

Research

Interpretive phenomenological analysis of a lawsuit contending that school-based yoga is religion: A study of school personnel

Catherine Cook-Cottone, Erga Lemish, Wendy Guyker

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Correspondence: catherine.cook.cottone@gmail.com

Abstract

This study focused on the perspectives of school personnel affiliated with the Encinitas Union School District in California following a lawsuit arguing that their yoga-based program included religion and therefore was unsuitable for implementation in public schools and was unconstitutional. Participants ($N = 32$) were interviewed using a semi-structured interview, and data were analyzed according to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Five super-ordinate themes (including sub-themes) were identified in an iterative process, including: participants' perspectives on the roots of yoga and the type of yoga taught in their district; the process of introducing a yoga-in-the-schools program in light of this contention (including challenges and obstacles, and how these were met); perspectives on the lawsuit and how the process unfolded; effects of the lawsuit on school climate and beyond; and perspectives on yoga as, and as not, religious. The study attempts to shed light on the impact of an ongoing lawsuit on a school district at the time of implementation of a program for students' well being.

Introduction

In the past several years, there has been a growing movement of bringing yoga and mindfulness into K-12 schools, recognizing the impact of these practices on children and adolescents' health and well being (e.g., for a review of yoga programs in the United States; see Butzer et al.¹). Researchers have been studying these programs, including: their effects on children and adolescents' physical and mental health; their ability to manage stress; regulate their emotions; concentrate on academics; and overall academic achievement²⁻⁶. As this movement continues to grow, some parents, and other individuals in the communities where these programs are offered, are expressing concerns regarding the potential religious elements that these practices introduce to their children that may conflict with their own

religious beliefs and those they wish to instill in their children. This debate gained further public awareness when one family of two children at a school in Encinitas, California (CA) sued their school district, arguing that the yoga program offered was introducing religion into the school and therefore was unconstitutional. While the legal system has ruled in favor of the district (twice), these arguments raise questions regarding the public perception of these school-based programs, and what is (and is not) actually taught to children within this educational context. In this article, we attempt to answer these questions, along with a focus on the challenges faced by school personnel while attempting to implement a school-based yoga program at the time of a lawsuit and ongoing public debate—including the presence of strong voices in both opposition and support of the program—among the local community. Due to the historical nature and the implications for other districts working to implement school-based yoga, a phenomenological analysis (PA) was conducted to document the experience of the school personnel working within Encinitas Union School District (EUSD). This study briefly reviews the timeline of the lawsuit, then details the PA methods and outcomes, and addresses implications for future research.

Program Development and Implementation

In 2011, the EUSD, included nine K-6 Elementary schools served approximately 5,400 children in Encinitas, CA (situated 20 miles North of San Diego, in the Southern region of CA). Initially, yoga was introduced to the school district in one of the nine schools. One instructor taught yoga to upper classes and children in special education, with no particular curriculum. This initial yoga program, and what evolved to be the larger, district-wide yoga program, was funded by the Sonima Foundation (formerly Jois Foundation, and now referred to as Pure Edge, Inc.). The Sonima Foundation was a non-profit, public corporation that worked to promote health and wellness programs in K-12 schools. Given positive feedback, in the summer of

2012, the district received additional funding from the Sonima Foundation to take the program district-wide during the 2012–2013 academic year. The school hired a new staff member to develop the curriculum and lead the implementation process of what, from this point forward, was referred to as a larger Health and Wellness program (HWP), that included yoga as one of its key components. The bulk of the curriculum was developed during that summer, and continued to be developed and refined throughout the following academic year.

The EUSD's comprehensive HWP was designed to improve student health and wellness and provide students with techniques, habits, and training for life-long health and wellness. This larger HWP program was comprised of four components: (1) on the mat (i.e., the yoga program); (2) through my actions (i.e., character education); (3) out in the garden (i.e. curriculum anchored in school gardens); and in the kitchen (i.e., nutrition and cooking curriculum).⁷ Specifically, this study focused on the portions of the HWP that included yoga. The specific aspects of yoga that were included in the program include: yoga poses, breath work, meditation, and relaxation. Note, the HWP curriculum integrated the yoga and character education portions of the program. The yoga and character education sessions varied by age, with shorter and less conceptual sessions for younger children. Each session included: focus (5 minutes); movement (10 to 20 minutes); relaxation (2 to 5 minutes); and enrichment (i.e., yoga-based activity or character education activity; 5 to 15 minutes). Each student was scheduled for two sessions a week. The first session introduced the character trait and involved more movement, breath work, and relaxation. The second session included focused movement and relaxation, yet emphasized work on the character trait.

Notably, according to the program developer, the program was designed to be explicitly secular (For more on the HWP at EUSD go to, <http://ww2.eusd.net/about/Pages/Health-and-Wellness.aspx>). Specifically, the focus content involved introducing the character trait of the week (e.g., altruism), controlled breathing exercises, and exercises connecting breath and movement. The movement component involved yoga sequences using child friendly, animal and other secular names for yoga poses. The relaxation component included attention to the heart rate, attention to breathing, and a revisiting of the character trait. The enrichment component included more time in yoga and active practice during the first session of the week, while the second session focused more on traditional character education activities.

