

## Article

# Exploring the Mind-Body Connection: Yoga, Mindfulness, and Mental Well-Being in Adolescent Physical Education

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**Abstract:** In light of the escalating mental health problems witnessed in recent years, the World Health Organization (WHO) is actively seeking ways to enhance mental health, with an overarching goal to promote mental well-being. Central to this objective is the significant role played by education. As stated by the UNESCO, educational institutions can play a pivotal part in fostering aspects like psychological well-being. Particularly, Physical Education stands out as it addresses specific content related to mental health. Therefore, this study aimed to evaluate the construct of emotional awareness in adolescents and determine whether it is affected by an intervention based on yoga and mindfulness. The study was conducted with a sample of 149 participants, with an average age of  $14.6 \pm 0.5$  years. A quasi-experimental study design was employed, where measurements were taken before (pre) and after (post) the implementation of an intervention with two groups, a control group and an experimental group. The control group underwent a six-session body expression teaching unit, while the experimental group followed the same unit but began with a warm-up based on yoga and mindfulness. The assessment instrument used was the revised Emotional Awareness Questionnaire (EAQ30). To assess the normality of the dataset, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was carried out, which indicated a non-parametric sample. Subsequently, the Mann–Whitney U test was executed, revealing no significant differences in any dimension. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was also conducted, which showed significant differences in two dimensions. The lack of significant results could potentially be attributed to the short duration of the study. Nevertheless, these findings could contribute valuable insights towards understanding the integration of yoga or mindfulness-based programs in Physical Education. These programs have the potential to significantly impact adolescent emotional awareness and mental health, which is particularly crucial given the increasing prevalence of mental health issues in this age group. Therefore, despite the absence of robust findings in this study, it illuminates the necessity and value for further research into the utilization of yoga and mindfulness in the educational context.

**Keywords:** adolescents; mental health; emotional awareness; yoga; mindfulness; physical education



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## 1. Introduction

In this study, we explore various facets of emotional processing, each pertinent to adolescent development. ‘Emotional intelligence’ is the capacity to process emotional stimuli, including recognition, understanding, and management of one’s own and others’ emotions. ‘Emotional education’ refers to structured teaching aimed at enhancing understanding and expression of emotions, thereby fostering emotional competence—specific skills that enable individuals to interact effectively in emotional contexts. ‘Emotional awareness’ is the conscious perception and discernment of emotional cues within oneself and others, while ‘mindfulness’ denotes a focused awareness on the present, acknowledging and accepting one’s feelings and thoughts without judgment [1–3]. ‘Mental health’ encapsulates

