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Yoga Storytelling as an Active Learning Approach: Insights from Early Childhood Classroom Practice

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Abstract
Movement plays a central role in early childhood learning, supporting children's physical development, emotional regulation and cognitive engagement. In recent years, educators have been paying more attention to movement-based approaches to enhance classroom learning experiences. Yoga, when adapted for young children, offers opportunities for playful movement, body awareness and relaxation. This paper reflects on my experiences as a movement educator and explores how yoga can support active learning in early childhood classrooms. Drawing on a series of 30-minute yoga storytelling sessions delivered to five- and six-year-old children in a preschool setting, the paper illustrates how yoga storytelling can be integrated into everyday classroom practice to promote active engagement, body awareness, imagination, and self-regulation. The sessions were built around three picture books that were selected to scaffold children's engagement, and each session followed a consistent structure of warm-up, storytelling through movement, playful extension, and relaxation. Combining yoga with picture-book storytelling created safe, embodied spaces for emotional expression, supported children's creative and logical thinking, and encouraged a shift in the educator's role from instructor to facilitator. The paper concludes by discussing practical implications for early childhood educators interested in incorporating short, story-based yoga routines into daily classroom practice. In doing so, the paper contributes to wider conversations about movement integration, embodied learning, and the pedagogical value of storytelling in early childhood education.

Keywords Yoga · Storytelling · Early childhood · Active learning · Classroom practice

Introduction

Movement is fundamental to early childhood development and learning, as young children primarily experience and understand the world through their bodies (Gallahue et al., 2012; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Through movement, children explore their environment, test ideas and express emotions, making physical activity a key pathway for learning (McGowan et al., 2024; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Engaging in movement supports the development of fundamental motor skills, coordination, balance and body awareness (Gallahue et al., 2012), while also contributing to cognitive processes such as attention, memory and problem-solving (Mavilidi et al., 2022). For young children, movement is not separate from learning; rather, it is a central mechanism through which they make sense of their surroundings and develop new understandings.

The strong connection between movement and learning is reflected in the concept of embodied learning, which suggests that cognitive development is closely linked to bodily experiences (Barsalou, 2008; Flood, 2024). Using rock climbing as an example, Lewis (2000) claims that the body is not just a means of transport for an otherwise disembodied mind, but a primary means of encountering and understanding the world. The climber's grip, balance and proprioceptive sense of the rock are ways of knowing through the body, where perception, action and understanding are inseparable (Lewis, 2000). This view is reinforced by Glenberg (2010), who draws together evidence from cognitive psychology and neuroscience to argue that bodily states such as posture, gesture, and movement are tightly coupled with attention, memory, and learning. He concludes that cognition

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is distributed across the sensorimotor system rather than confined to the brain, and that learners benefit when they are given opportunities to engage their whole bodies in the process of meaning-making. Similarly, Gallagher (2017) argues that cognition is not simply a brain-based event, but rather emerges through processes distributed across the brain, body and environment. In this model, sensory-motor, emotional and social experiences shape cognitive processes, and learning occurs through active engagement with the surrounding environment. Consequently, activities involving balance, coordination and spatial awareness allow children to connect physical experiences with thinking and understanding (Faella et al., 2025; Glenberg, 2010). Providing regular opportunities for movement in early childhood settings therefore supports holistic development, reinforcing the idea that movement is an essential component of young children's learning and development.

Building on this understanding of movement as central to learning, recent years have seen a growing interest in more deliberately incorporating physical activity and movement-based practices into everyday classroom routines, particularly in programs for young children. This interest is part of a wider movement integration agenda. In their report, 'Educating the Student Body', Kohl and Cook (2013) argue that schools are in a unique position to address the decline in children's physical activity. They therefore propose that movement should be treated as a core component of the school day, rather than being confined to physical education lessons or break times. Particular emphasis is placed on integrating movement into the classroom: short bursts of physical activity are woven into academic lessons, transition routines and everyday classroom rituals. Building on Kohl and Cook's (2013) position, Kuokkanen et al. (2024) extend the movement integration by exploring how movement and physical education can be embedded across general subject teaching, rather than treated as a separate timetabled activity. Working within a "learning by moving" framework, they argue that movement is not simply a vehicle for delivering subject content more energetically; rather, it is itself a meaningful pedagogical resource that can shape how concepts are encountered, represented, and remembered. Teachers can design lessons that draw on deliberately planned forms of bodily engagement, such as using whole-body shapes to explore geometry in mathematics, walking timelines to sequence events in history, acting out story characters to deepen comprehension in literacy, using gestures to represent abstract relationships, and engaging in collaborative movement tasks that require children to negotiate, take turns, and adjust to one another.

