The Wellbeing Protocol mitigates the effects of COVID-19 on stress and burnout: a qualitative analysis of the underlying mechanisms

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The Wellbeing Protocol mitigates the effects of COVID-19 on teacher stress and burnout: a qualitative analysis of the underlying mechanisms

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to convey and analyze participants’ experience of an online mindfulness-based workplace wellness program, The Wellbeing Protocol, during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, with the aim of understanding the underlying mechanisms of how the program impacted stress, burnout, and mental wellbeing.

Design/methodology/approach – New Zealand teachers participated in an online mindfulness-based wellness program in 2020. Participants’ experience was captured via focus groups and open-ended survey questions collected before, immediately after, and 3-months following the intervention. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings – Three themes emerged: self-awareness and non-reactivity may facilitate a reduction in stress levels, the purposeful cultivation of self-care and positive emotions may be a precursor to enhanced wellbeing, positive relationships with others and evidence of effectiveness at work may mitigate burnout symptoms. Findings depicted effective strategies to improve wellbeing as well as promising areas for further research.

Originality – This is the first study to investigate the impact of a mindfulness-based intervention on New Zealand teachers, the first to explore the impact of the Wellbeing Protocol, and one of few studies that have investigated an online mindfulness-based intervention. It has multiple qualitative data sources and a follow-up of three months.
**Practical implications** – For school settings: participants’ positive appraisals of the program suggest The Wellbeing Protocol might be a suitable option to support teacher wellbeing. For workplaces: the positive outcomes related to improved effectiveness and relationships at work, as well as the program’s flexibility related to its short length and online delivery, might make it a potential option to support employee wellbeing.

**Keywords** – workplace wellness, workplace learning, stress, burnout, wellbeing, intervention

**Paper type** – Research paper
Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak had a significant impact on employee wellbeing. High stress levels were reported across all occupation sectors (Lund et al., 2021). A McKinsey Global Institute survey showed that in January 2021, 49% of employees across the US, Latin America, Europe, Australia, and Asia were experiencing burnout symptoms, which, the authors suggested, might be an underestimate given that burned out employees are less likely to respond to survey requests (Alexander et al., 2021). The rise in employee stress and burnout seems to have continued in the post-pandemic economy and is likely to do so at least for the foreseeable future, primarily due to the changing nature of work arrangements and risk of virus exposure for those in high physical proximity jobs (Lund et al., 2021).

Teachers have been particularly impacted given that they work in a high physical proximity occupation. Further, the measures taken to reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in 2020, namely social distancing and home isolation, required educators to rapidly adapt to many changes such as online modes of instruction, using new technologies and increasing workloads (Pressley, 2021; Sokal et al., 2020a). Existing data on teacher mental wellbeing pre- and post-pandemic suggests that COVID-19 caused significant increases in burnout and mental distress. Ozamiz-Etxebarria and colleagues (2021) found increased rates of stress, anxiety, and depression for Spanish teachers in 2020. Pressley (2021) found increases in stress for US teachers and Sokal and colleagues (2020b) showed increases in stress and burnout dimensions of emotional exhaustion and cynicism in Canadian teachers that same year. Similarly, Vargas Rubilar and Oros (2021) found high levels of stress, professional burnout and psychophysical indicators of discomfort for Argentinian teachers caused by Covid-related changes to modes of working in 2020. A quantitative study of burnout and stress levels of New Zealand teachers in 2020 revealed high rates in both dimensions (Authors, under review). Further, the New Zealand Education Review Office (2021) surveyed half the country’s principals and more than 400 teachers, and found that the pandemic was placing an increasingly
heavy toll on the teaching workforce. Student behaviour was reported to have worsened compared to pre-pandemic standards, the number of teachers dissatisfied with their job had increased, and so did the number of respondents who reported unmanageable workloads and felt unsupported by their school leaders (Education Review Office, 2021).

Given the above considerations, it seems imperative for schools to cater to teacher wellbeing and to provide effective support. One study (Alexander et al., 2021) showed an increased focus on wellbeing at work was employees’ fourth most desired workplace change in 2021. Although there is a lack of global survey data dedicated specifically to educators, we can infer, based on existing facts and research, that the need to enhance teacher wellbeing is similar, if not more acute than the need within the general population. In New Zealand, for example, this claim is supported by a national survey conducted prior to the pandemic, which showed that already in 2019 teacher rates of stress and burnout were twice as high as those among the general population (New Zealand Educational Institute and Deakin University, 2020). Media reports further support this claim and depict a post-Covid over-worked, stressed, and burned-out New Zealand teaching workforce (n.a., 2021).