The program was offered to the district in a two-phase rollout process, partly due to collaboration with a team of researchers from the University of San Diego, who were examining aspects of the implementation. During phase

one, or the Fall of that academic year, five of the nine schools received the health and wellness (HW) classes, while the four additional schools served as controls. Later, during the spring, all nine schools received the program. At this point, there was one instructor per school and some of the students received the HW classes twice per week, while others received them once per week. The group of instructors began meeting regularly in the Fall to discuss aspects of curriculum and implementation.

The HWP then continued to develop with additional funding from the Sonima Foundation, and in the 2013–2014 academic year, each of the nine schools had two HW instructors (HWIs) on staff, for a total of 18 instructors district-wide. Classes were standardized for all students, with each child ideally receiving HW instruction twice per week. At this time, an additional character development part of the curriculum, incorporating character traits such as “altruism” and “perseverance” into the previously developed curriculum, was added. During the following academic year of 2014–2015, the HWP continued to be offered according to this model.

The Lawsuit

While the HWP was being offered at EUSD schools, a parallel process was taking place in the legal realm. During the first year of the program (academic year 2012–2013), a sizeable number of approximately 30 families began to express concerns to school administration regarding the content of the health and wellness program, specifically in relation to religious content being presented to the children. The school responded to these concerns by providing alternatives to the program (i.e., providing an opt-out option for children and their families), as well as through increasing information about, and transparency of, the program (e.g., inviting parents to observe a class). Unsatisfied, parents of two students from one family at one of the schools filed a lawsuit against the district. This family was represented by the National Center for Law and Policy, a non-profit legal defense organization that: “focuses on the protection and promotion of religious freedom;” holds at its core the values of “faith, family, freedom;” receives funding from churches, among other donors; and describes its attorneys as prepared to defend against “enemies of freedom” as they “witness a mounting number of assaults on faith, family and freedom” (taken directly from the organization webpage at: <http://www.ncplaw.org>). The argument behind the lawsuit was that EUSD's HWP brings religion into its schools, and therefore goes against the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution. On the defense side, a group of over 100 families of children in the district who were in support of the HWP formed the unincorporated association YES! (Yoga for Encinitas Students). They were

represented by lawyers at the Coast Law Group, a firm that was founded on the principle that both businesses and environmental communities deserve representation, and who provided their services pro-bono (Coast Law Group, <http://www.coastlawgroup.com>). The district's Superintendent also served as a defendant, and various expert witnesses provided evidence on both sides of the argument.

The first trial took place over six days in June 2013. The ruling was in favor of the defendant (EUSD), arguing that the HWP did not constitute an establishment of religion that was in violation of Article 1, Section 4 of the California Constitution. The following October, the plaintiffs (the family opposing the program) appealed the ruling and the case was brought to the state (CA) supreme court. One and a half years later, in April 2015, the state appeals court again ruled in favor of the district, further affirming the initial ruling. Shortly thereafter, at the end of that month, these researchers conducted their interviews with EUSD staff and personnel.

Up until this point, studies have focused on the impact of yoga and mindfulness programs on students' cognitive abilities and physical and mental health^{8,9}. No study thus far has examined the particular case of EUSD's school personnel's experiences and perceptions of the program, specifically in regard to the religious/spiritual dimensions and within the context of an ongoing lawsuit and public debate, which was the emphasis of this study.

Methods

In order to study district personnel's experiences of implementing a HWP based on yogic principles, at the time of a lawsuit against the district arguing that yoga is a religion and therefore unconstitutional and inappropriate to be taught within their schools, the researchers employed a qualitative approach designed for studying small groups of individuals with a shared major event—Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach has its foundations in hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation, arguing that humans are “sense-making” beings, and therefore will attempt to make meaning out of their experiences (phenomenology)¹⁰. In IPA, researchers conduct in-depth interviews and then analyze the transcribed text according to an iterative (or cyclical) process. This includes the underlying assumption that there are different ways to understand the data, and therefore it is necessary to return to the data as they make meaning of it. According to IPA, the interpretative process occurs on two levels: 1) the participant/interviewee making meaning of their experience and verbalizing it to the researcher; and 2) researchers themselves engage in a meaning making process of the interviewee's experience; making the final product multifaceted.¹⁰

Note, within the IPA process researchers should take every precaution in interpretation of the data to be true to the source (i.e., the meaning as expressed by the participant). This is especially important here as the researchers have extensive experience in yoga in the schools research. Accordingly, researchers must stay mindful that their interpretation, by nature of their roles and experience, cannot be completely free of bias. While this is the first IPA study within the literature and movement of yoga in the schools, other studies in disciplines such as health and counseling have previously examined the case of yoga programs for various patient/client populations, including patients after stroke¹¹ and those with chronic pain¹². Prior to setting out to conduct the research, the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the State University of New York at Buffalo, where the researchers are affiliated.

Participants

In order to gain a broad understanding of district personnel's experiences of providing the HWP at the time of an ongoing lawsuit, the researchers sought to interview all staff involved, including: district superintendent and assistants; school principals; University of San Diego researchers (ADM); classroom teachers (CTs); and HWIs. The total number of participants was $N = 32$, and the majority of interviewees were female and white. Although further and more specific demographics may be reported, the researchers choose to protect participants' confidentiality at this point, especially due to the controversial nature of this issue.

