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Art as Meditation: A Mindful Inquiry into Educator Well-Being

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Abstract

Being prepared for the intensity and complexities that educators face in their work means building strategies for managing well-being. This qualitative study explored educators' conceptualizations about their well-being using an arts-based, community-based participatory research (AB-CBPR) methodology. After a brief mindfulness meditation and contemplation of prompting questions, educators were invited to participate in drawing and writing reflections. The artifacts were coded to determine themes. Themes suggested the importance of human connectedness and interconnection, self care and nurturance, the healing qualities of the natural word, and the recognition that institutions need to provide space and resources to support educator well-being. The mindfulness-based art-as-meditation process was itself a salutogenic process and provided a means for developing a deeper understanding of educator well-being through a community-based participatory research approach.

Keywords

Arts-Based Research, Educator Well-Being, Meditation, Mindfulness

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Being prepared for the intensity and complexities that educators face in their work means building strategies for managing well-being. This qualitative study explored educators' conceptualizations about their well-being using an arts-based, community-based participatory research (AB-CBPR) methodology. After a brief mindfulness meditation and contemplation of prompting questions, educators were invited to participate in drawing and writing reflections. The artifacts were coded to determine themes. Themes suggested the importance of human connectedness and interconnection, self care and nurturance, the healing qualities of the natural word, and the recognition that institutions need to provide space and resources to support educator well-being. The mindfulness-based art-as-meditation process was itself a salutogenic process and provided a means for developing a deeper understanding of educator well-being through a community-based participatory research approach. Keywords: Arts-Based Research, Educator Well-Being, Meditation, Mindfulness

Being a teacher can be one of the most rewarding professions on earth, and one of the most challenging. Every day educators are working with school-aged children, youth, and post-secondary adult learners who have experienced mild to severe levels of trauma. The 1998 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study revealed that by the time children reach 18 years of age, almost 64% will have had at least one exposure to a traumatic experience, 20% will experience 3 or more (CDC & Kaiser Permanente, 2016). Those experiences include emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; emotional and physical neglect; and family/household challenges like spousal violence, mental illness, divorce, and incarceration of a family member. Add to that landscape the spectrum of global-scale human-made traumatic experiences like being an immigrant or refugee (Record-Lemon & Buchanan, 2017) or a survivor of climate disruption related disasters (Shepard, Kulig, & Botey, 2017) and teaching becomes "multi-layered, multi-dimensional, (and) multi-faceted" (Wassermann, 2015, p. 87) to say the very least.

While there is a movement towards trauma-informed teaching and school-based mental health, Ott, Hibbert, Rodger, and Leschied (2017) suggested that in Canada, school-based mental health policy narratives deserve more attention, including expanding "the current focus on promoting student wellness to include teacher wellness" (p. 1). Educators are part of the general adult population wherein at least 64% will have some form of trauma exposure (CDC & Kaiser Permanente, 2016), 8-9% will have a life-time diagnosis of PTSD (Kessler et al., 2017), and many more will be on the spectrum of undiagnosed post-traumatic stress. Moreover, educators are working with children and families that are also dealing with varying levels of distress, including those with traumatic stress, often resulting in problematic student behaviours. Educators are dealing with emotional and social issues including suicide, leaving educators feeling that too much is expected of them and the schools in regard to student mental health issues (Buchanan & Harris, 2014). Unpleasant student-teacher relationships can negatively impact educator well-being, including self-esteem, a positive self-view, work

motivation and job satisfaction (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Add to that the other stressors of institutional demands, budget cuts, and sometimes toxic workplaces (both in the environmental and relational sense), the compounded effects on educator stress and burnout is a cause for concern.

In a synthesis of over thirty years of research on special education teachers, Brunsting, Sreckovic, and Lane (2014) recommended that in addition to developing self-knowledge and help-seeking, and skills related to class management and cultivating collegial support, educators should engage stress management and self-care techniques. Mindfulness-based approaches have been suggested by researchers as an effective way to reduce stress, improve self-awareness, self-regulation, and reflective capacities, all necessary for effective teaching (Emerson et al., 2017; Jennings, 2015; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Skinner & Beers, 2016).

