with the constant stimulation of everyday activities. The findings suggest that yoga may have a place in the school curriculum for the purpose of teaching students' simple coping skills when experiencing feelings of stress, and anxiety, and assist with controlling their behavior.

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## Introduction

One of the main concepts for young children's development is the processes through which they acquire social, and emotional competencies. Davidson et al. (2012), describes social emotional learning (SEL) as a broad term for a number of skills-based programs with the goal of empowering children to flourish in their relationships, and their identity as well as in their learning. In addition, SEL is centered on appreciating the perspectives of others, establishing positive goals, making responsible decisions, and effectively managing interpersonal relationships (Greenberg et al., 2003; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Self-regulation strategies have been targeted by educators, laying the foundation in early childhood, followed by primary school, and higher school education (Cooper Stapp & Wolff, 2019; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Razza, Bergencico, & Raymond, 2013). Greenberg et al. (2012), reports that good SEL programs

assist children to regulate their emotions, increase awareness of emotional states in others, learn to have frank conversations about feelings, plan, and think ahead, and develop a sense of purpose.

Secular contemplative practices, such as yoga, and meditative activities, have been associated with SEL within the literature (Greenberg et al., 2012). These activities share a common goal of promoting focused attention or imposing some discipline on a normally unregulated mental or physical habit (Davidson et al., 2012; Razza et al., 2013). Davidson et al. (2012), suggests that one of the defining characteristics of secular contemplative practices is they require individuals to exercise volitional control in order to sustain the focus of attention on a particular object, such as the body in a yoga practice or the breathing in a meditation practice. Neuroscience indicates that similar to other skills that are learned through sustained repetitive practice, yoga provides the foundation for these skills to become established over time (Case-Smith, Shupe Sines, & Klatt, 2010; Davidson et al., 2012; Rashedi, Wajanakunakorn, & Hu, 2019). A key benefit of participating in contemplative activities, is the practice is a form of mental training, which may induce brain plasticity, particularly among children (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). As children are immersed in education for many years, implementing mental, and emotional competencies into schools may be appropriate for developing the wellbeing of children.

Butzer, Bury, Telles, and Khalsa (2016), indicate school-based SEL initiatives, which are not always discussed in terms of their contemplative practices, share many goals with school-based yoga programs. Hagins and Rundle (2016), suggest implementing yoga into schools as an alternative to physical education, or as a competency-based program, as commentary, and focus have been gaining momentum in the past decade (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). The explicit goal of many programs is to increase academic performance through changes in self-regulation, and executive function (EF), while also enhancing emotional balance, attention control, cognitive efficiency, and self-esteem (Hagins & Rundle, 2016; Serwacki & Cook-Cottone, 2012). Telles, Singh, Kumar Bhardwaj, Kumar, and Balkrishna (2013), suggest the aim of introducing yoga into school programs is to improve physical fitness, cognition, and psychosocial wellbeing of students. An additional goal is also concerned with making improvements in body composition, fitness, nutrition knowledge, and dietary habits (Dzimbova & Petrova, 2019).

The majority of empirical studies focused on children, and adolescents suggest yoga remains beneficial as a therapeutic intervention with very few adverse effects (Bazzano, Anderson, Hyton, & Gustat, 2018; Cook-Cottone, Giambrone, & Klein, 2018; Cooper Stapp & Wolff, 2019; Eggleston, 2015; Rashedi et al., 2019; Velásquez, Lopez, Quinonez, & Paba, 2015). Benefits include a strong, and flexible body, a balanced autonomic nervous system with all physiological systems, and a calm, and relaxed body (Kaley-Isley, Peterson, Fischer, & Peterson, 2010). Yoga is used by occupational therapists as a sensory-based intervention to reduce maladaptive or negative behaviors in children with mental health conditions or autism spectrum disorder in school-based settings (Arbesman, Bazyk, & Nochajski, 2013; Case-Smith & Arbesman, 2008; Koenig, Buckley-Reen, & Garg, 2012; Weaver & Darragh, 2015). Occupational therapists are encouraged to collaborate with other professions that

provide complementary health, and integrative health interventions (CHAIH) that could benefit a client, and are outside the scope of occupational therapy practice (Bradshaw & Kannenberg, 2017).