Materials

Prior to each interview, interviewees provided verbal consent for their participation in the study (this method was chosen in order to minimize written documents with participants' identifying information). Each interview was coded and recorded as an audio file on a personal computer. These files were then uploaded onto a web-based secure storage system and deleted from the personal computers.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researchers contacted district personnel and received permission to conduct the study. Researchers gained access to all school personnel and invited them to participate in the study via email. All those who were interested were interviewed ($n = 32$). Three researchers conducted the interviews over a period of five days at the end of April 2015. The majority of interviews were conducted during school hours and on district premises. Interviews were conducted one-on-one (i.e., one researcher, one participant) and varied in duration, with an average of

approximately half-an-hour per interview. The format for the interviews was an in-depth structured interview. Sample questions include:

- “Tell me about your experiences related to the provision of Western* yoga in your school district in general.” * This term was used in alignment with the EUSD legal team’s description of the type of yoga being offered within the district. The term Western was used to reflect North American, school and community-based yoga practices that focus on yoga as exercise (see Butzer et al.¹ and Cook-Cottone¹³). Other examples offered in the 2013 brief include restorative yoga and power yoga (see Peck et al.¹⁴). When asked by participants for a definition, Western yoga was defined by researchers as, yoga focusing on physical poses, breath work, meditation, and relaxation.
- “Describe your understanding of the concerns regarding the contention that Western yoga is too closely tied to religion to be appropriate for public education.”
- “Tell me about the school climate regarding Western yoga provision in your school. Describe relationships. Describe teaching. Describe student responses.”

It is important to note that the focus of the current study is only one part of a larger-scale study. Participants were also asked about other aspects of the program, including: students' emotional regulation, stress management, and academic achievement. Lastly, following the completion of the interview, participants received a 20 dollar gift-card for a coffee shop (although this information was not provided to participants ahead of their interviews and, therefore, was unlikely to have served as an incentive to participate).

Results and Discussion

Following the completion of the interviews, the data was transcribed verbatim. The three researchers then analyzed the data according to the IPA method in an iterative process. That is, the analysis was a process of identifying themes emerging from the data itself, returning to consolidate the data, identifying themes, consolidating the data, etc. Following this individualized process, the researchers met to discuss the sub-themes and super-ordinate themes, until reaching agreement on their interpretation of the data as a cohesive whole.¹⁰ Broadly, the researchers identified five super-ordinate themes emerging from the data, each with its own sub-themes, as follows: (a) from yoga roots to EUSD yoga;(b) creating a yoga-for-schools program; (c) the lawsuit story; (d) effects of the lawsuit; and (e) perspectives: yoga is religious/yoga is not religious (see Table 1).

Themes and Sub-Themes

From Yoga Roots to EUSD Yoga
Creating a Yoga-For-Schools Program
Creating and Using Secular Content
Negotiating Logistics
Opt-Out Challenges
Opt-Out Support and Compassion
The Lawsuit Story
Effects of the Lawsuit
Not Adding “Fuel to the Fire”
Polarization/Yoga as Politics
Accommodations
Clarification and Closure
Perspectives: Yoga is Religious/ Yoga is not Religious

Table 1. Identified Themes and Sub-Themes

From Yoga Roots to EUSD Yoga

Participants identified yoga, in its original form, as having cultural, historical, and religious roots based in Hinduism and in India. Participants mentioned the program as part of a holistic-child perspective, as well as targeting stress management and teaching coping strategies for anxiety. Further, the choice of words used (and hence, the absence of those words that were not mentioned) by participants to describe the type of Western yoga taught in EUSD schools provides evidence for their perspective on it as a secular form of yoga. For example, participants described the physical qualities of the yoga taught, using words like “stretching,” “balance,” and “flexibility” to describe the practice, as well as mentioning breathing exercises, relaxation techniques, and mental focus. For example, one HWI provided the following response, which was a typical response: “my teaching of yoga to children in the schools consists of teaching moving, breathing, and relaxing.” Another said, “We call it EUSD yoga, or Encinitas Unified School District yoga. It is a series of poses and breathing that is taught to the students. It’s designed to help them with flexibility, strength building, balance, um and then also, you know, the breathing and the movement and breathing together helps them with a sense of focus and an ability to calm themselves, through just that self control.”

Participants also made a distinction between the roots of yoga (e.g., identifying it as historical, religious) and the type of yoga taught at the schools (e.g., stretching). For example, one HWI indicated that: “we do not bring any religious aspects of yoga into the program whatsoever. We just take the physical and mental benefits of yoga—the postures and the breath—that the kids can still benefit from greatly.”

A further distinction was made between what is perceived as Western yoga, and the type of yoga that was taught in EUSD schools. Specifically, some participants identified

Western yoga as potentially having some spiritual or cultural aspects tied to it. Further, participants varied in their perception of how and what type of yoga was introduced into their schools. While some viewed the EUSD yoga as secular yoga, others identified that the EUSD yoga was initially introduced along with cultural artifacts tied to it, similar to those found in Western yoga in general (e.g., mandalas or use of Sanskrit names for yoga poses). This discrepancy may be due to various interpretations and understandings of the role of yoga within the EUSD during the first year that the program was introduced, including among administration and the individual yoga instructors, who came with varied yoga training experiences, credentials, and knowledge of school culture.

