

Research

Creating SPACE through Africa Yoga Project: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative analysis examined teachers' experiences of the Africa Yoga Project (AYP), a mentoring-oriented yoga program for fostering resilience among individuals and groups impacted by poverty and trauma. Interviews conducted with AYP teachers were coded using qualitative content analysis. Themes demonstrated that AYP benefited participants by creating S.P.A.C.E. (Safety and stability, Personal growth, Action, Cultural diversity, and Empowerment). The findings illustrated ways in which this program fostered individual and community wellness and positive engagement. Implications are discussed including the potential for providing yoga as a low-cost, sustainable, and effective intervention to promote health, economic self-sufficiency, and community engagement in diverse settings with limited resources.

Keywords: resilience, at-risk youth, yoga intervention, qualitative research, Kenya, mentoring

Introduction

Young people living in resource-poor settings are vulnerable to persistent psychosocial stressors associated with a variety of behavioral and psychological problems including substance abuse (Mugisha, Arinaitwe-Mugisha, & Hagembe, 2003), risky sexual behavior (Dodoo, Zulu, & Ezeh, 2007; Ngom, Magadi, & Owuor, 2003; Zulu, Dodoo, & Ezeh, 2002), delinquency, and violence (Blum et al., 2000). Studies specifically identify Kenya as a setting in which high percentages of youth (from 86% to 92%) have been exposed to trauma including witnessing, experiencing, or receiving news of physical or sexual violence, accidents, and natural disasters (Ndetei et al., 2007; Seedat, Nyamai, Njenga, Vythilingum, & Stein, 2004). Moreover, studies have revealed high levels of substance use among young people in Kenya, beginning in high school or earlier, with

rates as high as 84% for alcohol use and 55% for tobacco use by emerging adulthood (Atwoli, Mungla, Ndungu, Kinoti, & Ogot, 2011; Odek-Ogunde & Pande-Leak, 1999). In a study of Kenyan college students, the lifetime prevalence rate of any substance use was 70%, regardless of socio-demographic factors (Atwoli et al., 2011). The majority of substance users were seeking relief from stress (61%). Unfortunately, early exposure to substance use predicts future substance use and other psychiatric problems in later adulthood (Rohde et al., 2007). For example, alcohol use in Kenyan young people was associated with fighting and violence, property damage and loss, problems with parents, medical problems, and unplanned and unprotected sex, among other problems (Atwoli et al., 2011).

Such findings suggest that prevalent youth strategies for coping with stressors have failed to curtail the cycle of violence and psychosocial problems affecting resource-poor settings (Atwoli et al., 2011). In contrast, interventions that foster resilience among youth may reveal ways for promoting wellbeing, stress reduction, and empowerment in high-risk settings (Kabiru, Beguy, Ndugwa, Zulu, & Jessor, 2012). The development of resilience has been conceptualized as the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risks (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Resilience is operationalized as the presence of protective factors that enable an individual to successfully cope in risk settings. These protective factors can be individual characteristics (e.g., personal strengths) or environmental characteristics (e.g., parental monitoring) that enhance a person's ability to overcome adversity. For example, parental monitoring has been linked to resisting substance abuse among adolescents in Kenya and the U.S. (Kabiru et al., 2012; Ngom et al., 2003). Taken together, these findings suggest the need for approaches that foster resilience in at-risk youth populations (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). Moreover, psychosocial interventions in resource-poor settings need to be culturally viable, economically sustainable, and adaptable to the

stressors and attributes of participants and their communities (Blum & Nelson-Mmari, 2004).

Yoga as a Psychosocial Intervention

Mind-body interventions such as yoga are increasingly utilized to improve both physical and mental health for individuals experiencing stress or trauma (e.g., Barnes, Powell-Griner, McFann, & Nahin, 2004; Cabral, Meyer, & Ames, 2011; Salmon, Lush, Jablonski, & Septon, 2009; West, Liang, Spinazzola, 2016; van der Kolk et al., 2014). Research demonstrates that yoga effectively reduces anxiety and stress levels (Chong, Tsunaka, Tsang, Chan, & Cheung, 2011; Li & Goldsmith, 2012; Michalsen et al., 2011). The components of a yoga practice—physical movement, meditation, and focused breathing—ameliorate symptoms that can result from trauma exposure such as affect and impulse dysregulation, somatic complaints, negative self-perception, interpersonal difficulties, and attentional deficits (Emerson, Sharma, Chaudhry, & Turner, 2009; West, 2011). Focused breathing has been shown to improve emotion regulation (Arch & Craske, 2006) and modulate the sympathetic nervous system (Brown & Gerbarg, 2009), while meditation is associated with reducing rumination (Bortz, Summers, & Pipe, 2007), anxiety, depression, and stress (Schreiner & Malcolm, 2008). Furthermore, moving one's body alongside other people in yoga increases feelings of connection to others (Berrol, 1992; Macy, Macy, Gross, & Brighton, 2003; West, 2011; West et al., 2016).

