

# Chapter 12

## ‘Head’ First: Principal Self-care to Promote Teacher Resilience



Johanne Klap, Judith MacCallum, and Caroline F. Mansfield

**Abstract** As leaders of school communities, principals have a significant impact on school culture and teachers’ well-being at work. A school principal’s positive or negative emotions can influence the mood of their teaching staff and can enhance or hinder a teacher’s resilience. Unfortunately, though, many school principals suffer from their own high levels of stress, emotional exhaustion and fatigue-related issues, whilst concurrently being tasked with the responsibility and management of the well-being of their staff. In this chapter, we explore the role of mindfulness and self-care in promoting resilience as a way for school principals to meet the challenges of their role. Principals who are mindful and employ self-compassion are better placed and more resilient to positively impact others and flourish in their role. Leadership does matter and ensuring that we address leaders’ well-being and resilience will mean they will be better equipped to engender resilience in their staff.

**Keywords** School principals · Leadership · Mindfulness · Resilience · Stress · Self-compassion

### 12.1 Introduction

*If I’m not looking after myself, I’m not looking after my staff. If I’m not looking after the staff you’re not looking after the kids. For three years I’ve been looking at what I can do for the kids. What this has taught me is that unless I engage in me first I can’t... I really can’t. It’s that whole chicken and egg thing. I just wish I’d known about Mindfulness when I was*

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J. Klap (✉) · J. MacCallum  
Murdoch University, Perth, WA, Australia  
e-mail: [j.klap@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:j.klap@murdoch.edu.au)

J. MacCallum  
e-mail: [j.maccallum@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:j.maccallum@murdoch.edu.au)

C. F. Mansfield  
The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle, WA, Australia  
e-mail: [Caroline.mansfield1@nd.edu.au](mailto:Caroline.mansfield1@nd.edu.au)

*21 and started the game. Now I have been able to integrate it into my whole life. That's just how it is. It is a gift to me. Probably the most important one I've ever given myself. (Louise<sup>1</sup>)*

Louise is an experienced Western Australian school principal who participated in the *Mindful Leaders* programme, a mindfulness programme for school leaders made possible by the Education Department's Leadership Institute (LI) in 2016. Supporting school leaders has become a priority policy agenda in education systems (Darmody and Smyth 2016; Schleicher 2015) due to their impact on school communities. At that time, the programme was the first of its kind to bring mindfulness training to school principals as an innovative approach to supporting well-being and leadership. The training programme informing *Mindful Leaders* was the Potential Project's *Corporate Based Mindfulness Training* (CBMT®) programme. CBMT® has been developed specifically for the 'at work' environment and is used in organisations around the world. It is designed to provide secular mind training, mindful work applications (how to integrate mindfulness into work activities, for example, communication and meetings) and mental strategy training (or habits of mind training, for example, kindness, patience, presence, acceptance) to enhance well-being and performance. The programme was tailored to school leaders' needs and aligned with the Western Australian Education Department's focus on a "High Performance–High Care" mandate.

Thirty school principals from primary, secondary and special education schools participated in the first *Mindful Leaders* programme. Seventy per cent of participants were female. They attended ten weekly 2 hour sessions and 10 minutes daily mind training (supported by a smartphone app). Even though principals are notoriously time-poor, the attendance rate was outstanding (92%). Alongside the programme, we designed a longitudinal mixed-method study utilising standardised questionnaires of mindfulness, self-compassion and burnout, completed at three time points (time 1, pre-programme; time 2, post-programme; and time 3, 6+ months post-programme), together with in-depth interviews before and after the programme. The conversational 45 to 60-minute interviews focused on mindfulness, well-being, leadership and exploring programme impact.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, we present key findings, highlighting school leaders' use of mindfulness strategies to train and build resilience, by bringing awareness to their inner dialogue and the importance of nurturing self-compassion. Further, we demonstrate the 'ripple effect' principal resilience has on staff and argue for more attention to be paid to school leaders. The following sections set the scene with the school principals' own words, supported by the quantitative data that reveal trends across the cohort and qualitative data revealing the more nuanced experiences for school leaders.

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<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms used for all participants.