Workplace wellness programs represent an option to address this need. Several studies have shown such programs can have a positive impact on employee health outcomes, as well as on productivity and employee retention (Baicker et al., 2010; Carolan et al., 2017). In their systematic review, Heckenberg and colleagues (2018) found that mindfulness-based workplace interventions had a positive effect on physiological markers of stress such as daytime cortisol secretion and heart rate variability. In several meta-analyses, mindfulness-based wellness programs for teachers have also been shown to be conducive to wellbeing. For example, Lomas and colleagues (2017) found positive outcomes on measures of teacher stress, depression, and burnout following mindfulness-based interventions. Their findings were replicated by Emerson and colleagues (2017) who found that mindfulness
training helped teachers better regulate their emotions, reduce their stress, and improve their socio-emotional competencies.

The present paper explored the effectiveness of a mindfulness-based workplace wellness program, The Wellbeing Protocol, provided online to 32 New Zealand teachers during the first four months of the 2020 pandemic outbreak. Participants’ experience of the program was captured through open-ended survey questions collected before, immediately after, and three months following program completion, as well as through focus groups conducted upon program completion.

Although the field of research on mindfulness for teachers is rapidly growing, there are only a handful of studies dedicated to exploring the effectiveness of online interventions on teachers (see for example Boulware et al., 2019; Gonabadi and Razavi, 2021), none of which investigated the program’s impact at follow-up times. Additionally, the present study is the first to our knowledge to explore the impact of a mindfulness-based workplace wellness programme on New Zealand teachers. Although Bernay (2014) conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological study of five New Zealand teachers who were introduced to mindfulness during their teacher education programme, his study did not involve a more comprehensive programme with a large group of teachers that went beyond instruction in mindfulness practices.

Theoretical Context

Stress and burnout

Stress and burnout have been intrinsic to the teaching profession long before the pandemic, being a major cause of employee attrition (Schussler et al., 2016). In the United States for example, 50% of teachers leave the profession in the first 5 years (Schussler et al., 2016). In New Zealand, 37% of teachers resign by the end of their third year (Bernay, 2014). Many who remain in the profession experience high stress and burnout symptoms.

Applying a systems approach to teacher workplace stress, Jennings, Minnici, and Yoder (2019) identified two main categories of triggers. The first related to
organizational structures, for example job demands and resources available. The second involved individual skills and competencies, such as teachers' skill in managing stressors and regulating their emotions.

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) have shown that in the absence of tools or support to combat stress and burnout symptoms, the results may be a “burnout cascade” (2009, p. 492), meaning teachers resort to maladaptive coping strategies which further intensifies existing problematic conditions. When teachers lack the emotional regulation resources to effectively manage their response to stressors, they are likely to default to reactive behaviors that engender a vicious cycle of classroom disruption (Jennings et al., 2019). This results in increased frustration and exhaustion for the teacher, which impacts work performance and the quality of interactions with students, colleagues, and school leaders (Schussler et al., 2016). Breaking these reactive cycles requires highly-developed abilities to understand and manage one’s thoughts, emotions and behaviors effectively; to empathize with others; and to make considerate and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions (Abenavoli et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2013).

Wellbeing

The concept of wellbeing is complex and for a long time it eluded researcher’s attempts to define it (Dodge et al., 2012). In their work, Dodge and colleagues (2012) identified three key aspects required for a comprehensive definition of wellbeing: (1) the idea of a set point for wellbeing; (2) the individual’s need for equilibrium/the inevitability of homeostasis; and (3) the intrinsic fluctuating relationship between challenges and resources. They therefore defined wellbeing as “the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced” (Dodge et al., 2012, p. 230). They showed that the nature of wellbeing was not static, but rather continuously changing so as to reach a stable point where the individual acquired the psychological, social, and physical resources needed to meet specific challenges.

In their analysis of 99 self-report measures for wellbeing, Linton and colleagues (2016) identified five recurrent themes embedded in the concept: mental wellbeing,
social wellbeing, activities and functioning, physical wellbeing, and spiritual wellbeing and personal circumstances. The present study focused on mental wellbeing. Although in the past there has been disagreement about the relationship between positive mental health and mental wellbeing, recently a reasonable level of consensus has been established. Thus, mental wellbeing is now largely seen as covering two aspects: (1) the subjective experience of happiness and life satisfaction, also known as the hedonic perspective; and (2) positive psychological functioning, good relationships with others and self-realization, also known as the eudaimonic perspective (Tennant et al., 2007). This perspective also includes aspects such as autonomy, self-acceptance, competence and the capacity for self-development (Dodge et al., 2012; Ng Fat et al., 2017).