This article features an innovative qualitative research design that was used during the third quarter of a day-long research symposium on educator well-being that employed multiple data collection points (for a full description of the day, see Simmons et al., 2019), funded by a Werklund School of Education Research Collaboration and Community Engagement Grant and approved by the researchers' university research ethics board. Our collaborative research group and co-authors consisted of three academic staff members, (MS, MM, JL), an educator/student services leader from a local high school and alumni from the doctoral program, (EH), and three graduate students (ND, RL, KW) from the Werklund School of Education, and the "facilitator" (RC), an academic staff member from the Faculty of Social Work. We had a common interest in educator well-being grounded in our own experiences as teachers, as teacher educators, and/or mentors of teachers in the university and in the local community, and were curious to engage those educators, administrators, and student service leaders in a conversation about their realities and concerns regarding their well-being and resilience in the stressful day-to-day realities of teaching. We decided that a one-day research symposium could create a place and a space for facilitating conversations with educators from K-16 where we might get a sense of: (1) the contemporary issues concerning the well-being of educators; (2) how they define and understand teacher well-being; (3) what the literature states about well-being in relation to how local educators experience well-being; and (4) the resources and systems in schools that support educator well-being, and how those systems are responding to them.

For this article we have focused on the part of the symposium where we asked the question: What are the important elements and practices that can build and support your well-being as an educator? In our choice of methodology for this part of the day we were intentional in modelling a "salutogenic" or well-being generating process (Garista, Pocetta, & Lindström, 2018). We created and used a mindfulness-based art-as-meditation process for collecting participants' data within a community-based participatory research approach, cognisant of the fact that this activity would also bring some compassionate closure towards the end of an intense, day-long symposium. In keeping with CBPR principles sensitive to the location of power (Minkler, 2005), the research team made a conscious decision to join in as participants in the arts-based, community-based participatory research exercise (described below), with the exception of the facilitator and lead author (RC), an experienced mindfulness teacher and community-based researcher and organizer who devised and led the art-as-meditation exercise, inquiry, and data collection.

Methodology

As already noted, the study used a qualitative, arts-based, community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology. By creating bridges "between scientists and communities, through the use of shared knowledge and valuable experiences," CBPR is valued

in the social sciences not only as a way to collect data, but also to build capacity in individuals and communities through "a deeper understanding of a community's unique circumstances, and a more accurate framework for testing and adapting best practices to the community's needs" (Viswanathan et al., 2004, para. 3). CBPR is a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the process, with emphasis placed on both gaining knowledge about a given phenomenon and to integrate the knowledge gained with interventions for policy or social change benefiting the community members (Israel et al., 2019). "CBPR is not a method per se but an orientation to research that may employ any number of qualitative and quantitative methodologies," and is distinctive for the attitudes of the researchers and how they respond to the "location of power at every stage of the research process" (Minkler, 2005, p. ii, 5).

Furthermore, an arts-based CBPR (AB-CBPR) approach was chosen for our study. Arts-based approaches draw on the tenets of the creative arts in social research, and draw on literary writing, performance, dance, music, film, visual art, and other artistic mediums. Arts-based research "is a generative approach whose researchers place the inquiry process at the centre and value aesthetic understanding, evocation, and provocation" (Leavy, 2017, p. 9). It provided a way to make space for, capture, and present different ways of knowing. AB-CBPR is an emerging, innovative, and a paradigm-shifting approach and set of techniques to inquiry into the social world (Boydell, Gladstone, Volpe, Allemang, & Stasiulis, 2012). In our study with a symposium on educator well-being, it was appropriate to utilize reflective drawing as the method of choice because, as Theron (2012) suggested, this process helps

> … make constructive meaning of adversity, to take action, to experience mastery, and to regulate emotion associated with adversity. All of the aforementioned are well documented pathways to resilience … researchers with a social conscience would be well advised to use drawings, albeit in competent and participatory ways, as this methodology potentiates participant resilience and positive change. (p. 381)