While the examples above span a wide range of subject areas, certain movement practices are especially well suited to the early years, where children are still developing the body awareness, attention, and self-regulation skills that underpin classroom learning. Yoga is one such practice, and it has attracted growing interest as a developmentally appropriate way of bringing structured, mindful movement into everyday classrooms (Khalsa & Butzer, 2016). Unlike adult yoga, which typically follows formal posture sequences and longer holds, child-adapted yoga is shorter, more playful, and woven into stories and games to suit children's developmental needs. In this paper, yoga refers to such an adaptation: a child-friendly practice that combines simple postures, breathing exercises, and relaxation, delivered through playful storytelling. A growing body of evidence suggests that yoga can support children in managing stress and anxiety (Butzer et al., 2015; Case-Smith et al., 2010; Felver et al., 2015), foster social-emotional development and self-regulation (Sun et al., 2021), contribute to psychological wellbeing, creativity, and cognitive functioning in school contexts (Martin et al., 2024), and improve attention, memory, and executive functioning (Rashedi et al., 2019). At the review level, Wilkin et al. (2024) synthesised research on yoga interventions delivered in school settings and reported small-to-moderate positive effects on executive function outcomes, including aspects of attention, working memory, and inhibitory control which underpin children's ability to follow classroom routines, regulate their behaviour, and engage with learning tasks. Alongside this outcome-focused evidence, there are also signs that yoga is already being taken up in everyday classroom practice. Drawing on survey responses from educators across North-East England, Wilkin et al. (2026a, b) found that a substantial proportion of teachers had already incorporated yoga and mindfulness activities into their classroom routines, most often in short bursts of a few minutes at a time and most commonly to support children's self-regulation, calm transitions between activities, and focus before learning tasks.

Additionally, yoga plays a significant role in enhancing body awareness (Verma et al., 2023). Through yoga, children can focus on what their bodies can do, which helps them develop a deeper awareness of their own bodies, including the proprioceptive sense of body position and movement (Verma et al., 2023). Closely related to this is the development of spatial awareness. While practicing yoga, children learn to move within the space of their yoga mat, to recognize their personal boundaries, and to respect others' spaces. In doing so, they also become aware of how much physical space their bodies occupy. Furthermore, yoga supports the development of fundamental movement skills such as balance and flexibility which are skills that form the basis of many specialized sports disciplines (Donahoe-Fillmore & Grant, 2019; Dorra & Jarraya, 2024). In today's fast-paced modern life, children have also become part of the constant rush and spend most of their time according to adult schedules

(Elkind, 2007; Barker et al., 2014). Yoga provides them with an opportunity to listen to themselves and focus on the present moment. Similarly, the sedentary lifestyle brought about by the digital age has negatively affected body posture and physical health (Mustafaoglu et al., 2018; da Costa et al., 2022). Strengthening the back and abdominal muscles is essential in correcting posture issues, and children's yoga can be an effective way to achieve this, as many yoga poses specifically help develop these muscle groups (Fishman et al., 2014; Khunti et al., 2023; Verma et al., 2023).

In addition to these developmental benefits, children's yoga is closely related to the "active learning approach," where learning becomes embodied and therefore more effective. Research integrating physical activity into academic learning shows improvements in self-regulation, engagement and learning outcomes (McGowan et al., 2024). For example, when a child forms a triangle shape with their body during yoga, it provides a more meaningful learning experience than merely identifying triangles on a worksheet. This is because the child internalizes knowledge through physical experience, leading to deeper and more lasting learning (Glenberg, 2010). Similarly, embodied and movement-based learning approaches have been found to enhance attention, creativity and social competence in educational contexts (Faella et al., 2025). During storytelling activities, for instance, children not only listen but also act out the characters, making the story more memorable, meaningful, and engaging (Isbell et al., 2004). This approach also enhances attention and concentration, stimulates creative thinking, and fosters a sense of belonging (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). More broadly, storytelling is recognised as a powerful pedagogical approach, with Landrum et al. (2019) arguing that narrative structure engages learners more deeply than abstract explanations alone because it aligns with the way humans naturally organise and recall information. In her work on classroom storytelling, Keehn (2015) also found that listeners described becoming more attentive and emotionally invested when ideas were embedded in concrete stories rather than presented as decontextualised information. Stories also enable children to develop social and emotional skills, including empathy and turn-taking, as listening to and telling stories invites them to step inside another character's experience and to practise the social conventions of listening attentively, waiting their turn, and responding sensitively to others (Hibbin, 2016). Picturebooks, in particular, offer a uniquely powerful vehicle for storytelling with young children, combining narrative, illustration, and design in ways that invite multimodal engagement, imaginative exploration, and meaning-making (Crawford et al., 2024). When the embodied dimension of this experience is foregrounded, picturebooks can also serve as a developmentally appropriate entry point into physical literacy, supporting children in connecting movement, language, and ideas in an integrated way (Chatzipanteli & Gorozidis, 2024). For all these reasons, yoga can be an integrated part of all learning areas and with thoughtful planning, children's yoga can be effectively incorporated into maths and language learning (Kuokkanen et al., 2024), as well as used as a tool to support physical development (Donahoe-Fillmore & Grant, 2019).