*Workplace learning and wellness programs for teachers*

Many countries provide workplace learning opportunities for teachers with the aim of improving teaching quality, student academic outcomes, and teacher retention (Philipsen et al., 2019; Postholm, 2012). Very few professional development programs, however, address the need for specific instruction in the areas of stress reduction skills or social-emotional competencies to meet the demands of the profession effectively. Social-emotional competencies refer to a set of skills that include the ability to understand one’s own emotions and thoughts and those of others, to establish and maintain healthy relationships and to make considerate and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across a variety of contexts (CASEL, 2021). Possessing such competencies has been shown to improve teacher effectiveness and student academic outcomes (Abenavoli et al., 2013). Yet, there is a scarcity of programs that support the development of these skills.

There is a growing body of research showing that mindfulness-based workplace wellness programs can improve teachers’ social-emotional competencies and their ability to manage stress, while reducing burnout symptoms (Beshai et al., 2016; Hwang et al., 2017; Jennings, 2015). Hwang and colleagues (2017) found that
mindfulness-based interventions helped teachers cope with stress, better manage conflict and difficult emotions, and develop an increased awareness of their physical and mental experience. The authors identified an absence of sufficient studies employing multiple sources of qualitative data and assessing the impact of training over time with follow-up assessments longer than four weeks (Hwang et al., 2017). The current project design addressed this gap by collecting qualitative data through open ended survey questions from all participants and through focus group interviews from a representative participant sample. The present study also included a three-month follow-up assessment.

Both Emerson and colleagues (2017) and Hwang and colleagues (2017) in their respective systematic reviews of mindfulness interventions for teachers highlight the prevalence of US-based studies and interventions in the field of mindfulness for teachers and call for research to explore different cultural contexts. The present study contributes to this by exploring a New Zealand context. Further, the present study represents the first to explore the Wellbeing Protocol, a mindfulness-based intervention developed in Australia and New Zealand.

The Wellbeing Protocol (WP) is a mindfulness-based wellness program dedicated to reducing stress and burnout and improving wellbeing. WP includes mindfulness training, cognitive behavioral strategies for non-clinical populations, and positive psychology. The mindfulness tools and techniques included are secular and similar to those employed in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Stahl and Goldstein, 2010) or Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Crane, 2009). WP is a group-based program designed to be delivered online and covers topics such as the stress response, stress mindset, the cultivation of positive emotions, cognitive distortions conducive to anxiety and depression, and managing uncomfortable emotions. WP differs from other mindfulness-based interventions in several ways: it employs cognitive-behavioral strategies outside of clinical contexts, its educational content encompasses a great variety of sources, including neuroscientific studies and the latest research on stress mindsets, it is presented in the form of live online training,
and it is designed to suit busy work schedules being short (12 hours) and flexible (participants who miss a live session can watch a recording).

**Research Questions**

The current study focused on understanding the role of the WP in influencing teacher levels of wellbeing, stress, and burnout. We used a qualitative explanatory design (McMillan, 2004) to discover participants’ beliefs about how aspects of the program related to outcomes. Our specific research questions were:

1. Does the *Wellbeing Protocol* affect teachers’ stress levels and if so, how?
2. Does the *Wellbeing Protocol* affect teachers’ burnout levels and if so, how?
3. Does the *Wellbeing Protocol* affect teachers’ wellbeing levels and if so, how?

**Methodology**

*Participants*

Participants included teachers and paraprofessionals from public and private schools in New Zealand (N = 32). Participants volunteered and gave active consent to participate in the study in accordance with ethical research guidelines. Participants received no compensation or incentives to be part of the intervention or to complete the data collection. Table I provides demographic information for the sample.

Table I. Demographic data

*Data collection*

Qualitative data consisted of transcripts from four focus groups comprising a total of 14 participants and open-ended survey questions collected before and after the intervention and at 3-months follow-up. Focus groups were conducted after the intervention. Their purpose was to solicit in-depth information from the teachers’ perspectives as to if, how, and why certain outcomes showed effects. They were semi-structured, included 2 to 5 participants, and lasted approximately 1 hour each.
to suit teachers’ busy schedules. The small number of participants per focus group allowed for an in-depth discussion to take place within the designated 1-hour timeframe. The focus groups took place online via Zoom, after work, on days that participants agreed were convenient to their schedules but within two weeks of program completion.