Research by J.K. Dariotis et al. (2016); Frank, Kohler, Peal, and Bose (2017); Jennings (2016); Klatt (2009), has shown that proactive measures are the most effective in managing problem behaviors, and also shown that experiencing enhanced sensory input through yoga, and sensory integration activities has beneficial effects on children's ability to focus, and concentrate. In a study by Koenig et al. (2012), an occupational therapy intervention "Get Ready to Learn" (GRTL) was introduced to elementary school children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), using yoga postures, breathing, and relaxation exercises. The program was developed by Buckley-Reen (2009), an occupational therapist. The purpose of the study was to examine the effect of the GRTL program among children with ASD on decreasing maladaptive behaviors that may interfere with classroom performance, and increasing adaptive classroom behaviors (Koenig et al., 2012). The teacher's ratings for students who participated in the intervention reported improved behavior compared to the control group who continued with normal school activities. In addition, the children in the intervention group displayed significantly less irritable behavior, positive changes in lethargy, reduced social withdrawal, hyperactivity, and noncompliance that approached significance (Koenig et al., 2012).

Western based Hatha Yoga comprises postures, and breathing techniques (Case-Smith et al., 2010; Kishida, Mama, Larkey, & Elavsky, 2018). On the other hand, Mindful Based Yoga (MBY), in addition to the postures, and breathing, includes a body scan in order to familiarize participants with sensations they feel in varying physical postures (Kabat-Zinn, 2006; Paniccia et al., 2019). A study by Paniccia et al. (2019), investigated the effect of a MBY intervention for adolescents aged between 13 and 17 years who had experienced persistent concussion symptoms for greater than four weeks. The program included mindful breathing, and yoga postures. The etiology of persistent concussion, a form of autoregulatory dysfunction, affects both the sympathetic, and parasympathetic nervous system, whereby the nervous system does not achieve baseline levels of homeostasis (Ellis, Leddy, & Willer, 2016; Leddy, Kozlowski, Fung, Pendergast, & Willer, 2007). The pilot-study found preliminary trends of improved heart rate variability (HRV) over the course of the eight mindful-based yoga sessions (MBY), and from pre-to post intervention. Participants reported benefits such as knowing they were not alone which they reported as helping to calm down any anxious feelings, and improvements in self-efficacy between pre, and post intervention, as well as emotional domains were reported by the participants (Paniccia et al., 2019). Furthermore, participants alluded to the benefits of a group intervention. The findings demonstrate the importance of a MBY intervention include scanning the body that enable recovery, rather than pervasive attention to symptoms (Paniccia et al., 2019).

Although the current research remains insightful, the use, and impact of yoga for young people remains somewhat limited. Such research remains in its infancy, despite the growing interest, and availability of yoga among young people either physically or virtually (Bazzano et al., 2018; Greenberg, 2012; Rashedi, Weakley, Malhi, Wajanakunakorn, & Sheldon, 2020). Within this context, a clear gap exists where more research among school-aged children is required to understand the growing yoga program movement, both in, and after school,

more fully. In addition, understanding what yoga means to children, in their own words, and through their voices, will further enable our understanding, while ensuring programs actually meet their specific needs.

The aim of this exploratory study is to seek an understanding of the everyday experiences of children who participate in yoga. Using children's own voices, and world views, the objective is to provide an emerging suite of understanding regarding the interconnectedness of self-regulation practices that are developed through yoga, while providing insights regarding the benefits this may be to children.

## Conceptual Framework

In making a decision about what theoretical position provided the best fit with the research question and aims of the research, phenomenology provided an opportunity, to understand deeply the lived experiences of the children. In exploring the phenomena of yoga for young people, phenomenology is theoretically consistent with the idea that each child will experience the world, and yoga in unique ways, and that each child is then able to share that experience with the researcher (Crotty, 1998).

In qualitative research, understanding experience, which is fundamentally linguistic in nature, means in-depth interviews are often the method of choice. Data collection was based on the conversations between the researcher, the children, and the parents' who participated in the study (Butzer et al., 2017). Whilst this is considered to be a small study, the focus was on understanding the experiences of both the children, and the parents', the intention is to explore the experiences of a limited number of participants deeply, rather than the social conditions surrounding the experiences.

