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**YOGA PRACTICE AS IN-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION
ACTIVITY: PRELIMINARY DATA FROM A QUALITATIVE
STUDY**

Denis Francesconi (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a) University of Verona, Via S. Francesco, 22, 37129, Verona, Italy, denis.francesconi@gmail.com

Abstract

Body-mind practices such as yoga and meditation are becoming more popular in Western society in general and in teacher education programs in particular. Meditative practices, more precisely, are a trendy topic nowadays both in science and education theory and practice, while yoga so far has obtained less attention. The psychophysical effects of such practices are usually investigated by cognitive neuroscience and psychology. However, the question of why and how such practices are implemented within teacher education programs is still very much unexplored. For instance, didactical design, implementation and evaluation of body-mind practices are questions that deserve further investigation. In this article, I present preliminary results from a qualitative study on a yoga course offered to high school teachers in the Italian province of Trento as non-institutional in-service activity. In particular, I focused on how the yoga teacher designs the course and how she implements and evaluates it, and, on the other side, how this course is perceived by participants, the school teachers. Preliminary results suggest that a yoga course for high school teachers requires *ad hoc* instructional design which differs from those for other audiences. While some school teachers perceive yoga as secondary activity if compared to more traditional training activities, they also appear to be attracted even though that is due mostly to personal reasons – such as wellbeing and relaxation – than professional ones. Further studies in this field are required.

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Keywords: Teacher education, yoga, wellbeing, qualitative methodology, self-awareness.



1. Introduction

Nowadays, we are witnessing a proliferation of body-mind and contemplative practices such as yoga and meditation with all the educational apparatus such as courses and schools. While quantitative and experimental research is providing a huge literature on the effects of these practices on the brain, body and mind (Lazard et al. 2005), much less has been done on the qualitative side of research in order to investigate educational values and perspective. Considering the ongoing massive penetration of these practices in Western societies and culture – especially in the form of embodied cognitive science (Francesconi 2011; Francesconi & Tarozzi 2012; Varela et al. 1991) – it seems to be necessary to foster more investigation in social and education sciences with a focus on qualitative approach. Indeed, educational implications of body-mind practices in adulthood – and in teacher education in particular – have been not sufficiently investigated. With this article, I follow this direction targeting the subjective lived experience of yoga teacher and school teachers participating in a yoga course.

2. Problem Statement

As said, it seems to be clear that contemplative practices such as yoga, mindfulness meditation, tai chi and many more are becoming more popular in Western society in general and in teacher education programs in particular. The social relevance of why and how this is happening is a topic that should be further investigated. Here, I present preliminary data from a qualitative study – a case study – about a specific experience which took place in Trento, Italy, in years 2014, 2015 and 2016. The problem to be investigated deals with didactical design, implementation and evaluation of the yoga course offered to high school teachers as non-institutional training activity.

3. Research Questions

The research question has been split in two different questions:

- How does yoga teacher design, implement and evaluate the course?
- What do participants (the school teachers) think and feel about the course? And how does it influence teachers' self-awareness?

3.1. How does yoga teacher design, implement and evaluate the course?

The problem of how yoga teachers prepare their courses in terms of instructional design, implementation strategies and evaluation, especially when intended for school teachers, is certainly underestimated. Considering the raising number of such activities, it becomes important to acquire knowledge on the methods of implementation and the theoretical dimensions used by yoga teachers as background of their activities.

3.2. What do participants (school teachers) think and feel about the course? And how does it influence teachers' self-awareness?

In the case of this study, participants are high school teachers. School teachers in general are certainly not acquainted with body-mind practices in their professional development programs, both initial and in-service programs. However, in this case, I had the opportunity to study a project which can throw light on this point.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study relies on the intention to investigate possible ways to design and implement yoga courses for teacher education programs and to understand their influence on teachers' self-awareness.

5. Research Methods

I made use of in-field observations, semi-structured interviews, document analysis. A yoga course offered to high school teachers (n. 24) as part of their in-service training program has been followed for one year and a half and data constantly collected. Qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo) has been used for data analysis. Data analysis is still ongoing at the moment. The choice of a qualitative approach to study yoga practice depends on the little literature about qualitative research on this practice in educational studies and in particular in teacher education.

