

Perspective

Secularity: Guiding Questions for Inclusive Yoga in Schools

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Abstract

This commentary explores the legal and ethical obligations of yoga programs and teachers to uphold both the principles and the spirit of secularism when teaching yoga in schools. Arguing that secularity is essential both to comply with legal mandates and to maximize inclusivity and access, each facet of a secular approach to yoga in schools is explored through an inquiry-based model meant to help the reader gain clarity and make informed choices when developing school-based yoga programming. This article does not address the use of nonsecular yoga for children outside the school setting. It instead speaks to the complexities of topics such as spirituality, personal transformation, secular ethics, and the use of cultural and historical artifacts within school programs. While inviting continued reflection on the nuances of the topic, the article concludes that given both the legal imperatives and potential risk of exclusion, failure to offer school-based yoga using a secular approach threatens to undermine the success of the field and hinder access to practices that have positive effects on young people. *Cook-Cottone, Childress, & Cohen Harper. Int J Yoga Therapy 2019(29). doi: 10.17761/2019-00007.*

Keywords: yoga, schools, secularity, spirituality, best practices

Introduction

Yoga is being taught in schools at growing rates. An increasing number of schools in the United States are offering formal programs, and the popularity and success of training programs specializing in school-based yoga are expanding.¹ Although the field of school-based yoga is growing, there is substantial variation in content and form of programming, and in particular, variation exists in how programs and teachers address the issue of secularism and spirituality in relation to yoga programming. The issue of secularity has

emerged as a point of discussion within both the educational world and the field of yoga as a whole, with the subsets of yoga for children and yoga in schools being particular points of focus—at times, controversial ones. This article specifically addresses the intersection of education and yoga that occurs in school-based yoga programming. For the purposes of this discussion, it is critical to keep in mind that we are not addressing children's yoga outside a school setting.

In *Best Practices for Yoga in Schools*, Childress and Cohen Harper² posit upholding the principles of secularism in schools as an ethical and legal obligation of yoga service providers. The ethical concern relates to access and inclusion for all students. The legal concern centers on whether school-based yoga practices constitute religious activities that cross the boundary between church and state as specified in the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution (e.g.³⁻⁶). When offering yoga in a setting as complex and diverse as public schools, it is imperative to consider the broad implications of our content, the delivery of that content, and the ways in which we establish trust within specific communities.

We recognize that a wide variety of yoga programs are appropriately offered to children within community settings that range from completely secular to nonsecular. This article speaks directly to the delivery of yoga in schools. There is tremendous complexity inherent in the nuances of yoga in schools: the heterogeneity of yoga, secularity, spirituality, culture, history, inclusion, and legal mandates. Such complexities are best addressed from the perspective of an evolving process—one that builds on what is known and understood, is refined through conversation, and adapts as context shifts. Given these complexities, as well as the legal mandate of secularity in schools, a clear understanding of what it means to be secular, as well as why secularism is important, are essential for those teaching yoga in school settings. In this commentary, we first define yoga in schools and briefly address the growing body of research on yoga in schools. Next, we offer transformation through education as

a lens through which to view the discussion on secularity and inclusion in schools. We follow this with two lines of inquiry: What does it mean to be secular? and Why is secularity important in the school setting?

Yoga in Schools

The word *yoga* means to yoke or integrate. In school-based yoga, this refers to the integration of mind and body to enhance well-being (i.e., a state of mental health in which students realize their potential, can cope with normative stress, can work productively and fruitfully, and are able to make contributions to their communities⁷) and student engagement (i.e., active, intentional learning⁸). School-based yoga is generally described as a set of mind-body practices (i.e., practices that involve engagement of both the cognitive and the physiological self⁸). It is also recognized as a set of tools for well-being and student engagement including awareness and attention training, postures, breathing, relaxation, and meditation.⁸⁻¹¹ Consistent with school-based mindfulness practice and research, the primary rationale for teaching yoga in educational settings is based on evidence from cognitive and affective neuroscience as well as biopsychosocial research suggesting outcomes salient to school success.^{3,8,12}

The larger field of yoga has a long and complex history and is remarkably heterogeneous, with substantial variation across schools, applications, contexts, and types of yoga (see Cook-Cottone⁸). School-based yoga has evolved from this varied field, so it can look rather different from district to district, and even school to school, depending on the yoga teacher and yoga program. Despite the emergence of specific training programs designed to guide yoga teachers on how to best offer yoga in schools, there is no standardized protocol or set of guidelines for school-based yoga training or teaching. There are also no specific regulations related to the provision of yoga in schools from state to state or federally. The collaboratively created *Best Practices for Yoga in Schools*² offers structure and a set of guidelines for the field. Nevertheless, a range of practices continue to be taught as the field strives to define what is best and most appropriate for students in the school setting.