## Methods

The authors recruited three children, and three adults who represented a parent for each of the children. The children were invited to contribute to the research through one-to-one semi-structured interviews with the researcher. The parents' of the children were also invited to contribute to the research for the purpose of understanding how they see, or if yoga was beneficial to their children. Children, and their parents' were interviewed on-line due to the COVID-19 restrictions for the duration of 30 min. A single interview session was conducted for each child with their parent, while parents' were interviewed after the child had completed their interview. Both the children, and the parent were present together for the duration of the interview. Each interview was recorded, and later transcribed as part of the data gathering process. The sample size was impacted by the onset of COVID-19 that was announced as a pandemic in early 2020.

In order to establish breadth, and depth of the data, it is not necessarily about numbers of respondents, but rather about the focus (Todres & Galvin, 2005). Therefore, small sample sizes may show the uniqueness of each individual, and allows for deeper themes to emerge (Todres & Galvin, 2005). In support of small sample size, Crouch and McKenzie (2006), agree that qualitative methodology is aimed at finding out what things exist rather than discovering how many such things exist. Therefore, smaller sample sizes can show the uniqueness of each individual, and allows for deeper themes to emerge (Todres &

Galvin, 2005). The protocols used in the research study were approved by the institutional ethics committee (A19-131). Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study. The parent/legal guardian signed a consent/assent form on behalf of each of the children giving permission for the researcher to approach the children for the interviews. Further, each child was also provided with the opportunity to provide assent also as part of the process

## Study Context

The study described here took place within the context of a yoga program for young children held once a week at a local hall after school. The program transitioned to on-line yoga classes as a result of the COVID-19 disruption affecting countries on a global basis in 2020. A key feature of the program was the children attended the same local school, did not interact with each other during school time, however participated in an after-school yoga class together.

## Instrument

The semi-structured interviews, and questions were guided by how the participants answered the previous questions. For example, an initial question to the children was “when you go to yoga after school how does that make you feel?” This led to other unscripted questions, such as “can you describe a little bit more that feeling you mentioned inside?” (Table 1). The interview questions were not trialed prior to the interviews with the children, and parents. The nature, and sequence of the questions were open, to provide the participants flexibility in their responses that could be then further explored. The interview question to the parents were guided by seeking information related to observable changes in their child from participating in yoga such as “when your child is at home does she talk about yoga at all?” (Table 2).

## Data Analysis

Data analysis relied on inductive thematic analysis as outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible method that can be used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes as found in the data. The starting point was in reading the transcripts several times as described by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In looking for key elements, the process

**Table 1.** Open-ended child interview questions.

- 
1. When you go to yoga after school how does that make you feel?
    - a. Prompt questions guided by answer
  2. Can you tell me a little bit more that feeling you mentioned inside?
    - a. Prompt questions guided by answer
  3. When you do stretchy cat what do you learn from that?
    - a. Prompt questions guided by answer
- 

**Table 2.** Open-ended parent interview questions.

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When your child is at home does she talk about yoga at all? What do you notice about it?  
 When you were doing your practice the other day with the family, what did you notice that your child could do?  
 What about those stressful situations that a lot of kids are in these days where they have to deal with a lot of different people?

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involved searching across data sets, in this case, the participants interviews, in order to find repeated patterns of meaning. Maguire and Delahunt (2017), suggest coding lots of data into small 'chunks' of meaning, as these could represent the initial codes found within the data. A code describe by Braun and Clarke (2006), identifies a feature of the data that appears interesting. A theme as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents similar responses or meaning within the dataset. The approach used provides a way of progressively moving back, and forward between the entire data set, and 'dwelling' in the language of the participants. The responses from the children were shorter, sometimes just a word, and this required a single code for each chunk. The parents' responses were lengthier, and required several codes. The potential themes were reviewed to ascertain if they were working in relation to the coded extracts, and the entire data set. The data were then entered into a spreadsheet to record, which data chunks were indicative of codes, and coded all units, as identified the preliminary codes. The next process required a comparison method of analysis, wherein the findings were compared, and contrasted for discursive themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The concepts of expression found in the data were assessed as capturing something important in relation to the overall research question. By moving through these stages, themes were developed that came to encompass the experience of understanding the emerging themes from the interviews with the children. Unitizing was defined as the smallest piece of information about a topic that could stand-alone (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Strategies to Ensure Rigor and Trustworthiness of the Qualitative Thematic Analysis**