The research method I adopted is an adjusted phenomenological method consistent with both the phenomenological research philosophy (Tarozi and Mortari, 2010) and the research questions. Three different data collection strategies were employed: a) in-field observation, b) semi-structured open-ended interview, and c) document analysis. The semi-structured interviews were based on standard qualitative methods developed in order to capture thick experience descriptions. In order to do that, I made use of suggestions coming from a revision of DES – Descriptive Experience Sampling Method (Hurlburt, & Heavy 2001; 2004; 2006) – and the second-person method as suggested by Petitmengin (2006; 2010), which consists of an interactive interview process to facilitates subjects in refining experience descriptions (Gallagher & Francesconi 2012).

The data analysis phase, which, as said, is still ongoing, follows a standard six steps phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 2009). In particular: 1) reading several times the texts data to increase familiarity and get the whole sense of the texts; 2) marking meaning units; 3) collecting meaning units in themes; 4) abstracting themes in phenomenological clusters; 5) memo and research diary to trace the decisions taken by the researchers. A phenomenological cluster consists in a recurrent theme within the subjects' reports (Lutz et al., 2002). The emerging meaning units, themes and clusters follow a hierarchical structure consistent with our need of data conceptualization to reach wide and recursive topics. The three levels of abstraction were constantly compared and revised according to the evolutionary and recursive logic of qualitative approach. According to the traditional modalities of qualitative and phenomenological research (Kvale, 1996; Mortari, 2007; Tarozi, 2008), research's

journal and memoing are used to trace the path that the researchers performed during the research process.

5.1. Participants selection

This study is based on a case study that has been chosen for its relevance and uniqueness in the territory, therefore convenient sampling was employed. As pointed out by the yoga teacher, this course is one of the very few activities of this kind in the entire North Italy. The course was based on school temporal progression, from September 2014 to June 2015, but it was established two years earlier and continued one year after. I have follow the school year 2014/15 and then from September 2015 to March 2016. At the beginning of the school year, participants to the yoga course were around 24, at the end they were 8/10. The yoga teacher reports that that was a normal drop-out rate due to the approaching end of the school year. Participants were 24 with only 2 males, which is a normal rate, again, in the words of the yoga teacher. Average of work experience age and personal age was in line with normal teachers' population.

The yoga teacher is one of the initiators of the introduction of yoga in schools in the Nord-East area of Italy. She has decades-long experience, she is 60 years old; she was trained through various masters and courses.

The course is part of a project entitled "Progetto Benessere" (Wellbeing Project) and it is a bottom-up initiative that has been created and carried out by a group of teachers of three different high schools in Trentino with the support of their principals. However, and this is a relevant point, the course was not part of the regular institutional teacher training offer.

5.2. Task and procedure

Participants enrolled in a yearlong in-service teacher training program. This course was offered for the third time in the same format and location. Participants participated on a voluntary base and no compensation of any kind was provided. All participants were informed about the study and the interviewed participants signed the informed consent. All data were kept anonymous and safely backed up in data base. No specific task and procedure was assigned by the researcher. The researcher simply carried out in-field observations, interviews, document analysis about an independent ongoing activity.]

6. Findings

[Here below I have listed the main categories emerged so far from data analysis; they are divided in "yoga teacher perspective" and "yoga course participants" (the high school teachers).

6.1. Yoga teacher perspective

From the interviews with the yoga teacher, in-field observations and document analysis, the preliminary categories emerged are the following:

- **Designing the course: yoga course as *community of practice***: A yoga course for teachers differs from standard yoga courses in terms of activities, goals and settings. The yoga teacher speaks of "communities of practice" at school with regards to this course. In fact, the school teachers themselves organized it and then attended to it, also thanks to the sensibility of the schools' leaders, even if this course was not considered as an official and formal training course. In this project - called Wellbeing Project - there is therefore a great individual effort by the teachers, who were almost volunteering. The fact that the group is so cohesive in carrying out the project says a lot about the interest that teachers have in this regard. The yoga teacher emphasizes that yoga, as well as meditation, is necessarily a community of practice; in spite of what is commonly believed, these are not just individual activities. These activities, in fact, facilitate the sociality, the desire and almost the necessity of the other, help to open up to the other, invoke it. The relational dimension is crucial to yoga. Designing a yoga course for school teachers means to think about it as a community of practice. In this sense, co-designing with school teachers and principals was crucial: from the choice of the location, to the timetable, everything was shared since the very beginning of the course plan.

