

Yoga-Informed Educational Leadership: A Holistic Model For Regenerative Learning Environments

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Abstract

In Nigeria, where yoga is largely unknown and underused, recent socio-economic challenges-including inflation, burnout, and growing mental health challenges - make the need for a change in educational leadership model apparent. This paper projects a yoga-informed approach to educational leadership as a full, invigorative model for planning sustainable learning environments. Rooted in the incorporation of yoga philosophy, physical postures, and breathwork, the model lays emphasis on the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit. It seeks to promote self-awareness, stability, mindfulness, and compassion among both teachers and students. This approach aims to change educational planning by enhancing physical and mental well-being, resilience; analytical thinking and social responsibility in ways that are both contextually relevant and human-centered.

Keywords: yoga-informed leadership, regenerative education, sustainable schools, educational planning, holistic development

1. Introduction

Leadership style according to Nwankwoala (2016) are the methods adopted by a manager or an administrator to ensure that his/her subordinates contribute their efforts towards achievement of organizational and personal goals, these styles or method may be employee centred or organizational centred.

Leadership plays an important role in the management of any school because the successful achievement of the overall educational objective of a school depends largely on the leadership style deployed. As such, every school should ensure that adequate measures that make for its efficient and effective management are put in place for

the purposes of greater productivity and a smooth relationship between management and subordinates (Orupabo & Nwankwoala, 2018).

In Nigeria, managers of schools wield different leadership styles – autocratic, bureaucratic, democratic, transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles and these leadership styles have impact both on staff and on the educational outcomes of students. While some of these leadership styles have been praised for their effectiveness in delivering the educational objectives of schools, the usage of the styles that make for educational success are applied by very limited schools as against the larger number of schools who use leadership styles that do not serve the purpose of education and more so while educational objectives which is usually weighed in terms of successful outcomes in examinations are achieved using some leadership models, such models do not emphasize the mental, emotional and physical state of the educators and learners which are also vital because a sound mind, body and soul make for sound educators and learners.

In most public schools in Nigeria for instance, leadership style is mostly laissez-

faire, bureaucratic and transactional which make no room for innovation and autonomy and thus stifle empowerment and the use of initiatives in times of emergencies such as is currently witnessed in Nigeria as seen in the case of the herder-farmer crises faced in the middle belt region, insecurity; unemployment, inflation and the economic hardship that is biting hard on citizens and affecting the educational environment adversely. Leadership models in some other schools are authoritarian and rigid in nature and have dire effects on staff and students as they induce stress and burnout and drain staff and students of the willingness to be and stay creative (Ogunode & Lawan, 2020).

Nigerian educational planning tends to focus more on the provision of infrastructure, updating of curricula, and the outcome of examinations which are good. But they uphold the aforementioned while playing down on the holistic development of staff and students mentally, emotionally, and ethically which are also important. It is in a bid to bridge this gap that this paper proposes a yoga-informed leadership model; one that takes into account inner discipline, ethical action, self-awareness, and empathy as a model to help teachers, educators, tutors and

managers of school be in their best shape/form mentally, physically and emotionally while executing their duties and to inculcate the same practice into their students to aid them attain holistic education - one that admits of empathy, self-regulation and community-building - skills which are crucial for plying through Nigeria's difficult socio-economic realities.

2. Yoga-Informed Educational Leadership: A Comprehensive Regenerative Model

Yoga according to the Modern Recovery is an ancient discipline rooted in Indian philosophy; it encompasses physical postures (asanas), breath control (pranayama), and meditation (dhyana), all aimed at integrating the mind, body, and spirit. It is an ancient art and science conceptualized by Patanjali, the Father of Yoga, 5000 years ago. Yoga is said to come from the root word 'yug' which means to yoke or join; bind or concentrate. It was passed on by the oral tradition of Patanjali to the ancient yoga teachers who taught it as the ethical means to cleanse the mind, body, and spirit. The teachers of yoga emphasized its healing and self-realization ability as well as its ability to bring about

good posture in individuals who engage it. The practise of yoga provides guidance in gaining mastery over the mind and emotions to achieve spiritual growth and empathy (Lirong Yu, 2024).

In modern times, yoga is considered as part of a wellness practice for adults and is widely accepted in many workplaces as having clear benefits to employee work production and personal well-being as seen by the recent increase in wellness programs being implemented in major corporations. Microsoft, for instance implemented a Weight Management program in 2005 to increase the physical fitness of its employees and therefore reduce employee absenteeism (McPherson, 2005). In Louisville, Kentucky, the *Compassionate Schools Project* integrated yoga mats, relaxation, and mindfulness in classrooms and early data revealed enhanced focus, reduced anxiety, and increased empathy among students. More so, a 2024 scoping review highlighted that yoga in schools significantly supports students' self-regulation, emotional resilience, and social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies.

