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Laura Bartsch

Minnesota State University Mankato

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The Impact of Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques Implemented Within Minnesota School Settings: A Program Proposal for Waseca Junior and Senior High School

Laura Bartsch, LSW
Department of Social Work
Minnesota State University, Mankato
Waseca Public Schools

Purpose
The purpose of this research project is to gain insight into the extent of the use of relaxation-oriented curriculums within Minnesota schools through the distribution of an email survey. Additionally, a review of empirical literature was conducted to identify and evaluate evidence-based relaxation-oriented curriculums and to create a proposal for implementation at Waseca Junior and Senior High Schools.

Statement of the Problem
Children in today’s schools face a myriad of barriers to learning, creating difficulty in achieving academic success and emotional stability. Studies have shown that children with mental health diagnoses and students receiving special education services within school settings, along with those who have increased stress and anxiety, are at a higher risk of academic struggles and social barriers (Allen & Klein, 1996). Studies also report that reducing stress levels in children promotes the development of social and emotional skills, while increasing academic performance (Gates & Wollowton, 2007). As reported by Gillen and Gillen (2007), “research shows that addressing the emotional needs and developing the emotional skills of children enriches their lives, increases their academic ability, and builds resiliency (p. 170).”

The use of relaxation-oriented techniques in schools has been linked to increased academic achievement and work habits, as well as improved behavior and overall desirable school outcomes (Slovacek, Tucker, & Pantoja, 2003).

Methodology
The methodology of this research project included two phases. Phase one included a survey research design to explore current use of relaxation-oriented techniques in Minnesota public schools. A convenience sampling method was used to identify school social workers from various public schools around the state of Minnesota. This survey was distributed via email to 61 Minnesota school social workers.

Phase two of the project included a systematic review of the literature regarding relaxation-oriented curriculums identified by the researcher and the Waseca Junior and Senior High School social worker. The selected relaxation-oriented curriculums included Yoga Calm, Yoga Ed, and Ready…Set….R.E.L.A.X. This review included researching the impact, overall goals and scope, and contextual fit for implementation at the Waseca Junior and Senior High School. Research was located through various databases (including Academic Search Premier, Sage Premier, Dissertations & Theses, and ProQuest) for scholarly and empirical articles and through the review of individual curriculum websites.

Data Results
Sixty-one surveys were distributed via email in April 2012. Five responses were received (N=5), resulting in a response rate of 8%. The surveys returned indicated that:

• Four respondents identified as working in a rural school district.
• Four respondents reported that they work with junior and/or senior high school students.
• Two respondents currently using relaxation-oriented techniques (one with consistent use and the other reporting use on only the special education population within the school).

Limitations and Strengths
There were two main limitations related to the survey conducted during this project. First, the low response rate may be attributed to the use of an email survey method. Second, the timing of the survey may have contributed to a lower response rate, as school social workers were likely busy completing end of the year tasks during the last four weeks of the school year.

A limitation related to the systematic literature review was the paucity of empirical data related to the effectiveness of specific relaxation-oriented curriculums within school settings. Although it is likely that there is increasing implementation of relaxation-oriented curriculums in school settings, there are few published research studies (Khalas, Hickey-Schultz, Cohen, Steiner, & Cope, 2012).

Despite the above limitation, a strength of this project included the existence of empirical data on the three selected relaxation-oriented curriculums. This allowed for comparison of curriculum components and outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations
Yoga Ed has the most comprehensive program that is geared toward classroom implementation. Furthermore, after completing a comparison of empirical literature, it appears that Yoga Ed has more positive outcomes for students as it relates to impact on behaviors and overall well-being. Yoga Ed is the selected program in this implementation. Interested individuals in classroom settings and contextually fits Waseca Junior and Senior High School. Yoga Ed increases self-esteem, overall behaviors, academic scores, and concentration, all while lowering levels of stress and anxiety.

It is recommended that Waseca Junior and Senior High School implement the Yoga Ed curriculum to benefit students, staff, and the community as a whole. The implementation of Yoga Ed will require the training of a Yoga Ed instructor, as well as the purchase of curriculum materials. If Yoga Ed proves to be cost prohibitive, Waseca Junior and Senior High School may want to consider one of the other related identified relaxation-oriented curriculums.

References are available from the author upon request.

References