To establish credibility in this study faithful transcriptions of participant responses was undertaken, looking for similarities within, and across the responses, and when confronted with uncertainty or differences a dialogue was engaged with each coauthor to gain another opinion or different interpretation of the possible thematic analysis arising from the data texts. The interpretations arising from thematic analysis of the transcripts were also emailed to each parent from whom data was generated to ensure that the interpretations are recognized by the participant as an accurate representation of their experience. Lincoln and Guba (1985), describe this as 'member checking' to ensure trustworthiness of the interview transcripts, and the findings can be deemed credible, and the research is valid. The responses received back from the parents' indicated they believed the transcripts were an accurate representation of the interviews conducted.

Transferability refers to the ability to transfer the research findings from one group of people or to a different context (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Transferability in this study represents how the findings can "fit" into contexts outside the study situation. Thereby, how does the experience of children with after-school yoga fit with the experiences of another context (Patton, 2002). In order to support this, sufficient contextual information is provided in the study to make possible similar judgments by external readers. Discussions with coauthors about the themes emerging from the data took place so as to ensure the transferability of the findings. These discussions were mainly focused on simplifying the categories, and not making them too complex or nuanced so as to improve transferability. The process required deep reflection, and time, as there are many ways to express the language but still maintaining simplicity, and clarity (Bochner, 2001). Therefore, to

establish clear, and accurate themes became the goal, and after sitting with a number of possibilities the final four themes or categories were agreed upon providing an understanding that can be applied to another setting (Koch, 1994).

Dependability can be thought of as an audit trail, and occurs when another researcher can follow the decisions made by the researcher. This includes decisions taken about the theoretical, methodological, and analytic choices through the study. In this study evidence of dependability included (1) describing the specific purpose of the study; (2) discussing how, and why the participants were selected for the study; (3) describing how the data was collected, and how long the data collection lasted; (4) an explanation of how the data was transformed for analysis; (5) discussing the interpretation, and presentation of the research findings; and (6) communicating the specific techniques used to determine the credibility of the data.

## Results

Within the data four themes emerged, and were based on the words, and phrases of the participants, and came to represent the experience of children engaged with participating in yoga after school. These themes included *Stretchy Cat*, *Wiggly Inside*, *Being Still* and *Zooming Together*, which are discussed in detail below.

### Stretchy Cat

The theme ‘*Stretchy Cat*’ is a movement in that is taught in yoga where the body can be made into different shapes, just like a cat, which the children talked about emulating (Table 3). ‘*Stretchy Cat*’ therefore embodies this physicality of yoga that the children experience informed by their imagination of what the children feel that shape should be. One child embodied the physicality and body movement that was being explored at the time when they stated:

“*Stretchy cat, arms out, up, down, forward*” (Child 3).

**Table 3.** Yoga Teaching plans.

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Theme One: Sharing Circle

Step 1: Children and the teacher sit in a sharing circle with the mats arranged like a flower.

Step 2: Sitting in a comfortable position, like butterfly pose, the teacher rings a small bell and shares something small with the children.

Step 3: Children then continue to pass along to the next person as they say something and so on.

Step 4: Children stretch their legs out straight in front. This is a warm-up and is called “follow me” to the same Aboriginal music every week.

Step 5: Each child eventually has an opportunity at being the leader. The leadership is passed on using the namaste hand position.

Theme two: Pet Animals

Step 1: Children share what pets they have and make the shapes of those animals.

Step 2: The teacher will ask if the children have seen a cat, or a dog stretch their body.

Step 3 Children make a cat pose on their hands and knees. This is stretchy cat pose.

Step 4: Children sitting on bottoms and feet and arms stretched out in front breath in and out making a purring sound.

Step 5: Teacher – what about when a cat sees a dog and spikes it’s hair on its back.

Step 6: Teacher – make your way back into standing cat on all fours and push your belly button up-to your back, tuck your chin into your chest and make a big round back and hiss like a cat when they see a dog.

Step 7: Children then relax their angry cat back and become a happy cat meow, meow.

