

Relaxed and In Control: Yoga benefits students with special needs

By Sarah Webster, Staff Writer

BERKELEY – Central Regional High School Special Education Teacher Mary Flynn has been teaching special needs students there for 22 years. Knowing the enrichment yoga can bring into lives, Flynn decided to implement yoga practices into the classroom.

She said she started practicing yoga at a very young age for personal enrichment, beginning her journey when she was 15 years old.

When she began a yoga teacher certification course under the instruction of Registered Yoga Teacher Stephanie Delmanto at Vibhuti Yoga School in the summer of 2007, she knew studying the craft would benefit her personally, but she said she did not realize that she would ever use her certification to teach.

Flynn learned about a course called Yoga Therapy for the Child with Developmental Challenges through conversations with school occupational therapist Jenn Perillo and physical therapist Eileen Clemente.

After completing the special course, “I was so excited and knew I had to introduce my students to the benefits of yoga,” she said. Clemente helped Flynn work with the children in the classroom last summer. Flynn said they experimented with yoga practices by doing simple poses and relaxation exercises during class.

“I immediately bought yoga mats for everyone in my class and designed an appropriate sequence to meet the needs of my students,” she said. “Occupational therapist Jenn Perillo has been a tremendous technical advisor.”

Flynn said her class concentrates on four of the limbs of yoga – sound therapy, which involves singing the student’s name, breathing techniques, posture sequences and relaxation.

She began testing the waters to see if the children would respond positively as a class, Flynn said, adding the children were very enthusiastic.

Yoga therapy address a wide range of developmental goals including motor, sensory, emotional, psychological, perceptual and immune benefits, Flynn said. Yoga assists children to develop a sense of inner control – positively impacting their need to feel safe, interactions with other and the ability to reduce stress, she added.

Regulating and synchronizing the breath with the body results in a child being able to move from “survival” mode to developing self-awareness, self-control and emotional safety, she said.

She notices the children look forward to the class, adding the children are always asking to do yoga.

“There are days we have other things we need to do and some of the kids will bring the yoga mats out anyway and set up my mat with their mats,” she said.

Since the program started, Flynn said she has seen the positive impact it has had with the children.

They watch everything she does and follow instructions – always staying quiet, attentive and respectful, especially during yoga class, she said.

Students who normally have issues with each other never have issues during yoga, she said, explaining that they are more organized, relaxed and more in control of their behaviors at that time.

There is not only a benefit, but a need to hold this class, she said.

“I don’t want to see this program stop here,” she said. “If someone starts a yoga practice with children, it’s a wonderful thing. I would love to see this program grow, but also spill out into the community. I would love to share this program with others.”

Flynn believes that this opens up a new avenue for yoga and special education teachers. Teachers have already contacted Flynn to ask about getting started and she is happy to share her experience.

“Having an interest in our special population and an interest in yoga is where to start,” she said. “Then it’s all about learning how to incorporate it into the child’s program and life.”