

# Chapter 29

## The Benefits of Yoga for Primary Students: A Mindfulness Programme



Claire Gitzel

**Abstract** In schools around the world, “mindfulness” is being implemented in classrooms at a great rate. The literature claims that mindfulness in the classroom can reduce stress, improve the teacher–student relationship, increase student confidence, reduce the negative behaviour, improve behaviour management, promote classroom engagement and increase concentration (Willits 2015; Arthurson 2015). Prior to this investigation, I had a few experiences with mindfulness programmes: during my placements as a pre-service teacher; while attending a professional development conference; and through my employment as an Educational Assistant. Through reflection, I realized the proposed benefits of mindfulness could have been highly beneficial to myself as a student in the past and even now as a teacher. Yoga is just one programme used to increase mindfulness, and it can be conducted in the classroom for students and teachers to gain the benefits of mindfulness practices. It was proposed that yoga as a mindfulness programme, once implemented in the classroom, can increase student engagement, well-being and confidence. This chapter explains how students in my class experienced a range of benefits from yoga as a mindfulness programme.

Journal entry: Term 2, 2015, Newcastle, New South Wales:

I have had the opportunity this week to observe other teachers and their classrooms, which I always find highly beneficial to my learning. When I went into a Year 1 classroom, I found the students focused on the smartboard out the front. The students were spread across the room, in their own spaces, concentrating hard on the instructions being given from the YouTube yoga instructor. I was surprised to find every student engaged in this activity. Cosmic Kids yoga (Amor 2016): This was not the first time I had seen teachers use this program to promote “mindfulness”. At my place of employment, I had previously floated through a few classrooms while the class had been using this program. The students of this class were thoroughly engaged, calm, and focused. This certainly wasn’t the case every time I saw this program being used, but it was working well today. I wondered how long it would last. I wondered about the benefits of this program. Was it just to give the teacher a much needed ten minutes to catch up on emails or marking? Is mindfulness really beneficial to the students and how so?

---

C. Gitzel (✉)  
Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia  
e-mail: [clairewalkington@hotmail.com](mailto:clairewalkington@hotmail.com)

© Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2019  
G. Geng et al. (eds.), *Reflective Practice in Teaching*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-9475-1\\_29](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-9475-1_29)

## Introduction

I am a mature age student currently completing my final semester of the university as a primary education pre-service teacher. I am a sister; I am a friend, an educator, a wife and a mother. I currently live in a small town in New South Wales and have done so for many years since meeting my husband many years ago. However, during my school years, I moved often with my parents and brother. Every few years my family was relocated, and this meant starting at a new school, making new friends, and adjusting to various curriculums. The schools I attended were spread across New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and overseas in North America. I felt like I was always “the new girl” and my self-confidence as a student in this situation was not the best as I was shy and reserved.

Over the last six years, I have had many different roles while being employed at my local school. Most recently, and for most of my employment, I have worked as an Educational Assistant, which I have thoroughly enjoyed. I often work with students who need extra support, and I find assisting them with their education is very rewarding. I have found that these students often benefit from specialized programmes and differentiated activities that address their personal needs, learning needs and individual qualities. Along with my employment in classrooms, I have also completed three practicums in a variety of educational settings. During these experiences, I certainly noticed the stress levels of students, their self-confidence, concentration levels, engagement levels, the student–teacher relationship and student behaviour. These are all issues that can be addressed by introducing “mindfulness practices” such as yoga.

## Who Did I Think I Was?

A few years ago, while working at my local school, I attended a two-day conference for professional development where the term mindfulness was introduced to me by a guest speaker. Mindfulness refers to the process of observing, participating and accepting life moments from a state of kindness or equilibrium (Albrecht et al. 2012). This state can be achieved through meditation and contemplation and by paying attention to everyday activities (Albrecht et al. 2012).

My role as an Educational Assistant did not require me to explore this theory any further, but I was aware that mindfulness quickly became the theme for the year with colleagues learning more about it and implementing it into their classrooms through a variety of programmes. My understanding was, there are many ways to implement mindfulness, with overall benefits to both student and teacher well-being, increased student engagement, reduced negative behaviour, reduced stress, increase in student confidence and improved teacher–student relationships.

Reflecting on my years as a student, I can see how mindfulness programmes could have benefited me. Moving and changing schools often as a child had a huge effect

on me as a student, emotionally, socially and academically. My teachers would often refer to me as self-conscious, and this was very true. I was a worrier, and I lacked confidence. I never had an all-time favourite teacher because I was always moving. Looking back, maybe I did not want to form strong relationships because I did not think I would be there for long. I can see lots of links between my experiences as a student and how I might have benefited from a mindfulness programme.

This reflection has led to an interest in mindfulness programmes in the classroom: in particular, yoga and what it could do for student well-being and engagement. I wanted to see if yoga could really have these positive effects on students or it is just a way for a teacher to get ten minutes of much-needed catch up time.

