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# The Need of Teachers of Special Education Students and Processes to Improve Their Well-being and Temper a Sense of Stress

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## Abstract

### Keywords:

Special education schools; Special educational needs; Yoga; Stress; Well-Being; Practice; Burnout.

In Western countries, up to 40% of teachers report that their jobs and positions entail high levels of stress and tension, and many leave the teaching profession after a few years. High pedagogical and organizational demands pose a threat to the wellbeing special education teachers, which could cause burnout, stress reactions and anxiety. This paper deals with the need to develop a unique yoga based pedagogical intervention program for teachers who teach students with special needs. A comprehensive review of the research literature on the effect of yoga reveals significant improvements in the physical and emotional health of diverse populations defined by age, gender, occupation, health, and employment status. Therefore, Yoga seems to be an appropriate method to be embedded in the daily school routine in order to provide relief and reduce special education teachers' stress and anxiety levels. The primary conclusion of this paper reveals a need for a unique intervention program and that this is especially important for teachers generally, and teachers of special education specifically.

## Zusammenfassung

### Schlüsselworte:

Sonderschulen; Sonderpädagogische Bedürfnisse; Yoga; Stress; Wohlbefinden; Praxis; Burnout.

In den westlichen Ländern geben bis zu 40 % der Lehrer an, dass ihr Beruf und ihre Position mit einem hohen Maß an Stress und Anspannung verbunden sind, und viele verlassen den Lehrerberuf nach einigen Jahren. Hohe pädagogische und organisatorische Anforderungen stellen eine Bedrohung für das Wohlbefinden von Sonderschullehrern dar, was zu Burnout, Stressreaktionen und Angstzuständen führen kann. Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit der Notwendigkeit, ein einzigartiges, auf Yoga basierendes pädagogisches Interventionsprogramm für Lehrer zu entwickeln, die Schüler mit besonderen Bedürfnissen unterrichten. Ein umfassender Überblick über die Forschungsliteratur zur Wirkung von Yoga zeigt signifikante Verbesserungen der körperlichen und emotionalen Gesundheit verschiedener Bevölkerungsgruppen, definiert nach Alter, Geschlecht, Beruf, Gesundheit und Beschäftigungsstatus. Daher scheint Yoga eine geeignete Methode zu sein, die in den Schulalltag eingebettet werden kann, um den Stress- und Angstpegel von Sonderschullehrern zu reduzieren. Die primäre Schlussfolgerung dieser Arbeit zeigt, dass ein einzigartiges Interventionsprogramm benötigt wird und auch, dass dies besonders für Lehrer im Allgemeinen und Sonderschullehrer im Besonderen wichtig ist.

## 1. Introduction

In Western countries, the phenomenon of mental attrition among teachers, as well as possible means of handling the phenomenon and ways to prevent its occurrence, has been intensively studied since the 1970s (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). Teachers who drop out of the educational system are a social phenomenon that has been expanding in recent decades across the Western world (Ingersoll, 2001). Many teachers, especially at the beginning of their careers, tend to leave teaching permanently, including a considerable number of talented teachers (Arbib-Elyashiv, 2013). In Germany, 50% of all teachers retire early and half of them suffer from psychological problems such as exhaustion,

anxiety, and depression, all of which have been associated with mental burnout (Schneider-Levy, 2016). In England, the teaching profession is placed at the top of the list of the most stressful professions. In Switzerland, Scotland, Australia, and New Zealand, close to 80% of teachers are overloaded with work, which causes high levels of stress and burnout (Schneider-Levy, 2016). In the Israeli education system, the figures are similar: Half of teachers abandon instruction in the first five years (Schneider-Levy, 2016).

The purpose of this article is to discuss the needs of teachers of students with additional needs with a view to improving their sense of well-being, while

emphasizing the power of yoga to reduce their sense of stress by performing a series of emotional, mental, and physical exercises. "A healthy mind in a healthy body" is an expression coined by Maimonides about 800 years ago in medical writings on the health of the body and soul (Gamliel H., 2013). This is interpreted as a continuous exercise in yoga because the main influences are a healthy soul in the sense of emotional balance, mental strength, clarity and relaxation, and a healthy body in the sense of flexibility, fine posture and strengthening of all the body's systems (Yesudian & Haich, 1994).

In this paper I present a review of scientific research in respect of the effect of yoga practice on a sense of burnout, stress reduction and the development of a general sense of well-being with an emphasis on teachers in schools for students with additional needs.