My interest in integrating yoga into early childhood education developed through my training as a children's yoga teacher. The training I completed was the 100-hour Kids Yoga Teacher Training, a face-to-face course accredited by the International Yoga Federation, comprising 30 h of theoretical content covering child development and yoga pedagogy alongside a 70-hour practical internship in a preschool setting. During the practical internship, I led sessions in which I ran yoga-based activities with 54 six-year-olds across three classroom groups. These sessions involved adapting traditional yoga postures into playful, child-friendly activities that incorporated storytelling, imagination, and movement. Alongside this formal training, I have a longstanding personal yoga practice, which has shaped the way I approach breath, posture, and relaxation with young children. My academic background also spans the disciplines most relevant to this work, with a bachelor's in early childhood education, a master's in physical education and sports, and a PhD in early childhood. Alongside these qualifications, I bring more than twenty years of experience as a movement educator with young children, including work as a teacher educator since 2007 delivering Physical Education in Early Childhood within pre-service teacher education programmes. Together, this combination of academic preparation and sustained practice across both classroom and university settings informs my understanding of how movement, learning, and development intersect in the early years. In particular, I have observed how yoga-based practices can encourage active participation, support children's engagement, and create opportunities for playful movement within structured classroom routines. These experiences encouraged me to consider how yoga can serve not only as a form of physical activity but also as a purposeful pedagogical tool in early childhood education. Building on this, the present reflective paper examines how yoga supports active learning in early childhood classrooms and offers practical strategies teachers can use to foster movement, engagement, and body awareness among young children. By sharing examples from practice and reflective insights, the paper illustrates ways yoga can be integrated into everyday routines to promote playful movement and holistic development. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions about the value of movement-based learning in supporting young children's wellbeing and participation.

The School Context

I had the opportunity to run yoga sessions at a vibrant, well-established preschool on the university campus where I was working as an assistant professor at the time. Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from both the Ministry of Education and the university's research ethics board prior to the start of the sessions. Written informed consent was then obtained from all parents and guardians via a plain-language information letter, which described the activities, the planned use of photographs (covered under the same written consent), and the right to withdraw their child at any time without consequence. In addition to this parental consent, verbal agreement was sought from each child at the start of every session, and children were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could sit out, watch, or rejoin at any time without consequence. The preschool did not approach me to deliver the sessions; rather, I approached the preschool to offer the yoga sessions as part of my training. The collaboration was readily welcomed because I have an established relationship with the centre that long predates this project. The centre's teachers regularly attend my professional development workshops on integrating movement into early childhood learning, parents in the centre's community have attended my seminars on the importance of movement in young children's lives, and the centre routinely hosts my students for movement education practicum activities. Both the parents and the teachers were therefore familiar with me through this ongoing engagement, which contributed to the preschool's openness to hosting the additional yoga sessions described in this paper.

The Setting and Children

The preschool has nine classrooms and serves 162 children across three age groups: 3–4, 4–5 and 5–6 years old. There are three classes for each age group, with 18 children in each class. Having previously worked with these children in movement education classes, I introduced myself as a yoga teacher and asked them what they already knew about yoga. Many of the children were aware of yoga and gave examples from their families or the media; however, none of them had any direct experience of yoga. I intentionally chose to run the sessions with the 5–6-year-olds because I was familiar with their movement backgrounds and knew they were competent in using their stability skills. These included static balance (e.g., balancing a beanbag on their head), dynamic balance (e.g., stepping across balance stones), and activities that develop core strength and postural control (e.g., bear walking). Through our previous movement education classes, they also had an understanding of personal and general space, which is essential for participating safely and confidently in yoga activities.

