



Using Yoga Group Counseling to Promote Healthy Self-Regulation for Elementary School Students

Taylor Stabley¹, Kevin A. Curtin^{2*} and Molly E. Carpenter²

¹Department of Psychology, Corning-Painted Post Area School District, Corning, New York, United States of America

²Division of Counseling and School Psychology, Alfred University, 1 Saxon Dr, Alfred, NY 14802, United States of America

*Corresponding author: Kevin A. Curtin, Department of Psychology, Division of Counseling and School Psychology, Alfred University, 1 Saxon Drive, Alfred, NY 14802, United States of America; Tel: 607-871-2699, E-mail: curtink@alfred.edu

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Abstract

There is interest in understanding the self-regulation needs of elementary school children and the interventions employed to address such needs. The literature points to the efficacy of group counseling and yoga for the development of healthy self-regulation skills. This article presents a three phase, 11-session yoga counseling group that aligns itself with specific yoga principles and select behavior standards in order to address students' relationship skills, self-discipline, self-control, and overall well-being. The article concludes by discussing preliminary data that address the perceived self-regulation benefits of this particular intervention.

Keywords: Self-regulation; School counseling; Elementary education; Yoga; Group counseling

Introduction

An important task for the professional school counselor is to address students' social/emotional learning needs within the school environment. As such, school counselors must understand how healthy self-regulation can enhance children's social/emotional development. Within the context of a comprehensive school counseling program, school counselors can develop activities directed at improving students' self-regulation skills, giving children a greater ability to moderate their emotions, focus their attention, and control their behaviors while promoting successful learning, self-control, resilience, and an overall positive well-being. One such intervention is the integration of yoga and traditional group counseling, guided by specific yoga principles and select behavior standards, as a way to improve students' self-regulation skills.

Literature Review

A review of the literature indicates strong interest in examining the self-regulation needs of children in K-12 schools [1]. Self-regulation is a major task for children in terms of their development and learning

and involves a student's ability to monitor and manage feelings and behaviors as well as demonstrate pro-social and pro-academic skills [2]. School counselors therefore require interventions that promote healthy self-regulation within a school setting. The literature points to a variety of practices that can help children develop healthy self-regulation skills, including school-based group interventions as well as mindfulness-based approaches including yoga [3,4]. The integration of both yoga and group counseling may be a potentially beneficial intervention for the promotion of healthy self-regulation skills of elementary school children.

Yoga

Yoga is a peaceful and relaxing practice that connects the mind and body through a focus on breath work and meditation. Once used primarily as a spiritual ritual, it has now transformed into an approach where it has much promise for its physical benefits as well as psychological benefits, including reductions in anxiety, perceived stress, and negative affect [5,6]. In addition, studies have demonstrated improvements in children's executive functioning mood and emotional regulation [7,8].

In a qualitative-exploratory study on the physical, cognitive, and emotional benefits of yoga for young children, teachers implemented an eight-week, daily yoga intervention followed by interviews with the children [9]. There were two main themes that emerged from the study, the first being a unanimous positive reaction about yoga from the children as well as their understanding of yoga and self-regulation skills. Every child represented in the study showed an increase in these self-regulation skills after the intervention was given.

A qualitative study on the integration of yoga into a comprehensive school counseling program found a strong connection between yoga and the themes of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model as well as substantial overlap between yoga philosophies and the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors [10]. Given the potential benefits of yoga in a school setting, it can be valuable to integrate yoga with these established standards aimed at enhancing student success.

Integration of yoga and group counseling in schools

The American School Counseling Association has long held that group counseling in schools is a necessary and effective means of service delivery of the ASCA National Model for students who present with a variety of issues. Group counseling allows students opportunities to share their feelings and experiences, gain a sense of universality, enhance their social competence, develop self-awareness, and acquire self-worth by supporting others.

The literature points to the efficacy of group counseling in schools for a variety of issues related to self-regulation, including emotional regulation, depression and anxiety, and ADHD. In addition, research suggests that school-based yoga is beneficial for perceived self-regulation emotional regulation mood, affect and focus, perseverance, and positive relationships [11-14].

Classroom-based yoga practices varied with some focused solely on teaching students yoga poses without group discussion while others incorporated group discussion into the yoga lesson. Two particular school-based yoga practices integrated yoga with discussion and other counseling activities. Harper, et al., describes a yoga intervention for

elementary school students in which team-building, communication skills, mutual support, and personal reflection are built into the curriculum [14,15]. Daly, et al. describe a yoga-based, eating disorder prevention program that integrates yoga, life-skills psychoeducation, and group processing and which produced a significant increase in self-care behavior among participants as compared to a control group [15,16].