The focus group protocol was developed according to Krueger and Casey’s (2015) guidelines and consisted of questions related to what went well in the program, what needed improvement, if anything was different in their life because of the program, and if they noticed any change in their stress and wellbeing level. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses and to engage in dialogue with each other if they felt the need. Social desirability was mitigated in two main ways. One, during the focus group, the facilitator actively asked for dissenting opinions and ensured not one opinion received more weight than others. Secondly, the focus groups were not the only source of qualitative data. Open-ended survey questions allowed all participants to express their opinion regarding the program. Thus, the themes and codes that emerged offered a balanced view of participants’ experience of WP.

The open-ended survey questions were administered before, after the program, and at 3 months follow-up using online survey software. Participants received the survey link by email and were asked to complete it within a 4-day window.

Data Analysis

The data from the focus groups transcriptions and the survey questions were analyzed using thematic analysis, by identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes from the data-set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An inductive rather than a theoretical approach was selected in order to allow for the content of participants’ responses to generate categories and themes that were not necessarily dictated by the questions employed (Braun and Clarke, 2006).
The qualitative data-set was analyzed following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) according to which the focus group transcriptions and survey responses were first closely read and re-read to get an overall picture of the material collected and to generate initial codes. The initial codes were then reviewed for consistency and several were merged to avoid repetition and overlap. Codes were then grouped into potential categories that were then checked to ensure correspondence with the coded extracts and with the whole data-set. The next step was to identify the underlying meaning and relation between categories and generate themes related to the research questions. Finally, relevant quotes were selected.

Findings

Three main themes emerged (Table II): self-awareness and non-reactivity may facilitate a reduction in stress levels, the purposeful cultivation of self-care and positive emotions may be a precursor to enhanced wellbeing, positive relationships with others and evidence of effectiveness at work may mitigate burnout symptoms.

Table II. Themes, categories and codes illustrating participants’ experience of The Wellbeing Protocol.

1. Self-awareness and non-reactivity may facilitate a reduction in stress levels

The main underlying mechanisms underpinning the reduction in stress experienced by most participants were: increased awareness of experience, increased ability to manage unhelpful thoughts, emotions, or reactions, and a shift in mindset regarding stress and control. They will each be described in more detail below.

1.1. Increased awareness of mental, emotional and physical experience

Participants reported an increase in their ability to notice their thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations and to describe, identify, or categorize them.

So I feel like there’s a change in mindset too of like, sometimes I can hear negative thoughts in my head. And then I think, actually, that’s just a thought
and we can look at it in a different way. And then I feel a lot better about what it is that's happening, or what's about to happen. So maybe I'm just more conscious of my thoughts, and that they are thoughts, and then I can change them. (Participant 24)

I think I am now more attuned to my emotions. I feel ok to have the emotions I have. I feel more educated and therefore more at ease with what I feel. I am less hard on myself. (Participant 20)

Being exposed to examples of physical manifestations of stress enabled participants to identify their own physical symptoms and to better categorize sensations they were hitherto unsure of:

I now notice physical things like heart palpitations, whereas before, I probably wouldn't have really noticed. I mean, I might have noticed it, but I wouldn't have thought to slow down my breathing to assist that to drop. I would have just, oh God, I'm stressed and then worry about it later. But now that I learnt those techniques, I put those into place straight away. So that it doesn't escalate. (Participant 29)

I can now feel when these weird feelings are creeping up for no reason and I'm now asking myself, ‘Oh, wait a second, what's going on? Why am I feeling that way?’ And I think that's a big step. (Participant 17)

Similarly, the exercises meant to expand participants’ emotion vocabulary, enabled them to better understand the nuances of their emotions and to more adequately describe them.