Session Structure and Delivery

Due to the large number of children in each class and considering the effectiveness of yoga sessions with smaller groups, I divided the children into two groups. Each session included nine children and lasted a maximum of 30 min, concluding with a reflection on the session. While one group did a yoga session with me, the other group did their regular class activities with their teachers. I deliberately chose a 1:9 adult-to-child ratio for these sessions, rather than working with the full class of 18, because a smaller grouping allows for closer supervision, individualised support, and safer use of personal space. These are all particularly important when introducing focused, body-based activities to young children. Within each 30-minute session, time was distributed approximately as follows: a warm-up (about 5 min), storytelling integrated with yoga movement (about 12–15 min), a playful extension or yoga pose game (about 5–7 min), and a relaxation and brief reflection on the session (about 3–5 min). Children were not required to change into specific sports kit for the yoga sessions; the preschool already has a standing policy of asking parents to send children in comfortable, movement-friendly clothing on days when physical education or other sport-related activities are scheduled, and the yoga sessions were timetabled to coincide with those days.

Selecting the Picture Books

In planning the series, I deliberately selected three picture books that I had used previously in storytelling sessions and that, in my experience, children of this age tended to engage with most strongly. The three books were chosen to scaffold a gentle progression in children's engagement: the first focused on self-regulation, the second on shared participation, and the third on identity and individuality. Two of the books are animal-based because animal characters lend themselves easily to recognisable yoga postures and are highly motivating for this age group; the third book intentionally moved away from animals to encourage more open-ended, abstract interpretation.

Supporting Participation and Managing Disruptions

A small number of children appeared reluctant or shy during the first session, particularly when invited to lead a pose or speak in front of the group. In these cases, I did not insist on participation; instead, I positioned them next to me on the mat, modelled the pose alongside them, and acknowledged any form of engagement (e.g., watching, partial movement) as a valid contribution. Most children gradually joined in

over the course of the sessions. Occasional disruptions also occurred. For example, a child who took on the role of "tiger" in the pose game began to chase a peer rather than guide a pose, and on another occasion two children disagreed about which animal pose should come next. In these moments, I paused the activity briefly, named what was happening in calm and neutral terms, returned to the breathing ball or a simple shared pose to reset the group, and then re-entered the story by giving both children a small co-leading role.

Yoga Storytelling: Connecting Movement, Imagination, and Meaning

Across the following sections, I explain yoga storytelling as a pedagogical approach to integrate movement, imagination, and reflection. Each session followed a similar structure: a warm-up; storytelling through movement; a playful extension; and relaxation. This process progressively shifted children's engagement from body awareness and self-regulation to active participation and, finally, to self-awareness and identity.

Story 1: Supporting Self-regulation through Movement and Narrative

In this session, I aimed to encourage playful movement and develop children's body awareness while supporting their emerging self-regulation. The activity was inspired by *Never Tickle a Tiger* by Pamela Butchart (2014) (see Fig. 1) and adapted to include yoga poses representing different animals, allowing children to physically embody characters within the narrative.



Fig. 1 Materials used in the Story 1

I began with a warm-up designed to awaken different parts of the body through playful greetings. I invited the children to greet the sun by stretching upward, greet the earth by bending down, and then greet different body parts such as arms, legs, and knees through gentle movement (see Fig. 2). This sequence gradually prepared them for physical activity while increasing body awareness.

Following the warm-up, I introduced a range of animal yoga poses, including monkey, cobra, turtle, elephant, bear, bird, and tiger. I intentionally introduced the tiger pose last to create a natural transition into the storytelling. While the children were holding the pose, I introduced a tiger toy and spoke in the tiger's voice, explaining that something upsetting had happened and that the tiger needed help. This moment captured children's attention and created an engaging bridge into the story (see Fig. 3). The narrative centred on a character named Izzy, who struggled to control her movements and unintentionally disturbed animals during a visit to the zoo. When the story reached a moment of disruption, after Izzy tickled a sleeping tiger, I paused and invited the children to help the animals, who had "forgotten" how to stand after falling into the water. Together we revisited and performed the animal yoga poses, symbolically restoring order.