In the field of health promotion and education others have argued that spoken or written words may be insufficient to describe the salutogenic process, that is, the movement towards health, well-being and quality of life. Garista et al. (2018) suggested that arts-based methods such as drawing can serve not only as data sources but also as a health promotion process that utilizes all of the participants' human senses. Creating drawings helps participants comprehend their entire situation—or what Freire (1996) referred to as conscientization in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—the capacity to use available resources, and their ability to respond to stressful situations, an empowering meaning-making process. The results are data that are "flexible to dynamic systems, power relations, as well as emotional and latent aspects of human experience" (Garista et al., 2018, p. 1). The salutogenic properties of this method therefore has resilience and capacity-building potential which is very much valued in CBPR methods.

The AB-CBPR process in this study was further enhanced by prefacing the art-making process with mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation is a practice of training oneself in paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness meditation is known not only to down-regulate the stress response and enhance focus and concentration, but also to have a positive effect on creativity regardless of the length of practice, so that even a short meditation can stimulate creative abilities effectively (Lebuda, Zabelina, & Karwowski, 2016). The non-judgmental attitude that mindfulness invites is also helpful for adults about to participate in an arts-based activity, many of whom may have negative thoughts or memories related to their artistic ability. For the purposes of this study a 15-minute mindfulness of breathing meditation was used to

facilitate participants' focus, relaxation, and "allowing and letting be" in preparation for a further silent contemplation of several questions, followed by an "eyes open" art-as-meditation practice that asked them to respond to those questions through colour, shape, and form, and then finally through text and dialogue.

Visual research methods have been used mostly in anthropology, and most often focus on photographic documentation of social life, an early example being Bateson and Mead's ethnographic analysis of photos of Balinese society (Guillemin, 2004). More recently, cultural studies have adopted this method for research on film, video, electronic visual media and material artifacts to "explore the visual in terms of cultural significance, power relations and sociocultural practices" (p. 273). Analysis of these media include compositional analysis, content analysis and cultural analytics, semiology, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, photo-documentation and photo-elicitation, audience studies, and so on (Rose, 2016). Arts-based research methods are somewhat different than other visual methods and less well known, and address complex and often subtle interactions that provide an image of those interactions in ways that make them noticeable: "arts-based research is a heuristic through which we deepen and make more complex our understanding of some aspect of the world" (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 17).

Guillemin (2004) noted that the use of drawings as an arts-based method in health research has primarily been used with children and there were, at the point of her writing, few studies using drawings with adult participants. Her epistemological perspective is that "knowledge is produced through practices, interactions, and experiences … methodologically, drawings are visual products and, at the same time, produce meanings" (p. 274). Drawings are "bound up in power relations, social experiences and technological interactions" (p. 274) and produced in a particular space and time. Our study, like Guillemin's, used drawing as a way for participants to respond to personal questions through colour, shape and form, and then further used to elicit participants' reflections on what they drew – in our case through written reflections and group discussion.

Sample

For the day-long symposium we used purposive sampling by sending invitations through local school boards, university email lists, and personal contact by the researchers resulting in a representative mix of thirty-three educators: K-12 teachers, principals, regional directors, professional development providers, and university-level instructors and professors, that also included gender, racial, age, and cultural diversity.

Materials and Procedure: Art as Meditation Activity and Data Collection

The research environment was a conference room within a Faculty of Education in a Canadian university, arranged for this portion of the day into six stations (tables pushed together with chairs around), fluorescent and natural lighting, an overhead projector for activity instructions, and a portable music player. Materials consisted of large sheets of newsprint covering tables with four to five people per station. Each station had two baskets with a variety of fine-tipped, colour markers.