Research on Yoga in Schools

The body of research on the effects of yoga in schools has been growing rapidly within the past 15 years.⁸ There is evidence that school-based yoga is both acceptable and feasible, and it yields outcomes important to school personnel.^{9,11,13-15} Research indicates that school-based yoga may offer benefits such as tools for stress management, improved focus, regulation of emotions, increased positive behaviors, enhanced learning outcomes, and physical fitness.^{9,11,14,16,17}

However, many studies suffer methodological weaknesses and challenges (e.g., no randomization, small sample sizes, poor reporting of yoga protocols and practices), and some studies report mixed findings.^{8,14} For example, a randomized controlled trial of a school-based yoga program found that yoga was acceptable and feasible.¹⁸ Furthermore, although no effects were found for measures of somatization, suspensions, academic grades, or general affect, yoga resulted in significant reductions in unexcused absences and detentions; increases in school engagement; and significant increases in students' emotion regulation, positive thinking, and cognitive restructuring in response to stress.¹⁸

The field of yoga research in general, and more specifically the field of yoga research in schools, has a long way to go to establish a body of evidence detailing the pathway from the specific yoga curricula to shifts in student experience, behavior, and performance. Also needed are protocols for reporting exactly how the yoga was delivered, what components of yoga were offered, how often and for how long, within what context, how teachers were trained, what outcomes were expected and why, and how nuances in delivery and intention may affect specific outcomes. Part of this process involves the discussion of secularity and inclusion. Factors such as acceptability, feasibility, and measurable outcomes speak directly to secularity, inclusion, and how to operationalize and study the shifts and transformations that may occur when a student practices yoga.

Yoga: When Learning Is Transformational

In accordance with legal mandates and to be inclusive of all students, it is considered best practice for yoga programs offered in schools to be secular.^{2,8} Accordingly, this article does not address the potential effects and benefits of secular versus nonsecular yoga. Furthermore, this is not a paper on secular versus spiritual practice. Like other subjects (e.g., Language Arts, Math, Biology, Music, Philosophy, and History), yoga programs can be secular and still provide support for the development of a student's inner world.⁸ In 2016, yoga researchers Khalsa and Butzer¹⁰ detailed a theory of the mechanisms of change in yoga, inclusive of fitness, self-regulation, awareness, and spirituality (see Cook-Cottone⁸ for an update of this model). According to this theory, spirituality includes constructs such as flow, transformation, and meaning and purpose in life.^{8,10}

Acknowledging yoga's potential to support inner change and growth, and to have a transformative impact, is important. To describe that process as spiritual is potentially problematic when working in schools, given the lack of clarity and evolving meaning surrounding the use of the word *spiritual*. Words are tools used to point to meaning and experience, and as such are always imperfect. As our culture is shifting, the meaning of the word spiritual is

shifting to reflect an association with the inner life of the individual, but for many it evokes religious connotations, and it has historically been used synonymously with religion.¹⁹ Describing the experience of exploring and discovering meaning through learning as a pathway to inner transformation, rather than using the term spirituality, reduces the potential for confusion and misinterpretation.

Educator Rachel Kessler,²⁰ through her work with adolescents, identified seven desires that young people bring to the quest to understand and to learn; acknowledgment of these in the educational experience is important to empower young people to explore their full experience as developing beings. These seven desires that young people express speak to the inner experience of transformation that learning can unveil: yearning for deep connection, longing for silence and solitude, search for meaning and purpose, hunger for joy and delight, creative drive, urge for transcendence, and need for initiation.²⁰ These transformative desires are aligned to a secular approach in education. Yoga in schools can acknowledge these experiences in a secular framework and without the imposition of cultural, religious, or spiritual beliefs or artifacts.

What Does it Mean to Be Secular?