an individual's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being. Each term, though distinct, converges on the broad construct of emotional and mental well-being, crucial in educational contexts, especially among adolescents. "Mental health is a state of mental well-being that allows individuals to cope with life's stressful moments, develop all their abilities, learn and work properly, and contribute to their community's improvement" [4]. The importance of focusing on adolescents specifically stems from the transitional nature of this developmental stage, often marked by a unique set of mental health challenges [5]. Adolescence is a critical period where individuals undergo significant biological, psychological, and social changes [6]. These changes, while forming the bridge to adult identity and autonomy, can also create vulnerabilities due to the increased exposure to stressors, the pressure to conform, identity confusion, and the emergence of mental health disorders [7]. However, in recent years, mental health problems have been on the rise and have become widespread, affecting even the youngest population. Despite the increasing recognition of mental health issues among adolescents, there is a significant gap in the literature concerning effective, accessible, and sustainable strategies within school settings to address these challenges [8]. This gap is particularly concerning given the high prevalence of mental health issues within this age group and the long-term consequences these can have on an individual's overall well-being, societal contribution, and quality of life [9]. This is reflected in numerous studies, including one on the emotional and behavioral adjustment of Spanish adolescents, which shows that 7.7% of adolescents have emotional and behavioral problems [10]. Moreover, according to the WHO [11], one in seven young people aged 10 to 19 suffers from some disorder, with depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders being the leading causes of illness and disability among them. The organization also highlights that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among adolescents aged 15 to 19. These statistics not only illustrate the severity and immediacy of addressing adolescent mental health but also underscore the necessity of intervention during this formative and vulnerable period. Early intervention and the promotion of mental health and resilience within educational settings are crucial to mitigating these issues and enhancing life trajectories [12]. For this reason, the WHO [11] seeks to improve the mental health of individuals and society in general to promote mental well-being. The current literature primarily focuses on the problem, with less emphasis on holistic interventions that can be integrated into daily school activities, such as physical education, which is a gap that our research aims to fill. In relation to this situation, as pointed out by Wante et al. [13], affectivity and well-being in early adolescence are subject to emotional regulation. Therefore, it seems necessary to work on emotional intelligence, characterized as a cohesive combination of abilities that encompass the recognition, utilization, comprehension, and regulation of both our own emotions and the emotions of those around us [14]; and emphasize its relevance, especially when speaking about adolescents [15]. Regulating emotions and being emotionally efficient lead to healthy mental health and better psychological adjustment [16,17]. Furthermore, there is ample scientific evidence regarding how emotional intelligence is related to multiple benefits, such as improved physical and mental health, improvements in relationships and cohabitation, and higher academic performance [18]. However, there is a lack of comprehensive studies exploring the potential of practices like yoga and mindfulness within the physical education curriculum to enhance emotional intelligence and address mental health issues among adolescents. This study aims to fill this research gap by investigating how a program based on yoga and mindfulness influences students' emotional awareness in a physical education context [19]. Therefore, emotional intelligence is one of the aspects associated with mental and social well-being in humans and plays a fundamental role in the educational process [20]. However, historically, intellectual development has been prioritized [21], despite humans possessing two minds—one rational and one emotional [22]. While programs to develop social and emotional skills in classrooms are now in place [23], emotional education has proven crucial for comprehensive learning [24,25] and is a fundamental condition for personality development and a positive attitude towards life [26]. In line with this idea, several studies have shown that

the development of emotional competencies at all educational stages generates well-being in students [16]. Moreover, the new educational legislation (LOMLOE) [27] indicates that teachers must respond to the needs of today's society, with emotional education being one of them. Therefore, in Royal Decree [28], significant changes are introduced to respond to the challenges of the 21st century, such as ensuring the comprehensive development of students and working on emotional education from all subjects. Thus, it seems that working with emotions is essential. For this reason, in this study, we wanted to address the emotional problems that concern adolescents. However, what can we rely on to develop emotional education from the classrooms?

In line with the previous question, the United Nations (UN) has been developing various programs over the years, and currently, the 2030 Agenda is approved, a universal agenda for sustainable development, which consists of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) that seek to improve the quality of life of the entire world population, through a set of targets for each goal. For the development of these SDGs, education plays a key role, as pointed out by UNESCO [29]. Educational centers, through the learning environment, can help develop aspects such as psychological well-being and the inclusion of the most vulnerable students. Therefore, through education, we should respond to social demands for the comprehensive development of students, establishing relationships between what happens in the classrooms and social reality [30]. Consequently, in this study, we have decided to focus on the improvement of adolescents' mental health through emotional education. All of this is based on certain goals of some of the sustainable development objectives, such as goal 3 on health and well-being, and within it, goal 3.4 on the treatment and promotion of mental health and well-being. In this way, we have approached this task from the area of Physical Education, as the previously cited Royal Decree points out that through Physical Education, students should learn to manage their emotions. This area also includes content blocks that address the three components of health: physical, social, and mental, which is the focus of this study. In turn, there are studies that have determined that regular sport and physical activity are related to healthy habits for improving both physical and mental health [31]. Besides being an area that contributes to the formation not only physical but also affective and emotional, seeking the integral development of students [32]. At this point, we ask ourselves, what activities can help us achieve the aspects we have discussed in the previous paragraphs? Various authors consider yoga as a potential discipline in the prevention of emotional problems as it brings various vital benefits [33]. Additionally, since 2005, the number of studies on mindfulness and the analysis of its efficacy in children and adolescents has increased [34]. It is a technique that has benefits for improving mental health (physical, social, emotional, and cognitive) of students in this society characterized by a frenetic pace that leads us to well-being problems [35]. Moreover, it can be effective and serve as a protective factor against the development of certain psychological problems [36,37]. In fact, mindfulness-based programs are increasingly important due to their benefits and impact on people's well-being [38–40]. Despite finding benefits about mindfulness as some of those indicated in the previous paragraph, Ruiz et al. [41] conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of the efficacy of mindfulness in children and adolescents, from which no significant results were obtained. This could be due to the small number of studies on this program, as well as the limited studies focused on adolescents, which, in addition, have small samples and lack a control group [42].