<sup>2</sup>Quantitative analysis involved a series of time (3) x gender (2)-repeated measures MANOVAs and ANOVAs using SPSS software to examine changes in principals' leadership, work and well-being over the school year. Where a significant main effect was found between time 1 and time 3, time 1 versus time 2 and time 2 versus time 3 contrasts were carried out (where violations to sphericity occurred, the Greenhouse–Geisser correction was used). Qualitative analysis using NVIVO software focused on identifying common and emerging themes.

## 12.2 Mindfulness: Training for Resilience

*We have always given people breaks, but it's only ever been at that critical stress time because of the nature of our work. It's not a preventative thing. It's a dealing with 'it' thing. With mindfulness, the different shift for me, is that if we can build up that resilience beforehand. Resilience is really important. Giving ourselves the strategies to not necessarily hit the bottom every time... (Janet)*

Recent research has shown that mindfulness training can positively influence the resilience, well-being and performance of teachers (Hwang et al. 2019). In the United States, interventions based on the Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) (Jennings et al. 2017) programme consistently demonstrate the benefits of mindfulness training on teachers' social and emotional competence and the quality of classroom interactions. Specifically, teachers described how the training increased their ability to reappraise situations and change perspectives, increased awareness of emotions focusing on the present and integrated their experience into CARE metaphors (Sharp and Jennings 2015). Since the process of resilience involves drawing on personal resources, to successfully navigate challenges, building personal resources through mindfulness training has been shown to positively influence resilience for teachers (Birchinnall et al. 2019), provide a protective mechanism against stress (Shapiro et al. 1998) and shield from burnout (Abenavoli et al. 2013).

Mindfulness is a way to be in the world. Mindfulness practices can enable people to develop the capacity to be more focused, calm and clear in their daily lives (Hougaard and Carter 2018). It is also a way to observe self and to choose a considered response, rather than a reaction towards another person or event, or towards one's own internal dialogue, emotions and feelings. More specifically, it is to "gain a deeper understanding of the changing nature of one's own body and mental states" so as to "free one's mind from the habits and tendencies" that can get us stuck and the cognitive discernment to "recognise wholesome from unwholesome mental states" (Dreyfus 2011, p. 51) and focus on what matters. Mindfulness, in other words, is the ability to pay attention to the task at hand, become observant of thoughts and respond from a place of calmness and consideration (instead of knee jerk, or habitual reactions), resulting in better actions, choices and decisions (Ruedy and Schweitzer 2011). It can be conceptualised as both a trait and state (Brown et al. 2007) and can be purposefully trained and harnessed by practicing meditation-based mindfulness (Hart et al. 2013).

Although mindfulness training has been shown to support resilience in a range of professions and in the corporate sector, with the exception of Mahfouz (2018), there is limited research exploring the influence of mindfulness training on school leaders. This study is unique in the field and offers insights about how mindfulness can support school principals to adopt a mindful approach to leadership, their self-care and their resilience.

### 12.3 Mindfulness: Managing My Inner Dialogue






*Most significantly the Mindfulness course has provided me with a level of looking after me, like being kind to myself. I've tried that several times before... But this course has been demonstrably effective in me really looking after myself and my mental wellbeing. The level of negative self-talk, as in 'I haven't done this', and 'I'm not good enough at that', and 'I need to get better at this', has rapidly declined. So, I'm really much better at saying, 'well, that's not done yet'- thought out of my head, leave it, park it, don't hold it so tightly. So those things have made a big impact on me. So that's very significant. (Jenny)*

To better understand how the programme may have influenced participants' development of mindfulness skills such as observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging and non-reactivity, we administered the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) (Baer et al. 2006) at time 1, time 2 and time 3. The FFMQ provided a standardised measure, comprising 39 items developed from five independently validated mindfulness surveys. Subscale scores and a total score were calculated with a higher score indicative of greater mindfulness. We also examined the open-ended interview transcripts, as one part of the qualitative analysis, to identify responses related to aspects of mindfulness. Examples of these responses are shown in Table 12.1 together with the results of quantitative analysis. There was a significant increase in each aspect of mindfulness which was sustained for 6 months (time 3) after the programme, with responses from the interviews revealing how the principals explained these positive changes.