It's given me a language for how I'm feeling. (Participant 10)

I find I am more open about my emotional state with others around me and asking for what I need. (Participant 11)
Present moment awareness was one of the most reported consequences of the mindfulness training both in the focus group interviews and in the surveys. For example, most responses to the survey question “Has the program had any effect on your life?” revolved around being in the moment:

The area of my life I wanted to bring balance to was my mental well-being. I wanted to stop worry [sic] about what others think, still listen to their opinion but not let it affect how I feel about myself. Mindfulness was one of the techniques that helped me with this, giving full attention to the present moment and to things in a nonjudgmental way. (Participant 5)

The program has had a huge effect on life at both home and work. Largely, I have adopted a new way of thinking- I am now concerned with the 'now' rather than worrying about the past or what might happen. (Participant 7)

1.2 Increased ability to manage thoughts, emotions, and reactions

Being able to notice and categorize their thoughts allowed participants to recognize negative thoughts and interrupt automatic thought processes. Negative thoughts were primarily related to perceived judgments from others and worrying about future outcomes or imagined worst-case scenarios. Participants reported being able to stop rumination or worrying by applying techniques learnt in the program and by bringing their attention to the present moment.

Tomorrow I've got the dentist and it's almost an emergency run on my tooth. And normally, I would be besides myself, but I've been pushing it out of my brain and just going: that'll happen when I get there, so I've been able to move it out of my brain. Free my brain. (Participant 31)

Prior to this course I used to ruminate on issues that had not even happened. I have learnt that this is just my brain making up stories, and so I'm learning to just deal with things I can control. I am so thankful for many of the teachings from this course and the trainer's ability to back these up with research and anecdotes. (Participant 1)
Participants mentioned being able to stop negative self-talk by employing skills acquired in the program. Most of them described their negative self-talk as harsh self-judgment related to their performance in different contexts.

Yes, this program had many positive impacts on my personal life, so as a result can positively impact my work [sic]. For example, after this program I came to know that it is natural to have negative judging thoughts towards myself and I learnt to dis-attach [sic] those thoughts which in a way can save my energy to do more important things. I feel calmer and more energetic every day. (Participant 7)

The big one was validate myself! Stop jumping to conclusions about what people think of me as that was something that I was really bad at. (Participant 5)

All participants mentioned decreased reactivity to external and internal stimuli, and an improvement in their ability to pause before responding. This was mostly credited to their increased skills of not identifying with and letting go of unhelpful emotions and thoughts.

I can get myself to relax by using breathing and presence, be self-compassionate and non-judgmental of my initial reactions so I can respond appropriately. (Participant 16)

I'm a lot less reactive. I ask myself: so why am I feeling this way? And then a lot of the times, it's just ego. And I think with this, that breathing has allowed me to become less reactive. And kind of understand that it's the other person's problem, not mine. And I've kind of, if it's someone that I actually really can't be bothered with, then I am quite happy to get up and walk away from the conversation, which I've done quite a few times in the staff room, not rudely, I just get up and pretend I'm going to make a cup of tea and I just don't rejoin the conversation, which is fine, because it's, um, I don't have to react to everything. (Participant 19)
1.3 Reduced stress impact

Realizing that stress can be seen as a positive was reported by all participants to be a significant source of comfort and a very effective tool to reduce stress. This mindset change was linked to positive outcomes such as feeling calmer, more relaxed and more energized. The survey question “Has the program had any impact on your stress levels?” elicited responses such as:

I am just a lot calmer and in control. (Participant 30)

Yes, I feel calmer, I’m able to slow down and relax myself [sic] when I feel I’m becoming stressed. (Participant 20)

A significant outcome of the training highlighted by participants was an increased sense of control and agency. They credited this to their improved ability to let go of their negative thoughts and emotions, and to their heightened confidence in their capability to manage any unpredictable challenges. This led them to feel less stressed and more in control.

I feel more prepared, for what I couldn’t tell you. Maybe that makes me more able to cope with life. (Participant 11)

Taking back some of the control and being present in life, makes me a better teacher and a far more relaxed member of our family. (Participant 28)

2. The purposeful cultivation of self-care and positive emotions may be a precursor to enhanced wellbeing

Most participants noticed improvements in their mental wellbeing and attributed them to an increased understanding of what self-care entailed followed by more frequent practice of self-care actions and feeling more positive towards self and others.

2.1 Increased self-care practice

After program completion, participants reported a greater understanding of what wellbeing was, what constituted self-care, and why both were important. For
example, many reported feeling less guilty about attending to their wellbeing. As a result, there was an increase in reported self-care practices and routines.

I put myself first sometimes now and I know it helps my other relationships if I’m happy. (Participant 13)

In my job are early childhood curriculum has a major learning strand called well-being so we are always conscious of our tamariki’s [students] emotional well-being but this program has made me realize how important our well-being is. (Participant 24)

2.2 Feeling more positive towards self and others

Many participants reported that having an increased ability to name their emotions and a better understanding of the general human experience of emotions and thoughts, allowed them to be less hard on themselves. Additionally, being able to recognize, name, and let go of self-judgments related to their inner critic, allowed participants to be more understanding and more sympathetic towards themselves. For some, this led to an increase in energy resources, and for others to improvements in overall mood.