With the intention of contributing to the mentioned research line, in this study, we wondered whether a warm-up based on yoga and mindfulness could influence students' emotional awareness in Physical Education. Thus, the aim of this study was to evaluate the emotional awareness of students before and after such an intervention program and to check its effect on the emotional awareness of Physical Education students. This study sought to find a relationship between the practice of yoga and mindfulness in different sessions of a didactic unit on Block 5, manifestations of motor culture, and the improvement of the emotional awareness of the students who carried out this practice. Thus, it is

expected that the practice of both techniques will be positively related to adolescents' emotional awareness.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The intervention was carried out with 3rd year ESO students from a school in the city of Elche. This year was divided into 6 classes, each with approximately 25 students. Thus, the sample consisted of 149 adolescents. The selected groups were grouped randomly. The control group sample consisted of three groups, making up a total of 75 students, and the experimental group was composed of three groups with a total of 74. The ages had an average of  $14.6 \pm 0.5$ .

### 2.2. Procedure

This study used a quasi-experimental design with convenience sampling, involving two groups, one control, and one experimental, and two evaluation times (pre- and post-intervention). The intervention was based on the development of a didactic unit on Block 5, expressions of motor culture, which consisted of 6 body expression sessions, each lasting 50 min, and was developed at the end of the second quarter (Figure 1). To determine if the planned intervention influenced students' emotional awareness, classes were divided into two groups. A control group worked on the previously mentioned sessions, and an experimental group's intervention was based on the development of the same didactic unit, with the peculiarity that in the warm-up of each of the six sessions, a part of yoga based on sun salutations and mindfulness with breathing and relaxation techniques was performed. Additionally, with the experimental group, the first session was devoted to the practice and understanding of the most basic aspects of yoga. Both before and after the unit's development, students completed a questionnaire to assess their emotional awareness. The necessary authorization was requested from the management team of the selected center, and the period for completing the questionnaires was agreed upon. The questionnaires were administered during the students' Physical Education sessions, specifically at the beginning and end of the didactic unit related to the basic knowledge of Block 5 and expressions of motor culture, as reflected in Royal Decree [28], which refers to the LOMLOE [27]. The necessary instructions were given to complete the questionnaire, emphasizing the sincerity and honesty of their responses. The time required to complete the questionnaires was approximately 5 min.

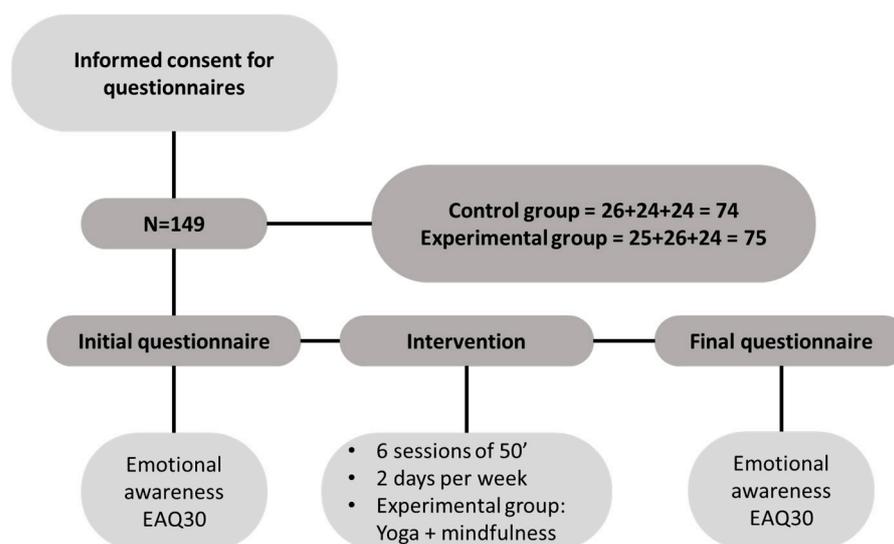


Figure 1. Summary of the procedure.