Step 8: Teacher – curl up like a sleeping cat and rest, let’s prrrr and be still cats until you hear the bell

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To the children, ‘*stretchy cat*’ was a code, and captures the way the children were able to express, and understand their bodies. The children expressed that when they hear codes like downward dog, candlestick, wedge or bridge, their imagination would light up as they know how this shape is to be made by their bodies.

Consistent with the literature on yoga in schools, the physical aspect of yoga was one of the main reasons for children’s participation in the activity. The children described feeling excited about participating in yoga, and looked forward to their weekly yoga class. The emphasis of experiencing fun, and enjoyment, as well as a challenge were part of a sense of purpose, achievement, and satisfaction described by one child as:

*“When I first started it was a bit complicated, I did not know what I was doing but then the teacher explain[ed], and demonstrate[d] so it is a lot easier”* (Child 3).

The children in this study reflected on their sense of becoming “physically stronger, and muscles becoming stronger.” The physical instructions given in yoga assisted the children to become more aware of their bodies, and what it feels like when making more physically demanding shapes.

In additional, participants also highlighted that the physicality of yoga was couched within a sense of adventure, and imagination. Imagination, and fantasy were very actively discussed by the children. To them, they ‘live’ or frame their world, and understanding of it, within their own fantasy. They expressed how they love to experiment with the possibilities of their bodily, and physical movement, and are not inhibited by social cues or more. Within their explanation regarding why they attended the yoga was that it was like ‘going on an adventure’ and the use of their bodies in a physical way was how this was achieved.

### ***Wriggly Inside***

In addition to Stretchy Cat, the second theme “*Wriggly Inside*” emerged, and related to the more psychological aspects of yoga. It was how the children came to be in tune with their inner feelings, and their ability to manage their own inner energy, and emotions. One child spoke about this inner feeling as an outward expression when they said

*“Yoga makes me feel happy – because it makes me wriggly inside”* (Child 2).

The capacity to cultivate focus and stay with the ‘hard’ or difficult shapes was expressed by the children as they linked the hard elements of yoga, and the hard elements occurring at school. This was demonstrated by a child when stating:

*Some things are hard at yoga, and some things are hard at school, so if I can do it at yoga I can do it at school”* (Child 1).

In addition to the feeling, a determination to persist even when experiencing difficulty, it was expressed as being a unique synergy between yoga, and school. Children related how the psychological difficulty of yoga had an impact on the difficulty at school and cultivated a particular mind-set. This observation was demonstrated when a child said

*“Yoga gives me the mindset to finish schoolwork and persist to finish it – I am more persistent”* (Child 1).

In a sense, they saw the connection between yoga and school. If they could do the challenging parts of yoga, they could also achieve the challenging parts associated with school. Yoga, as a vehicle, had provided the children with the ability to become aware of feelings from inside their bodies, which required a particular sensitivity, and was expressed within the text of a child as coming from ‘within’ the body.

The children described emotionally challenging environments each day, and how yoga had helped with some of these difficult emotions. One child talked about how she used her inside feelings, developed at yoga, to help solve a stressful situation with her schoolfriend when she said:

*“When I am at school I walk away – it is not that easy at school I only have one friend and I have to walk away”* (Child 1).

From the perspective of the parents they too indicated they were aware that, on some level, the children were learning psychological strategies to assist and cope with the pressures that the children were encountering in life. This awareness was expressed when a parent said:

*“I think it is a good setup for later in life. And a better outlook on life”* (Parent 2).

Both children, and parents demonstrated that yoga had the potential to play a large role in helping children learn self-regulation skills. For example, parents used terms within their discussion that included terms such as awareness, attention, recognizing emotions, managing emotions, self-compassion, gratitude, making decisions, setting goals, a curious mind, development of high self-esteem, and ability to accept change.

### **Being Still**

The third theme “*Being Still*” was an intermingling of the physical and psychological aspects of yoga among the children. This phenomenon demonstrated that to be still requires a balance that comes when the children find the right combination of the physical aspects of yoga, as well as those that are more psychologically focused. In so doing, they described a higher order level of experience. Being still also captures the way that children outlined how they had changed since initially practicing yoga. Being still tended to focus on the physical aspects of movement, and to be in a more ‘in tune’ state where children comprehended the interconnection between body, and mind.