Specifically, participants indicated that during initial implementation, some yoga instructors brought yoga cultural artifacts (which led to an *impression* of religious teachings, or a confusion between cultural artifacts and religion), including a mandala-drawing book, prayer mudra, the use of Sanskrit, an eight-limb poster, and the mentioning of Hindu stories. For example, one CT indicated: *“one of the yoga teachers had a book with designs [mandala drawing book] and while the kids were waiting to get BMI (body mass index) and HR (heart rate) she had them draw to keep them busy.”* Another HWI indicated: *“I would say, ‘just bring your hands to heart’”* referring to a prayer mudra, a common hand gesture in traditional and Western yoga practices. Another participant indicated: *“I heard most about the language [Sanskrit] being used initially, sort of set off concerns,”* while another CT participant described: *“at one of our schools they had a poster of the eight limbs of Ashtanga yoga on the wall. It was not [there for] long, but it was there.”* From these reports, it seems that there may have been a lack of clarity on the provision of secular yoga and the role of the inclusion (or lack thereof) of cultural artifacts within the school system. Concerned parents interpreted the inclusion of these cultural artifacts as evidence that yoga was inherently religious. Although this may be a reasonable association, the EUSD administrator contended this was not the intention of the program. The district responded to these concerns by clarifying the policy in regard to cultural artifacts tied to yoga, thus eliminating their presence from the school environment. The result of this process, from the district's perspective, was that EUSD yoga is secular and does not include cultural artifacts found in Western or traditional yoga. However, the message that continued to dominate concerned parents' perspectives was that all yoga, with or without the associated cultural artifacts, was a religious enterprise as described below.

Creating a Yoga-for-Schools Program

Four sub-themes were identified from the data under this

superordinate theme: (a) creating and using secular content; (b) negotiating logistics; (c) opt-out challenges; and (d) opt-out support and compassion. These themes are examined below:

Creating and Using Secular Content. In order to clarify the secular content of the program, the district instituted several changes and guidelines. For example, in regard to the language used, they engaged in a two-fold translation, from Sanskrit to English, and from English/adult language to child-friendly language. As one HWI described it: *“we changed the names of the poses—for example, one pose in Sanskrit is called ‘Janu Sirsasana’ and it means ‘head-to-knee pose.’ So ‘Janu Sirsasana’ is a fun thing to say, but ‘head-to-knee pose’ is pretty boring, right? So we just changed the name to ‘half-butterfly pose’... or I’ll say, ‘stretch one wing out of your chrysalis and put it down,’ connecting it again to nature and science, what they’re studying in science.”* In addition, the district also eliminated the word ‘mindfulness’ from the program (as one HWI indicated *“we can’t use the word ‘mindfulness,’ it is too closely tied to religion”*), and established that no chanting or prayer found in traditional/ Western yoga (e.g., chanting of “aum”) would be incorporated into the program. As described above, the district indicated there would be no traditional/ Western yoga cultural artifacts included, such as the presence of mandalas or mala beads, and the program itself has been re-framed as ‘health and wellness’ instead of ‘yoga’; (as one HWI described, *“the yoga being taught in schools moves away from the spiritual and is more focused on the calisthenics and breathing aspects”*). The HWP, then, was viewed as a set of tools for physical well-being, stress management, and emotional regulation, as described by an administrator (ADM): *“see it as a way to train your mind to address stress and have, you know, a better attitude for dealing with the world around you.”* Lastly, the district made a conscious effort to align the HW curriculum across the nine schools and all classrooms, and held weekly HW teacher meetings in order to assure all instructors were “on the same page,” in which they continued to develop the curriculum and to conduct training in classroom behavior management (teachers came in with varied backgrounds and experiences in educational settings).

Negotiating Logistics. The district has also faced and addressed various challenges to implementing the HWP in its schools. One such challenge was providing a space that would be appropriate and accommodating to the content of the program. This was complicated by scheduling classes into the already busy school day, and managing teachers' schedules so that, on the one hand, all children received the standard two classes per week, while on the other hand, teachers were not overworked and overwhelmed by their load. Another main challenge initially faced by the district was how to regard the time that students engaged in health

and wellness. Specifically, should it be included as part of their required physical education minutes or not (two hundred minutes of PE are required in CA per 10 days). In addition, some of the schools also provided after-school HW classes for parents and teachers, taught by the same HWIs, which added another complication to these teachers' workload. At the same time, the district needed to consider the larger question of how to connect and integrate the program within a broader social-emotional learning framework. Lastly, in response to parents' concerns, the district provided an opt-out option from HW classes. This option was perhaps one of the most significant challenges for individual instructors and teachers: that is, providing students with alternative activities and arrangements for engagement and learning while their peers were in health and wellness classes twice per week.

Opt-Out Challenges. Children opted-out from HW classes for various reasons. Some were related to religious concerns, while others seemed to be unrelated to the controversy around the program. One ADM explained parents' concern with the program having religious content: *"from my parent community that has not wanted their children to participate [in health and wellness], their biggest concern has been the sequence piece of the yoga, and how it was against their religious beliefs. Also, the meditation piece; they were concerned that it was against their religion, [that] children would be meditating, or doing some type of prayer."* Another ADM expressed viewing this sub-group of parents within the larger context of the school community: *"the only obstacle really has been for those families that don't want their children to participate. As a whole, all of my families really appreciate the yoga and really see the value in it for their children."* Further, some of the interviewees expressed regret/concern for children who were opted-out by their parents, but who themselves seemed to enjoy or benefit from the HW classes. According to one CT: *"I had a student that loved yoga, and then his family was told by his church that yoga was started religiously and so therefore it must be religious, and so the parents had to pull him out, and I just saw how hard that was on him because he wanted to go and do yoga."* Lastly, in regard to religious concerns, several participants discussed noticing a new trend in which parents opt their children out due to fears of physical injury; expressing a concern that these new arguments were a strategy for some families to take the lawsuit forward. For example, one CT stated: *"The physical injury allegations were a move against yoga when religion did not work."*