### 2.3. Measurements

To assess students' emotional awareness, the revised Emotional Awareness Questionnaire (EAQ30), developed by Rieffe et al. [43] and validated for the Spanish context by Samper-García et al. [44], was used, with a reliability index calculated with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.74. This questionnaire is made up of 30 items with Likert-type response options ranging from 1 to 3 points (1: False, 2: Sometimes true, and 3: True). These items measure 6 dimensions:

Distinction of Emotions (DE): items 1, 7, 13, 19, 24, 29, 30. For example, item 7: "It is difficult to know if I feel sad, angry, or something else."

Verbal Exchange of Emotions (VE): items 2, 8, 14. For example, item 8: "I find it hard to talk to someone about how I feel".

Emotional Reaction (ER): items 3, 9, 15, 20, 25. For example, item 3: "Other people do not need to know how I feel".

Bodily Awareness (BA): items 4, 10, 16, 21, 26. For example, item 10: "When I am upset, I can also feel it in my body".

Analysis of Emotions (AE): items 6, 12, 18, 23, 28. For example, item 23: "It's important to know how I feel".

Attention to Others' Emotions (AO): items 5, 11, 17, 22, 27. For example, item 5: "It is important to know how my friends feel".

### 2.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics of the study variables (means, medians, and standard deviations) were calculated. A normality test was performed for all variables, and since both the control and experimental groups exceeded 50 subjects, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was considered. Based on this, the data set turned out to be non-normal, so the non-parametric tests of Mann–Whitney U were carried out to evaluate the differences between the groups in both the pre- and post-intervention results, and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to evaluate intra-group tests (pre vs. post). The dependent variables were the dimensions of the questionnaire used (distinction of emotions, verbal exchange of emotions, emotional reaction, bodily awareness, analysis of emotions, and attention to others' emotions), and the independent variable was the group (control and experimental). The statistical treatment of the data was carried out with the free statistical software Jamovi 2.0.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive Analysis

As previously mentioned, the questionnaire used is composed of items that measure six distinct dimensions. It was administered before (pre) and after (post) the intervention by both groups, control and experimental. The mean and standard deviation data for each dimension are reflected in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Descriptive analysis for the six dimensions of the emotional awareness questionnaire EAQ30, before and after the intervention for the control and experimental group expressed in mean and standard deviation.

Group	Dimension	
	Distinction of emotions	
	PRE	POST
Control	1.73 (0.462)	1.89 (0.442)
Experimental	1.80 (0.481)	1.93 (0.434)
	Verbal exchange	
	PRE	POST
Control	2.00 (0.375)	1.96 (0.390)
Experimental	1.97 (0.335)	1.95 (0.366)

**Table 1.** *Cont.*

Group		Dimension	
		Emotional reaction	
		PRE	POST
Control		2.05 (0.467)	2.11 (0.440)
Experimental		2.05 (0.444)	2.06 (0.395)
		Body awareness	
		PRE	POST
Control		1.96 (0.469)	2.07 (0.432)
Experimental		1.95 (0.488)	2.03 (0.390)
		Emotional analysis	
		PRE	POST
Control		1.99 (0.261)	2.03 (0.243)
Experimental		2.02 (0.209)	2.01 (0.277)
		Attention to the emotions of others	
		PRE	POST
Control		2.30 (0.401)	2.27 (0.433)
Experimental		2.36 (0.396)	2.22 (0.448)

Note: This table shows the means and standard deviations of the six dimensions of the EAQ30 questionnaire.

### 3.2. Comparative Analysis

To ascertain the normality of the data set, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was observed, where  $p$ -values greater and less than 0.05 were obtained, as shown in Table 2. Thus, with both normal and non-normal data, it was concluded that the dataset was non-parametric.