This interconnectedness was demonstrated when the children described opportunities to remember to breath within themselves when a feeling of anxiety seemed to overwhelm them. This was especially important at school, so that they, in a sense, could regain their balance. For example, a child expressed the skills they had developed to regain a sense of balance when they stated:

*“If I get a test wrong, I do the breathing that we are learning in yoga, I just close my eyes and do three deep breaths”* (Child 2).

Further, the feeling of being more at ease was highlighted by the children as freeing, especially yoga was an opportunity to be without siblings, and a time away from the family dynamics. For example, a child had expressed:

*“I feel more relaxed – time on my own from siblings”* (Child 1);

while another child stated:

*“I feel more relaxed”* (Child 2).

In addition to the children, the parents also described how they were looking for ways to calm their children down more, and how challenging this was due to the constant stimulation of everyday activities. Parents reported that calming children down at night can be a challenging situation after the stimulation of the day’s events. Pushing bedtime out later into the evenings required parents to search for skills to assist their children to prepare for sleep. The hope that doing some mindfulness may help to relax whilst in bed was a goal of self-regulating in preparing to settle for the night. A parent reported their experience with their children when they said:

*“I do Smiling Mind (App-based meditation) every night before bed which she really loves and will not go to sleep without it”* (Parent 2).

This was also echoed by another parent who said:

*“When we started yoga at the end of last year, we were hoping that it might calm her down a bit, and we do a bit of mindfulness”* (Parent 3).

As such, the findings indicate how children benefit from learning how to develop stillness within themselves which then quietens the nervous system down enough to allow the children to find and feel this quiet place within.

### **Zooming Together**

The final theme *“Zooming together”* arises from the transition to online yoga due to COVID-19, and captures statements reflecting children’s growing appreciation for their unique yoga community, and the opportunity to take an interest in, and encourage positive bonding with each other to enhance their bonding. As such, within the children’s voices it was demonstrated that they were motivated to work together, especially in activities, such as yoga, where they participate as a group online. Collaborative activities, such as ‘doing’ yoga together, was discussed to stimulate the child’s ability to negotiate with and pay attention to each other.

With the support of each other, the children learnt how to work with others, while retaining their own unique way of undertaking the various movements. This was demonstrated when a parent stated:

*“They are all from the same school but some of them are from different grades. Different social circles. They are friends but may not be friends you play with every day”* (Parent 3).

Collaboration therefore gives the children opportunities to help another person and children seem motivated to do as indicated by one of the parents who said

*“Because the kids in the yoga class are a little bit younger there are leadership skills that she is showing.”* (Parent 1)

Within this context, another essential element that was highlighted by parents was indicated to be the family relationship in holding their children in this supportive practice. This also assisted parents to find ways to be together and connect with their children beyond the day-to-

day predictability of life. The parents were creating positive opportunities for children to grow, and expand outwards mentally, and physically. This was achieved with considerable forethought as to the nature of their children, and how to build confidence in themselves.

## Discussion

The current study aimed to explore the experiences of children as they participated in their weekly after school yoga class was presented using the voices of the children, and their parent. It emerged that the children found yoga after school as positive, and beneficial for children, both for their wellbeing, and an extension of their friendships beyond the class cohort. It was also found that skills developed in the yoga class were transferred to other contexts, such as school, and home, as had been highlighted by children indicating it making them feel happy, and giving them a sense of peace. These skills are consistent with the literature on yoga in schools (Cook-Cottone et al., 2018; Rashedi et al., 2020).

It was found in this study that the physical aspect of yoga was one of the main reasons why children wanted to participate in the activity. The emphasis of experiencing fun, enjoyment, as well as a challenge were part of a sense of purpose, achievement, and satisfaction. Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi (2003), provide a broader view of enjoyment considered to be linked to intrinsic motivation whereby skills, and abilities are an important psychological process. The physical instructions given in yoga assisted the children to become more aware of their bodies, and what it feels like when making more physically demanding shapes. These findings are supported by Delle Fave and Massimini (2003), pointing to the relationship between structured leisure activities, and optimal experiences or 'flow' characterized by psychological engagement, intrinsic motivation, and enjoyment, the crucial determinant being 'structure.' In addition, the findings in this study significantly extend the understanding of imagination, with play being an intrinsic reason for children doing yoga. Vygotsky (1978) explained that children's gestures gave insight into knowledge that they could not yet express in speech. Furthermore, Feldman (2005), reports that yoga classes that incorporate a theme assist young children to find the joy in learning, and not just the performance outcomes.