I keep a bullet journal where I track my mood and overall, since doing the course, it has been much more positive, and more consistently positive as well. (Participant 15)

I think a positive thing for me was just realizing that all of these sometimes negative thought processes that we have is completely normal. And that most people have the same crazy thought processes. I think that made me feel good about myself. But that's yeah, that's not just my crazy brain. That's most people. Everybody's system, yeah. (Participant 2)

A significant change recorded by most participants was a rise in positive feelings towards others both in their personal and professional lives. This was attributed in part to the fact that they no longer assumed others were negatively judging them. Another antecedent to this was the purposeful cultivation of gratitude and kindness.
Participants described feeling more positive towards self and others after engaging in random acts of kindness or after writing things they were grateful for. These practices were also linked to reports of feeling more positive towards life and present moment experience in general. When asked what impact the program had on them, participants reported:

Yeah, I think I'm much kinder, and I can see when people are kind. Before I never saw, I always saw the negative things but never really saw the positive things in people. Now, I'm more alert for positive things. (Participant 15)

I have definitely noticed a difference in my overall happiness and attitude towards work after the course. I already loved my job so much but I feel that I am now enjoying it even more! Which I did not think was possible! (Participant 22)

3. Positive relationships with others and evidence of effectiveness at work may mitigate burnout symptoms.

Feeling more positive emotions towards others, being less reactive and stressed were identified in participants’ reports as precursors to improved relationships at work and at home. These positive relationships together with specific examples of improved effectiveness at work are likely protective factors against job burnout.

3.1 Improved relationships with others

Participants described having an improved ability to understand others’ perspectives. Some credited this to being less attached to their own opinions, thoughts and emotions, and to being less defensive. Many reported having received positive feedback in the workplace or at home about being less reactive, not taking things personally, and being generally calmer.

I have even had comments from my team leader at work and my family about being far less defensive and reactive, not taking things so personally. I see the things that people say to me differently now and understand their comments are more about themselves than myself. (Participant 23)
Knowing stress can be helpful I am less likely to stress and I am learning to see that I get stressed because I care, for example when getting stressed about an upcoming MoE [Ministry of Education] visit I reframed my thoughts to let myself and others know they are coming in to provide guidance where necessary while making sure our paperwork is in order. (Participant 12)

As a result, participants described an improvement in their relationships with colleagues, students and family members.

Yes, I feel calmer, I'm able to slow down and relax myself when I feel I'm becoming stressed especially when dealing with crying children, if I am able to calm myself and slow down, I can empathize more and be present to support coregulation. (Participant 17)

I have truly found that this program has made me a better, calmer, more present teacher and this in turn role models to the children the same practice. (Participant 13)

3.2 Improved effectiveness at work

Participants reported noticing an improvement in their teaching practice, credited primarily to them being perceived by students as calmer and being able to instill a sense of calm in the classroom. Many taught some of the practices related to stress reduction and mindful present moment awareness to students, with the result of improved classroom climate.

Participants noticed increased effectiveness at work and gave as examples improved ability to deal with crises, to prioritize tasks, and to reduce procrastination.

I have stressed far less and continue to only concentrate on which [sic] I have control of. Recently while dealing with a chronically suicidal student, I have found that under this extremely stressful circumstance I handled things far better than I ever would have a year ago. I kept healthy boundaries and once I established safety for the student I handed over and went into self-care mode. I have felt the work we have done in the course has held me in far better
stead over the lockdown period and also supporting others. I definitely feel more resilient. (Participant 23)

I think my students would say that I'm a lot less emotional, I think. I just had one incident, I had a boy who's under an immense amount of, there's just so much going on. And I'm not a counselor, but I had to do with his learning so I guess I'm involved and at one stage, he threw his toys at the wall, stormed out the room, punched the wall, kicked the door, whatever, whatever, and I just sat there very calmly and I had his bag so I knew he was coming back but the way I've dealt with him I think is, it's hugely that calm and, and dealing them with the positive, like he came back in and instead of growling, I was just really calm and you know, it's okay, it's okay to have those emotions. And I've heard the trainer in my head, you know, it's okay. It's normal to have these emotions and I think the course has given me that understanding of yeah, emotions are okay, it's what you do with them. So that was, it was nice to deal with a negative child on a positive level, it was good. (Participant 11)

Participants also described being better able to say “no” when appropriate, not taking on others’ responsibilities and recognizing the warning signs of becoming overwhelmed before limits were reached. The last point was linked to a decrease in stress as participants reported being able to use the techniques learnt to address symptoms before they escalated.