Other parents chose to opt their children out of HW for reasons unrelated to religion, including children not wanting to do yoga or wanting to engage in other activities instead. Several participants expressed concern that children were allowed to opt-out of the program because they did

not enjoy it, and equated opting-out from HW to opting-out of other (more "important") subjects. As one CT described it: *"Will children be opted-out of multiplication or math simply because they don't want to do it?"* Some participants discussed more specific reasons why children wanted to opt-out of the classes, often describing social groups where one child opts-out, followed by several children in their close circle, creating clusters of friends. A most noticeable and discussed trend of children who chose to opt-out was that of boys in older grades. In general, participants described more buy-in among children in lower grades (regardless of gender) and more children who opt-out in older grades, especially boys. Participants described that these older boys showed a preference for more "active" physical sports and team games. Another hypothesis brought up by some participants was that all the HWIs were female, which may explain, particularly at that stage of early puberty, the greater buy-in among females. At this point, it is important to stress that despite the elaborate discussion of meeting opt-out challenges, those children who chose to opt-out were a minority in each of these classrooms and schools. For example, CT teachers reported: *"Only a few kids have opted out," "This year not a single student has opted out,"* and *"Yes, one and two, about 1-2 kids opted out of yoga from my class."* A HWI said: *"I think we've had about 8 out of about 700 students opt out, and those have been primarily for religious reasons. This is a good sign that people are supportive of the program and know it helps kids—with stress management, relaxation, sports, strength and flexibility."*

Opt-Out Support and Compassion. It was notable in these interviews that although participants may have disagreed with the reasons that parents chose to opt their children out of the HW classes (particularly due to religious reasons), interviewees expressed a great degree of respect for parents' freedom of speech and right to choose what is best for their children. Participants described often attempting to provide concerned parents with information about the program, specifically addressing their concerns about religious content and providing information to support their contention that the program did not contain any religious elements. In addition, as described above, they made efforts to provide these children with alternatives while their peers were engaged in health and wellness, such as: having the child join another classroom's PE time (ensuring that the child received their mandatory PE minutes) providing academic assignments; etc. Further, participants described their desire to protect the child who was opted-out from feeling left out. As one CT described: *"I would never want a kid who is opting-out and coming to me during that time [that their peers are in health and wellness] to feel like they had done anything wrong. So we welcomed her [to my classroom] with open arms, and she participated in whatever we were participating in."*

The Lawsuit Story

Participants' understandings of the lawsuit story as it unfolded in the district were varied and multifaceted. As described above, the bringing in of cultural artifacts (e.g., mandala drawing book, eight-limb poster) was interpreted as the incorporation of religious content. Above all, it seemed that the use of Sanskrit raised concerns, as Sanskrit was viewed as related to religion. As one CT described: *"Sanskrit was probably used and that immediately set off bells for some parents in the school...[with Sanskrit being associated with religion] and then it was like, well, what else is being taught?"* Another ADM described parents' concerns about the connection between language and religious content: *"concerns about religion were that we were not only teaching students yoga poses, [it was that the] school [was] teaching them the beliefs and practices of Hinduism, the Sanskrit language with its inextricable ties to Hinduism, and promoting worship and practices of certain Hindu Gods."* As one of the CTs expressed, if earlier changes to the use of language were in place, it may have placated some of the concerns: *"the questions started rising because of the Sanskrit language terminology being used that could have been just slightly tweaked... that would have made, in my view, yoga much more accepting and palatable without causing such an eruption."*

The unfolding of the story continued, as described by an ADM: *"one of the parents at one of the schools is a pastor in a church in the community who was saying that a non-Christian religion was being taught in the school [due to yoga]. Eventually he realized he was having a negative impact [on the perception of yoga in the school] and apologized to the superintendent. But by then, other parents at another school aligned themselves with a law group that has deep ties with Christian philosophies. It got out of hand... and there was a lot of miscommunication and misinformation, and had they just met with the appropriate district official it would have all been okay."* At this point, a lawsuit had been initiated, arguing that yoga is religious and therefore not appropriate for public education. To illustrate one aspect of the argument: *"Specifically, they contend the physical postures of yoga—whether students intend them to or not—reflect religion worship and lead to a spiritual shift toward Hinduism."*¹⁴ An ADM described the district's response: *"that's a tough argument to fight. And so we didn't. It's like, if that's your belief then that's your belief, but we are not teaching religion."* The district responded, along with delivering the message that the HWP was secular, by providing an opt-out option (as described above), as well as by inviting parents to attend the classes and become informed about what was being taught. HWIs specifically described encouraging CTs to attend and become informed so that they were better able to communicate with concerned parents. It was described that during the initial implementation, cultural artifacts

were introduced, and that the school leadership was not informed that individual teachers had brought these in, but that the program itself never included religious content, despite the common understanding outside the district. As one ADM said: *"I am a little frustrated because the press has always said we stripped religion out of our yoga program. I don't believe that to be true because there was never religion in our program."*

While the pushback from parents was apparent at that point, participants viewed the district as not prepared to address, or that they did not fully anticipate, these concerns. This may be due to the unusual presence of yoga, and an overall yoga-culture, in Encinitas. One HWI described the context: *"Encinitas is the yoga capital of the world, or at least in the U.S.,"* and another HWI said: *"where we live, there's a yoga studio of some kind on every block."* Others expressed a shortcoming in the district of not clarifying what was and was not appropriate for yoga in the schools with individual HWIs, with the need to underscore the secularity of content. As one CT expressed *"[it] would have been best that at ground zero the yoga teachers would have known what is and what is not okay to bring into a public classroom."* This may have been especially important as these instructors had diverse training backgrounds and credentials. While those with education credentials may have understood the school culture, those with only yoga training may not have been informed on the need to emphasize secularity, and those were the instructors described as initially bringing in the cultural artifacts.