Yoga for resilience. In addition to symptom reduction, yoga aims to foster resilience and personal growth. This is consistent with recent paradigm shifts in the field of counseling and trauma treatment in particular, which call for interventions to go beyond treating psychopathology and include a focus on improving functioning, strengthening resources, empowerment, and personal growth (Cloitre et al., 2012; Johnson, Worell, & Chandler, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This “strengths-based” perspective recognizes that people can experience growth, not only distress, following adversity (Poorman, 2002). It emphasizes the need for treatment to foster positive development and empowerment, rather than solely symptom alleviation (Johnson et al., 2005). Thus far, little work has been done to explore how yoga fosters resilience and personal growth.

Current Study

The present study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the impact of the Africa Yoga Project (AYP) from participants' own perspectives. The study received Institutional Review Board approval and informed consent was obtained.

AYP's multi-faceted intervention aims to apply the physical and mental health benefits of Baptiste Power Vinyasa Yoga while also promoting individual and community resilience in the forms of peace, reconciliation, and economic opportunity. Baptiste Power Yoga consists of a rigorous and intuitive (focused on what is right for the individual) physical practice of vinyasa yoga, meditation, and active self-inquiry. The meditation practice is often (though not always) practiced prior to asana, and like other aspects of Baptiste Yoga, the form and length differ according to individual and group needs. Self-inquiry refers to a reflective practice offering opportunities for deepening self-understanding. Self-inquiry may be practiced in the form of journaling, guided reflective exercises, and community sharing. These elements are combined with the intention of encouraging action and authenticity in one's life, building confidence, and inspiring hope for new possibilities (Baptiste, 2002). In addition to the practice of Baptiste Yoga, AYP also engages students in (1) training to become yoga teachers to enable income generation and self-sufficiency, (2) public service and community development, and (3) a mentorship program for professional and personal growth, such as goal-setting and developing communication skills. The intended outcomes are improved physical and mental health, economic wellbeing, social support, and community engagement. Thus, using a qualitative research method, we examined the experiences of teachers participating in the Africa Yoga Project in each of these areas.

Methods

Participants

All seven interviewees were Kenyan nationals participating in AYP as teachers. There were four women and three men, between the ages of 20 to 35. Due to the sensitivities surrounding the violence associated with tribalism, ethnicity was not asked for explicitly in the qualitative interviews, although a number of the participants alluded to their ethnic identities while describing their personal experiences of community violence.

We used an exemplar method of data collection consistent to that used in previous grounded theory approaches to studying positive youth development (Bronk, 2012). This method involves the nomination of participants who exemplify the phenomenon of interest (i.e., those successfully engaged in this mentored yoga intervention). Bronk (2012) argued that examining a construct among those who exemplify it in an intense form can be a useful way of observing the particulars of that phenomenon. Moreover, this method allows investigators to gather highly detailed data, which are necessary for understanding the development of a multifac-

eted, complex construct. The study utilized nomination criteria based on the following indicators of significant involvement in the program: (a) participation in the AYP program as former yoga students; and (b) participation in the program as current mentored yoga teachers.

AYP Program and Baptiste Power Yoga Teacher Training

All AYP teachers are trained in Baptiste Power Yoga and participate in ongoing training through AYP. Baptiste Yoga is inspired by the Hatha yoga teachings of Krishnamacharya and his students Iyengar and Desikachar, whom Baron Baptiste studied with personally from a young age (www.baronbaptiste.com). Baptiste teacher training is conducted by Baron Baptiste, along with master teachers such as Paige Elenson (Co-Founder and Director of AYP) and support teachers already certified. Baron Baptiste has visited AYP in Nairobi for teacher trainings on numerous occasions. Participation in two weeklong Baptiste trainings can lead to a 200-hour yoga teacher certification (followed by a 500-hour certification, if further trainings are pursued). These trainings are centered on asana and meditation practice, philosophy, alignment, assisting, and finding your voice as a teacher and community leader. Self-reflection and sharing with the community are also major elements in the training and are intended to create a mental and emotional “clearing” that promotes personal vitality and the ability to more effectively empower and inspire others (Baptiste, 2002).