In 'Yoga in Schools: Self-Care for Administrators and Teachers' (2024), Lirong

Yu asserts in relation to the incorporation of yoga in schools for administrators' selfcare that in educational settings, nurturing spirituality enhances resilience, emotional equilibrium, and proficient leadership and that effectiveness of balanced self-care is critical for teachers and school administrators. Yatendra Kumar Sharma, Sushil Kumar Sharma & Ekta Sharma (2018) in their study aver that yoga practices bring about better balance equilibrium in the autonomic function, metabolic rate and neurohumoral functions to achieve both physical and mental well-being. Daniela Cvitković (2021) in his work noted that in schools that introduced yoga as part of the curriculum, there was reduction in stress, improved mood, increased attention and calm in some children, which are prerequisites for successful learning. Donna Wang & Marshall Hagins (2016) in their paper qualitatively studied six focus groups across four public schools in New York City and found that middle and high school students perceived the benefits to yoga as increased self-regulation, mindfulness, self-esteem, physical conditioning, academic performance, and stress reduction.

Given the benefits yoga affords from its use 5000 years ago and its benefits as shown in the research and studies already highlighted, incorporating it into Nigeria's educational leadership in these trying times when stress, burnout, and anxiety is prevalent amongst educators, teachers and administrators of schools owing to the difficult socio-economic crises faced in the country will serve tremendous benefit to them and their students.

a. The Eight Limbs of Yoga as Leadership Pillars

Patanjali emphasized eight limbs of yoga namely: Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi and these limbs of yoga can very well serve as leadership competencies as itemized below:

- I.Yama - Ethical conduct with emphasis on codes of restraint, abstinences, self-regulations
Principles like Ahimsa (non-violence) and Satya (truthfulness) promote integrity-based leadership and caring communication.
- II.Niyama - Self-discipline and inner cultivation

Practices such as Santosha (contentment) and Tapas (inner discipline) breed self-regulation and reflective leadership.

III. Asana - Meditation posture and embodied presence

This is very useful in ensuring physical resilience and bodily awareness which are fundamental for grounded leadership.

IV. Pranayama - Breath control

These Techniques ensure breath regulation which enhance mental clarity, calm under pressure, and readiness for decision-making

V. Pratyahara - Sense regulation

This deals with the withdrawing of senses while nurturing focus and presence and is helpful in reducing distractions in leadership

VI. Dharana - Concentration

This aids in the cultivation of single-pointed attention which is necessary when navigating difficult educational challenges

VII. Dhyana - Meditative awareness

This encourages self-awareness and the capacity for reflective leadership.

VIII. Samadhi - Integration

This is the culmination of practice: full engagement, clarity, and a sense of purpose that translates to visionary and compassionate leadership.

These eight pillars show that yoga offers not only relaxation but an integrated ethical and psychological tool for effective leadership founded upon ancient wisdom and applicable to modern educational challenges.

b. The Yoga-Informed Leadership Model: Core Pillars

Nigeria's economic, emotional, and psychological strain makes the need for visionary, stable, and compassionate administrators dire, not just mere educational administrators who only reel out commands. The Yoga-Informed Leadership Model is structured around four interrelated pillars that integrate the core principles of yoga into leadership practice. This model offers a regenerative and human-centered approach to leadership that merges personal growth with collective transformation with each pillar drawing from yogic philosophy and practice that respond directly to the challenges of school leadership in Nigeria.

Figure 1 below illustrates the interconnection of these core elements and how they translate into leadership competencies suitable for Nigeria's education sector.

A. Self-Awareness and Inner Grounding

At the heart of yoga is the journey inward. The practice of Svadhyaya (self-study) and Pranayama (breath control) nurses a deepened awareness of the self which is an essential trait for leadership. Through intentional breathwork and reflective exercises, school administrators, leaders can cultivate calmness and resilience, particularly in high-tension situations common in Nigerian schools, such as delayed salaries, underpayment; overcrowded classrooms, or poor infrastructure.

For illustration, when a school principal practices ten minutes of breath awareness each morning, he will notice reduced anxiety and greater composure in managing staff disputes and uncooperative parents. Hülshager et al. (2013) affirm that mindfulness and breath-based practices improve stress regulation and decision-making.

Self-awareness and inner grounding enable administrators, leaders, teachers to respond rather than react in the face of crises without being overwhelmed and to make decisions with clarity rather than in panic.

B. Embodied Compassion and Empathy

The principle of Ahimsa (non-harming) goes above physical harm to include words,

policies, and systems that can hurt or exclude. A yoga-informed leader maintains empathy not as an emotion but as an attitude by practicing mindful listening, valuing diverse voices, and championing inclusive leadership.