Secularity means “not pertaining to or connecting with religion.”³ The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines religion as “the service and worship of God or the supernatural, commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance, a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practice, or a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith.” An important distinction to make is that rather than promoting a position of nonbelief, a secular approach invites students to bring their own belief system to the educational experience.² It is important to draw a clear line between secular and religious practices.²¹ School-based yoga has evolved from traditional forms of yoga with roots in Indian philosophy and religion.⁸ However, as in school-based mindfulness practices, school-based yoga does not include worship of a supernatural being or deity, devotion to a religious faith, or adherence to any beliefs or set of beliefs.³

Consider how the modern clock evolved from religious to secular, from a tool originally created exclusively to time prayer to a tool for maintaining academic schedules.²² Another relevant example is the distinction between choral reading of prayer in religious settings and the use of choral reading of poetry or drama in English class.³ The tools of yoga can be practiced in schools in a distinctly secular manner.^{3,8} A secular approach to school-based yoga utilizes effective yoga methodologies (e.g., awareness and attention training, physical postures, breathing techniques,

relaxation, meditation) without integrating the religious dogma of some forms of yoga practice and philosophy.^{5,6,8,23}

As yoga providers create programming for schools and consider their secularity, they should ask the following critical questions:

- What is the educational purpose of the program?
- How does the program enhance student learning and well-being?
- Do I have evidence that this practice is effective for the intended purpose?
- Does the type of yoga or the yoga practices I am offering include, or allude to, a set of beliefs?
- Does the content I am teaching conflict with, or have the potential to conflict with, students’ religious beliefs?

What Does it Mean to Be Aligned with Secular Ethics?

A secular approach to yoga in school can align with secular ethics. By definition, secular ethics is a branch of philosophy in which moral ethics are separated from religion. Within the context of a secular approach to yoga in schools, teachers can share positive principles and concepts from yoga without making religious connections or using Sanskrit words.⁸ In the school setting, this approach is often framed as promoting positive youth development through social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions.²⁴ As in other forms of SEL, a yoga teacher can address important social-emotional values that enhance emotional and relational well-being within the context of a secular program.^{3,21,25} A recent meta-analysis published in the journal *Child Development* analyzed 82 school-based SEL interventions involving 97,406 kindergarten to high school students.²⁴ Researchers found that participants fared significantly better than controls in social-emotional skills, attitudes, and indicators of well-being.²⁴ This report also noted other less frequently studied but notable outcomes (e.g., graduation rates and safe sexual behaviors) that further illustrated SEL’s improvement of critical aspects of students’ developmental trajectories. Given the substantial developmental benefits that have been shown in research over time, programs with SEL content are viewed as education-based public health approaches (see Greenberg et al.²⁵ for a review).

Much of the SEL and secular ethics content delivered within school-based yoga is currently being studied in the field of positive psychology.²⁶ According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL addresses five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness,

relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.²⁵ This includes knowledge and skill development in values, optimism, hard work, stress management, impulse control, perseverance, inclusion, and compassion.²⁵ Like CASEL competencies, secular ethics often delivered within the context of school-based yoga programs do not come from a spiritual or religious source, and they include similar concepts, such as gratitude, integrity, self-inquiry, loving-kindness, honesty, hope, caring for others, compassion for others, self-compassion, equanimity, nonharming, and joy.^{3,21}

Programs and teachers should consider the following questions when integrating ethical concepts into yoga programming in schools:

- What is my intention in teaching these concepts?
- Does the secular ethics content I am delivering enhance student SEL?
- If there is overlap between secular and religious ethics, am I delivering the content in a secular manner designed to enhance emotional and relational well-being?

Are Cultural Tools Appropriate in a Secular Environment?

Although we have discussed yoga as a set of practices, yoga also has a particular culture and history. Yoga culture is often associated with specific artifacts reflecting its long history, may be infused into religious and spiritual practices, and, at times, pays homage to the roots of these practices. Yoga culture often includes language (e.g., Sanskrit), rituals (e.g., use of incense, mala beads, mantras), and other symbols (e.g., deities, use of the prayer mudra, Om symbol). Many current forms of yoga embrace yoga culture and symbolism without a sense of its history or meaning, a phenomenon that is debated and challenged as cultural appropriation (a conversation beyond the scope of this article).

Integrating yoga culture into yoga practice can give the impression that the practice is religious and/or spiritual.^{3,23} It is important to share histories as histories within the appropriate developmental and educational contexts. But a growing body of research shows that using cultural artifacts or descriptive stories from historical cultures is not necessary for a school-based yoga program to be effective. For example, several secular programs have shown positive outcomes.^{17,18,27} It is recommended that anything that suggests religious significance in a practice should not be used without the appropriate context.³ For school-based yoga programs, cultural artifacts that are not exclusively historical (and presented as such) may create confusion regarding the secularity of a program and threaten to undermine secular programming.