Participants also described the initial rollout of the program as happening very fast. The process, from conception to running the program, took place over a short duration of time (i.e., over the summer break). In addition, it was described by participants that the district did not initially communicate effectively with the community regarding the intentions and elements of the program, further leaving room for speculation and misunderstandings. According to one CT: *"district personnel did not know how to put parents' and teachers' minds at ease regarding concerns,"* and another HWI indicated: *"for some parents, yoga felt too close to something they were unfamiliar with and [that] might be potentially religious; they didn't understand."*

Further, another complication described by participants as potentially adding to the concerns, was the involvement of researchers from the University of San Diego (USD) at the time of implementation of the HWP. As an ADM described: *"the USD research component of yoga implementation may have contributed to the lack of trust by parents in the whole process, as it may have contributed to the religion-related conversations that were already happening, as USD is a very religious-based school. This led to the school having to really show that the USD study was an academic study and was*

not religious-based at all.” For context, the University of San Diego describes its Catholic identity on its web page, <https://www.sandiego.edu/about/catholic-identity.php>

Overall, participants emphasized that the parents involved in the lawsuit were a small and isolated minority group represented by one family as plaintiff, while there was a strong sense of support from the majority of the district community. As one ADM described: *“the lawsuit didn’t impact many. I think it was a very isolated group at a certain school,”* while another ADM said: *“no matter how much transparency or offers to visit [a HW class], there are still assumptions in [certain] Christian pockets.”* On the other side, participants described overwhelming support for the district’s program by a majority of parents, mentioned the YES! parents, and an overall school climate that is positive and supportive, viewing yoga as an integrated part of the community (in and outside the schools), and therefore welcomed by parents. Of special note was the importance and impact of religious figures in the community attending the HW classes. As stated by an ADM, *“We did invite religious leaders to come observe the classes and to come and speak with us. I spoke to a few different pastors myself to talk about the program. Although not every church leader in the area supported us, the ones that took the time to meet with us and observe the program did come out in our favor.”*

Overall, participants expressed support of, despite disagreement with, the family’s right to file a lawsuit and expressed positive sentiments that the family appropriately reached out to the legal system to execute their rights, noting that the system is “working.”

Effects of the Lawsuit

Participants expressed various effects that the lawsuit had on their classrooms and schools, including: a need to be cautious; polarization; yoga as political; creating accommodations; and a view that the lawsuit had clarified and brought closure to the debate.

Not Adding “Fuel to the Fire.” In regard to implementing the program during the lawsuit, some participants described having a fear of adding “fuel to the fire.” For example, this impacted individual CTs’ ability to do stretches or breathing exercises with their students in regular (i.e., non health and wellness) classes, for fear that these would be interpreted as “yoga,” which may have prevented opportunities to generalize and transfer the learning from HW to other aspects of children’s academic, social and emotional lives. As one CT indicated: *“there’s this pressure as a teacher—do you want to challenge these kids that are excited and want challenges, and want to make it more fun for them, show them new poses and keep them progressing? Or do you keep it in this really safe little bubble?”* Further, some CTs and HWIs described coping by being careful and staying out of the

way, being aware that there were many eyes on the program, and some expressing that the debate was exhausted and it was time to move on. As one CT said: *“with this lawsuit, I really believe that we’ve come to some extreme side, airing on the side of caution... I feel like it would be nice to be able to let go of some of that now... adhering, but not being paranoid or living in fear,”* while another summarized *“the lawsuit is won and it’s been appealed and it’s been ruled in the district’s favor. So we should move forward.”*

Polarization/ Yoga as Politics. Other effects of implementing the program at the time of the lawsuit included a sense of polarization within particular classrooms and schools, and a perception of yoga as political. Some parents and other community members took to activism, including both objectors (e.g., picketing outside the school), and defenders (e.g., the parents who associated to form the YES! group). Participants also described these forces as reacting to one another, as expressed by an ADM: *“the harder the Christian right tried to push on the rest of the parents to join their side, the more push back they got.”* In addition, there was also interest in this debate by the larger community, as one HWI indicated: *“there was an extra component to your job — managing media attention.”* At the same time, participants expressed experiencing a sense of double standard regarding integrating religion into the curriculum, as is played out with more mainstream religions. As one CT said: *“I feel like if people are going to get up in arms about bringing yoga, then is that going to strip all other cultural references from other programs?... can we not sing Christmas and Hanukkah songs within the public school?”* In addition, several participants expressed regret/ loss that they could not bring in more of the historical and cultural context of the teachings taught in health and wellness, having a sense that children are missing out on opportunities to learn about the world and themselves. As one HWI expressed: *“it’s a disservice to both yoga and students... [to] not tie-in the ancient aspect of yoga and the understanding of how it ties [to] the body in a non-scientific way.”* There was also an understanding that parents’ concerns varied, shifting from arguments about religious content to those regarding physical injury as a strategy to remove the program from the district. As described by an ADM: *“it really hurts a lot of parents that there’s a feeling that they [the “yoga sticklers”] are trying to shut the program down and they will not stop and they’ll go to any cost.”*

