

# The benefits of using Yoga

Yoga in education has the potential to address some of the health and esteem issues causing concern in young children by enabling teachers to build and nurture strong, holistic foundations of wellbeing.



**Rachael Jefferson-Buchanan**

is a senior lecturer in PE, Dance, Education Studies and Primary Professional Practice at Bath Spa University

Yoga in education has the potential to address health issues by enabling teachers and children to build strong, holistic foundations of wellbeing

**F**OUR YEARS ago I completed a two-year diploma with RYE UK in the area of Research on Yoga in Education (RYE). This not only transformed me personally, in terms of my values and outlook on life, but it also inspired me to utilise yoga within my professional role at Bath Spa University. I will be sharing this learning journey with you, introducing you to some simple RYE techniques, and exploring their potential usage and value within an early years setting.

## Health and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing have been topical issues in education for some time, particularly because UK national statistics have revealed an increase in childhood obesity. The finger is usually pointed at children's poor nutrition, in tandem with their screen-based sedentary lifestyles (Oliver, 2005; Palmer, 2006).

The plethora of government health policies, initiatives and publications during the last 12 years (*National Healthy Schools Programme*, 1999; *Every Child Matters*, 2003; *Healthy Living Blueprint for Schools*, 2004; *SEAL*, 2005; *Change4Life*, 2009) are clearly indicative of growing concern in this area.

In the 2007 UNICEF report (p31), childhood is referred to as 'the vital, vulnerable years' – the need for the school, family and wider community to support and nurture children's health and wellbeing is apparent. While there are many unknown explanations for health and wellbeing variations found in children, yoga in education has the potential to address some of these disparities by enabling teachers and children to build strong, holistic foundations of wellbeing.

## Yoga and its benefits

The Sanskrit word for yoga is 'yuj', which has many meanings, one of them being to yoke together. Essentially then, yoga means to unite, and thereby harmonise mind, body and emotions to create a balanced individual. Yoga techniques can also help develop the power of concentration by exercising it in similar ways to any other muscle.

Children's lack of concentration and inability to 'sit still' are often cited as issues by teachers. It is possible to teach children to appreciate stillness, alongside their need for rest and activity during the day; yoga can indeed promote moments of stillness that subsequently lead to improved concentration and learning.

It was during the 1970s, in Paris, that the president of RYE, Micheline Flak, first began to introduce yoga to her pupils during her daily English lessons. Having begun to regularly practise yoga herself and to feel the accumulative benefits of this, she discovered that her classroom teaching also improved.

Some of the key aspects that Flak (2006) alludes to in her analysis of the benefits of yoga in education are essential to note here: 'It strengthens the spine: stronger spine, greater self-confidence; it brings about correct breathing: better health, calmer emotions; it fosters relaxation: more receptive, ready to learn; it creates the conditions for attentiveness, self-confidence, memorising, creativity.'

Flak recognises that the teaching and learning environment can be stressful and fast-paced in today's schools. Across several decades, her consultancy and research have, therefore, focused on yoga becoming central to all aspects of classroom pedagogy and practice.

## RYE and the Patanjali Scale

RYE methods include only the first six steps of yoga practice, drawing on an ancient work, *Yoga Sutra*, by Patanjali. These six steps are the underpinning framework for all RYE teaching and learning:

- Yama – to live together.
- Niyama – to eliminate toxins and negative thoughts.
- Asana – to be in a good position.
- Pranayama – learn how to breathe.
- Pratyahara – learn to relax.
- Dharana – learn to concentrate, learn to learn.

The intellectual is clearly predominant within our western education system, but the close interdependence of mind and body is focused upon through RYE techniques that either position themselves under each of these six steps, or between several of them. The result of practising these techniques with children can help them work towards the art of balanced living and improved health, because their vital energies become better managed.

## The whole child

The notion of developing the whole child is thus paramount to RYE pedagogy and practice. In this sense, the aim of education for RYE practitioners is to ensure that all aspects of the child are enhanced and developed (not merely their intellectual abilities) through varied and transformative teaching-learning



*Practising RYE techniques can help children work towards the art of balanced living and improved health, enhancing all aspects of learning*

processes that take into account the child's body and its bodies.

Flak (2006) describes these 'bodies' as the physical layer, the energy layer, the mental layer and the emotional layer. Each of these four layers communicates and interacts, so it is essential to have them all in good condition before high quality learning can commence.

RYE techniques can help pupils to manage these four layers, which is necessary because they can conflict at times, resulting in difficulties for the individual. For example, if a child suffers from lack of sleep or has a poor diet, this could adversely affect their physical layer. Similarly, children can become disruptive in the classroom after running around and playing outdoors during lunchtime, which means their energy layer needs to be regulated.

### Examples of RYE techniques

The RYE approach is to intersperse short, simple yoga techniques throughout the school day, that will improve pupils' attitudes to learning and maximise their mindfulness and attention. Using the methods developed by RYE will positively affect how we teach and how our children learn.