It is important to note that when yoga is a part of a

teacher's culture and history, the capacity to share artifacts without misrepresentation may be greater. Note that the further one's own connection from the historical and cultural significance of artifacts, the more likely it seems to be that the objects might be misused or presented without clear connection to the histories.

Yoga providers should consider the following questions related to cultural artifacts when planning and implementing school-based yoga programs:

- Do any of the items I'm using have spiritual or cultural significance that may be interpreted as connected to a religious tradition?
- Am I aware of the historical significance of the artifacts and the meaning they might have to someone whose culture is being represented?
- Am I using language (e.g., Sanskrit) or music that contains religious references, or could be perceived as the language of a specific religion?
- Am I using items that are superfluous to the intended outcomes of the program but are being retained for the sake of tradition or custom (such as mala beads), or items that have been overlooked (such as clothing with deities or symbols)?

How Can a Secular Approach to Yoga Support Exploration and Transformation?

Yoga can be a practice that helps students develop and transform their sense of meaning, values, and possibility as they explore their inner worlds. A secular approach to yoga in schools invites inquiry into the meaning of the experience of yoga, just as a music course invites students to consider the meaning and significance of a discovery made while creating or listening to music, or as the study of history can invite students to explore their own experiences within a new context of understanding. The field of education provides a solid foundation for a secular framing in which to discuss transformative experience; see the exploration of Kessler's²⁰ work above. Teaching yoga must provide the student agency in the creation of meaning, just as viewing art or reading powerful literature does. A secular approach to yoga in schools can provide tools for inquiry and contemplation, rather than a set of beliefs, artifacts, or tools that unveil a prescribed truth.

A secular approach to yoga in schools can invite students to explore personal experience(s) with the practices while remaining aligned to legal mandates and creating an inclusive learning environment that welcomes students of all backgrounds and beliefs. But doing so successfully requires careful consideration and understanding. At the heart of a democratic education is the invitation to engage with a subject and to explore what it means to the learner.

Lev Vygotsky, whose theories underlie much of modern education, names the individual learner as an active agent in constructing meaning.²⁸ He points out that all people use tools to understand the world, and that we benefit from new tools when seeking to understand ourselves, our thoughts, and the world around us. We need new tools, such as painting, music, and language “to make clear to ourselves what we are thinking or contemplating.”²⁸ Yoga can be such a tool for learners. A secular approach to yoga in schools can acknowledge, invite, and include the experience of the student rather than prescribing the meaning of the experience. Sharing yoga as a tool encourages learners to use it to discover meaning about themselves and the world they live in; this is a process of introspection and reflection.

If we are to offer students the full benefits of yoga programming, we must acknowledge yoga as a practice of integration, not just a practice of physical exercise. Horton²⁹ acknowledges the risk of speaking about the mind-body connection in schools, and the parallel need to find meaningful and accurate ways to do so. Individual practitioners and programs discussing the experience of yoga often use the word *transformation*. Providers of school-based yoga programs may shy away from this conversation, feeling ill-equipped to explore this personal process in a reliably secular way. But failure to acknowledge the introspective and transformative experiences students may have through yoga can limit learning and positive outcomes, create confusion, and send mixed messages, diminishing the capacity to ensure secular programming. While finding the right language can be challenging, considering and expanding conversation on the topic of personal transformation is valuable.

A secular approach to yoga in schools can welcome the personal experience of yoga by positioning the practice as a contemplative one. Hyde and LaPrad³⁰ include mindfulness in schools in this context. They point out that the goal of contemplative practice is to know through personal inquiry, not by being told what to believe.³⁰ This acknowledgment of the role and inclusion of personal inquiry in meaning is aligned with a secular approach to sharing yoga.

Why Is it Important to Be Secular?

The first section of this article explored what it means to be secular. This second section addresses the question of why this approach is desirable and explores issues such as access, inclusion, and legal imperatives.

Does School-Based Yoga Prioritize Access and Inclusion?

Inclusive and accessible school-based yoga respects diverse religious and nonreligious beliefs, maintains separation of

church and state in principle and practice, and recognizes religious equality before the law.² This is consistent with the legal requirements of the First Amendment, which maintain religious neutrality in public schools and their associated activities.^{2,3} Secularism maintains a separation between state and religious institutions, recognizing religious equality before the law.