Accommodations. As described above, in response to parents’ concerns, and eventually the lawsuit, the district had accommodated the community by: incorporating an opt-out option from HW classes; creating weekly HWI team meetings; increasing transparency about the content and curriculum of the program by creating a webpage, manual, and responses to FAQs; and inviting school personnel, parents, and other community members to observe the HW

classes. As one ADM expressed: *“I look for these [religious connections] when I observe class and I have not been able to make that connection.”* These efforts seem to have trickled down to individual HWIs, as one described: *“to manage the challenges, I’ve had to really be creative—like with the names of the poses, the mindfulness, breathing - we have to be creative in how we present things that we know would be beneficial, but in a way that will not be perceived as crossing the line as too ‘yoga-like’ or religious.”*

Clarification and Closure. Participants also expressed a sense that the lawsuit had brought clarification and closure to this public debate. As one HWI expressed: *“the judge has already said that it’s not religious, and is constitutional, and that’s what I believe, that’s what I know from my own experience.”* Similarly, an ADM described: *“I think winning the yoga lawsuit has been helpful because all the facts have been presented and then re-presented through the appeal and both have been found in fact that yoga is not religious, so we now have something that we can point to and say this has been addressed in court of law, twice, and it’s found not to be religious.”*

Yoga is Religious/ Yoga is not Religious

Participants described perspectives expressed in the community throughout this debate regarding the inherent nature of yoga, on the one hand as religious, and on the other as non-religious. Some argued that all yoga is religious, regardless of the form of practice. For example, an ADM described: *“the initial concern voiced to administrators by a few families [was] that there was no way to do yoga in its purest form, as physical exercise, without incorporating Hinduism into that practice.”* Another ADM explained: *“yoga is an interesting one because you can go from the far Christian right to the far Hindu right, and through their lens they see yoga as a manifestation of the religious practice.”* Further, an ADM expressed the voiced opinion of those strong objectors of the program: *“[they argue that] if you do the physical behaviors found within yoga, whatever you call them, whether you know about the background of these movements, whether you know the dogma of these movements, just doing the physical movements is actually invoking the Hindu gods to come into your body which, for the Christian right that was promoting these arguments, those Hindu gods are really Satan... so if you do lotus pose, you are inviting Satan to come into your body.”*

Another argument expressed by participants was the understanding of some in the community that spirituality (including words associated with “Eastern” spirituality, such as “mindfulness” and “meditation”) equals religion. For example, an ADM described: *“they took mindfulness to mean meditation to mean prayer.”* Further, engaging in meditation was understood to be engaging in prayer of a non-Christian religion, and therefore should not be done within

schools. There was also an understanding that you cannot separate something from its roots. As one ADM indicated: *“concerns about religion were that we are not only teaching students yoga poses, [the] school [was] teaching them beliefs and practices of Hinduism, the Sanskrit language which is inextricably tied to Hinduism, and promoting the worship and praise of certain Hindu gods.”* In addition, as described earlier, cultural artifacts, were interpreted as promoting religion, as described by an ADM: *“in one of the schools a teacher read Hindu stories that were about treating each other nicely, but because it had a Hindu origin, it was seen as promoting Hinduism.”*

At the same time, participants expressed diverse opinions, (their own or others), viewing yoga as coming from religious roots; yoga as emerging from various traditions; and the distinction that the version of yoga taught in the schools was non-religious. One CT expressed the opinion that *“if you want to find religion in yoga you can,”* while another said: *“religion is part of yoga’s historical past.”* Another CT indicated: *“I can understand how there might be religious ties to yoga, but not in the way it is taught in the school,”* while a HWI observed: *“the history of a thing does not define a thing.”* Specifically, participants discussed the yoga taught at EUSD in the HWP: one CT said, *“there are no religious ties or philosophy taught or associated with the yoga done at EUSD.”* Others expressed similar opinions, including the following statements made by individual HWIs: 1) *“we do not bring religious aspects of yoga into the program whatsoever. We just take the physical and mental benefits of yoga—the postures and the breath—that the kids can still benefit from greatly;”* 2) *“the focus of yoga in the schools is connecting to yourself, to find ways to breathe and move in a way that is healthy and that helps you relax;”* 3) *“I feel that the program has done a really good job completely focusing on these [non-religious] aspects of yoga and nothing else that would make people fearful or worried;”* and finally 4) *“yoga is a set of lifelong skills that make them [the children] better students, better citizens, and better human beings.”*

Participants expressed a sense of being misunderstood regarding religious content, as such content was never a part of the EUSD yoga program, described by an ADM: *“there never was any religious tone to the yoga brought into the school, but people just had a perception that yoga was religious-based.”* Instead, participants described the yoga taught at EUSD in the HWP as comprised of mental and physical elements. They described an absence of religious-based connotations, with poses having secular names and no use of Sanskrit. Further, participants described the program as based on research-supported practices, including postures, breathing exercises, and relaxation and meditation techniques. In addition, they described that the more parents and others in the community were informed of what was actually includ-

ed in the program, the less concerned they were about religious content. As an ADM described: “*interestingly enough, most of our opt-out parents did not come to look at the class, and some of the loudest ones have never seen it and their kids have never participated.*”