It appears then that yoga has made its way into schools and has the potential to integrate with a more traditional group counseling format. With yoga then as a somewhat new component of group counseling, this is indeed good news as school counselors are finding that it can provide even greater opportunities to address the here-and-now, strengthen interpersonal learning, and ultimately create the type of energy or life-force (prana) that can effect change within a group. Given the efficacy that each practice has for improving students' self-regulation skills, the authors present an intervention that integrates yoga with traditional group counseling, guided by specific yoga principles and select mindsets and behaviors for student success [17].

Yoga group counseling intervention

Group logistics: The yoga counseling group described in this article was designed for the elementary school age level and informed by the ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success [17]. These standards provide a framework for student success and include attitudes, learning strategies, self-management skills, and social skills. According to ASCA, school counselors employ the mindset and behavior standards to "assess student growth and development, create culturally sustaining strategies and activities, and build a program that helps students achieve their highest potential". The intervention described in this article is guided by the standards related to overall well-being, positive relationships, self-discipline, and self-control [18-20].

Given that this is a group for students with self-regulation difficulties, a group size of 6-8 members is suggested to effectively and safely facilitate the experiential component of the group [21]. The

school counselor considers students for the group after having consulted with teachers based on any significant difficulties the student may be having with self-regulation, self-control, anxiety, self-discipline, or social interactions [22]. The school counselor will then conduct a screening process with each child and their parent to determine appropriateness, readiness, and willingness to participate in this type of group.

Prior to the start of the group, the school counselor will conduct informed consent with families and children about the expectations, types of activities, benefits, freedom to withdraw, and potential risks of the yoga counseling group, including any concern for injury [23,24]. Families and students will be informed that yoga group counselors will respect the physical and emotional boundaries of students, including refraining from any hands-on adjustment or assistance [14].

Traditional yoga classes are contraindicated for individuals with a history of trauma [15], and while this is more than just a yoga class, school counselors should make it clear that this particular yoga counseling group is not considered Trauma-Sensitive Yoga, since that would require specific training for this particular practice [15]. However, the school counselor should take into account any past traumas that the child has experienced and monitor throughout the group their level of comfort-ability and safety [25]. Using trauma-informed guidelines may be beneficial in this case such as allowing the right to pass, creating a safe place, building a strong relationship with the student, and promoting predictability and consistency [26,27].

Format: The yoga counseling group is a three phase, eleven session intervention that aligns itself with specific yoga principles and select standards from the ASCA mindsets and behaviors in order to improve students' relationship skills, self-discipline, self-control, and overall well-being (Table 1)[28]. The nine yoga principals provide the basis for much of the process component for the group and include (a) be generous; (b) believe in something bigger; (c) practice peace; (d) be honest; (e) have alone time; (f) be content; (g) practice moderation; (h) be clean, and (i) work hard [29].

Session	Theme	ASCA Mindsets and behaviors	Yoga principle	Suggested poses
1	Connectedness	M.2; B-SS2; B-SS3		Breath-work, such as Flower Breathing; Candle Breathing
2	Connectedness	M.2; B-SS2; B-SS3	Be Generous	Cat; Cow; Mountain
3	Connectedness	M.2; B-SS2; B-SS3	Believe in Something Bigger	Tree; Dolphin; Shark; Sun Salutation
4	Mindfulness	M.1; B-S	Practice Peace	Balloon Breathing; Savasana; Peaceful Warrior; Easy Pose
5	Mindfulness	M.1; B-SS9	Be Honest	Child's Pose; Downward Dog; Reclining Twist
6	Mindfulness	M.1; B-SS9	Have Alone Time	Bunny Breathing; Chair; Warrior I & II
7	Mindfulness	M.1; B-SS9	Be Content	Pigeon; Crescent Moon; Flamingo
8	Self-Control	M.4; B-SMS2; B-SMS8	Practice Moderation	Power Breathing; Partner Flamingo; Partner Warrior III; Partner Tree; Partner Chair
9	Self-Control	M.4; B-SMS2; B-SMS8	Be Clean	Dragon; Triangle

10	Self-Control	M.4; B-LS4	Work Hard	Warrior III; Dancers Pose; Boat
11	Review			Yoga flow; Consolidation of Learning

Table 1: Specific yoga principles and select standards from the ASCA.

Phase one of the yoga group comprises sessions one, two, and three, focusing on the theme of connectedness and guided by ASCA mindset standard M.2 [30](sense of acceptance, respect, support and inclusion for self and others in the school environment) and behavior standards B-S^ (positive, respectful and supportive relationships with students who are similar to and different from them) and B-SS3 (positive relationships with adults to support success). Phase two of the group plan includes sessions four through seven, centering on the theme of mindfulness and guided by the ASCA mindset standard M.1 (belief in development of whole self, including a healthy balance of mental, social/emotional and physical well-being) and behavior standard B-SS9 (social maturity and behaviors appropriate to the situation and environment). Phase three of the yoga group involves sessions eight through ten, emphasizing the theme of self-control and guided by ASCA mindset standards M.4 (self-confidence in ability to succeed) and behavior standards B-SMS2 (self-discipline and self-control); B-SMS8 (balance of school, home and community activities); and B-LS4 (self-motivation and self-direction for learning). The final session is a review of the yoga group counseling experience and includes a culminating yoga flow activity [31].