School-based yoga empowers youth to embrace effective mind-body integration, self-regulation, and physical fitness using yoga practices without the stress of negotiating religious and cultural values. A secular approach to school-based yoga maximizes that ability of programs to be equally appropriate and engaging for those of varied religious backgrounds, and for those coming from a position of non-belief. Because secularism maximizes inclusivity, this approach is recommended for private as well as public schools.²

Providers seeking to create or expand yoga programs in schools must consider how to maximize access and inclusion. Important questions to ask include the following:

- Will all students, regardless of their religious backgrounds, feel comfortable with the content in my yoga class? If not, why?
- Would parents and family members, regardless of their religion, feel free to embrace the practices without feeling conflict with their own beliefs?
- What specific aspects of my yoga program might act as a barrier to participation for students and families from a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds?

Given the complexity and nuances involved in the spiritual and cultural aspects of school-based yoga, it may be helpful to involve stakeholders in program design. Smith et al.³¹ suggest using the Deployment Focused Model that seeks stakeholder input in the initial phases of intervention planning to address issues such as acceptability, feasibility, and sustainability in school settings. This type of program initiation mode may also help address other areas of practicality in implementing school-based yoga by including the school staff, faculty, and administrators; researchers; as well as students and students’ families in the formative phases of a program.

How Can We Be Sure Our Teaching Is Aligned with Legal Imperatives?

There is a clear legal imperative for school-based yoga teachers to comply with U.S. federal law. Publicly funded schools in the United States must practice separation of church and state. Specifically, the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits public schools from advancing any particular religious belief over another, or over nonbelief.

The Free Exercise Clause requires public schools to accommodate the religious beliefs and practices of teachers and students when such practices do not interfere with the daily operation of the school.

In addition, a growing body of case law informs practice. In 2013, a group of parents unsuccessfully sued the public school system in Encinitas, California, because they believed that its district-wide yoga program was inherently religious and therefore unconstitutional.^{2,4-6,23} In 2015, the California Court of Appeals upheld the lower court's ruling that the Encinitas program was constitutional, stating that while the practice of yoga may be religious in some contexts, the classes in question were "devoid of any religious, mystical, or spiritual trappings."⁴ It is important to note that to be considered constitutional, a government practice must pass the following requirements of what is referred to as the Lemon test³²:

1. the governmental practice must have a secular purpose;
2. the program's primary effect must be one that neither advances nor inhibits religion; and
3. the program must not foster an excessive government entanglement with religion.³¹

When not being delivered in schools, yoga programs do not need to adhere to a secular approach, although many do for a variety of reasons, including to maximize inclusivity. To support schools, students, and families in having access to informed consent, yoga programs could be transparent with their degree of secularity and any associations with nonsecular organizations and/or schools of yoga. If there are associations, the yoga program can detail the ways in which the program is being delivered in a secular or nonsecular manner depending on the setting. Although a school may opt out of working with a program with nonsecular roots and/or associations, the transparency would allow them the information they need to do so.

The following questions will help yoga providers reflect on the content and intention of their teaching to ensure their programming is consistent with legal imperatives:

- What are the intended outcomes of the programming? Is the purpose entirely secular?
- Does the programming have the effect of advancing or inhibiting religion? Does it pass the Lemon test?
- Are any of the teachers leading the programming giving the impression of supporting or inhibiting any religion?

Conclusions and Future Direction

Yoga service providers working in schools have an obligation to recognize and uphold the principles of secularism, and to respect the diverse religious and nonreligious beliefs of the school community both in principle and in practice.²

There are substantial opportunities for collaboration and research to further address the issues explored in this commentary. For example, researchers could study how the different approaches to yoga might impact a child's social and emotional development. Does the integration of context, history, and culture along with the school-based yoga program shift the acceptability or effectiveness of the program in the school setting? Does the inclusion of SEL content influence yoga outcomes or impact child development positively or negatively? Again, it is important to acknowledge the tremendous complexity inherent in the nuances of yoga in schools. The authors hope that these complexities can be addressed from the perspective of an evolving process—one that builds on what is known and understood, is refined through conversation, and adapts as context shifts. Acknowledging academic freedom and the relative infancy of the field of yoga in schools, this commentary is offered as a line of inquiry rather than a set of mandates. Given legal imperatives and risk of exclusion, it is important to consider that failure to offer school-based yoga using a secular approach threatens to undermine the success of the field and hinder access to practices that have positive effects on young people.

Conflict-of-Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest. This study was not funded.

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