In addition to the formal Baptiste teacher training, AYP offers ongoing training to its teachers. This is accomplished through practice teaching with thorough feedback from experienced teachers, ongoing mentorship from experienced teachers in Kenya and abroad, and community dialogue. Community dialogue consists of group reflection discussions (between mentors and mentees as well as teachers and students) on a range of topics, including how to talk about tribalism/racism with persons from diverse backgrounds, challenging gender norms, and addressing health concerns. Training occurs through more formal opportunities as well. For instance, mental health professionals have offered workshops on working with trauma and using trauma-sensitive yoga techniques. Other professionals have provided workshops on cultural sensitivity, managing individual differences among students, or responding to issues that affect the community. Through these trainings, AYP teachers have the opportunity to learn about ways to manage issues impacting themselves, their students, and the community, such as stereotypes, tribalism, and racism. Furthermore, participants frequently work with Kenyan and international students from diverse backgrounds with regard to race, nationality, and country of origin, ethnicity or tribe, as well as socioeconomic status and ability status.

These experiences are both encouraged and explored within the AYP community and seen as a major source of experiential learning for teachers and students alike.

AYP teachers are referred by associates or self-referred into the program, and many have a background in dance and acrobatics. AYP lessons are tailored to the unique needs of the groups they serve and do not adhere to a rigid lesson plan; however, each lesson typically includes a physical yoga practice, education (e.g., lessons on leadership, anatomy, or goal-setting), and community dialogue. There are more than 50 AYP teachers who each teach a minimum of five outreach classes per week. For many, teaching these classes along with private lessons (including relatively affluent clients) provides a living wage and has led to significant economic improvement in their lives.

The AYP organization is led by a group of teacher-leaders who have demonstrated promise and excellence in their teaching, mentoring, and outreach. For example, in the wake of the 2013 terrorist attack in Nairobi, AYP offered free trauma-sensitive yoga classes that provided a setting for healing and support. Furthermore, many AYP teachers who have served as mentors and community organizers were formerly involved with drugs, gambling, stealing, and violence. As AYP teachers, they offer no-fee community classes to marginalized populations (e.g., orphaned children, deaf youth, persons with HIV/AIDS), train and mentor new teachers, engage in community dialogue, and enhance development and outreach via ambassador programs with Western practitioners.

Procedure

The teachers invited to join in this study were selected based on the criteria of having participated in the AYP program as former yoga students and as current mentored yoga teachers on the leadership team. AYP leadership team members teach their own classes and mentor other teachers, and thus are in the best position of all AYP participants to reflect on the full range of experiences offered by the AYP intervention. Participation in the study was voluntary and the decision of whether to participate did not affect status within AYP.

The AYP Director and a Program Coordinator reviewed the semi-structured interview questions to ensure culturally relevant language. English and Swahili are the official languages of Kenya, and all participants were fluent English speakers. However, when participants occasionally used Swahili and dialect during the interviews, the interviewer would ask for clarification and would check for understanding by paraphrasing and summarizing main points. Participants were informed that the intention of the interview was to learn about their experiences as AYP teachers through questions about their perceptions of the mentor

program and the impact of AYP on their lives and their students' lives. Interviews took place at AYP headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. The second author conducted the in-person, semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately 45–60 minutes.

The development of the interview protocol was guided by the Organismic Valuing Theory (OVT; Joseph & Linley, 2005). OVT describes the experience of adversarial growth (e.g., improved self-perception, stronger relationships, greater appreciation for life) that can occur after stressful life events as individuals integrate their experiences and strive toward psychological wellbeing. In this model, resilience and wellbeing can be facilitated by meeting basic psychological needs (i.e., the need for affiliation, autonomy, and competency) and by providing supportive environments (Joseph & Linley, 2005). Thus, our interviews sought to query participants about their perceptions of any changes (positive, negative, or both/neither) they experienced through participation in the program, including in physical and mental health, stress levels, self-perception, relationships, and future outlook. Interview questions on these topics were open-ended and used only as a guide, enabling interviewers to follow freely the accounts of each interviewee. Interview questions invited them to reflect openly on the experiences and changes they observed in themselves. Questions included the following: Describe your experience as an AYP yoga teacher. What has been the most important or memorable aspect of your work with AYP? Describe your experience as a mentor/mentee. The interview also raised questions about whether they were aware of any influences on their future aspirations and sense of purpose, what kinds of support had been provided to them, sources of stress, as well as views toward their vocational plans, interests, and obstacles. Each of the open-ended questions was followed by additional prompts to further investigate the experiences identified by participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were then verified—a process that entailed listening to recordings an additional time and making corrections to the transcripts as needed.