In the Nigerian situation where ethnic, religious, and socio-economic differences often create tension even within a single school, such leadership is crucial. Imagine a school in Jos that implements peace circles during weekly assemblies where students and teachers sit together in silence, reflect, and then share thoughts, this will create an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. Boyatzis, (2006) and Sharma, (2018) attest that compassionate leadership improves staff retention, student discipline, and encourages inclusive learning spaces, this pillar transforms schools into sanctuaries of emotional safety.

C. Clarity and Focus in Decision-Making

Dharana (concentration) and Dhyana (meditation) help cultivate mental clarity (a skill that is non-negotiable) in school leaders who must deal with tough, difficult situations such as issues involving budget cuts, policy shifts, and staff shortages. Focused decision-

making determines whether a school succeeds or fails.

Mindful-meditation trains the mind to stay present and disengage from distraction. Zeidan et al., (2010) and Langer, (1989) confirm that mindfulness improves executive function, working memory, and problem-solving as such a school leader who instils a 3-minute stillness practice before weekly strategy meetings is likely to experience improved productivity and less reactive decisions among the team.

D. Community Connection and Ethical Leadership

A yoga-informed leader embodies Seva (selfless service) by grounding decisions in ethical values and community needs. In a country like Nigeria, where leadership is

often hierarchical and disconnected from the grassroots, a yoga-based approach invites humility, collaboration, and responsibility.

Consider a headmaster who initiates a parent-led school farm to supplement feeding programs. Rather than imposing decisions, he co-creates them—honouring the wisdom of the community. This participatory ethic is central to yoga philosophy and resonates with indigenous African leadership traditions which is grounded in dialogue and consensus. Effective educational leadership, therefore, is not about authority but about service. And service, when infused with integrity and transparency, inspires trust and accountability (Northouse, 2018; Palmer, 2004).

Yoga-Informed Leadership Model



Figure 1 illustrates the proposed Yoga-Informed Leadership Model as developed by the author

1. Benefits of the Yoga-Informed Leadership Approach

The benefits of the Yoga-Informed Approach are three dimensional— individually, institutionally and systemically (Zenner et al., 2014, Tang et al., 2007; Sharma, 2018)

On the individual basis, the Yoga-Informed Leadership Approach can profit both administrators, teachers and students in diverse ways some of which include:

Increase in IQ	Qualitative health	Reduced Anxiety	Lower Stress	Enhance Self Control
Overcome Depression	Overcome Addiction	Develop Confidence	Personal Transformation	Foster Healing
Increase the efficiency of the functioning of the brain	Appreciate Life	Instil Resilience	Improve Classroom Behaviour	Instil Peace and Calm
Enhance emotional Regulation	Keep Diseases Away	Develop Values	Keep staff and students happy	Heighten Focus

On the institutional level, this Yoga-Informed Leadership Approach have the following benefits as shown in the box below:

Instils Compassion	Implements Reflective Practices	Ensures Emotional Safety	Enforces Teacher- Wellness
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On the systemic level, this Yoga-Informed Leadership Approach supports a change from a reactive educational planning model to a responsive one which is good for the Nigerian educational system as it is characterized by poor resource allocation, unstable curriculum reforms, with little attention given to mental health. It is worthy of note that the UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development framework (UNESCO, 2020) places emphasis on the importance of psychosocial wellness, cultural mindfulness, and values education which are core pillars of the yoga philosophy. Thus, yoga-informed leadership is not at odds with global policy standards but is matter-of-factly aligned with them.

1. Challenges to the Implementation of the Yoga-Informed Leadership Model

Yoga indeed is not commonplace practise is Nigeria. Although a good number of institutions and organization integrate yoga in their workplace, it has not found its way

effectively into the educational sector and it is not without cause as there are a lot of misconceptions about yoga and its use. Some of the reasons why implementing the said leadership approach may face backlash include:

- a) The belief that it is a religion, dogma, a cultish practice and foreign

The belief in Nigeria that yoga is a religious or spiritual tradition incompatible with Christianity or Islam which are the dominant religions in Nigeria will invariably make it difficult for people to come to terms with its use. In many communities with conservative views, yoga may be mistakenly associated with Hinduism or Eastern mysticism and thus be met with suspicion, disregard and rejection.