I then facilitated a reflective discussion focused on emotions and self-control. I invited the children to consider three questions in turn: how each animal might have felt in the story; what Izzy might have learned from the encounter; and how they themselves might manage their movements when they experience similar feelings, such as excitement,



Fig. 2 Warm up greetings



Fig. 3 Reading *Never Tickle a Tiger* by Pamela Butchart

frustration or the urge to rush, in everyday situations at school. The session continued with a yoga pose game. Children stood in a circle while the tiger toy was passed between them. The child who received the tiger selected a yoga pose card, and we performed the pose together. Throughout the game, I voiced the tiger as a playful character, offering encouraging and light-hearted comments on each pose as it was performed. For example, I praised the strength of a lion pose, marvelled at the height of a tree pose and wondered aloud how a butterfly might balance. This added humour and maintained the children's engagement. To conclude, I guided the children through a relaxation activity. They lay down and imagined travelling to the zoo, observing animals and nature along the way. At the end, I invited them to share which animal they had imagined and demonstrate its pose (see Fig. 4), bringing the session to a calm and reflective close.

Story 2: Building Participation and Co-construction through Patterned Narrative

Building on the children's developing body awareness and control, I designed the second session to emphasise participation, prediction, and shared storytelling. Inspired by *Brown Bear*, *Brown Bear*, *What Do You See?* by Bill Martin Jr. and illustrated by Eric Carle (1967/1992) (see Fig. 5) this activity encouraged children to actively engage with the narrative through movement and imagination. I began



Fig. 4 Animal poses as a reflection



Fig. 5 Materials used in the Story 2

with an energetic warm-up involving music and movement. I invited the children to dance freely and then freeze in a yoga pose when the music stopped. As the warm-up was highly energetic, I followed it with a short breathing activity. Using a breathing ball (see Fig. 6), I guided the children through controlled breathing.

During the storytelling, I adopted an interactive approach. As I read the story, I paused to ask the children to predict which animal might appear next. After revealing each animal, I invited them to express it through a yoga pose. This supported their listening skills, anticipation, and active participation. At the end of the story, I extended the activity by inviting the children to co-construct the narrative. I placed



Fig. 6 Breathing ball for controlled breathing

miniature animal figures in a bag and asked each child to select one, announce what they saw, and guide the group in performing the corresponding pose. In this way, children moved from participants to co-constructors within the activity. To conclude the session, I guided the children through a relaxation exercise, asking them to remember the animals whose poses they had practised during the lesson and to choose one of them. They were invited to imagine that the chosen animal had come to visit their classroom. After a few moments of quiet reflection, the children slowly opened their eyes and moved to the tables. Each child received an A5 sheet of paper and coloured pencils. They were asked to draw themselves performing a yoga pose together with their "guest animal." After approximately ten to twelve minutes, the children shared their drawings and explained their ideas to the group. This allowed them to reflect on and express their experiences in a creative way (see Fig. 7).

In using children's drawings as one entry point for reflection, I was mindful that drawing as a method has limitations. Fargas-Malet et al. (2010) discuss how drawing tasks are particularly vulnerable to social-desirability effects, since young children often work within a small repertoire of familiar images and may default to those rather than attempting representations of more complex or ambiguous feelings. Duncan (2013) similarly emphasises that drawing should be offered as one optional mode of participation in research and reflection, with children's own preferences guiding how much weight is placed on the drawings they produce. Huang et al. (2016) further suggest that drawing tasks can be undermined when children perceive their own work as inadequate, leading them either to disengage or to produce drawings that conceal rather than express their experiences. More recently, in their fieldwork with children, Søndergaard and Reventlow (2019) observed that while drawing can be a useful facilitator for some children, others approached it reluctantly or disengaged from the task altogether, and they caution that drawing should not be assumed to work as a communicative tool for every child. For these reasons, the drawings were treated as one possible way for children to share their thinking, alongside verbal sharing, movement, and pose-based responses, rather than as a definitive record of their experience.

Story 3: Exploring Identity and Self-awareness through Open-ended Storytelling

While the previous session focused on shared participation, I designed the final session to encourage deeper reflection on individuality and self-awareness. Inspired by Leo Lionni's *Pezzettino* (1975), this activity invited children to interpret meaning and express their ideas through movement. I began with a warm-up that emphasised body and spatial



Fig. 7 Reflective drawings of children

awareness. I guided the children through movements such as stretching, bending, walking in different ways, and placing various body parts on their mats such as one hand and one foot, two hands and one foot, two knees and one hand, or two hands and two feet. These instructions encouraged children to explore different body positions and increased their awareness of how their bodies move within a defined space.