Analysis

Content analysis was used within a qualitative descriptive framework to analyze the transcribed interviews (Sandelowski, 2000). In an effort to stay close to participants' voices and fully elucidate the varied aspects of their experiences, no constraints were placed on the data through pre-developed codes (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). This form of analysis is frequently used in practice disciplines as it aims to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive summary of a phenomenon or set of experiences using the language of participants; it is helpful when exploring a new area of

research where preliminary, low-inference data are needed (Sandelowski, 2000).

Consistent with a qualitative peer review process, all authors reviewed each transcript and were involved in the coding process. In addition to the second author (the interviewer), the first and third authors were not in the field and thus were new to the data at the time of analysis, providing fresh, additional perspectives on the data. Transcripts were coded using a three-step, iterative process: (1) data were organized by identifying codes that captured the various aspects of expressed content, (2) codes were condensed into broader level categories, and (3) themes were abstracted that linked recurring ideas and expressed the underlying meanings found across categories (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). After the first author conducted the initial analysis, the other two authors joined the first in a peer review of the initial analysis, refining the categories and developing the most descriptive labels at each level (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). Such collaboration enables a coding team to increase familiarity with the intricacies of the data through the sharing of perspectives, supporting a deeper understanding of the conceptual framework (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

This review of the data and coding was conducted to assure credibility and confirmability. Any inconsistencies or disagreements regarding the codes were discussed, resolved by consensus, and revised accordingly to create an accurate picture of the interview data and to develop a clear and comprehensive set (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The active coding process was completed when no new codes arose from the data.

Rigor was established with thorough and transparent documentation of the data collection procedures and analysis process used to generate the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Management of subjectivity was accomplished through reflexive evaluation and dialogue with other researchers. The utilization of direct and representative quotations from participants, which can be found in the Results section below, also contributed to the study's trustworthiness (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Five primary themes that reflected teachers' experiences emerged from this analysis and are described below. The acronym S.P.A.C.E. was developed by the authors for ease in referring to these themes as well as to reflect their overlapping nature. The following sections detail the results of this analysis, including descriptions of themes and direct quotations from participants.

Results

For each theme below, though there were multiple representative quotes, one or two representative quotes have been selected for the purposes of illustration. In order to preserve confidentiality, identifying information was altered or removed. In some cases, brackets have been used to insert general terms that maintain the meaning of participants' words while protecting confidentiality.

Findings in Context

Although this study focused on participants' experiences of AYP, the findings were first contextualized with information on the participants' lives prior to becoming involved with AYP to provide a point of reference for participants' experiences of AYP and perceptions of change related to their participation. Specifically, the participants described being raised in impoverished urban settlement areas they referred to as "slums" and a history of living in conditions of poverty with a household income too low to provide consistent meals for the family. Most had also been impacted by trauma and violence throughout their lives. They described exposure to domestic or community violence; some mentioned experiences perpetrating aggression and violence prior to their participation in AYP (e.g., "We were thrown out of the house because we didn't have money for the rent and that was like a trauma to me."; "I used to live in a very risky area... thieves kept coming to our house like it was nothing... the house didn't even have a gate, it's in the ghetto... very violent.")

Participants described desperate attempts at coping, such as joining gangs or leading dangerous lifestyles as a way of dealing with their difficult life circumstances:

After [my parents'] divorce, things changed in my life. I didn't have anyone to protect me. I was the only son, I didn't have a brother... and all of [my sisters] were afraid of being attacked by men. I was being bullied a lot... no one was there for me... life was trouble. I never trusted anyone... since I didn't trust people, I became more defensive... After years of living like that... I started... joining gangs, finding a way to protect myself, like any necessary way to protect myself and to protect my sisters.