Beyond the physical aspect of yoga, the psychological features of how yoga made the children feel, and the specific strategies they felt they had learned through yoga when encountering stressful situations. This capacity to cultivate focus, and continue with making the 'hard' or difficult yoga shapes was expressed by the children. In this sense, they were able to link overcoming the hard elements of yoga, and the difficulties they had experienced or had occurred in the school setting. Yoga had provided the children with the ability to become aware of feelings from inside their bodies, which required a particular sensitivity. These outcomes are supported by Serwacki and Cook-Cottone (2012), who found in their systematic review that yoga interventions exerted positive effects on factors, such as emotional balance, attentional control, and anxiety. In a school-based yoga program, Case-Smith et al. (2010), reported students finding calmness, and improved focus in the classroom, which was echoed by the classroom teacher. The yoga program had assisted students control their behaviors, and were less likely to react to difficult situations with acting out behaviors. Further evidence from Jacinda K. Dariotis et al. (2016), indicated that as students were not able to distinguish anger, and other negative emotions from stress prior to

intervention skills, which helped them to engage in prosocial behavior by disengaging from high-conflict situations, as in separating themselves from the conflict. As such, when children begin to connect more to their bodily experiences, through yoga, they begin to explore their somatic, and emotional experiences (Case-Smith et al., 2010). Children have the capacity through yoga to develop a set of skills, which include focus, resilience, attention, and greater sensory awareness (Case-Smith et al., 2010). In the current study, it is suggested that due to the nature of holdings the shapes, the children were learning to cultivate a persistent mind-set, including by way of their effort, and incremental intelligence. These actions of self-regulation involved a higher order of executive function skills regarding emotional intelligence, not only to disengage, but to leave behind stressful situations, and give them space to resolve (Davidson et al., 2012; Telles, Gerbarg, & Kozasa, 2015). The links between the SEL competencies, and the skills learned in yoga would seem to indicate that the sequenced activities of yoga have a propensity to lead to enhanced contexts of emotional regulation, interactions, and relationships, however, is an area that requires further research.

Although the physical, and psychological aspects of yoga were identified separately, it was also noted that they were also inseparably connected in another aspects. The theme of *Being Still* recognized that to be still requires a balance that occurs when the children find the right combination of the physical, and the psychological aspects of yoga that work for them (Velásquez et al., 2015). In the study, children described experiencing a state of stillness for themselves as they connected to their breath when doing the poses. As such, through the yoga practice, the children had experienced a more ‘in tune’ state of being, and seemed to apprehend the interconnection between body, and mind, and found safety within their bodies through focus, and attention. The children expressed a need to find a state of calmness within their body, and described finding stillness through certain poses, and even when lying down.

Contemplative practices such as meditation, and yoga are considered to be forms of mental, and behavioral training, and intended to produce a change in cognitive, and emotional processes by placing some constraint or imposing some discipline on normally unregulated mental or physical habit (Davidson et al., 2012). The parents in this study expressed concern for the challenging external environment that each child found themselves in on a daily basis. Both the children, and parents were searching for ways to self-regulate certain aspects of their daily life. For parents, it was calming their children at the end of the day in order for their children to prepare to go to sleep. While for the children it was finding ways to release tension from their body. It was found in this study that yoga can be a core foundation in the cultivation of self-regulation, and states of calmness that concurs with that of Conboy, Noggle, Frey, Kudesia, and Khalsa (2013).

The yoga poses, such as mountain, help children to connect to the earth, feel safe, and secure, giving them a sense of control over their environment. In order to cultivate this sense of control, at the core of the yoga instruction is repetition which in time brings a greater sense of control of the body, and emotions (Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, Johnstone, & Davidson, 2008). In this sense, standing like a mountain emulates, and reminds the children that a mountain never moves, but is a witness to all that happens around such as continual changes in the weather. Being the mountain teaches children the ability to ground both physically, and mentally. Finding stillness within confirmed the introspective aspect of

doing yoga, such as concentration, focus, breathing, and relaxation (Kishida et al., 2018). Although not always expressed explicitly, the 'Being Still' theme identified that the children had learned to use the yoga to calm, and center themselves, and to trust their instincts.