Before beginning the story, I asked the children to observe the book cover and share their predictions. To make the story more tangible, I also introduced a small orange plastic ice cube as the main character, Pezzettino (see Fig. 8). When the children saw it, they immediately recognized it as an ice cube. I explained that in our story the object would represent Pezzettino, the small character searching for where he belongs. Children were curious and eager to touch it, so I allowed them to briefly pass it around the circle. Their strong imaginative capacity made it easy for them to accept the transformation of the ice cube into a story character.

The story describes Pezzettino's journey as he tries to discover whose piece he might be. Along the way, he encounters different characters described by their abilities: someone who runs, someone who flies, someone who climbs, someone who swims, someone who is strong, and someone who is wise. Rather than specifying exactly who these characters are, the book leaves their identities open



Fig. 8 Materials used in the Story 3

to interpretation. This detail encourages creative thinking because each child may imagine a different character performing the action. During the story, whenever Pezzettino met a new character, I asked the children to guess who that character might be and to demonstrate their idea through a yoga pose (see Fig. 9). For example, when the story mentioned someone who runs, children suggested animals such as dogs, cheetahs, rabbits, or dinosaurs, while some children suggested humans. They then expressed their ideas physically through movement or yoga poses. This process continued for all the characters described in the story. At the end of the story, Pezzettino arrives at an island where he accidentally falls and breaks into many small pieces. At that moment he realizes that he is not part of someone else but is instead made up of many pieces himself. The story concludes with the idea that he is complete as he is.

After the story, I facilitated a brief discussion about individuality, focusing on the idea that everyone is unique and complete in their own way. The session continued with a movement game. I placed yoga pose cards in different corners of the room and asked the children to move to each corner using movements that matched the theme, such as running or swimming. Once there, they selected and performed a pose. This activity combined physical engagement with imaginative thinking. To conclude, I guided the children through a relaxation activity, asking them to imagine something they most enjoyed doing. Afterwards, they shared their ideas, which reflected a wide range of personal meanings and experiences such as becoming a superhero, being a character like Rapunzel, becoming invisible, playing in the sea, spending time with their parents, playing with Lego or simply wanting to be alone.

Reflections on Classroom Yoga Activities

Implementing these yoga storytelling sessions across multiple groups provided me with valuable insights into my role as a movement educator and into how children engage in active, embodied learning. While each session had a different narrative focus, together they revealed how movement-based storytelling can support children's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional engagement in interconnected ways. One of the most consistent observations across all sessions was children's strong engagement with active learning. The integration of storytelling and movement encouraged children to participate physically rather than passively listen. They were not only hearing the stories but also living them through their bodies. I observed that this embodied approach helped sustain their attention and motivation, even in groups with high energy levels or varying behavioural dynamics. The structure of the sessions, moving between warm-up, storytelling, play, and relaxation, also supported this engagement by balancing activity and calmness. The reflections that follow are drawn from a structured but practitioner-oriented reflective process. Writing short reflective journal entries was itself a requirement of my children's yoga teacher training, and the entries were shared with the instructor who delivered the training as part of the criteria for completing the course. After each session, I wrote a short reflective journal entry following a consistent template that prompted me to record (a) what I had planned, (b) what actually happened during the session, including specific examples of children's engagement, language, and movement, (c) any moments of disruption or unexpected response, and (d) what I might do differently next time. Across the sessions, I revisited these entries to identify recurring patterns in children's engagement, body awareness, social-emotional



Fig. 9 Yoga poses for the characters in the book

responses, and imaginative contributions, and these patterns inform the four sub-sections below. The reflections therefore represent my situated observations, experiences, and interpretations as a practitioner-researcher, rather than findings from a formal qualitative study.

Children's Social-emotional Engagement

As I repeated the sessions, I also became increasingly aware of how these activities supported social-emotional engagement. Many moments revealed children's emotional worlds in unexpected ways. For example, one child's repeated choice of a particular animal pose was later linked to their experience of loss. Another child expressed a desire to be alone during a guided imagery activity because he felt he was always busy with after-school activities. These experiences reminded me that movement and storytelling can create safe spaces for emotional expression, even when children do not explicitly verbalise their feelings at first. This resonates with evidence that storytelling can support children's social and emotional engagement, including empathy and a sense of identity (Hibbin, 2016). It also aligns with emerging evidence that school-based yoga and mindfulness can support children's social-emotional development and self-regulation, particularly when delivered in ways that allow children to participate at their own pace (Sun et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2024). I learned the importance of responding sensitively and allowing children to engage in their own ways, rather than imposing fixed expectations.