I have learnt to pause and reflect before I respond to some situations. I find myself asking why more often ... why do I feel like this? Why do people act this way? I also have been able to say ‘no’ more and truthfully answer why. (Participant 8)

Yes. I am being longer [sic] to myself and setting more realistic expectations of myself. I am better at saying ‘no’. I am making deliberate efforts to appreciate the small things, do things that bring me joy and am learning not to heed others comments. (Participant 3)
Discussion

The themes identified in this study, as well as the categories and codes that supported them, were consistent with findings from similar studies of mindfulness-based interventions and workplace wellness programs (Emerson et al., 2017; Hwang et al., 2017; Lomas et al., 2017). Some of the underlying mechanisms outlined in the present study, however, have received little to no attention in previous studies and they are presented as potential new avenues for research.

**Self-awareness and non-reactivity may facilitate a reduction in stress levels**

A common finding across studies is that mindfulness training may result in improved self-awareness, which can lead to improved emotional and physical wellbeing and reduced stress symptoms (Abenavoli et al., 2013; Hwang et al., 2017; Schussler et al., 2016). For example, Abenavoli and colleagues (2013) showed a reduction in reported daily physical symptoms and negative affect which mediated teachers’ reports of perceived stress. Roeser and colleagues (2013) showed an improvement in teachers’ attention and somatic awareness as well as a reduction in negative affect. These results are consistent with findings of mindfulness-based wellness programs for non-teacher populations whereby the training increased participants’ awareness of mental and physical phenomena and reduced their stress, anxiety, rumination, negative affect and depressive symptoms (Cayoun et al., 2019; Townshend et al., 2016).

The present study confirmed these findings and furthers this line of research by proposing that non-reactivity might be a foundational precursor to reduced stress. Non-reactivity is one of the five dimensions of mindfulness identified by Baer and colleagues (Baer et al., 2008) and is defined as the ability to not react automatically to internal or external stimuli. The majority of participants in the present study cited an increased ability to respond rather than react automatically and linked this to improvements in their stress levels and in their relationships with others. In a systematic review of mindfulness-based interventions for teachers, Hwang and colleagues (2017) found that not reacting automatically allowed teachers to
experience being calmer, more centered and relaxed. Further investigation of the connection between non-reactivity and stress reduction might be a useful research endeavor.

The purposeful cultivation of self-care and positive emotions may be a precursor to enhanced wellbeing

Self-care encompasses self-awareness, self-compassion, and the implementation of a variety of strategies across physical, emotional, mental, and social domains (Mills et al., 2020). But self-care is not always prioritized by teachers as they might feel selfish at the thought of attending to their own needs or may fear judgment from others. Current research does not address specifically the relationship between self-care and teacher wellbeing. Studies from the healthcare sector, however, have established a correlation between improved self-care and increases in wellbeing (Mills et al., 2020; Narasimhan et al., 2019). The present study highlights that enhancing teacher understanding of the importance of and practical application of self-care may lead to an increase in practice adoption and frequency, which in turn, may catalyze improvements in wellbeing. This finding would benefit from further research to explore further the link between the two.

A growing body of research has highlighted that the purposeful cultivation of positive emotions has a causal effect on wellbeing via biological and psychological pathways (Le Nguyen and Fredrickson, 2018). To date, the link between the two in the context of a workplace wellness intervention has not been explored, perhaps because not many workplace programs include specific strategies on this topic. The findings of the current study suggested that including explicit strategies to cultivate positive emotions might facilitate an increase in participants’ wellbeing levels. These promising results open up new avenues for research in the workplace learning and wellbeing domains.

Positive relationships with others and evidence of effectiveness at work may mitigate burnout symptoms.
Workplace burnout has been defined as a process in which the psychological resources of an employee are gradually depleted as a consequence of prolonged stress at work (Maslach et al., 2001). The most prevalent burnout symptoms in the workplace include: loss of motivation and sense of purpose, exhaustion even after resting, cynicism or disconnectedness, and feelings of ineffectiveness even when the outcomes achieved are good (Ahola et al., 2014; Faraci, 2018; Maslach et al., 2001).