- **Implementing the yoga course considering teachers' needs**: the yoga teacher has many decades of experience in teaching yoga to different kind of audiences, including teachers. She admits that "teachers lack systematic attitude and patience, and this is not just in yoga classes! While the boys need stability and are constantly looking for balance, teachers are not always in balance. Yoga with the kids works well, maybe better than with the teachers." (2a)
In designing and implementing the course she takes all of that into consideration trying to favour a climate of welcoming and care while still promoting a culture of challenge. "Teachers should be taught that they can make it, they can do it. I say that because they lack motivation. And there is nothing better than yoga to do this, promoting bodily awareness and positive self-image. We must rediscover the logic of the potential in each person and the will to reach goals, too often overlooked by teachers because they are too tired or demotivated." (1a) The yoga teacher affirms that implementing a course like this one means to promote self-motivation in school teachers.

- **Welcoming difficulties**: the yoga teacher talks about the necessity of "opening the world of possibilities". This is her definition of yoga: "What you experience in certain complex and even painful yoga positions is your limit and I train the ability to overcome it, to resist by letting go, breathing deeply and calmly right in the most difficult moment. All of this is not easy but what I admire the most is the effort of the participants in challenging themselves." (2a). Moreover, she speaks about "welcoming difficulties" ("accoglienza della difficoltà"): it is necessary to "stop and recognize difficulties right in the moment when they emerge, somehow welcoming them, questioning them and letting them go". (2a)

- The teachers' body on the mat: the yoga teacher indicates the body as crucial problematic topic in teacher education, which is too often simply forgotten. In this case, obviously, the physical dimension is very much important: in a yoga course, indeed, multisensorial stimulation is promoted. The yoga teacher says that the bodily dimension during the yoga course put participants in a condition that is almost comparable to the one of "nudity", especially if compared to the daily formalism typical of the teachers' profession. The yoga teacher sees and perceives how much embarrassed teachers are, especially in the beginning of the course, to show themselves in sport suit, bare feet, or yoga pants. She suggests that teachers might experience shyness and embarrassment, that they drop out or even do not enrol in the course because of embarrassment despite their interest to participate. At the same time, being there with their *lived body* on the mat has some advantages: this situation makes it possible and necessary to drop the limits and barriers that separate oneself from his own body. In order to participate to such course, it is necessary to expose, to provoke, to be true and honest without fear of being judged and without judging. In standard classrooms, there are many barriers and much distance between students and teachers but also within teachers themselves, that is between the *body-as-object* and *body-as-subject*: "The educational relationship is a relationship that requires raw truth, and I say it reasonably because I am a teacher myself and a yoga teacher too. The lived body is the truth". (2a)
- Intersubjectivity: often yoga teacher proposes exercises that must be done together in pairs or groups of three. She says: "I make them work in pairs or groups as a way to dismantle their defences and to remove dangerous individualisms. I also propose exercises in groups of three, where beside the pair there is a third participant which, sometimes, can be me. In these multiple dimensions, I try to make clear that 'you need the other, not me'. They like support from me, but my support must be taken away sooner or later and they must be able to continue alone or with their colleagues. Trusting the other is a real challenge in yoga". (2a)
- The needs of school teachers: high school teachers demand for more attention to their wellbeing, however, practices like yoga are sometimes still perceived as secondary or exotic activities. Teachers' main reasons to participate to such course are wellbeing, stress prevention, recreation. The yoga teacher refers that the training needs of teachers, as they report them, are mainly based on personal and psychological needs, such as relaxation, calm, silence: "Teachers ask above all to work on relaxation, they have too much stress or they are not able to handle it. They also ask for physical fitness and that sometimes mean physical fitness such as curing neck ache and back pain." (1a) This seems to be in contrast with didactical aims of the yoga teacher, which are mainly based on self-awareness, emotion regulation and flourishing.
- The example of the boat pose (figure 1): the yoga teacher gives a definition of yoga: "A metaphor for yoga: calm in the storm. There is an exercise that is a very good example: the boat. In this pose, teachers usually give up too easily while students keep the position longer: they give up too easily and in this position I ask them to force their limits to discover new