A review of RYE techniques is given below in relation to the Patanjali Scale. Through the RYE training, teachers are encouraged to recognise their pupils' levels of attention, selecting and utilising RYE techniques, such as these, according to their pupils' needs and interests.

#### Yama – to live together

**Pass the message:** Hold hands in a circle. A leader passes a gentle squeeze to the child next to them, who then does the same to the next child in the circle. The message stops when it returns to the original leader. Variations can include passing a smile, a tickle, or passing a simple movement that the next child has to copy. Moreover, to heighten the tactile sensation and concentration, children can close their eyes when passing the squeeze or tickle.

#### Niyama – to eliminate toxins and negative thoughts

**ABC song:** While singing the ABC song, perform simple release exercises, repeating these five times, slowly, with complete awareness of each body part. Feet – ankle rotations clockwise and anti-clockwise. Knees and hips – bend both knees by squatting down and up. Shoulders and arms – bend arms at

# RYE techniques offer the teacher positive, holistic and creative ways to enhance the learning capacities of children in their care

the elbows on a slow inhale and extend the arms outwards with an exhalation. Relax the arms and rotate the shoulders forwards and then backwards.

Head and neck – nod the head up and down. Tilt the head to the left shoulder and then the right shoulder. Eyes – keeping the head stationary, the eyes look up and down, right and left, diagonally from down right to up left, and from down left to up right.

### Asana – to be in a good position

*Seven positions of the spine:* This exercise can be performed either standing or sitting:

- Inhale and begin by straightening the back and standing upright.
- Exhale and drop torso forwards from hips, bending knees.
- Inhale, raising torso and then tip backwards from vertical, opening the chest while supporting the lower back with the hands.
- Exhale, stretching torso sideways to the right with the left arm lifted over head, reaching to the right.
- Inhale, back to centre and then exhale, and repeat sideways stretch to the left with the right arm lifted over head.
- Inhale, back to centre and then exhale twisting waist to right (arms low and relaxed).
- Return to centre inhaling and then exhale while repeating waist twist to left. Inhale and return to centre.

Note: These postures do not have to be precisely performed; the movement and flow is more important. Images of a flower/tree swaying in the wind could be provoked, or children could pretend to catch bubbles or a football.

## Key points

- The plethora of government health policies, initiatives and publications during the last 12 years are clearly indicative of growing concern in this area
- The six steps of the ancient Patanjali Scale are the underpinning framework for all RYE teaching and learning
- The RYE approach is to intersperse short, simple yoga techniques throughout the school day, which will improve pupils' attitudes to learning and maximise their mindfulness and attention
- The notion of developing the 'whole child' is paramount to RYE pedagogy and practice
- It is possible to teach children to appreciate stillness through yoga practice, alongside their need for rest and activity during the day
- The result of practising RYE techniques with children can help them work towards the art of balanced living and improved health

### Pranayama – learn how to breathe

*Humming bee breath:* Sit cross-legged with the spine straight. Part the teeth but keep the mouth shut. Close both ears with the index fingers (elbows back) and exhale making a low steady hum as long as possible with one steady breath (listen to the sound all the time).

Repeat this exercise with the eyes closed as well, still listening intently to the sound made.

### Pratyahara – learn to relax

Lie in 'shavasana' (corpse pose), or sit in a relaxed position on the chair with both feet placed on the ground and the hands relaxed on thighs.

The teacher tells a story about a storm. The story includes a journey on a ship through a terrible storm, with huge waves and large black clouds. Nobody else is on deck, they are alone.

Just as the storm seems to be at its worst point, it begins to subside and light starts to shine through the clouds. The waves die down and the harbour is visible with people smiling and waving. Feel the sunshine warm the whole body and fill the brain with light.

This exercise invites the children to confront their worst fears. The ship does not sink and they do not drown, so they learn to overcome their inner turmoil (by battling against the storm) and to be more courageous. This leads to acceptance and ensuing calmness.

### Dharana – learn to concentrate, learn to learn

Colour in a mandala (templates are widely available on the internet). Listen to some relaxing music while doing this. Concentration on these geometrical designs helps the child focus on their inner order.

## Conclusion

Early childhood is a critical stage in the development of habits that will affect a person's future health and wellbeing. When RYE techniques are regularly used with young children, they can become powerful health and wellbeing tools, offering the teacher positive, holistic and creative ways to enhance the learning capacities of children in their care. **eye**

## Useful resources

- Research on Yoga in Education: [www.ryeuk.org/](http://www.ryeuk.org/)
- Teachers' TV programme on RYE: [www.teachers.tv/videos/ks1-ks2-pe-yoga-across-the-curriculum](http://www.teachers.tv/videos/ks1-ks2-pe-yoga-across-the-curriculum)
- UNICEF (2007) *Child Poverty in Perspective. An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries. Innocenti Report Card 7*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence. [www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf)

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