**Abstract**

Teachers around the world have faced many new challenges in recent years, not least with the sudden switch to teaching online during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. School leaders likewise have had extra responsibilities added to their already busy role. Although the threat posed by the pandemic seems to have largely subsided, schools continue to deal with COVID-19-related issues. A lack of support for education professionals’ well-being during all of this has been evident. There is often little guidance as to how those working in education can attain adequate levels of health and well-being under extraordinary circumstances. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to highlight the proven effectiveness of mindfulness practices used to support teachers’ and principals’ well-being, as documented in existing literature.

Keywords: mindfulness, teachers, principals, well-being, mental health

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused one of the largest systemic disruptions in recent history. COVID-19 changed lives everywhere and triggered a new paradigm (World Health Organization, 2020). Its impact on day-to-day living and fields such as healthcare, education, business, industry, and the service sector is still being felt in many places around the world (Quezada et al., 2020). As reported in prominent science and medical journals (Torjesen, 2021)*,* because of the virus’s ability to adapt and evade bodily defenses, it will likely be a permanent fixture, meaning ongoing adjustments will be needed. During the height of the pandemic, schools shut down for extended periods, and many classes shifted suddenly from face-to-face to remote instruction. There were lots of unprecedented changes for which there was no roadmap.

As many researchers have documented (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Pressley, 2021), many countries sought innovative solutions to limit the virus’s effect on pupils’ schooling. Most significant was the shift of the learning process from bricks and mortar classroom instruction to online spaces, using web conferencing tools and other designated software (Daniel, 2020; Lederman, 2020; Marshall et al., 2020). Maintaining a healthy work–life balance is critical for teachers, but COVID-19 brought for many a difficult change in the form of reduced separation between home and school, and teachers’ engagement in healthy physical and mental activity became more of a struggle (Maclntyre et al., 2020). It could be helpful to look at some questions posed by different researchers in order to better understand and address the problem of working in a “crisis” setting in an educational context. Wells and Klocko (2018) asked: “What are we doing to help principals learn elements and qualities that can help them to thrive and stay in the profession?” (p. 169). Added to this is: “What does it mean to ‘be well’?” (Tov, 2018, p. 2). Another question is: “How did they cope, personally and professionally, with such an abrupt change?” (Marshall et al., 2020, p. 47). Combining these three questions, we can start to consider how we can more comprehensively improve teachers’ and principals’ well-being and work–life balance.

The problem of teacher turnover (Lee et al., 2021) and principal turnover (Kim & Pendola, 2022) remains a core issue that has knock-on effects throughout the education sector. Fortunately, a lot of research shows that mindfulness practices help to improve principals’ and teachers’ well-being and health. In previous studies, the need to directly reduce the stress that affects teachers and principals in order to increase their well-being has been raised in much research. More than 15,000 journal articles have been published over the past few decades on the topic of mindfulness (Pratt, 2021). By considering the above questions in the context of mindfulness, we can start to join up mindfulness practice, as evidenced in the extensive literature, can help to diffuse growing issues around education professionals’ well-being under extreme events.

**Documented Challenges for Teachers and Principals**

Goh et al. (2016) highlighted the fact that some 8% of U.S. healthcare funds are spent on conditions linked to work-related stress. Stress is one of the main reasons why educators leave their profession (Diliberti et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Diliberti et al. (2021) revealed the top-five reasons for leaving the teaching sector as being remuneration, student management, health issues, risk of passing the COVID-19 infection to family members, and online learning demands. School teachers already undergo considerable stress (Klapproth et al., 2020) as they deal with students and a lack of resources (Robosa et al., 2021). The lack of clear guidelines for working under COVID-19 was yet one more stressor (Santamaria et al., 2021). School principals, likewise, experience high, chronic pressure in their job (Combs et al., 2009), leading to stress build-up and lessening their ability to cope (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Klocko & Wells, 2015); burnout is one of the common results of this stress (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003; Yildirim & Dinc, 2019).

Adequate support for educators’ quests for enhanced self-care and well-being is a significant issue that extends into the future (Kaden, 2020). Although school leaders are already handling the stress of standard job-related responsibilities, they met unprecedented challenges during the first wave of COVID-19 (Kim, 2022b), and they continue to operate in the knowledge of a possible resurgence of the pandemic—or something similar (Collie, 2021; Ozamiz-Etwebarria et al., 2021).

