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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

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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 School.

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 concerns 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 & Wolverson, 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. 150). The use of relaxation-oriented techniques in schools has been linked to increased academic achievement and work habits, as well as improved behaviors and overall desirable school outcomes (Slovacek, Tucker, & Pantoja, 2003).

Research Questions

- What is the extent of use and impact of relaxation-oriented curriculums in Minnesota schools?
- Which relaxation-oriented curriculum would best fit the Waseca Junior and Senior High School for classroom implementation?

Literature Review

There are an array of relaxation-oriented techniques and activities that have been studied, which include, but are not limited to: yoga, mindfulness activities, deep breathing, and meditation. There is abundant literature to support the health benefits related to the use of relaxation-oriented techniques. The scope of the literature narrows when applied specifically to school setting. Despite this lack of research on school settings, available studies suggest that relaxation-oriented techniques improve test scores, increase memory, reduce stress, and develop lasting coping skills; all of which are beneficial to the child in a learning environment. There are various curriculums and programs that exist for application within schools, including *Yoga Calm*, *Ready...Set...Relax*, Center for Mindfulness, Yoga Kids International, and more. Minnesota schools have implemented such programs around the state. These programs all have the same intent- to promote academic and emotional success through the use of relaxation-oriented techniques. In a study that was researching the relationship between relaxation-oriented techniques and academic achievement, results showed that with exposure to a relaxation curriculum, students earned higher GPAs, along with improved work habits and cooperation, which was maintained for an average of 2 years, as compared to those who did not participate (Benson, 2000). Allen and Klein (1996) report that research shows a direct correlation between stress and anxiety levels with lower test achievement and lower intelligence scores. They conclude that there is an inverse relationship between anxiety and achievement in schools, further promoting the need for a relaxation-oriented curriculum within the classroom.

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 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

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

Phase Two Results: The systematic review of the literature revealed that all three curriculums vary in composition with all being supported by the empirical literature and designed for classroom implementation (see Table 1). Although *Yoga Calm* and *Ready...Set...R.E.L.A.X.* have individual strengths, it is *Yoga Ed* that has the greatest number of positive outcomes on students (see Table 2). Furthermore, *Ready...Set...R.E.L.A.X.* was the curriculum with the fewest positive outcomes, and was the least comprehensive in composition. The tables below illustrate the specific comparisons of components and outcomes of the selected curriculums.

Curriculum Comparisons

Table 1: A comparison of the components of the relaxation-oriented curriculums

Curriculum	Addresses all grades	Empirical literature support	Evaluation built in	Classroom oriented	Addresses students & teachers
Yoga Calm	X	X		X	X
Yoga Ed	X	X	X	X	X
Ready...Set...R.E.L.A.X.		X	X	X	

Table 2: A comparison of the outcomes of the relaxation-oriented curriculums

Curriculum	Increased self-esteem	Improved student behaviors	Increased academic scores	Improved attendance	Lowered stress/anxiety	Increased concentration
Yoga Calm		X		X		X
Yoga Ed	X	X	X		X	X
Ready...Set...R.E.L.A.X.	X		X		X	

Curriculums Reviewed

- Yoga Calm*- a relaxation-based curriculum for implementation with the K-12 classroom that focuses on tools that address children's stress management and social/emotional skills.
- Yoga Ed*- a yoga-based curriculum for parents, teachers, children, and health professionals that improve academic achievement, physical fitness, emotional intelligence and stress management.
- Ready...Set...R.E.L.A.X.*- a research-based curriculum for classroom implementation that addresses grades K-6, which promotes relaxation, learning, and self-esteem.

Limitations and Strengths

There were two main limitations related to the survey conducted during this project. First, the low response rate of the survey reduces the ability to generalize the data and restricts the ability to conduct any meaningful data analysis. Thus, the data/results of this survey should be cautiously interpreted and are not representative of all Minnesota schools. 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 (Khalsa, 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 & 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 evidence-based curriculum that has supported its effectiveness 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 identified relaxation-oriented curriculums.

Due to funding limitations, it is recommended that Waseca Public Schools request grant funding to train an instructor and purchase needed materials, such as from the Waseca Area Foundation. This will require the school to decide on specific curriculum and training needs related to the program. This will help to determine the overall cost associated with implementation.

Implications for Practice

- Rural school systems face significantly more barriers in accessing services and programs than do urban schools (Caudhill, 1993). Waseca Public Schools are currently in the process of consolidating schools and reducing budget costs, this may be a barrier to implementing a relaxation-oriented curriculum.
- Research shows there is a direct correlation between emotional and behavioral struggles with overall poor school outcomes, creating a significant need for social workers to work with at-risk populations (Simpson & Peterson, 2012). If implemented, populations at risk, including students with mental health diagnoses and students receiving special education services within the Waseca Junior and Senior High School would benefit from the positive behavioral and emotional outcomes of *Yoga Ed*.
- The lack of research specific to the benefits of implementing relaxation-oriented curriculums prompts the need for additional efforts in evaluating the outcomes of specific curriculums. If implemented within the Waseca Junior and Senior High School, there is a need for the social worker to actively evaluate the outcomes of the *Yoga Ed* curriculum on the students and staff. Evaluation may not seem feasible given the demanding workload of school social workers, however, to make evaluation efforts less time consuming, collaborating with local colleges and universities is recommended.
- The survey design could be improved by utilizing a more comprehensive list of recipients, such as the Minnesota School Social Workers Association listserv. Also, the survey should be administered earlier in the school year, to promote a higher response rate. Consideration of a mail versus email survey may also be beneficial in strengthening the design.

References

References are available from the author upon request.