**Table 2.** Mann–Whitney U test results.

Dimension	Intervention	U Mann–Whitney	Sig. Asin. (Bilateral)
Distinction of emotions	PRE	2278	0.330
	POST	2387	0.596
Verbal exchange	PRE	2513	0.992
	POST	2450	0.779
Emotional reaction	PRE	2451	0.789
	POST	2355	0.507
Body awareness	PRE	2476	0.871
	POST	2367	0.539
Emotional analysis	PRE	2431	0.718
	POST	2389	0.592
Attention to the emotions of others	PRE	2282	0.333
	POST	2272	0.315

Note: This table shows whether the differences between groups are significant or not in relation to each of the dimensions measured in the questionnaire.

Based on these results, the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test was performed, as shown in Table 2, where it was observed that there were no significant differences in any dimension, as the  $p$ -values in all dimensions were  $p > 0.05$ .

Finally, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was performed, as shown in Table 3, where significant differences were found in the dimensions of distinction of emotions and bodily awareness, as in both dimensions, the  $p$ -values were  $p < 0.05$ . The distinction of emotions with a  $p$ -value = 0.009 and an effect size of 0.260. Bodily awareness had a  $p$ -value = 0.039 and an effect size of  $-0.222$ .

**Table 3.** Results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

	DE	VE	ER	BA	AE	AO
	PRE- POST	PRE- POST	PRE- POST	PRE- POST	PRE- POST	PRE- POST
<b>Z</b>	−2.625	−0.850	−0.545	−1.952	−0.418	−1.555
<b>Sig. asin. (bilateral)</b>	0.009	0.395	0.586	0.039	0.676	0.120

Note: This table shows whether, within the same group, the differences are significant or not between the data collected in the pre- and post-test in relation to each of the dimensions. DE: distinction of emotions, VE: verbal exchange, ER: emotional reaction, BA: body awareness, AE: analysis of emotions, AO: attention to the emotions of others.

#### 4. Discussion

The primary objective of this research study was to meticulously examine the emotional awareness of students both before and after an intervention program carefully designed around the principles of yoga and mindfulness. The primary motivation behind this investigation was to determine whether this unique combination could foster noticeable improvements in the emotional consciousness of adolescents, a demographic often characterized by heightened emotional vulnerability. This heightened emotional vulnerability during adolescence is attributed to a multitude of factors, including biological changes, peer pressures, academic challenges, and the beginning of self-identity formation [26]. Integrating tools that allow for better emotional management becomes pivotal during this transformative phase. Extensive scholarly efforts have delved into the importance of emotional competencies, especially from an educational standpoint [45,46]. The conclusions from these studies highlight the strong correlation between these competencies and mental well-being. However, it is pivotal to note that regarding adolescents, the depth of research is somewhat limited and often hindered by the small sample population sizes. In the context of this particular study, the collected data did not exhibit any significant differences between groups across all analyzed dimensions. Interestingly, intra-group differences were evident in two of the dimensions. The lack of definitive results could potentially be attributed to an inappropriate time allocation for the study's intervention, which was limited to a single academic unit consisting of six sessions [47]. However, this time constraint does not negate the possible benefits of such interventions. Various studies imply that a well-structured intervention program, anchored in the principles of yoga and mindfulness, might substantially improve emotional awareness and the overall mental well-being of adolescents [48,49]. Nonetheless, the data collected and analyzed in this study did not conclusively support the hypothesis that such a program significantly impacts students' emotional awareness. One must consider that even if the results are not conclusive, yoga and mindfulness may have cumulative benefits over time, which might not be immediately perceptible in short-term interventions but become evident over prolonged engagements [37].