The reason for selecting this specific population stems from the paucity of research in this field and the necessity to deal with challenging situations with the students placed in the centre. Later in this paper, I aim to outline a post-graduate level course for group yoga practice for teachers within the framework of their work environment with an emphasis on improved awareness and abilities to fortify their perception of optimal performance, both on a personal level and in the classroom. Thus, this study discusses the sense of despair of teachers who teach students with special needs in special education schools in Israel, to examine whether these teachers are aware of any decline in their sense of well-being. I will also present a unique yoga intervention program with the aim of strengthening the awareness of these teachers as regards their abilities to develop means of coping with feelings of stress and raising their sense of well-being, as well as developing pedagogical support methods while teaching.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1 Perspectives on the phenomenon of stress in schools*

The definition of the concept "stress", according to the literature, refers to a dynamic state between the person and his/her environment that requires adjustment, both in the positive and negative sense (Glicksman, 2009). The sources of stressors largely determine the severity of the stress and the ability to cope (Glicksman, 2009). According to theories on stress, it appears that there are several components to the concept, one of which is attributed to a

physiological aspect that is capable of causing damage to body tissues (Selye, 1956). Another component is social that causes damage to the social system (Smelser, 1963), and a third component is psychological, which refers to cognitive processes that violate the individual's emotional balance and mental integrity (Lazarus, 1966). However, in an attempt to understand the sense of emotional welfare or general well-being for people experiencing stress, measures of life-welfare can be found in a report written by Stiglitz (2015), in which he claims that the concept "life-welfare" includes all of the elements necessary to satisfy human needs combined with the possibility of working toward personal goals and sensing satisfaction from life (Stiglitz, 2009).

These goals are intended for the general population but when we examine the teacher population discussed in this paper, comprehensive knowledge of the work environment is essential for understanding the challenges on a daily basis. Schools, like other organizations, are emotion-laden spaces that teachers experience as part of their daily work with respect to their positions and roles and the students, colleagues, and parents (Gilad 2008). However, the special education school framework has unique social and pedagogical characteristics, such as values, educational theory, and work practice (Gilad 2008).

Like other organizations, teachers operate within organizational, environmental, and bureaucratic constraints, such as administration, human resources, job definitions, climate, policy, vision, and work norms (Bulkley & Fisler ,2003), which pose an additional challenge to their daily routine. Therefore, it is understandable that the difficulty in achieving personal goals, however important, may be unattainable at times despite the constant aspiration, whether consciously or not, towards mental well-being and stress reduction.

This paper attempts to shed light on improving ways of constructively coping with all of the above by promoting a shared yoga session within the familiar space of the school environment.

### *2.2 The potential of Yoga to reduce stress and anxiety at school*

Many studies indicate that continuous yoga practice has the potential to provide health benefits, including disease prevention and treatment (Nov, 2019). Persistent practice changes the practitioner's worldview and can inspire discipline and a healthier

way of life (Iyengar, 2000), in itself a goal preventing the erosion of teachers' well-being in general and teachers teaching students with additional needs in particular. Shmerling (2000) defines burnout or stress as a psychological withdrawal from work in response to stress or dissatisfaction with work and adds that the concept of attrition refers mainly to changes in motivation - loss of a sense of enthusiasm, excitement, or sense of mission at work. Cherniss (1980) notes that the discourse on stress refers mainly to a process that leads to negative attitudes and behaviors of the professional as a result of personal pressures. As part of one's efforts to develop a sense of resilience, we can learn from Sivananda's (1988) approach to five principles for managing a healthy lifestyle, beginning with physical exercise, relaxation methods and learning practical techniques for controlling breathing, thinking and proper nutrition. Vishnu-Devananda (1995) argues that these five principles are intended to lead the practitioner to an elevated state of consciousness that recognizes that an individual is more than the sum total of a single person, an acknowledgement that improves one's self-image. Sivananda and Vishnu-Devananda are two yoga teachers of many who have offered an approach to dealing with difficulties arising from diverse causes. As a result of publications and the increased Western trend towards yoga, there has been a tendency in recent years to conduct comprehensive studies on the effects of continuous and sporadic yoga practice to scientifically prove and understand the effects on the physical, emotional, and cognitive being. The National Institute of Medical Research in Britain allocated no less than £ 4 million to British universities in Newcastle and York to fund a comprehensive study of the health benefits of yoga (Nov, 2019). This dedicated funding demonstrates that health, education, and science practitioners increasingly recognize that practicing yoga, together with changes in lifestyle and nutrition, can effectively replace conventional medical care (Nov, 2019) or serve as additional therapy. The University of Sheffield Medical School and other institutions have conducted numerous clinical trials that demonstrate positive physiological changes, mental effects, and health benefits of regular yoga practice. These studies have led to the conclusion that regular practice can prevent and even cure many diseases (Nov, 2019).