Children's Cognitive and Imagination Skills

The sessions also appeared to support cognitive engagement, particularly through prediction, problem-solving, and interpretation. In the more structured narrative, children engaged in anticipating what might happen next, while in open-ended stories they generated their own interpretations. I noticed that some children focused on realistic representations, questioning elements that did not align with their understanding of the world, while others embraced imaginative possibilities. In my experience, these varied responses suggest that storytelling through movement can stimulate different types of thinking, from logical reasoning to creative exploration (Martin et al., 2024). Consistent with this view, Immordino-Yang et al. (2007) argue that the cognitive processes most heavily recruited in classrooms are inseparable from emotion and bodily experience, while Landrum et al. (2019) argue that narrative structure engages learners more deeply than abstract explanation because it aligns with how humans naturally organise and retrieve information. Martin et al. (2024) further observe, in a scoping review of school-based yoga, that children in such programmes often use their own creativity and fantasy to frame and navigate the activities. For example, in the Pezzettino session, one child responded to the question "What do you think Pezzettino will discover next?" by suggesting that he would meet a flying turtle, then immediately offered a "flying turtle pose" of their own invention, combining a careful interpretation of the story's logic with a confident imaginative leap.

Children's Body Awareness and Spatial Awareness

Another significant area of development was children's body and spatial awareness. Across sessions, I observed improvements in how children controlled their movements, remained within their personal space, and adjusted their bodies in relation to others. The use of personal space mats was particularly effective in supporting this awareness. Over time, children appeared more confident in performing poses. For example, they seemed more willing to attempt a pose without waiting for me to demonstrate it first, were quicker to settle into the starting position, and required fewer verbal prompts. They also appeared more mindful of their positioning, with fewer instances of children stepping off their mats or accidentally bumping into one another during transitions between poses. At the same time, I became more aware of how individual differences, such as prior movement experience or physical characteristics, influenced children's participation. Children with more prior movement experience, for example, those who had taken part in dance, gymnastics, or my own earlier movement education classes, tended to approach the poses with greater confidence, attempt the more challenging balance poses (such as tree pose on one leg) for longer, and offer pose suggestions during the co-construction tasks. Children with less prior experience initially relied more heavily on watching peers before joining in, and benefited from additional modelling and simplified versions of poses. This reinforced the need for flexibility and inclusivity in movement-based teaching.

Children's Engagement and Co-construction

Imagination played a central role in all three sessions. Children engaged deeply with the idea of transforming into animals, characters, or imagined scenarios. In some cases, they extended the stories beyond what was presented, suggesting new poses, adding narrative elements, or interpreting characters in unique ways. I also noticed that imagination was not always straightforward; some children preferred realistic representations, while others fully embraced fantasy. This variation reminded me that imagination develops differently for each child and should be supported without judgment. A particularly important insight for me was how these activities supported the co-construction of knowledge.

Rather than positioning myself as the sole source of knowledge, I observed how children contributed ideas, guided activities, and influenced the direction of the sessions. For example, when children selected pose cards, predicted story elements, or created their own narrative sequences, they became active contributors to the learning process. Even moments of disruption or unexpected behaviour often led to new learning opportunities, shaping the experience collaboratively. This shifted my role from instructor to facilitator, where I responded to children's ideas and adapted the session accordingly. At the same time, these experiences highlighted the complexity of managing group dynamics. Each group responded differently depending on their composition, energy levels, and prior experiences. Strategies that worked in one group sometimes created new challenges in another. For instance, giving a child a leadership role could increase engagement but also create competition among peers. Similarly, children's curiosity and enthusiasm could easily shift the focus of the group if not guided carefully. These moments required me to think flexibly and make immediate pedagogical decisions.

Overall, these experiences reinforced my understanding of yoga storytelling as a powerful pedagogical approach. By combining movement, imagination, and narrative, I was able to create learning environments that supported active engagement, emotional expression, cognitive engagement, and collaborative meaning-making. As a movement educator, I now see my role not only as guiding physical activity but also as facilitating holistic learning experiences where children can explore their bodies, emotions, and ideas in integrated and meaningful ways.