Table 1 lists the main challenges faced by teachers and principals. For teachers, these

include work-related stress (Maclntyre et al., 2020; Rabaglietti et al., 2021), burnout (Candeias et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021; Sokal et al., 2020), job dissatisfaction (Chan et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2021; Parveen & Bano, 2019), and classroom management issues (Lukas & Yunus, 2021). Specifically, a lack of guidelines for COVID-19 was added as a recently emerged difficulty (Azhari & Fajri, 2021; Santamaria et al., 2021; Smith, 2020).

At the senior level, principals have a lot of responsibilities and challenges, and they are worried about stress and burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Karakose et al., 2022; Kim, 2022b; Mahfouz, 2020), job satisfaction (Kim & Pendola, 2022; Mandel & Pendola, 2021; Yan, 2020), and job performance (Mahfouz, 2020; Wells & Klocko, 2018). During COVID-19, school management directly related to handling COVID-19 was added to principals’ burdens (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Mutongoza et al., 2021).

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| **Table 1** | |
| *Summary of challenges for teachers and principals* | |
|  | **Major challenges** |
| **Teachers** | Work-related stress (Maclntyre et al., 2020; Rabaglietti et al., 2021)  Burnout (Candeias et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021; Sokal et al., 2020)  Job dissatisfaction (Chan et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2021; Parveen & Bano, 2019)  Job-related tension (Helms-Lorenz & Maulana, 2016)  Classroom management (Lukas & Yunus, 2021)  Lack of guidelines (Azhari & Fajri, 2021; Santamaria et al., 2021; Smith, 2020)  Remote, online learning (Diliberti et al., 2021; Lederman, 2020; Serhan, 2020; Weis et al., 2020) |
| **Principals** | Stress and burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Karakose et al., 2022; Kim, 2022b; Mahfouz, 2020)  Job dissatisfaction (Kim & Pendola, 2022; Mandel & Pendola, 2021; Yan, 2020)  Job performance (Mahfouz, 2020; Wells & Klocko, 2018)  School management from COVID-19 (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Mutongoza et al., 2021) |

**Supporting Mental Health for Teachers and Principals**

After having gone through the COVID-19 “tunnel,” most school leaders continue to carry associated stress and feel its effects. To cope with uncertainty in the coming years, it is important to develop programs to help principals reduce their job-related stress and increase their mental and physical health (Wells & Klocko, 2018). What is in place so far is inadequate and needs improvement. There have not been enough appropriate health programs provided to principals thus far, and it is important to help prepare them for a possibly even more stressful time as a school leader in the future. To help these individuals maintain a good work–life balance under such constraints, better coping strategies should be fostered, making them accessible, with suitable practice tools.

Research spanning more than 30 years on mindfulness-based interventions has provided significant positive evidence that they serve to lessen job insecurity and emotional exhaustion (Chen & Eyoun, 2021). Mindfulness practices have yielded encouraging and ameliorating effects on mental health issues such as depression or depressive thoughts (Chambers et al., 2008), stress and anxiety (Song & Lindquist, 2015; Stapp & Lambert, 2020), and stress and anxiety (Farris et al., 2021; Krygier et al., 2013). Over the past several decades, mindfulness meditation has become very popular in the United States and elsewhere (Goldberg et al., 2021). Many researchers have concluded that mindfulness meditation helps individuals to improve their psychological well-being (Hölzel et al., 2011), and that everyone can use a range of mindfulness practices in daily life Practices may include yoga, breathing, mindful walking, meditation, and body scanning (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Maxwell & Duff, 2016; Seung Sahn, 1976; Stapp & Lambert, 2020; Thich, 2008).

A lot of research has shown that meditation positively impacts the brain structure and brain activity (Davidson et al., 2003; Guidotti et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2015; Lutz et al., 2004; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Travis et al., 2018). Mindfulness can help foster a more contented mood. There is also evidence that meditation helps to increase frontal cortex activity related to emotions and stress (Davidson et al., 2003). Research has demonstrated that there are differences in brain activity and performance between meditators and non-meditators; brain images reveal a higher density of gray matter in the left temporal lobe (Holzel et al., 2007).

It was found that those who undertook mindfulness practice could control the anterior brain diagram more intentionally control the anterior brain so that cooperative decision-making increased (Kirk et al., 2016). Training in mindfulness also increases the anterior cingulate cortex, an area toward the front of the brain that is involved in higher-level processing (Allen et al., 2012; Hölzel et al., 2011). Kilpatrick et al. (2011) found that mindfulness meditation training impacts on intrinsic brain connectivity. Mind–body training (MBT) also contributes to the immune and nervous systems (Jung et al., 2010).