The facilitator provided an overview of the silent art-as-meditation activity – its context within the day's activities regarding educator well-being, what it would entail, what the sequence of activities would be. Participants were instructed that towards the end of a 10- to 15-minute mindfulness meditation, participants would be asked to contemplate the following questions:

- What would enhance or support your well-being as an educator?
- What is of core importance to you?
- What are some possible strategies to support your well-being?

The meditation was followed by a silent, guided art activity. Participants were asked to work individually responding to the question prompts by using the materials on the tables to create images, colour, and shapes (as opposed to words). They were to trust in emergence and stillness (e.g., if it feels like nothing is happening or you feel like you are "done" before the end of the activity, to stay with the stillness and see if there is anything else that wishes to emerge). They were to pay attention to thoughts and emotions nonjudgmentally during the process. If they cared to, they could experiment with using their non-dominant hand.

The facilitator, RC, after a brief introduction to mindfulness and meditation, gave participants an opportunity to opt out of the practice and art exercise if they wished, and also to ask questions about the activity for clarification. She then guided the participants in an extended Breathing Space meditation (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2012). Towards the end of the meditation practice, the facilitator asked the participants to contemplate the three questions about what would enhance their well-being as an educator. After ringing a bell to signal the end of the meditation, the instructions were repeated and also posted on the overhead screen for participants to refer to. They were invited to begin by looking at the markers on the table and notice if there was a particular colour or colours that might be attractive to them, and to pick up those markers and start to use colour and shape and image as a way to begin to respond, in silence, to the questions. The facilitator then played some recorded instrumental music and gave the participants about 20 minutes to complete the task.

This activity was followed by a silent reflective writing exercise. At the end of the art-as-meditation activity, participants were asked to remain in silence, put down their materials, and contemplate how that process was for them. As they sat in their chairs with eyes open or closed, they were invited to drop their attention into their body, staying with first feelings, body sensations, then thoughts. After a minute or so, they received a further instruction to pick up a marker and describe beside their images what they saw: what was present in their bodies, hearts, minds, and artwork.

At the completion of their reflective writing, they were invited to stand and—in silence—circulate around their table community and appreciate the work; then the invitation widened to circulate around all the tables in silent appreciation. At the end of the activity, the facilitator asked participants to comment nonjudgmentally about what they noticed about the community's work: similarities in images, colours, words, themes. Those comments from the community about themes were collected and helped to inform the researchers' later data coding and analysis. A larger conversation then ensued regarding what would enhance or support our well-being as educators.

Data Analysis

The data generated from this exercise were 25 participant artworks (artifacts) with 24 of those also containing written text. The images and text were initially analyzed inductively, using thematic analysis. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) suggested approaching analysis by trusting intuitive reactions first, followed by a more formal review, a process they say is like social life involving "action, reaction, and interaction" (p. 82). We followed their suggestion to analyze collaboratively through dyadic analysis, the exchange and development of ideas between two members of the research team. This analysis was then shared with the other members of our research team. When the other members examined the analysis, they were

asked to comment critically on the initial dyadic analysis and this refined the subsequent interpretation, thereby enhancing trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014).

As part of the text analysis, words were put into a "word cloud" generator to determine the frequency of words related to the images. McNaught and Lam (2010) recommend using Wordle in preliminary analysis as "a fast and visually rich way to enable researchers to have some basic understanding of the data at hand" (p. 630). In exploring the initial word cloud, a decision was made to create semantic alignment, therefore words that were from the same root such as vital and vitality or connection, connectedness, interconnected, and interconnection were changed to one representation that captured the concept. Smaller words such a, the, and, do, your, I, of, and but were removed. In most cases it was not possible to tell if the artwork images and text were composed simultaneously during the first part of the art-as-meditation exercise, or the text was added during the second reflective part of the exercise; ultimately the authors decided that this sequence was not important to the analysis process.