Yoga has a variety of poses and is divided into standing positions, forward bends, backward bends, twists, squatting, sitting positions, etc. For example,

forward bends affect the nervous system and reduce blood pressure (Coulter, 2002). In addition, forward bends improve gastrointestinal functions and ease stress and anxiety (Zahor, 2008). In recent years clinical studies have shown an improvement in flexibility, posture, and body strength in a variety of people practicing yoga. Other studies examined the health effects of yoga on elderly populations. In Australia, for example, improvements in posture, mobility, and body strengthening were observed in elderly people who practice yoga regularly for about 30 minutes a day. A research article published in the United States two years ago examined the effect of yoga on a group of 26 athletes and found that the exercises dramatically improved the flexibility and posture of those athletes against a control group (Nov, 2019.) The yoga practice of combining breathing techniques and meditation leads to improvements in posture and strengthening of the body, and also to optimal changes in brain function, which, of course, boosts optimal physical functions (Yesudian & Haich, 1994). Constant yoga exercise enables better sleep quality, improves alertness during daylight hours, facilitates weight reduction and strengthens the immune system (Yesudian & Haich, 1994). Studies have shown that constant practice combining breathing techniques regulates secretion of cortisol, also referred to as a stress hormone, which explains why consistent and continuous exercise results in elevated serenity and relaxation (Nov, 2019). A study conducted at the University of Australia in 2009 examined the effects of yoga on a group of 131 people with anxiety problems. The study showed that continuous exercise for 10 weeks stabilized the cortisol levels of participants and significantly reduced anxiety. Yoga exercises include many relaxation techniques which can reduce symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Nov, 2019). The term stress refers to a violation of a state of balance in which an organism is positioned due to a physical or mental threat. Although people in the past may have been exposed to more stressful situations than those that threaten life today, contemporary society displays many physiological threats that elevate stress levels (Yesudian & Haich, 1994).

Sometimes stress becomes permanent and chronic, and the body loses its optimal state of physical equilibrium. Medical studies confirm that yoga is an effective mean to relieve tension created by stress and depression (Yesudian & Haich, 1994). Chen (2018), President of the Weizmann Institute, claims that stress

affects brain wiring and that there is a link between the stress the mother experienced during pregnancy and metabolic and mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety. Chen (2018) adds that physical activity produces chemicals in the body that improve mood and stimulate hormones and neurotransmitters, including endorphins, to reduce stress. In a study conducted at the Boston University School of Medicine in 2007, yoga practitioners found a high level of neurotransmitters in people who practiced yoga regularly, compared with a control group. Amongst the practitioners, higher levels were still present within an hour after the end of the yoga practice (Chen 2018). Lazar (in Cromie, 2006) conducted a study and found that meditation increases cortical plasticity in the brains of adults in areas important for cognitive and emotional processing and well-being. Lazar, who leads the study at Harvard Medical School, says these findings are consistent with studies that have shown that the region associated with music in the brain increases in size in the brains of musicians, and the same applies to brain regions associated with motor and visual activities in the minds of jugglers (in Cromie, 2006).

### 3. Conclusions

The purpose of this article is to discuss the need to improve the sense of well-being among teachers and to emphasize the power of yoga to reduce stress by focusing on teachers who work with students with special needs. In the literature review, studies have been presented that scientifically examine the effects of yoga practice and the benefits of reducing anxiety or stress and improving emotional mental and physical well-being.

School as an organization demands that teachers exhibit high level teaching skills in order to cater for their students' special educational needs. Within the school reality, teachers need to cater not only for their students' educational and personal needs but also for the parents of these students, as well as to contribute to teamwork and comply with formal administrative and bureaucratic demands that are more demanding than other school frameworks. Furthermore, in their nature, special education schools have unique educational policy and culture to which teachers need to adjust their everyday pedagogical practice. These demands might bring about a threat to the teachers' wellbeing who experience stress, burnout and reduced motivation and enthusiasm to answer those social and pedagogical job-related roles and workload. However, a look at the ministry of education general manager's circular (<https://apps.education.gov.il/mankal/default.aspx/20.2.22>) does not show any formal relation to reducing stress and anxiety among special education teachers.

Moreover, the pre-service teacher education curriculum in Israel does not take into account the well-being of teachers. Yoga appears to be an appropriate method to be embedded within the everyday school routine in order to provide relief and reduce special education teachers' stress and anxiety levels.

Within this framework, it seems necessary to formulate a unique intervention yoga program that includes a series of yoga practice sessions in schools, and then examine its impact on special education school culture and on teachers' perception of their well-being as a result of their participation in the Yoga program. The methodological design will be a pedagogical intervention program using a qualitative research methodology and an action research approach. The study will include teachers educating in special education schools for students with special needs. Teachers will participate in focus groups, observation, questionnaires, and interviews. The purpose is to obtain data and design a regimen suitable and compatible with the research population and the effects of the content for improvement and accuracy. It would be best if teachers could practice some of the exercises with the students during school hours because yoga is customizable, and everyone can partake in the session. At the same time, the message of the program is that a one-time or periodic practice provides a short-term response only. To create a solid foundation and gain and maintain the benefits mentioned, constant practice is recommended to promote an optimal lifestyle on personal and professional levels.

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