In addition to the act of yoga itself, a new finding emerged among the children who recognized that they were part of a yoga community through their participation in an after-school yoga program. This study took place just as COVID-19 a global pandemic, had commenced, and severely restricted people's physical contact, and movement across suburbs, cities, and countries. As such, this impacted access to the children for the study, but also demonstrated how yoga services pivoted to an online delivery process to ensure programs for the children were still enacted. Within this context, the children continued their yoga via virtual technology each week with their teacher, and each other. It was found in this study that yoga is an immense social experience, when coming together each week. When collectively moving together, the children learned from one another, and created a positive engagement with their environment, by experiencing fun, talking with one another, and learning to trust each other within the uncertain time in which they found themselves. This was a finding similar to Kishida et al. (2018), who found that community was a central word that emerged, often growing with time, and familiarity.

Several aspects of the present study confirm that working together reflected an increased motivation expressed as greater happiness, and a sense of satisfaction by the children. This was evident as the children continued yoga online despite the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent lockdown. When given the opportunity to connect with each other, it was preferable to connect virtually than the alternative of no connection at all. Powerful psychological forces when working together can function like social glue, creating social contexts that bring people together, and only seen when altered, such as occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and lockdown (Feinberg, Ghorbani, & Herder, 2020). Jennings (2016) support contemplate practices, such as yoga, as they cultivate individual, and community flourishing. The finding of the benefits of children working together as a group in yoga are consistent with theorizing that important aspects of the self, such as intentions, and motivation arise from social interactions, and social relationships become socially shared, and contribute to social cohesion, and coordination. These findings are supported by Feinberg et al. (2020) who found that a communities social capital relies on involvement, mutual assistance, trust, and social cohesion.

## Limitations and Further Research

Given the qualitative nature of this exploratory study with small numbers of participants, the outcomes described are not generalizable to a broader population, however, provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of children using their own voice, which is unique to this study. The exploratory study confirms the benefits of a weekly yoga class for young children. For the children who participated, yoga could be seen to develop SEL competencies such as positive states of mind, and skills to deal with challenging emotions daily. Considering the results more extensive research is needed to delve deeper into the phenomenon of how yoga contributes to the development of SEL competencies within

children. To achieve this, the next step may be a pilot study, where yoga may be implemented as part of the physical education program within the school or as an after-school activity, which could be achieved face-to-face or virtually.

A further limitation is the use of a single yoga school, however we were able to explore key elements that have remained unexamined, and include the influence of culture, socioeconomic background, and types of schools, on how children engage with, and benefit from yoga programs. The participation of the parents was an additional strength to the study, which allowed them to provide their point of view about the experiences of yoga for children, which enabled further confirmation of many aspects of what the children had experienced.

## Conclusions

The present study revealed the experiences of young children who participated in an after-school yoga program designed for children. In addition, the perspectives of the child's parents were also explored to get a sense of how yoga influenced the lives of the children, and their wider families outside of the yoga school class. The study identified that children experienced their bodies in ways that developed their physicality, self-awareness, and a connection to others. In addition, this qualitative study allowed for the voices of the children to be heard, and to understand how they made sense of their experiences of yoga after school, and the way that informed the other elements of their lives. The children in this study expressed insights as to how yoga had assisted them to find, and express joy, and fun by moving their bodies into different shapes. Importantly, this research has shown that



**Photo.** Children making the shape of an H in a game of alphabet yoga. Source: Teacher – Ms Nerida Downes with the children

there is growing need for us to listen to children as they themselves are emersed within the construction of childhood, and what this means to them to learn about their body through the practice of yoga. Further, the research found there were physical, psychological benefits, along with benefits pertaining to connection with others. This exploratory foundational study has provided the ground upon which future research related to the benefits of yoga for children can continue to be developed scientifically. The outcomes indicate that children embrace yoga which for them is fun as they get to move their bodies in all kinds of different shapes that invokes their imagination and energizes their embodiment. Including yoga into the school curriculum would seem to be beneficial giving children choices associated with improvements in physical strength, self-esteem, self-regulation, and an overall focus on well-being in general.



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