Additionally, two participants were interviewed post-symposium about their creative responses during the meditation. Their drawings were brought back to them to look at as a visual "aide memoire" of their "eyes open" meditation process. The participants were provided an opportunity to speak about their art and choice of words that they used to accompany the images through the use of open-ended questions about their choices. The participants communicated their memories about their in-the-moment experiences and how the visual took shape as they participated in the meditation. The interviews provided a broader perspective into their in-the-moment processes (see Artifacts 1 & 2), thickened the richness of their data (Ponterotto, 2006), and also provided some data triangulation that added to the trustworthiness of the researchers' analysis (Creswell, 2014) of the other images and words. Data generated from these interviews were integrated into the general findings.

Findings

Table 1. Frequency of images in artifacts

Description of Items/Images that Appeared in the Artwork	Frequency (Total number of artifacts = 25)
Use of words	23
Nature • Trees, plants, water and feather • When used nature, used a lot of green	7
Human Form(s) • Faces, hands, and/or bodies	8
Heart Shape • Distinct heart shapes with red colour or abstract in nature	4
Closed Circles • Varied colours, interlocking circles, various sizes	13
Spiral Shape • Not as dominant, rather complementary in nature	4

| Use of Colour • 2 with one colour, 3 with two or three colours: 20 with more than three colours	25
Dynamic Movement • Swaying motion, movement outward	11
Use of the majority of the page	22

Imagery

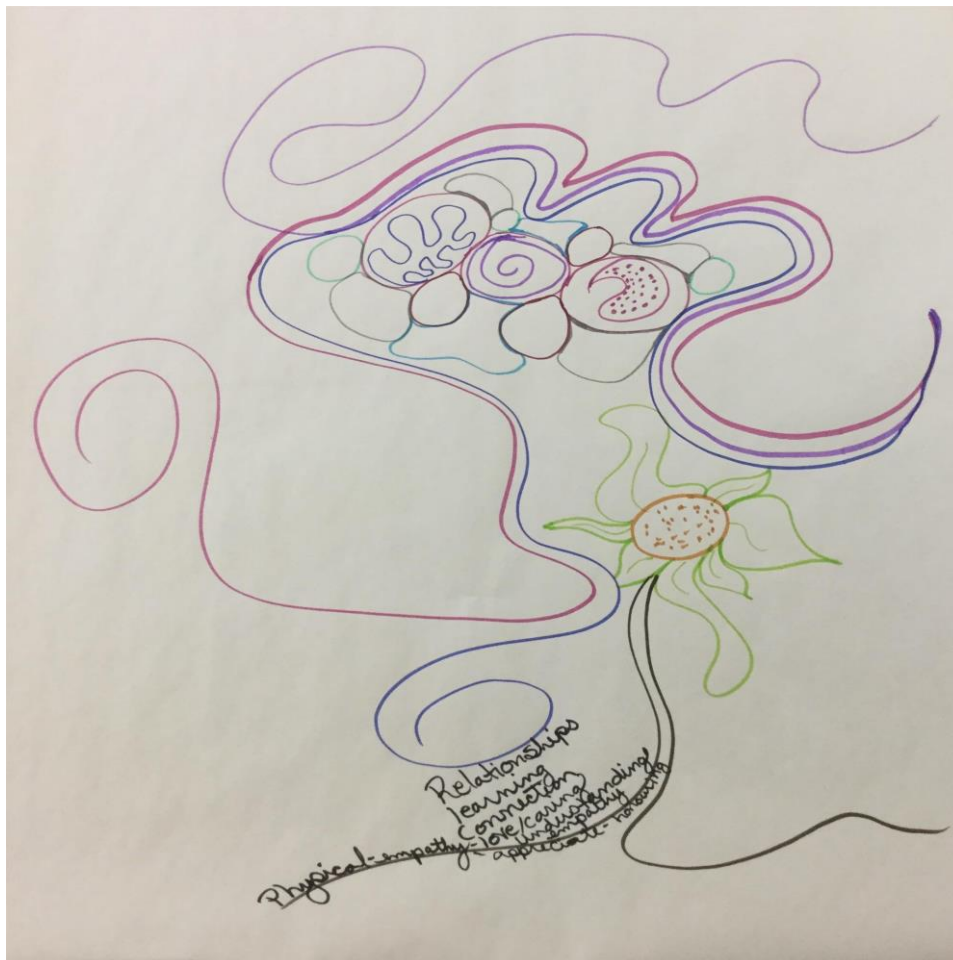**Figure 1**. Example image theme: circles and interlocking circles