## **Who Do I Think I Am?**

As I get closer to finishing my degree, I am becoming more confident as a classroom teacher. As a teacher, I strongly believe in addressing the curriculum but also providing students with programmes to look after their well-being, including ways to manage classroom behaviour and student engagement that allow students the best chance of learning. Some students can experience stress, low confidence, low engagement or disengagement with the curriculum (Willits 2015; Arthurson 2015) during their school years. Mindfulness and yoga, as a mindfulness programme, have been proven to be a way to combat these issues that some students experience. I am now also a teacher who reflects on my own school years, and I use this reflection to relate to my students in the classroom when I teach. I have a better understanding of what they may experience, and am now equipped with a strategy that can benefit many students.

## **Of This Much I Am Sure**

At the start of my learning journey, I had some experiences with mindfulness programmes. I was intrigued by yoga in the classroom as a mindfulness programme and wanted to explore the benefits. Research showed it could benefit students by reducing stress, increasing confidence, increasing engagement, reducing the negative behaviour, bettering classroom behaviour management by the teacher and improving the teacher–student relationship (Willits 2015; Arthurson 2015). I wanted to explore the truth of these remarks and see it in action for myself. After completing my observations of the effect of yoga in my classroom, I can now say I have the experience and results to confirm the benefits of yoga programmes in the classroom. Of this much I am sure.

While doing my investigation, I wanted to focus on two particular benefits of a yoga programme suggested by research. My focus questions were “Can yoga increase student confidence?” and “Can yoga increase student engagement during

the following lesson?" I used the programme Cosmic Kids (Amor 2016). Each yoga session ran for about 5–10 min, and these sessions were held once a day for three weeks in a Year 2 classroom. The classroom consisted of nine female and 11 male students.

Did the yoga programme increase student confidence? I answered this question by observing students, discussing results with the teacher and asking the students to provide visual feedback after each lesson on how confident they were feeling. As a class, we discussed the definition of confidence and how the students could identify their feelings by gesturing with thumbs up to indicate feeling "confident" and thumbs down for "not so confident". Most days, 16 or more students would report feeling confident after completing the yoga programme. During the final week of this programme, at least 17 students reported feeling confident each day after completing the 5-min yoga lesson. Please note that some days, there were student absences. Sometimes there would be a correlation between the students who reported "not feeling confident" and the students who we, I as a researcher and my classroom teacher, would consider to be the students who sometimes lack self-confidence or who were often reserved during the yoga lesson. Over the three weeks, the majority of the more reserved, quiet and less confident students became much more involved in the programme. It was noted that these students were smiling during the programme, more engaged with the programme and looking less uncomfortable. The classroom teacher agreed with this, stating, "I have noticed greater self-confidence in many of my students, not only during yoga but also in other KLAs [key learning areas]". In a similar study, which implemented a similar programme, Willits (2015, p. 70) also noted that students displayed "joy" and "eagerness" towards the programme. Yoga, as a mindfulness programme, can have a positive effect on student confidence. Of this much I am sure.

Did the yoga programme increase student engagement in the following lessons? During my investigation, I counted how many students were on task, focused and completing work or engaged in classroom discussion, and how many students were off task. I took this tally 15 min into the following lesson after completing a yoga lesson. There were some limitations to this method, as some students were in the grey area between being on task and off task. Similarly, each student was observed for 30 s and although during this time, they would be on task, they could be off task not long afterwards, and vice versa. Drawing a conclusion was difficult as I did not know what the level of student engagement may have been without the yoga programme. Considering these factors, the overall data did confirm students were engaged with the lesson following a yoga lesson. On 11 of the 15 days, yoga was used, 14 or more of the 20 students were engaged in the following lesson when tallied. My informal observations correlated with this, I noted many students were active in the discussion and focus while completing class work. I also noted students effectively collaborating together. The research, despite its limitations, does relate to the current literature. When questioning how yoga as a mindfulness practice can increase attention to learning, one source claims,

Yoga practice, a mindfulness exercise that promotes physical and emotional well-being, may create a cooperative environment or situation where internal distractions due to different learning styles and external disruption such as negative behaviors are minimized. (Arthurson 2015, p. 11)

Yoga as a mindfulness programme can contribute to student engagement. Of this much I am sure.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would recommend using yoga as a mindfulness programme in the classroom. The literature claims a vast range of benefits for students including reduced stress, improved teacher–student relationship, increased student confidence, reduced negative behaviour, improved behaviour management, improved classroom engagement and increased student concentration levels. Through my learning journey, I have found several of these claims to be true. For example, over three weeks of including a yoga programme, students claimed to feel increased confidence, and this was also noted by my observations and by the classroom teacher. Also, students were engaged with lessons following a short yoga lesson with the teacher noting increased concentration levels. Similarly, I found this to be true while investigating my research question. In the future, I hope to continue using yoga as a mindfulness programme in the classroom.

## References

- Albrecht, N. J., Albrecht, P. M., & Cohen, M. (2012). Mindfully teaching in the classroom: A literature review. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(12), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2012v37n12.2>.
- Amor, J. (2016). *Cosmic Kids: Making yoga and mindfulness fun for kids!* <http://www.cosmickids.com/>. Accessed March 10, 2016.
- Arthurson, K. (2015). Teaching mindfulness to year sevens as part of health and personal development. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(5). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2015v40n5.2>.
- Willits, G. (2015). *The effects of yoga practice on classroom management in an elementary school setting*. San Rafael, CA: Dominican University of California. <https://scholar.dominican.edu/masters-theses/183>. Accessed December 9, 2018.