Fortunately, desperation eventually led participants to AYP through which they moved toward peaceful, positive development (e.g., "Instead of being tortured or having a lot of violence, you need to take your life back. So I decided to do yoga for my own benefit.").

AYP Creating S.P.A.C.E.

Participants' reports of their experiences with AYP were consistently positive. They expressed enthusiasm about their affiliation with the organization and described it as an important part of their lives. Negative comments were rare and almost uniformly related to ways in which participants wished for more resources to expand AYP's reach beyond Nairobi and into the global community. The five major themes that arose from the data were organized as follows: (1) Safety and Stability, (2) Personal Growth, (3) Action, (4) Cultural and Experiential Diversity, and (5) Empowerment. The mnemonic S.P.A.C.E. was used to represent the primary themes that arose from the interview data. That is, these themes reflect the most common experiences that emerged from the interviews; no additional themes were purposely excluded.

Safety and Stability

The theme of Safety and Stability captures participants' descriptions of an increased sense of safety and stability in various domains of their lives (e.g., financial, environmental, emotional) through their work with AYP. Participants described these life changes as sources of pride, allowing them to live in an honorable way and provide the means and environment for their children to be raised with increased opportunities and decreased exposure to trauma, violence, and poverty. More specifically, participants most commonly described two aspects of Safety and Stability: (1) financial and environmental stability; and (2) emotional stability and wellbeing.

Financial and environmental stability. All participants identified increased safety and stability with regard to financial and environmental status as outcomes of teaching yoga through AYP. For instance, the income generated from teaching yoga considerably improved participants' ability to provide for themselves and their families, and allowed them to establish residence in safer environments. Participants were able to move to safer neighborhoods, send their kids to school, and afford adequate clothing and food for themselves and their children (e.g., "Africa Yoga Project has changed me in all aspects of life—educationally, in living... when I got employed with Africa Yoga Project, I started saving money so I decided to shift from... the slums."; "I'm able to provide a roof for my family... to provide food. I'm able to protect them, to see them growing in a very safe space.")

Emotional stability and wellbeing. Participants described feeling more emotionally stable and less reactive in the face of challenging circumstances as a result of practicing yoga in the AYP program. They provided examples of

how before their AYP participation they had struggled with aggression including physical fights and angry altercations (e.g., “[Yoga] has taught me how to control my anger... I used to pick fight[s] a lot... And if I cried, someone had to pay for my tears.”; “I used to be so judgmental and aggressive... but now I have come to balance the angry self with realization.”; “I used to have hatred because [I kept remembering] my past... and it made me want revenge... but when I let it go, I started seeing the new space.”).

A number of participants reported that their experiences in AYP had helped them shift from an attitude of reactivity to one of forgiveness and reconciliation (e.g., “How do I let [people] know I'm angry without [acting in] violence?... I just use language because we talked a lot about that [in AYP].”). Participants admitted that they were less likely to hit their children and more likely to treat them with patience. Many also described learning how to deal with experiences of marginalization (particularly for women in a male-dominated society and for people whose tribal group is marginalized in comparison to more powerful tribes):

There was a lot of violence as I was in primary school, so I experienced a lot of traumatic moments. I've seen people die fighting, [through] tribal wars, which was very traumatic, but I thank God I found yoga. It has helped me overcome the traumas.

Indeed, many participants described an overall increase in the ability to cope with stressful situations:

Yoga taught me how to deal with situations, whether good or bad, or how to tackle my problems... If I'm doing this very difficult pose and I feel like getting out of it because it's painful or it's frustrating, then I just realize if I get out of it without solving it, I'll have the same experience next time.

Participants also noted improvements in their own and students' overall wellbeing and health (e.g., strength, reduction in illness/pain). Comments included “Practicing yoga, the physical part of it, has also made my brain mentally fit.”; “I felt like I had released a very big burden from my body. It's like I was carrying a load and I just put it off... I felt like crying.”

Personal Growth

Participants reported experiencing personal growth in the areas of educational/ professional development and connections.