The importance and effectiveness of relaxation techniques such as yoga and mindfulness have gained significant recognition in educational contexts [50]. Serving as potent coping mechanisms, they address a myriad of emotional needs and challenges that emerge during a student's developmental phase [34]. Within Physical Education's realm, a variety of attention and relaxation techniques present themselves as feasible inclusions in the curriculum [35]. Mindfulness, in particular, has exhibited significant advantages for students across cognitive, interpersonal, and affective dimensions [36]. In a recent study by García-Taibo et al. [51], mindfulness greatly contributed to students' psychological well-being when incorporated within the educational milieu, especially within Physical Education. Earlier studies also posited that mindfulness could act as a protective buffer against a range of psychological concerns [26,27]. Embedding mindfulness in daily routines is deemed paramount for both physical and psychological health, leading to enhanced mental well-being [38,39]. Furthermore, a plethora of studies have associated yoga practices with

various improvements in life quality, notably psychological strides during adolescence [40]. Thus, an education system that interweaves yoga could potentially foster better emotional self-regulation among students, promoting enhancements in their mental dispositions [41]. Educational institutions that have adopted yoga have witnessed merits such as elevated mental health, improved student behavior, and overall enhanced health [42,50].

However, despite these promising aspects, our study is not without its inherent limitations. Primarily, it spanned only a single academic year and occurred over a concise period. Consequently, we advocate for subsequent research to expand upon our findings with more expansive sample sizes and longer intervention periods, maybe spanning a trimester or an entire academic year. Taking it further, integrating control groups, or diversifying the age groups or socio-economic backgrounds of participants, can provide deeper insights into the intervention's efficacy. Moreover, it would be intriguing to replicate this study with all analyzed variables but aimed at discerning gender-based differences. One notable limitation of our study involves the use of an emotion awareness assessment tool developed in 2008. Although widely validated, this instrument may not fully encapsulate the most recent advancements or perspectives in the field of emotional intelligence. Future research should consider employing more contemporary assessment tools, which might provide insights aligned with the latest understanding of emotional awareness and related constructs.

Thus, this research stands as a noteworthy addition to the expanding body of work exploring the infusion of mindfulness and yoga interventions within educational precincts. As our society becomes more attuned to the paramount importance of mental health, endeavors striving to amplify emotional awareness and wellness in students should anchor our educational pursuits. Introducing these methods into curricula could equip students with crucial skills to navigate their emotions, laying the groundwork for healthier mental outcomes. As adolescents grapple with the mounting academic and social demands, providing them with tools to navigate their emotions and boost their wellness is indispensable. With the mounting mental health concerns among adolescents, such intervention programs possess the potential to radically transform our educational frameworks, advocating not just academic ascension but also emotional growth and overall wellness.

## 5. Conclusions

In an era where mental health issues continue to rise, particularly among adolescents, there is an undeniable need to develop innovative, effective strategies for addressing and potentially alleviating these issues. Yoga and mindfulness-based intervention programs implemented through the Physical Education domain stand as promising approaches towards this objective. Their potential in enhancing mental health is significant and aligns with the achievement of Goal 3.4, which advocates for the promotion of mental health and well-being. The study at hand aimed to explore the impact of these programs on emotional awareness in students, a crucial element that plays an integral role in mental health. After careful development and implementation of the intervention, the results did not yield the expected significant improvement in emotional awareness. This does not diminish the potential value of yoga and mindfulness programs but rather points to a need for further research and perhaps a refinement of the application methods within the study. When viewed in a broader perspective, various existing pieces of information support the effectiveness of yoga and mindfulness in improving mental health and mitigating psychological issues. These practices are believed to foster a better understanding of self, enhance emotional regulation, reduce stress, and generally improve psychological well-being. They facilitate the development of a calm and focused mind, which is invaluable in the turbulent period of adolescence. Physical Education teachers, therefore, ought to consider the integration of yoga and mindfulness programs into their curriculum. This is not merely about diversifying physical activities but about taking a holistic approach to education, which values mental health as much as physical fitness and academic achievements. By doing so, schools could play a pivotal role in improving adolescent mental health, thus responding to one of the most important yet worrying issues of the present day. Yet, it is

also necessary to mention that these programs' effectiveness could be influenced by various factors, including duration, frequency, and the manner of implementation. Hence, further research, possibly with larger sample sizes, different time frames, and more diverse groups, is necessary to understand the full potential of these practices in educational settings. In conclusion, yoga and mindfulness, though not found significantly effective in this study, hold great promise in the quest for solutions to improve adolescent mental health. As educational institutions continue to explore and integrate these practices into their systems, the hope is for a future where mental health is no longer a concern but a testament to the resilience and potential of the human spirit.

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