One of the most basic mindfulness meditative practices (mind training) involves sitting quietly and bringing one's awareness to the breath, thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations. Neuroscience researchers have found that this kind of practice heightens the activity in the regions of the brain that regulate attention (Goldin and Gross 2010) and emotion (Hulsheger et al. 2013). Participants were introduced to a 10-minute mindfulness practice in week 1 of the programme which was developed over the next 4 weeks to include the elements of relaxation, focus and clarity. At week 5, awareness training was introduced, including using the insights of impermanence, genuine happiness and potential. Daily practice was encouraged and supported by a smartphone app. For our participants, practice was a very important part of maintaining their levels of mindfulness. In the time 3 questionnaire, 22 of the 23 participants who responded reported still practicing their mindfulness training. Five were practicing a few times a month, 11 were practicing a few times a week, 4 were practicing most days and 2 were practicing every day. The challenge of maintaining practice was acknowledged: *"Easy to return to default position and not give myself the gift of a practice, although (I am) aware of so much more and less critical of myself"* (Barry), whereas when the practice had become a daily habit it was because: *"Knowing that it makes me feel better, I am much calmer and know that I control the level of stress I may be presented with"* (Stella).


Alongside the practice are a series of behaviours and attitudes that help bring mindfulness to the every day (Kabat-Zinn 2013). This can also be understood as 'habit of mind' or 'mental strategies'. These habits of mind are critical to bridging the

**Table 12.1** Principals' mindfulness trends, item and interview examples

Trend line time 1, time 2, time 3	Subscale and example of item and main effect for time (F)	Examples of time 2 (post-programme) interview responses
	<p><i>Observing</i> (e.g., "I pay attention to sensations, such as the wind in my hair or sun on my face") <math>F(2,42) = 11.469, p &lt; 0.001</math></p>	<p><i>I actually can walk and stay and look at the lake, and I've seen trees rustling for the first time. I can have a shower and actually think, 'God, this water feels so good'. (Sue)</i></p>
	<p><i>Describing</i> (e.g., "I can easily put my beliefs, opinions, and expectations into words") <math>F(2,42) = 3.957 p &lt; 0.05</math></p>	<p><i>Because you have to be clued into notice. What does that mean? What does that look like? What do you have to do? And when you start noticing, you just get calm. Well, I do. (Lydia)</i></p>
	<p><i>Acting with Awareness</i> (e.g., "When I do things, my mind wanders off and I'm easily distracted") <math>F(2,42) = 10.334, p &lt; 0.001</math></p>	<p><i>It's being more aware, consciously aware of what you say, how you act and actually what you're doing - when I'm here, I'm here, wherever I am, I'm actually there. (Sonya)</i></p>
	<p><i>Non-Judging to inner experiences</i> (e.g., "I criticize myself for having irrational or inappropriate emotions") <math>F(2,42) = 10.182, p &lt; 0.001</math></p>	<p><i>I've had key issues and key things happening that day, and I've been overthinking getting ready for them, and I've been annoyed with myself. But then I've been telling myself, 'Why are you being so unkind to yourself?' So, the self-talk has changed and I'm making myself more accountable for my self-talk. I'm being kinder to myself but I'm not there yet, I'm still on the journey. (Karen)</i></p>
	<p><i>Non reactivity to inner experiences</i> (e.g., "When I have distressing thoughts or images, I am able just to notice them without reacting") <math>F(2,42) = 8.132, p &lt; 0.01</math></p>	<p><i>A big powerful thing is the whole thing about observing and noticing. What calmly, powerful little words they are. Because we don't notice, we just do. And we don't observe, we just do. We just act. And so even just stepping back and observing how I was going with things, and observing me being frustrated meant, and that valuable second to observe and chat with myself, 'Come on. You're not going to engage in this nonsense anymore. You've moved on from here.' (Lydia)</i></p>

(continued)

**Table 12.1** (continued)

Trend line time 1, time 2, time 3	Subscale and example of item and main effect for time (F)	Examples of time 2 (post-programme) interview responses
	<p><i>Overall FFMQ</i> Sum of subscales F (2,42) = 19.61, p &lt; 0.001</p>	<p><i>There's something around the mindfulness training that changes your mind. How can it be so simple? (Beth)</i></p>

practice of mindfulness with everyday life, and the “more these habits are cultivated the faster they become part of your default mode of behaving and the calmer and clearer your mind will be” (Hougaard et al. 2016, p. 123). Carrying the practice into daily life can facilitate adaptive stress responses (Donald et al. 2016) which in turn may have positive implications for personal well-being and leaders’ work.