Enhancing personal well-being is essential for improving mental health. The importance of health and well-being used to be a long-held area of philosophical discussion, but until relatively recently had somewhat fallen to the wayside with the rise of industrialism (White, 2002). The phrase “well-being” means positively influencing people’s lives (Tov, 2018). Well-being is relevant to the workplace environment, as it impacts on employee performance (White, 2002). Reducing stress helps to improve personal well-being for life (Strauss et al., 2021).

**Overview of Mindfulness**

The word “mindfulness” is not a straightforward word to understand. Therefore, it should be recognized that people’s understanding of mindfulness differs, whether it is talking about mindfulness, thinking about mindfulness, or reading articles on mindfulness. Over the past 30 years, the conceptualization and definition of mindfulness has been continuously revised.

From linking many definitions of mindfulness together (Bishop et al., 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Epstein, 1999; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Shapiro Jr., 2008; Thich, 1975), central elements of mindfulness are the present moment, non-judgement, moment to moment, and awareness (Kim, 2022c). Through mindfulness practice, we can positively shape both the physical and mental mind; mindfulness offers the development of a resilient mind that is operable across unexpected encounters.

The concept of mindfulness originates from Asia, having always been integral to Buddhist philosophy (Brown et al., 2007). The word “mindfulness” literally translates from Pali into English as awareness, attention, and remembering (Siegel et al., 2009).

As Buddhist monks traveled to the West, and Westerners traveled to the East, more and more people became enlightened about Buddhist teaching (Sheinman & Russo-Netzer, 2021). The concept of mindfulness as Westerners know it now can largely be attributed to Jon Kabat-Zinn. He founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program in the United States, initially created to help terminally ill patients. Many doctors have since made patient referrals to this program, and it is now a highly recognized program that helps people all over the world. Kabat-Zinn’s most well-known explanation of mindfulness is “Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4), although he acknowledges that he himself was heavily influenced by Seung Sahn, a Korean monk who he met at MIT. Seung Sahn (Dae Seon Sa Nim) was the founder of the Kwan Um School of Zen, and among his principle sayings were: “My teaching is only to put it all down. Only go straight-don’t know” (Seung Sahn, 1982, p. 21) and “‘Only go straight-don’t know’ means no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no impulses, no consciousness” (Seung Sahn, 1982, p. 183).

**Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)**

Mindfulness practice and MBSR are at the center of the new paradigm. MBSR programs related to various psychological factors have a close influence on the treatment of diseases and well-being (Table 2).

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| **Table 02** | |
| *MBSR program schedule and syllabus* | |
| Week | Program details |
| 1 & 2 | Introduction to mindfulness  Orientation  Body scan meditation  Mindful movement  Mindful eating  Awareness of breathing |
| 3 & 4 | Walking meditation  Mindful yoga  Sitting meditation  The stress response  Unpleasant events calendar |
| 5 & 6 | Sitting and standing meditation  Mindful communication discussion, full day  Working with difficulties |
| All Day Intensive | Review and mountain meditation, loving-kindness meditation, etc. |
| 7 & 8 | Silent meditation  Body scan review  Find mindfulness practices to suit you  Loving kindness meditation  Course end |

Though it has deep roots in Buddhist philosophy, MBSR has separated itself from the Buddhist concepts of religion and spirituality (Maxwell & Duff, 2016). A substantial body of research shows that mindfulness-based interventions lessen a number of potentially harmful psychological symptoms (Roemer et al., 2008), and provide a natural way for easing depression, anxiety, stress, and pain (Forkmann et al., 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR, the most popular of such programs, is implemented to reduce not only depression, anxiety, and chronic illness (Niazi & Niazi, 2011), but also physical distress, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization (Lo et al., 2021). Using a protocol of secularized meditation skills presented in a variety of settings, it is delivered as an 8 program at centers worldwide (Alajmi, 2021; Stahl & Goldstein, 2010).

**Various Mindfulness Practices**

There are various mindfulness practices that are both *formal* and *informal*. Generally, formal practices use to participants in mindfulness-related programs. Informal practices are exercised in everyday life or use practices not obviously from mindfulness-related practices. This kinds of mindfulness practices to help to improve resilience (Keye & Pidgeon, 2013). As each person is unique, each person can practice their own mindfulness informal practice whatever they want. There are a lot of mindfulness practices used in mindfulness programs. Formal practices include breathing, Yoga (Saeed et al., 2019), body scan, and meditation. There are many informal practices, and these include, among others, mindful eating, walking, washing the dishes, having a conversation, and drinking tea. There are many other mindfulness-related practices as well. Table 3 lists both formal and informal mindfulness practices.