Implications for Early Childhood Educators

This experience highlights several practical strategies that other early childhood educators can use in their efforts to support children's wellbeing, focus, and emotional regulation in the classroom. In my experience, the integration of simple movement-based practices such as yoga into daily routines can help create a calm and supportive learning environment while also meeting children's physical and emotional needs, an emphasis that is consistent with broader recommendations to infuse physical activity into early childhood classrooms (Kohl & Cook, 2013; Kuokkanen et al., 2024; McGowan et al., 2024). One important strategy is incorporating short movement breaks throughout the day. Young children often have limited attention spans and may become restless during extended periods of sitting. Brief yoga or stretching activities lasting one to three minutes can help children release energy, refocus their attention, and return to learning tasks more calmly. These breaks do not need to be complex; simple poses such as stretching up tall, pretending to be animals, or practicing slow breathing can be effective in helping children reset both physically and mentally.

Another effective approach is integrating yoga with storytelling (Isbell et al., 2004; Landrum et al., 2019). Young children are naturally drawn to imaginative play and narratives, so combining yoga poses with a story can make the activity more engaging and meaningful. For example, a story about a journey through the jungle can include poses such as a tall tree, a stretching cat, or a strong lion. This approach supports creativity, language development, and physical movement simultaneously. It also helps children follow instructions more easily because they are connected to a familiar and enjoyable narrative. Yoga can also be used during classroom transitions, which are often challenging moments in early childhood settings. Transition times such as moving from outdoor play to group time or preparing for rest can sometimes lead to heightened energy levels or frustration. Simple breathing exercises, stretching, or a short, guided movement sequence can help children slow down and prepare for the next activity. Using consistent yoga routines during transitions can create a sense of predictability and calm within the classroom environment.

Finally, yoga practices can play a valuable role in supporting emotional regulation (Butzer et al., 2015, 2016; Felver et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021). Through breathing exercises and mindful movement, children can learn simple techniques to calm their bodies and manage strong emotions. For instance, encouraging children to take deep "belly breaths" when they feel upset can help them pause and regain control. Over time, these strategies support the development of self-regulation skills, which are essential for positive social interactions and successful learning. Overall, integrating yoga into early childhood classrooms offers a flexible and inclusive approach that supports children's physical wellbeing, emotional development, and engagement in learning. By using simple, playful, and consistent practices, educators can create opportunities for children to build important lifelong skills in mindfulness and self-awareness.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, there is no universally agreed definition of yoga; the term is used to describe a wide range of diverse practices, which poses real difficulties for implementation in classroom settings and for comparing experiences across teachers and programmes. In this paper, yoga has been described as an adapted, child-friendly practice combining simple postures, breathing, and relaxation delivered through storytelling, but readers should

bear in mind that other practitioners may use the term differently. Second, there is evidence that physical activities, including yoga, can be perceived as "gendered", and some teaching staff may hold assumptions about boys' and girls' engagement with yoga activities that shape participation (Wilkin et al. 2026a, b). Although I tried to invite all children equally and to present poses in gender-neutral terms, gendered patterns of engagement may still have operated in ways that were not visible to me at the time. Third, there are well-documented barriers to teachers' incorporation of movement and yoga into their daily practice, including time pressures, curriculum demands, limited training, and confidence (Wilkin et al., 2025). My own situation as a children's yoga teacher in training, with a movement-education background is not representative of the typical early childhood teacher, and the strategies described here may need additional support, planning time, or professional learning before they can be adopted in other classrooms. Finally, no formal evaluation or systematic feedback was collected from the children at the end of each session. Although children spontaneously shared comments, drawings, and pose suggestions throughout the series, I did not use a structured tool to capture their views on the activities. As a result, my account of how children experienced the sessions reflects my own observations and interpretations as a practitioner-researcher, rather than the children's evaluations in their own words, and future iterations of this work would benefit from including children's voices in a more systematic way.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval The procedures conducted in this paper with human participants follow the ethical guidelines set by Applied Ethics Research Centre.

Consent for Publication The author has given consent for publication.

Consent to Participate This study was conducted in accordance with institutional and national research committee ethical standards. Written informed consent was obtained from all parents/guardians of the participating children prior to the start of the sessions, and this written consent explicitly covered a photography release for the use of children's images in research and publication. In addition, verbal assent was obtained from each child at the start of every session, and children were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could sit out or stop at any time without consequence.

Competing interests The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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