Conclusions

Participants in this study had various perspectives on the process of implementing a yoga-in-schools program in their district, specifically within the context of the contention regarding the appropriateness of the program and an ongoing lawsuit filed against the district. Themes across participants were identified and discussed, including: perspectives on the origins of yoga and how that history relates to the content taught to EUSD children; the differences between yoga as taught in schools and that encountered in our culture more broadly; interpretations of the tension between different versions of yoga; the challenges that arose in the process of implementation in light of the contention; perspectives on the lawsuit and how it unfolded; the effects of the lawsuit on the schools and district community; and finally participants’ interpretations of parents’ and the community’s perspectives on the presence/ or absence of religion within yoga. The experiences expressed by participants suggest that the relationship between yoga in the schools and the debate over religiosity has been a point of ongoing and perhaps unresolved discussion in the local community of Encinitas, CA. Other schools and districts may benefit from utilizing some of this information as they implement their own yoga-in-schools programs. As one ADM stated, “*I think that informing people about what yoga is, is really more important than talking about what it’s not... You can show pictures with poses (we call them different cat, cow, animal poses....). And you can see how Americanized it is, and how ‘elementary school-ized’ it’s become.*”

This study had several limitations. First, while the authors have taken every precaution in interpretation of the data to be true to the source (i.e., the meaning as expressed by the participant), the authors are involved in yoga, (specifically yoga in the schools research), and therefore their interpretation, by nature of their roles and experience, cannot be completely free of bias (note that the IPA method specifies that interpretation occurs on two levels; the second that of the researcher). Second, despite the large number of participants for a qualitative study, participants self-selected to take part in the study, and therefore their perspectives may not be representative of other school personnel in the district. Although we garnered data from a broad range of schoolteachers, administrators, wellness teachers, and researchers from across the district, it’s possible that those who did not participate might have added additional per-

spectives. Third, the study focused on one particular school district, within a particular context, and therefore may not be generalizable to the experiences of other school personnel at other districts. More broadly, our findings may not generalize to the experiences of school personnel in other countries where cultural norms and laws are different.

Implications for future research include studying the experiences of school personnel in other schools and districts in the context of their community’s response to the yoga program, including: similarities and differences; challenges and obstacles faced; and how the school/district responded to these possible endorsements/pushbacks. Further, as this research moves forward, it would be important to study the perspectives of others who have been impacted by these processes (e.g., arguments against such programs while they take place in schools), including children and parents. Lastly, outcome research may choose to focus on similarities/differences across various schools/ districts in relation to presence, absence, degree of contention, and debate regarding the nature of the program in their schools.

Conflicts of interest statement

There are no relationships, activities, or financial relationships with entities that could be perceived to influence the content of the submitted work, nor patents, copyrights or royalties relevant to the submitted work to declare.

References

- Butzer, B., Ebert, M., Telles, S., & Khalsa, S. B. S. (2015). School-based yoga programs in the United States: A survey. *Advances in Mind-Body Medicine*, 29(4), 18–26.
- Khalsa, S. B. S., Hickey-Schultz, L., Cohen, D., Steiner, N., & Cope, S. (2012). Evaluation of the mental health benefits of yoga in a secondary school: a preliminary randomized controlled trial. *The journal of behavioral health services & research*, 39(1), 80–90.
- Noggle, J. J., Steiner, N. J., Minami, T., & Khalsa, S. S. (2012). Benefits of yoga for psychosocial well-being in a US high school curriculum: A preliminary randomized controlled trial. *Journal Of Developmental And Behavioral Pediatrics*, 33, 193–201.
- Goldberg, L. (2004). Creative Relaxation: A yoga-based program for regular and exceptional student education. *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, 14, 68–78.
- Peck, H. L., Kehle, T. J., Bray, M. A., & Theodore, L. A. (2005). Yoga as an intervention for children with attention problems. *School Psychology Review*, 34, 415–424.
- Scime, M., & Cook-Cottone, C. (2008). Primary prevention of eating disorders: A constructivist integration of mind and body strategies. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 41, 134–142.
- For Healthy Habits (2016). *For Healthy Habits [homepage]*. Retrieved from <http://forhealthyhabits.com>
- Miron, E., Bar-Dov, A., Strulov, A. (2010). Here and now: Yoga in Israeli schools. *International Journal of Yoga*, 3, 42–47.
- Stueck, M., & Gloeckner, N. (2005). Yoga for children in the mirror of the science: Working spectrum and practice fields of the Training of Relaxation with Elements of Yoga for Children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 175, 371–377.

10. Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method, and research*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
 11. Garrett, R., Immink, M. A., & Hillier, S. (2011). Becoming connected: The lived experience of yoga participation after stroke. *Disability and Rehabilitation: An International, Multidisciplinary Journal*, 33(25-26), 2404–2415.
 12. Tui, Y., Unruh, A., & Dick, B. D. (2011). Yoga for chronic pain management: A qualitative exploration. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 25(3), 435–443.
- United States Courts (2016). *First Amendment and Religion*. Retrieved from <http://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/first-amendment-and-religion>
13. Cook-Cottone, C. P. (2017), *Mindfulness and yoga in schools: A guide for teachers and practitioners*. New York, NY: Springer.

 14. Peck, D. A., Borak, L., Coast Law Group, LLP. Attorney for Intervenor YES! Yoga for Encinitas Students, *Sedlcok v. Baird*, Encinitas Union School District, Case No. 37-2013-00035910-CU-MC-CTL (2013) Superior Court of the State of California.