Mindfulness practices can be easily undertaken in daily life (Kim, 2022b; Mayo Clinic, 2020). “Mindfulness training promotes confidence, cognitive flexibility, curiosity and the ability to consider alternative ways of viewing and responding to situations non-judgmentally” (Rocco, 2012).

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| **Table 3** | | |
| *Summary of mindfulness practices* | | |
|  | | **Mindfulness practices** |
| Formal practices | * Breathing (Stahl & Goldstein, 2010) * Yoga (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Saeed et al., 2019; Schuver & Lewis, 2016; Stahl & Goldstein, 2010; White, 2012) * Body scan (Birtwell et al., 2019; Stahl & Goldstein, 2010; Thich, 1975) * Meditation (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Rosenzweig et al., 2010; Seung Sahn, 1982; Stahl & Goldstein, 2010) | |
| Informal practices | * Mindful eating (Birtwell et al., 2019; Boyce, 2011; Carmody & Baer, 2008; Thich & Cheung, 2010) * Walking (Abujaradeh et al., 2021; Carmody & Baer, 2008; Thich, 1975) * Washing the dishes (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Hanley et al., 2015; Thich, 1975) * Having a conversation (Kersemaekers et al., 2018; Struckmeyer, 2020; Thich, 1975) * Drinking tea (Thich, 1975) * Daily journaling and emailing (Kersemaekers et al., 2018) * Mindful showering (Abujaradeh et al., 2021) | |

**Implications and Recommendations**

Since 2000, mindfulness has been expressed by a mindful revolution and the science of meditation. Integrative medicine, including body/mind approaches for healing and well-being, has created a new paradigm in North America, which includes scientifically identified treatment methods centered on mental and physical healing, alternative medicine, and complementary medicine.

This article draws attention to some of the challenges that are linked to teachers and principals and highlights how mindfulness can help address some of these challenges. For future research, we need to empirically investigate the impact of formal and informal mindfulness practices. Many teachers leave their profession the first five years of teaching (Weldon, 2018) and 20 % of school principals leave their position each year (Kim & Pendola, 2022), and mindfulness could be one means to help keep key workers in their workplaces.

Despite the major pandemics that went beforehand, there seemed to be little preparation for COVID-19. School districts, policy makers, and school administrators need to deeply consider educators’ mental health as part of a policy or in giving instructions on how to look after their mental health.

There are some valuable mindfulness programs for teachers, such as the Inner Resilience Program (IRP; (Lantieri et al., 2016), Mindfulness-Based Emotional Balance (MBEB; (Roeser et al., 2022) , and Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE for teachers; (Jennings, 2016; Jennings et al., 2013). Unfortunately, there are a lack of programs specifically at the level of school principals. Barriers to the adoption of mindfulness programs into school leadership include issues around the working climate, institutional barriers, and social-cultural norms (Kim & Pendola, 2022). Mental health programs should be designed to be important in public policy and practices when implementing a mindfulness policy.

Although principals could potentially use some of the mindfulness programs already created for teachers, principals have different stress factors compared with teachers, so some differentiation is needed. For future research, principals’ stress and challenges should be factored in with more tailored focus. We need to focus on the effects of informal mindfulness practices for future studies (Birtwell et al., 2019; Kim, 2022c; Lloyd et al., 2018). Because informal practices can be easily practice in everywhere rather than formal practices. In addition, forming a way to measure informal practice more accurately is required(Dobkin & Zhao, 2011). Informal mindfulness practices can be used every day, as part of or outside other activities, making them highly accessible to all.

**Conclusion**

We are still in the COVID-19 tunnel in 2023, facing the same—and in some cases even more heightened—challenges. Unfortunately, we may have to continue wearing masks in the future, and there is a strong chance that another pandemic will occur. One goal must be to give more attention to the education field in order to combat stress disorders by providing practices staff can use to manage their stress (Kim, 2022b; Kim & Pendola, 2022). COVID-19, for example, had an influence on many teachers’ decisions to leave their job (Diliberti et al., 2021; Rabaglietti et al., 2021). Mindfulness practices can help to improve their personal performance and working environment (Kersemaekers et al., 2018). Extensive research has shown that mindfulness practices, such as nurtured in Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR program, are a valuable tool in stress management for principals (Kim & Pendola, 2022; Mahfouz, 2020; Wells, 2013). Finally, mindfulness practices are readily accessible, can be done anywhere, and provide a proven coping mechanism and stress reducer.

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The preparation of this manuscript did not involve human subjects and therefore no institutional review was required.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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