Educational/professional development. They described the expansion of their minds and vocational

opportunities through their involvement in AYP. This learning ranged from concrete skills to philosophical ideas. For instance, participants noted that they were taught how to use technology tools—computers, the Internet, and Skype. They learned about different aspects of the human experience (e.g., the brain, physical alignment, and anatomy). They gained accurate information and new perspective on managing aspects of their lives (e.g., exploring myths about being a woman in Kenya, budgeting, parenting, trauma, coping), including how to act as social justice agents by confronting cultural myths, stereotypes, and gender-role norms. Such learning opportunities seemed particularly salient for women in AYP leadership as they functioned daily within a male-dominated society. They described how this society held different expectations for men and women and revered education. Consequently, AYP provided female teachers the rare and valuable opportunity for leadership in their families and communities. In particular, their positions of leadership gave them authority and influence to empower youths in the community.

Participants described how learning was often gleaned through dialogue with other peer teachers, as well as with expert trainers who served as their mentors. Consistent collaboration with other teachers and mentors provided additional professional development and education on a wide range of topics, including how to engage new communities, work with challenging students, set goals, and become financially literate. Participants expressed both gratitude for these opportunities and motivation to continue seeking such knowledge. For example, one of the teachers described it this way:

[AYP] has given me a chance to [let go of preconceived beliefs and open myself up to new information], like I want to receive more knowledge. I'm after the knowledge, teaching skills, and also how I can create a good space for my students whereby they can open and tell me anything that is happening in their lives... [we were offered] a one-year workshop [from an external trainer] on managing stress, trauma, hierarchy... [it] gave us a clear outline on how you can handle a class or issues that affect the community... [we] learned about stereotypes, tribalism, racism.

Many participants also described learning opportunities involving exposure to new contexts through travel to new places, working in different settings, and connecting with communities across the globe through their work within AYP (e.g., “I have been in Holland... in China.”).

Interpersonal connections. Through learning opportunities that enabled them to become leaders and to collaborate with students and mentors, participants reported a heightened sense of community and relationship building.

For example, one participant described developing strong connections with mentors, students, and family this way:

My mentor, she has been there for me really fully and then every time we talk, we talk about yoga, we talk about big things in life, like my relationship with my baby, with my parents... yeah, with everyone. So she has been there to give me advice [on] what to do next, how to handle things.

Participants noted that their connections with students and mentors gave them a strong sense of community within the program and beyond (e.g., “Yoga is a type of nation that connects us together... allows sharing... a stress-free... calming way”; “... the project's community, how they keep supporting each other... it's always up for you... you feel like people depend on you and you depend on them.”).

Action

In addition to learning about themselves and experiencing positive life changes, participants also began taking action to effect change in communities throughout Nairobi. For example, participants spoke proudly of their ability to give back to their communities and those in need, such as women in prison, persons with HIV/AIDS, children with developmental disabilities, and persons living in “slums.” They described learning, through yoga, the importance of passing on what they gain from yoga:

Like you know when you practice yoga, you start experiencing things that go on and off the mat... now, through practicing Baptiste Yoga, I started seeing that what I do to people will come back to me. So it made a transformation in my life, like I became more of service to people. [I am] giving back because I know one day I will be given back what I give.

Many participants disclosed experiences of survival in the face of great difficulties, including poverty, trauma, violence, and crime. Moreover, they shared the life lessons learned through dealing with such challenges. AYP was described as an opportunity to pass on these survival stories as a way of empowering others (especially their young students) to overcome hardship, make positive choices, and avoid making the same mistakes:

I used to be a drug addict... sometimes I used to sell it... but later I started seeing the consequences of it, and especially when you get a family, it can break it a lot... I want to create an awareness of the impact of the drugs to the youths.

Participants also described the process of promoting peace in their students' lives (both inner peace and peace

among people or communities previously involved in violence):

The students, after [their] first classes... you'd hear someone has engaged in a fist fight, one of my students... is seen in the community very drunk and abusing other people in the streets... they used to engage themselves in activities that are not positive, but with regular practicing of Baptiste flow, they started practicing what they were [learning] on the mat and taking it off the mat... [Now], parents of the students I teach, they came to congratulate me... their kid, they're seeing he's changing, he's becoming more decent, he's becoming more acceptable in the community.

Another participant said the following:

I'm very proud of yoga by the way it created a lot of peace... I can see yoga has brought peace, it's in my community... There are enemies in my class... And [in class] they were partners.