Figure 2. Example of image theme: humane form(s)

For the analysis of the artwork, 25 artifacts were chosen on the basis that they had both images and words. Three members of the research team, the session facilitator, an academic staff member and the practice teacher (co-authors RC, JL, and EH) hand-coded these artifact data. The process began by conducting a basic count of items/images followed by an analysis, guided by Saldaña and Omasta's (2018) suggestion to trust intuitive reactions first, of each work as a whole using the three guiding questions as a way to contextualize responses: What would enhance or support your well-being as an educator? What is of core importance to you? What are some possible strategies to support your well-being? Table 1 provides a summary of the frequency for which images appeared in the artifacts. Dominant themes were agreed upon by the more formal review as suggested by Saldaña and Omasta (2018) that was conducted collaboratively within the research team which included all the co-authors. Those themes included single and interlocking circles of various sizes and colours (Figure 1); human forms including, faces, hands, bodies and heart-shapes (Figure 2); and nature-based imagery that included trees (Figure 3), plants, and water with green as the predominant colour. For most of the participants, their artwork used the majority of the space on the page, more than three colours, and a feeling of dynamic movement (Figure 4) was evident in about half of the artworks.
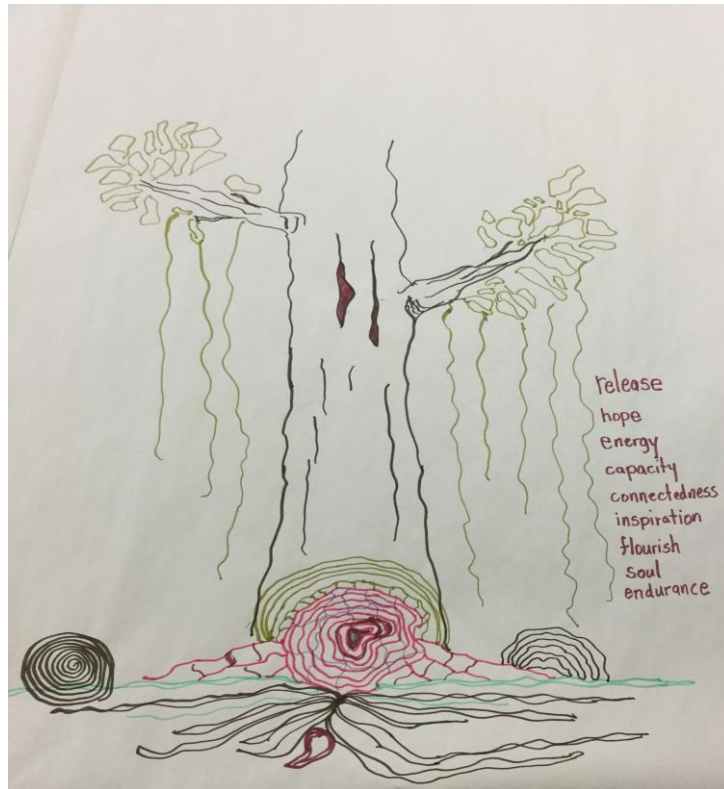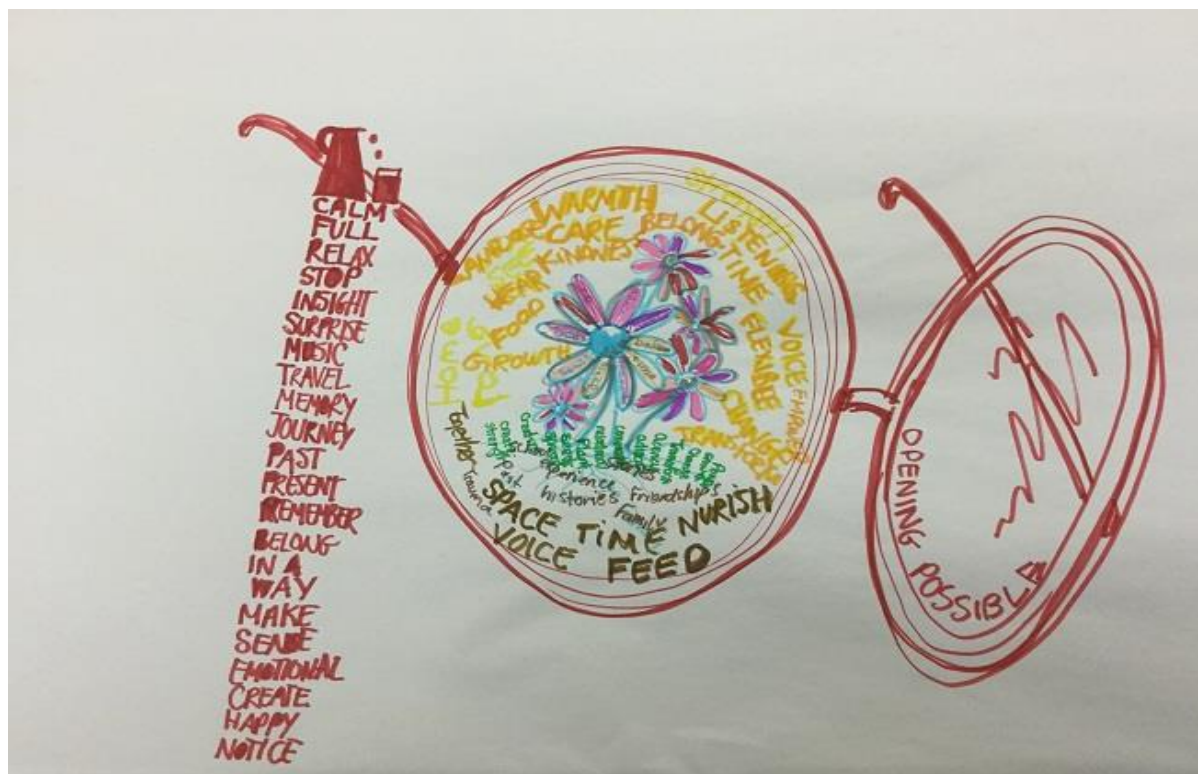
Figure 3. Example of nature-based imagery theme