However, yoga as used in this leadership model is not a religious doctrine but a philosophical and practical framework for self-regulation, mindfulness, and ethical living. Contemporary interpretations, like those used in schools globally, emphasize its

secular and science-backed benefits, including stress reduction, enhanced focus, and emotional regulation (Telles et al., 2019; Khalsa & Butzer, 2016). The inclusion of yoga on the list of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity recognized its universal value as a "living tradition" rather than a belief system (UNESCO, 2016).

b) The deep-seated preference for authoritarian leadership

The difficulty to change and the love for status quo or hand-me-down ways of educational leadership in Nigeria which are largely autocratic and bureaucratic in nature may make reception of this model slow. The aversion of many administrators to 'soft-skills' as they see such skills as ineffective in managing large, underfunded schools may keep administrators from buying into the model. But this model is not passive in any way but champions emotional intelligence, mindful awareness, and transformational leadership outcomes (Boyatzis, 2006;

Goleman, 1998) which are needful in educational situations of burnout, stress and inconsistencies in performance.

c) Lack of training and Policy Level Support

Owing to the fact that yoga is not widely known in Nigeria and is underutilized, it becomes nearly impossible for there to be yoga trainings made available to administrators and teachers and because such trainings are not underway, there will also be no policy support for its implementation as its effectiveness is not broadly declared.

Other less striking reasons for which the yoga-informed leadership may be rejected include:

d) The belief that it is for self mortification or self torture

e) The belief that it is strictly an exercise or game and does not serve any other role or function

f) The belief that it is magic, mere tricks

2. Steps to take to introduce Yoga-Informed Leadership Approach in schools

The steps to take to introduce the leadership model advanced by this paper are as depicted in the call-out box diagram in **figure 2** below:

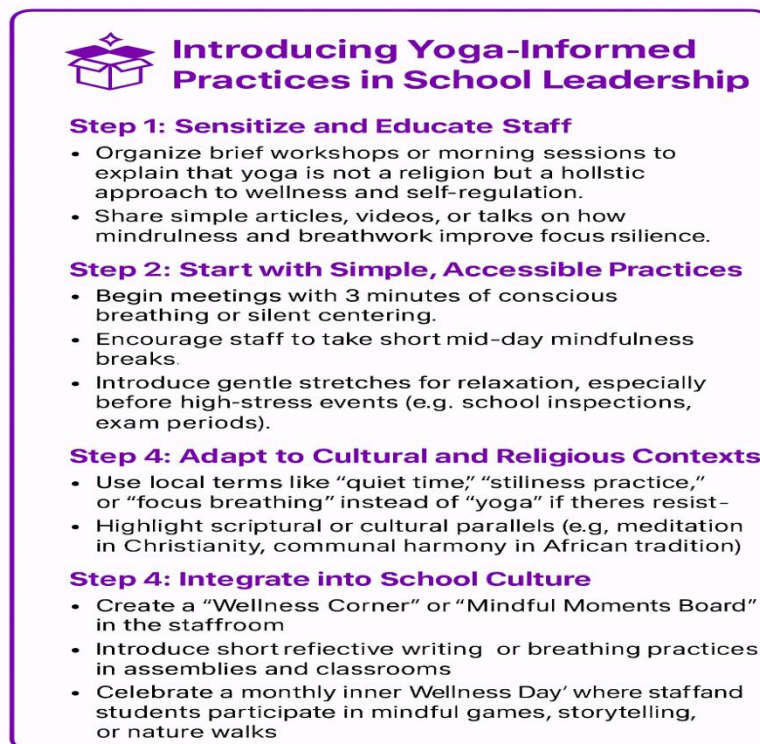


Figure 2 illustrating the process of implementing Yoga-Informed Leadership Model

3. Conclusion

Given the state of Nigeria’s deepening educational woes which includes among many others: rising stress among teachers, overstretched administrators, under-funded schools, and deteriorating student well-being, it is obvious that the models of educational leadership in use no longer serve. In these times, there’s the need for not merely paperwork administrators but transformational, human-centered leaders who embody clarity, compassion, and

resilience. Leadership in education should grow into a more aware, regenerative force that can meet both structural and human needs with equanimity and foresight. This paper has proposed a Yoga-Informed Leadership Model as a timely, relevant, and low-cost model for achieving such transformation. By mixing the ancient wisdom of yoga with contemporary leadership practices, this model promises to promote inner grounding, emotional intelligence; ethical decision-making and

communal responsibility—qualities that are urgently needed in Nigerian schools. The principles of yoga—such as mindful awareness, self-discipline, and non-harming—are universally human and can be translated into simple, accessible practices within school environments.

However, what is required is the institutional will to act. Ministries of Education, teacher training colleges, school boards, and professional bodies should consider integrating yoga-informed principles into their leadership development programs. The model can be test-run in select schools to test the adaptability and impact of the model, particularly in teacher well-being, student behaviour, and school atmosphere. Policy openness to alternative leadership models—especially those rooted in comprehensive and sustainable practices—will show a commitment to progressive, culturally adaptive reforms in education which is a good thing.

In changing educational leadership through the lens of yoga, Nigeria will have the opportunity to not only strengthen its schools but also reaffirm the humanity at the heart of learning. It is in this spirit that this paper calls on policymakers, educators, and researchers

to embrace the Yoga-Informed Leadership Model—not just as a trend, but as a grand invitation to lead with presence, purpose, and compassion.

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