Cultural and Environmental Diversity

Participants described the opportunity (and challenge) of working with issues of diversity. AYP participation required them to interact daily with people across cultural backgrounds and contexts. Students come from various tribes, socioeconomic statuses (e.g., private classes to wealthy Kenyans and ex-patriots), and backgrounds (e.g., women in prison, students with HIV/AIDS). Moreover, some have traveled across the globe to promote the mission of AYP. Participants described how these cross-cultural encounters or “boundary crossings” required the daily practice of bridging divides and becoming open to people, even in situations that had previously felt unsafe or marginalizing:

Dealing with the rich people... in Kenya and we teach their class and go to their homes [to teach] but they don't see you as a poor person or beggar... they see you as a powerful person, which is really encouraging to me. Like you know what, one day I'll be rich and I'll be treating other people just like I like to be treated... I know how to deal with the different people. How I am talking to these rich people, it is the same way I am talking to the people in my community. Not just like treating them like very special... they are my students.

Moreover, participants described learning how to build bridges across differences in class to allow for positive experiences individually and as a group:

I came to learn about stereotypes, tribalism, racism... my community was pressuring me to hurt other[s], not to be good to other communities... so I later came to start yoga outreaches... I used to talk about tribalism in

my class, like imagine different tribes, like the Kikuyu and the Luo (those were the tribes which were [most] affected) and up to now I have so many tribes in my class and they have let it go and forgot[ten] [the problems between them].

Another participant put it this way:

Using the themes, like non-violence, peace, love, togetherness, trusting... If you use those themes in your class, making a group of people [who did not get along] do handstands and support each other like partners... that's huge. If you change one person in that class... if I talk about not thinking violence for one hour, then by the time they're coming out of class they've already forgotten that they wanted to do something bad.

Empowerment

Participants described gaining a sense of personal power through their practice of yoga and mentoring relationships. Many described learning concrete goal-setting skills, including how to identify specific steps and a timeline for achieving goals. "I told [my mentor] I want to build my mom a house and then she told me what the first step [was]... she taught me how to set goals... now I already have the materials." They learned to believe in themselves and their abilities to achieve their goals:

[My mentor] told me one thing that I keep repeating to myself... "I'm good enough. I'm in control, I'm in charge, I'm the boss. Go for it." She's not there to give solutions to the problem; she's there to help me find solutions to my problem.

Participants were aware that peers, mentors, and the director of AYP believed they had special potential to influence others, and they actively sought opportunities to use this influence to empower their students:

I realized in myself a leadership quality which is natural... and then I was trained to do it... and what inspires me to keep on moving is inspiring others... if I can manage to influence a hundred or fifty youths to become positive thinkers, leaders, role models for the community, then our country is moving in the right direction.

Limitations

The present study has several noteworthy limitations. First, the findings were based solely on self-report data, and thus may be subject to biases that are less apparent in other sources of objective data such as observational data. Yet, we were expressly interested in participants' perceptions of their participation in AYP and in their subjective sense of wellbe-

ing and growth experiences—and this interest in participants' subjective experiences is a major purpose behind the use of qualitative research methods. Additionally, while all participants were fluent English speakers, cultural differences and use of dialect could potentially have resulted in miscommunication at times, even with ongoing clarification throughout interviews.

Moreover, the findings were based on a limited number of participants who were all exemplary in that they had been both yoga students and yoga teachers in AYP, and thus they may not be generalizable to all participants in the program or to those who did not succeed in the program. Future qualitative and quantitative studies should be conducted on a wider sample of student-practitioners with various roles in AYP, as well as larger samples of participants from various geographical regions and different backgrounds to ascertain whether findings can be replicated across diverse populations. Studies should also be done to ascertain whether the amount of experience or time in the program makes a difference in the outcomes. Given AYP's particular focus on Baptiste Yoga, results cannot be generalized to other forms of yoga practice. Future research may also explore how the various aspects of Baptiste Yoga—*asana* practice, meditation, and self-inquiry—may overlap with other forms of yoga, such as trauma-sensitive yoga, and if it similarly impacts practitioners. Study participants often commented on ways AYP has helped them heal from past traumas, and the findings paralleled other studies exploring the use of yoga for trauma recovery. While this study garnered information on the psychosocial impact of AYP, it did not examine physiological changes or other changes in trauma symptoms. Thus, future studies may do well to explore how participation in AYP impacts the various domains of trauma symptoms.

Finally, future studies may also do well to separate out the influences of mentoring, yoga, and economic improvement in order to ascertain the differential impacts of these aspects of the AYP intervention. That said, participants in this study articulated how each of these aspects of AYP mutually interacted to influence them and their students.