Figure 4. Example of dynamic movement in imagery

Use of Words

Over 100 words or phrases were presented in the 25 artifacts. Educators expressed similar concepts across a number of the artifacts. The word cloud generator provided a visual of the most frequently occurring words and concepts from the artifacts (DePaolo & Wilkinson, 2014). As shown in Figure 5, the word "connectedness" was used most frequently by participants given its size and dominance in the word cloud. Other words that were frequently used were: hope, space, time, growth, rest, community, support, love, strength, compassion, support, beginnings, introspective.

Figure 5. Visual representation of word frequency generated by Wordle

The word cloud validated hand coded analysis of the text in the artifacts. The dominant themes were connectedness with self and others, relationships, love, caring, empathy, time and space for self care and nurture; being seen and heard.

Integration of words and images

Figure 6 provides an example of the complexity, richness, and interwovenness of words and images in some artifacts. In this artifact, a pair of red-ribbed glasses reflects a number of elements. The left lens of the glasses (another circle shape) contains images of flowers that are composed of words and the rest of the lens is full of words as well. The flowers are in different colours and dominate in the circle. There seems to be an intensity in the one lens. In contrast, the right lens has more open space with the phrase "opening possible." Further, from left temple of the glasses is a stream of words that seem to be pouring from a water pitcher into a water glass. These words, as well as phrases, include calm, full, relax, stop, insight, surprise, travel, past, present, etc.

Figure 6. Example of complexity, richness, and interwovenness of words and images.