There is convincing evidence that social relationships at work have a significant impact on burnout (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017; Leiter et al., 2015). Greater social support and positive social interactions mitigate burnout symptoms and represent a buffer against the stressful impact of demands from others (Leiter et al., 2015). Little research has investigated teachers’ workplace relationships and their correlation with burnout. In a recent study on teacher empathy, relationship with students, and burnout, the authors found that teachers higher in empathy had closer relationships with students, were better able to manage problematic behaviors and had lower levels of job burnout. Teachers who had poorer empathy skills showed largely the opposite findings, with greater relationship conflict, fewer problem-solving strategies, less competence, and higher job burnout (Wink et al., 2021).

Our study further advances this emerging area of research by proposing that positive relationships in the workplace and evidence of effectiveness at work might act as deterrents to teacher burnout. Participants in our research found that following the program they experienced enhanced relationships at work and greater effectiveness in managing tasks and problematic situations. They gave examples of positive interactions with students and colleagues, and received compliments for their relationship skills and ability to tackle workplace problems. These are arguably mitigating factors against the burnout symptoms of disconnectedness and work ineffectiveness, although further research is needed to directly explore this correlation.

The present paper has several strengths. First, it is the only study to explore New Zealand teachers’ appraisals of a mindfulness-based intervention. It is also the first
to explore the impact of a mindfulness-based intervention developed in Australia and New Zealand. Second, it is one of the few to capture qualitative data from multiple sources to include a three-month follow-up, and to investigate an online mindfulness-based intervention. Third, the paper brings forth three avenues for further research hitherto unexplored in mindfulness literature: non-reactivity may be a pathway to stress reduction, the inclusion of positive psychology strategies in mindfulness interventions may enhance wellbeing outcomes, and improved relationships with others following an MBI might mitigate against burnout dimensions of cynicism and low personal achievement.

Concluding remarks

Participants in the workplace wellness program the Wellbeing Protocol seem to have gained increased self-awareness and ability to respond rather than react automatically. They also seemed, overall, to be more positive and more effective at work, as well as having improved relationships. They reported feeling less stressed, more relaxed and more confident.

There are several areas for further research proposed that would advance our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of effective strategies to support employee wellbeing in the workplace.

The implications for practice are twofold. For school settings, WP seems to be a promising option to support teachers in reducing stress and improving mental wellbeing. For workplace settings, the positive outcomes related to improved effectiveness and relationships at work, as well as the program’s flexibility related to short length and online delivery, might make it an option to support employee wellbeing.

References


Jennings, P.A., Frank, J.L., Snowberg, K.E., Coccia, M.A., Greenberg, M.T., 2013. Improving classroom learning environments by Cultivating Awareness and


# Tables

## Table I. Demographic data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic variables</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Instructional context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Regular education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td></td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td></td>
<td>Paraprofessionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31%</td>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>47%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Table II. Themes, categories and codes illuminating participants' experience of *The Wellbeing Protocol.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better able to perceive own's thoughts,</td>
<td>Increased awareness</td>
<td>Self-awareness and non-reactivity may facilitate a reduction in stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotions and physical sensations</td>
<td>increased awareness of mental, emotional</td>
<td>levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and physical experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better able to name or describe emotions,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical sensations or thoughts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being more in the present moment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to not react to triggers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to let go of negative thoughts or emotions</td>
<td>Increased ability to manage thoughts, emotions and reactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to let go of attachment to one's own opinions or feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress is now seen as positive</td>
<td>Reduced stress impact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling more in control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling calmer, more relaxed, less stressed</td>
<td>Feeling more energy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased understanding of what self-care and wellbeing is</td>
<td>Increased self-care practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased practice of self-care actions/routines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being less hard on oneself</td>
<td>Feeling more positive towards self and others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling more positive emotions towards others at work or at home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling more positive feelings towards life/experience in general</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better ability to understand students or colleagues’ perspectives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received feedback from team, colleagues or students about positive changes</td>
<td>Improved relationships with others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved relationships at work or home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in workplace conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with other educators in the program was positive and helpful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealt with a work crisis in a better way than before</td>
<td>Improved effectiveness at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching practice improved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better able to prioritize at work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not taking on others’ responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better able to recognize warning signs before limits are reached</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The purposeful cultivation of self-care and positive emotions may be a precursor to enhanced wellbeing.

Positive relationships with others and evidence of effectiveness at work may mitigate burnout symptoms.