Discussion and Implications

The current research extended previously published work on yoga as an intervention for those affected by trauma by revealing outcomes that exceeded individual-level benefits. Existing work has suggested that participants benefit personally from the practice of yoga including improved physical and mental health (Barnes et al., 2004; Cabral et al., 2011; Khalsa, 2004; Salmon et al., 2009; van der Kolk et al., 2014; West et al., 2016). Our findings revealed that mentoring-oriented yoga in AYP may not only directly impact participants by enhancing personal physical health

and psychological wellbeing, but it may also be used to impact communities more broadly by bridging people from diverse and conflicting backgrounds. The findings suggested several mechanisms through which mentoring-oriented yoga can be used to build upon the individual and collective strengths of participants. For example, participants who would typically struggle with anger, aggression, and reactive behavior as a result of traumatic environmental conditions were taught tools for managing affect, including skills for communicating feelings, rather than acting out. Moreover, AYP provided a forum for bridging differences between people. Teachers tailored classes to be culturally relevant for diverse groups of students. Beyond the physical aspects of yoga, AYP teachers described intervening in ethnic-related conflict by discussing it openly in class and by having adversaries join together for partner yoga. Such encounters presented opportunities for persons from opposing groups to address differences in a safe and structured forum. Ultimately, this aspect of the program provided opportunities in and out of class for peaceful dialogue and promotion of understanding and reconciliation. In this way, participants together practiced principles for promoting personal and social change that was relevant beyond their shared yoga practice.

In addition to enhancing intergroup dialogue, our findings suggest that the intervention bolstered coping skills for preventing the intergenerational transmission of violence. For example, AYP teachers reported changing their attitudes and styles of parenting. Through educational opportunities (e.g., conversations and in-services about parenting), self-esteem, emotional regulation through the practice of yoga, and involvement in a purposeful and income-generating activity, teachers described the kind of empowerment that may be necessary for preventing child maltreatment and other types of intergenerational violence. By coping with their stressors, regulating their emotions, and changing their parenting strategies, these teachers provided safer environments, material goods, and emotional support to their children, thus fostering resiliency in themselves, their students, and the next generation. Overall, participants described intentionally role-modeling to their students and communities the mentoring they received to develop a sense of purpose (i.e., noble purposes that involved making a contribution to society), as well as the concrete tools for acting on this sense of purpose (e.g., communication, leadership, and other life skills).

Recognition of the mechanisms through which mentoring-oriented yoga interventions such as AYP exert their influence can inform the development of other such programs. Youth mentoring programs in general have increasingly adopted a positive youth development approach (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Liang, Spencer, West, & Rappaport, 2013) where there is a focus on identifying and

building on the existing strengths of youth (Damon, 2004). However, a focus on social activism and engagement in purposeful activities is relatively new in the youth mentoring literature (Liang et al., 2013). Results from this study suggested that emphasizing resilience and purpose might be a beneficial mentoring strategy for yoga programs. Moreover, yoga programs with a mentoring component may do well to expand beyond a focus on individualistic goals for personal health and wellbeing to also encompass building strengths among participants that enable them to engage in noble causes, such as community organizing and other social change endeavors.

Conclusion

This study described a qualitative analysis of teachers' experiences in the Africa Yoga Project (AYP), a program aimed at fostering resilience in youth impacted by poverty and trauma. Findings from the current study provided evidence of the efficacy of the Africa Yoga Project as a psychosocial intervention for youth and their communities. Teachers who had been exposed to violence and adversity reported personally benefitting as well as witnessing their students benefitting from participation in AYP. In keeping with previous research on the outcomes of yoga for those impacted by trauma and violence, the basic aspects of yoga (e.g., focusing on the mind-body connection, attuning to physical sensations and breathing, connecting with others) seemed to have positive, individual-oriented effects for all program participants (Spinazzola, Rhodes, Emerson, Earle, & Monroe, 2011; West et al., 2016; van der Kolk et al., 2014). Moreover, program participants noted the additional benefits of economic empowerment and community engagement, and provided a rich picture of the additional interpersonal and social justice outcomes of the Africa Yoga Project. Namely, they reported increased safety and stability, personal growth, action, cultural diversity, and empowerment for themselves and their students, which had implications for their communities and for society at large. Findings provided evidence that mentoring-oriented yoga may be a low-cost, sustainable, and effective intervention to promote individual and community resilience and social change.

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