In the second set of directions, participants finished their visual representations with an invitation to write words that connected to their image. When examining the images, 5 of 25 artifacts incorporated words intentionally into the image. For example, with one drawing the words were part of the roots of a plant. In a second example, the image had words repeated and integrated as part of the visual display. In a third example, with the use of a letter V for a heart began the start of the listing of letters and then becoming representative of a human form. The words were woven into the image, rather than in the majority of the artifacts where the words were listed, which reflected an after-thought to the images.

Discussion

Arts-based, community-based participatory research (AB-CBPR) methodology with the inclusion of mindfulness meditation may have been helpful in opening participants' awareness to other embodied ways of knowing through sensations, feelings, and emotions. This contemplative space within the day-long symposium seems to have allowed for an alternative way of expressing participants' values regarding their well-being through colour, shape, and form as well as words, and created a sense of openness where they could share and discuss insights with each other. While the meditation, visualization, and turning inwards to attune to the sensations within and then represent them visually may come across as individuals in a space together, what emerged was very much in relation to the community building and shared vulnerabilities that emerged throughout the day.

The initial community-based thematic analysis, and the consequent research team's analyses, revealed how people articulated, represented, or presented their understandings of well-being and resilience as individuals but also as a community of educators. It could be argued by viewing the results of the day that this mindfulness meditation prefaced AB-CBPR was as much a salutogenic process as a research methodology, helping participants come to a deeper understanding for themselves about their well-being and how to nurture it. Informally,

participants articulated how important the research symposium day generated a sense of well-being, and that "the day provided space and critical moments for educators to share and reflect on their experiences and needs for well-being" (Simmons et al., 2019, p. 865).

This AB-CBPR exercise during the day-long research symposium fed into the "next steps" discussion at the end of the day on how to move this emergent community of practice forward, as well as into the additional data gathered by exit slips and a post-symposium questionnaire. Those aggregate data, presented in detail an separate article (Simmons et al., 2019), included a theme around the relationality of/with well-being, that is, that the well-being of self is closely linked to the well-being of others, the participants needed community and support, and that this symposium gave the participants the space "to come together (that) created a sense of validation and community" (p. 863).

The findings of this study suggest that the images as well as the words and phrases captured in the AB-CBPR exercise expressed the core values educators have in regard to enhancing and practicing well-being. Of key importance to these educators was a sense of self and well-being embedded in a community of all beings: human connectedness and interconnection, cultivated and expressed in images and words about self-care and nurturance, as well strong references to the healing qualities of the natural world. This supports the Brunsting, Sreckovic, and Lane (2014) recommendation that educators should engage in stress management and self-care techniques. Underlying this were expressions of needing time and space for well-being activities and the importance of community in being seen and heard, which point to larger structural and institutional issues and the need to promote and provide resources (time, space and money) for teacher wellness (Ott, Hibbert, Rodger, & Leschied, 2017). The results, to use the participants' data to draw our conclusions, would be a sense of hope, release, freedom, vitality, flourishing, and resilience that comes from creating and taking advantage of these well-being generating opportunities for teachers as individuals and the community as a whole.

On reflection, as researchers, it would have been helpful to include a participant's statement for each artifact during or shortly after the process. This could have occurred in writing or with audio/video capture right at the time of the creation of the artwork that would have provided greater insight into why and how images and words were used. With the current study, the follow-up interviews occurred several months after the symposium, so it relied on the ability for recall. Emotions and ideas that were evident when the work was being constructed may not be remembered the same months later.

This innovative adaptation of arts-based, community-based participatory research methodology prefaced with mindfulness meditation warrants more use and refinement, especially in the context of other health research like exploring well-being with adults. Prefacing of the drawing component with mindfulness meditation seems to relieve some of the self-judgment, anxiety and stigma associated with producing "art" evidence by the high participation rate in the activity. This approach could also be useful with populations where ways of knowing and being are more congruent with a contemplative or mindful approach to inquiry and arts-based expression than western-based scientific methods.

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