The structure of each session includes a psychoeducation component; an experiential activity that involves opportunities to demonstrate breathing techniques and yoga poses; and a process component in which the group counselor facilitates a discussion on how the activity was meaningful and relevant to the session's theme, yoga principle, and/or mindsets and behaviors. In the beginning of each session, the group counselor routinely reminds students of the group norms, reviews the session's agenda, and asks students to report on their homework. At the close of each session, the group counselor asks how each member intends to implement what was learned in group to their lives outside of group and to be prepared to report on their progress. Breath-work is a vital component for each session, with the yoga group counselor teaching a variety of breath-work techniques that are appropriate and fun for children, such as candle breathing, flower breathing, hot cocoa breathing, and balloon breathing [32,33].

During the final session, the counselor facilitates a review of the entire yoga group counseling experience, including a review of all the yoga poses by engaging the students in a yoga flow. As a way to consolidate learning, the counselor invites students to share any positive changes and/or behaviors they made throughout the group.

Pilot data: An important role of the school counselor is to conduct systematic program evaluations as a way of determining whether social emotional learning programs are effective given the needs of students. We were able to determine, based on pilot pre/post surveys administered to eight fourth grade students, a number of important initial findings. In general, all students reported they learned to better recognize feelings of discomfort and anxiety, both at school and home. In addition, all students reported they were better at quieting uncomfortable and anxious feelings on their own, both at school and home. All students were able to identify and demonstrate their favorite yoga pose and breathing technique. Finally, based on observations of

several participants following the yoga counseling group, teachers reported that students were able to demonstrate newly learned yoga and breathing techniques as a way to stay calm and relaxed in the classroom.

Discussion

The yoga counseling group has several implications for school counselors. First, it is important that academic and social/emotional programs such as yoga groups strongly align with the ASCA National Model and the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors [10]. Both yoga and group counseling align with these frameworks and are considered worthwhile interventions for comprehensive school counseling programs. Further, school counselors are able to use the ASCA standards as a guide to create interventions, including contemplative practices, to assess student growth and promote overall student success. It is satisfying to see that this particular yoga counseling group aligns with several relevant ASCA mindsets and behaviors, specifically those focused on well-being, positive relationships, self-discipline, and self-control.

Second, as a result of the yoga group counseling intervention, students in the pilot study reported they were better at recognizing feelings of discomfort and anxiety as well as quieting uncomfortable and anxious feelings on their own. In addition, teachers reported that students were able to exhibit newly acquired yoga and breathing techniques as a way to stay calm and relaxed in the classroom. This is consistent with the literature on classroom based yoga interventions in which children were able to demonstrate knowledge of and an increase in self-regulation skills [16,9]. Research supports the implementation of yoga in schools and given the efficacy of school-based group counseling interventions, this particular yoga counseling group demonstrates tremendous potential for children with self-regulation difficulties.

Third, yoga by itself can be taught by teachers, counselors, or outside yoga instructors, so long as these professionals are properly credentialed and experienced in the practice and teaching of yoga. However, group counseling is an intervention that is best facilitated by school counselors or other school-based mental health professionals, given their unique skill set and scope of practice. Therefore, when it comes to integrating yoga practices with traditional group counseling, professionals should be mindful when selecting yoga group leaders, making sure that they possess advanced competencies and specialized training in group work as well as in the practice of yoga. Co-facilitators such as a school counselor working with a registered yoga teacher would be compatible in a yoga counseling group and necessary if the school counselor is not a certified yoga teacher themselves.

Finally, there are important implications for research. While interest and research is growing for yoga as an adjunct in schools, there are few studies examining the integration of yoga with traditional group counseling. Therefore, more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach to working with children. There is

certainly a need for more randomized controlled trials to further explore and better inform professionals of the benefits of this intervention. It would also be helpful to understand the mechanisms that underlie yoga groups, perhaps focusing on the integration of group processes or the curative factors with specific yoga principles, physical mechanisms, or mindful practices.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, the development of healthy self-regulation can provide children greater capabilities in managing their emotions, attention, and behaviors in order to be successful in school. As such, it is vital that school counselors be equipped with interventions, guided by established standards such as the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors, to promote healthy self-regulation within a school setting. Integrating yoga practices with traditional group counseling may be a valuable approach for elementary students who have self-regulation difficulties. A yoga counseling group such as the one described in this article offers many opportunities to address students' relationship skills, self-discipline, self-control, and overall well-being. In this way, yoga is not just a complementary or adjunct approach to other social emotional practices; rather, it is intentionally integrated into an overall approach to group counseling treatment.

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