regions of themselves. You need to listen to your body and to learn to perceive. It is important to observe the trembling, vibration, and small muscular spasms, to look at it from the outside, not to stick to it and to surrender immediately: get out of it by looking at the trembling from the outside. It is necessary to listen to the emergence of the trembling, its growing dynamics and know how to deal with the relaxation of the muscles. Relaxing while in tension, this is a tough task.” The yoga teacher says that the effects of the boat pose could be easily transferred to classroom experience, and teachers could use them to face stress or to regulate emotions.

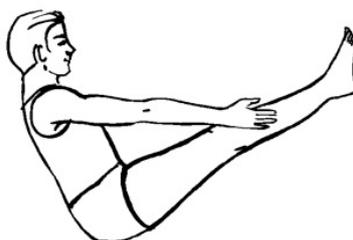


Figure 01. Boat pose

6.2. School teachers' perspective.

Teachers perspective have been acquired by in-field observations and semi-structured interviews to four participants. Here I present the main categories emerged so far:

- Non-judging attitude and intersubjectivity: a school teacher talks about positive effects of yoga practice in these terms: “I find a lot of interest in this practice and I have to say that in the past I have been confronted already with yoga experiences at school with a remarkable outcome on interpersonal relationships: in yoga practice you learn not to judge the other and to accept limits and diversity, something very important for people who have to work together. In the beginning, it is always a bit strange to see your colleagues in the room in yoga pants doing complicated yoga poses, but after a while you start to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.” (3)
- Wellbeing: following the question “How can yoga promote wellbeing for teacher? How do you think experiential practices such as yoga can promote the wellbeing of teachers?” a school teacher replied like that: “First of all, teaching to work on your own breath, so as to appease anxiety and slow down the time... Then it has an effect on reconsidering the importance of positive thinking, so you can change your point of view on things. Kids often carry a tense experience, sometimes of anger or of deep dissatisfaction. I think it is important that teachers are in the position to help them channelling any negative energy in the right way, developing positive listening and acceptance patterns. (4)

7. Conclusion

A yoga course for teachers seems to require *ad hoc* instructional design when compared to those usually offered to non-teaching participants. In particular, the yoga teacher who participated to this study suggests that specific yoga poses must be selected in order to tackle specific psychophysical goals that can be useful or even necessary for teachers in their work. An example consists of the “boat pose”, a position that can be used to stimulate self-control and emotion regulation.

The selection of the physical environment where to take the course is also crucial. In this case, the cooperation of the schools’ principals and teachers is fundamental in order to provide the right location, which, in this case was free and easily accessible. The “yoga community of practice”, as yoga teacher names it, is very much relevant in determining all course design. In terms of evaluation, the yoga teacher says that she carried out a constant evaluation process by staying close to participants, talking to them and monitoring them in real time both in terms of yoga skills acquisition and psychophysical changes.

On the side of teachers, it seems that while some teachers perceive this body-mind practice as a secondary activity if compared to more traditional training activities, they also appear to be attracted to them even though mainly for personal reasons than professional ones.

Even if the course was not institutional and it was not formally recognized as providing credits for the annual teacher education program, high school teachers participated regularly in a good number (n. 24 at the beginning of the course, around n. 10/12 at the end). This suggests personal interest of teachers in this activity. In the final semi-structured interview, teachers also confirmed that they would like to participate to further similar initiatives.

However, a problem about transferrable knowledge emerged. As suggested by the yoga teacher, she tries to provide transferrable knowledge, knowledge that teachers can learn during the yoga course and implement in classroom, for instance on the topics of self-control or emotion regulation. However, teachers didn’t show strong interest in transferring knowledge from yoga course to their teaching style and behaviour. They appeared to be mostly interested in immediate personal effects of yoga – such as wellbeing and relaxation – than in its possible professional outcomes.

While the experience of this yoga course can be considered a positive experience both for yoga teacher and school teachers, further studies need to be done in this area to better evaluate feasibility of yoga courses in teacher education programs. |

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