

41. Creating S.P.A.C.E. Through Yoga: Africa Yoga Project Teachers Promote Personal Transformation, Peaceful Communities, and Purpose-filled Service

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Objective: Yoga is increasingly used as an intervention to improve physical and mental health and promote a sense of strength and empowerment. The Africa Yoga Project (AYP) is an organization that builds on these goals by attempting to increase access to the tools of self-determination for individuals living in the “slums” of Nairobi and other Kenyan communities profoundly affected by trauma and poverty following the post-election violence in 2008. AYP aims to achieve this goal by training individuals to become yoga teachers to foster income generation, public service, and community development. This study was designed to elucidate the experiences of AYP yoga teachers and whether and how AYP has affected their lives and communities.

Method: Seven one-on-one interviews were conducted with AYP teachers who offer traditional classes and no-fee and low-fee community classes with underserved and marginalized populations (e.g., women in prison, orphaned children, people with HIV/AIDS). Teachers with leadership roles were selected on the basis of their ability to speak to the personal and community impact of AYP. Interviews took place at AYP headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, and lasted 45–60 mins. Audiotaped interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content analysis, from which five primary themes arose.

Results: Participants’ reports of their experiences in AYP were overwhelmingly positive. Negative comments universally related to ways in which they wished for more resources to expand AYP’s reach beyond Nairobi. Five major themes, referred to as S.P.A.C.E. themes, arose from the data: (a) safety and stability, (b) personal growth, (c) action, (d) cultural and experiential diversity, and (e) empowerment.

Conclusion: Results demonstrate how AYP provides a unique opportunity to its members. Participants described feeling more stable in their lives, with increased ability to take action, create meaningful connections, and empower others. Findings also suggest that yoga can be an effective intervention for individuals and communities to promote peace and reconciliation, improve physical and mental health, and bring economic opportunity to low-income people. This presentation will address potential implications, including opportunities for creating sustainable programs to empower individuals and communities and provide tools for self-determination through yoga.

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