## 12.4 Mindfulness: Nurturing My Self-care

*This course has given me permission to look after me. It has given me the opportunity to recognise that for me to be effective, I need ‘me time’, and not feel that inner critic constantly nagging at me. The inner critic is losing her voice, she has almost got laryngitis, because I have a greater sense of peace about who I am, what I can and what I can’t control. (Kate)*

One of the mental strategies’ principals recognised as having an impact was nurturing the habit of kindness and in particular kindness to self, by bringing awareness to their inner dialogue and inner critic. By soothing or sending themselves caring and helpful messages when things were challenging, they were more likely to cope with stress. This kinder self-talk stimulates part of the brain that responds to kindness (Gilbert 2009). For Jenny, the importance of how she related to herself and her capacity to show kindness and care to self and others even in tough conversations is captured here:

*My son said to me last week, ‘You’re different, mum, you’re acting different’ and I said, ‘Well, all I can say is it’s probably the mindfulness training that I’m doing, and I’ve come to terms with the fact that I need to accept some things, and be kinder to myself.’*

*I can go home and not beat myself up on the way home in the car, thinking I haven’t done this, or that. I’m much more patient with myself and realize that there’s more to life than worrying about what you haven’t finished at work. That, I think, is probably the nature of a lot of educators. So now I feel better and more comfortable about what I’m doing, the level of, how hard I’m working, and how I’m balancing that. I still feel very successful. It’s more my own self-talk. We’re only here once. I’m not getting any younger, I don’t want to be defined by my work. I want to work harder at my relationships with people, particularly my family and partner, and myself, my relationship with myself, I think needs to be better. It is, already. So that’s really a good thing. (Jenny)*

Self-compassion or relating to self with kindness is a healthy form of self-acceptance and has three components: being gentle and understanding perceived inadequacy and then to engage within soothing and positive 'self-talk' (Neely et al. 2009); the ability to recognise that others struggle; and to be able to place personal struggles into context (Neff 2003). In order to give oneself compassion, one must be able to turn toward, acknowledge and accept that one is suffering, meaning that mindful awareness is a core component of self-compassion as "sometimes we first need to hold ourselves before we hold our experience in tender awareness" (Germer and Neff 2019, p. 2).

To measure changes in self-care, we used the Self Compassion Scale (SCS) (Neff 2003) which comprises of 26 items with five subscales. Subscale scores and a total self-compassion score were calculated. As shown in Table 12.2, self-compassion increased from time 1 to time 2 and was sustained at time 3. Over half of the participants (52%) spoke directly about how they had given themselves permission to take care of themselves by employing self-kindness strategies.







If principals are able to be kinder to themselves and purposefully look after themselves, this could impact their performance and personal well-being. Self-compassion has been found in other studies to promote recovery and replenishment of mental and emotional energy (Abenavoli et al. 2013), have positive effects on psychological and physical well-being, happiness and contribute to the ability to be more compassionate to others (Campos et al. 2016). Being kind to self can have positive impacts on fatigue and stress levels (Heffernan et al. 2010) and negate burnout (Barnard and Curry 2012). Research with teachers suggests that practicing mindfulness and self-compassion may also have positive implications for performance (Jennings 2015). Self-compassion provides a stable footing for principals to resiliently traverse their challenging leadership work landscapes.

## 12.5 Mindfulness: Reducing My Stress and Burnout

*I think the levels of stress and the pressure that we put ourselves under is enormous in the role that we have. We're a vulnerable lot. I couldn't help thinking that there's so many people sitting here that are really struggling internally. That's what we do. We have to present this calm, knowledgeable, capacity to solve situations, and manage things for such extended periods of time, and deal with really complex issues. It just eats away at you internally, and makes you a very vulnerable person, because you just get to saturation point. For a lot of us, we just lose sight of what's really important, which is ourselves. That's pretty sad. (Jenny)*

Jenny's experience and insights into how other principals were feeling are mirrored in the literature where it is widely acknowledged that being a principal is fraught with high rates of stress, competing demands, work overload and burnout (Beusaert et al. 2016). Principals also have the added pressure of working under the scrutiny, expectations and pressure of parents, community and the media (Barr and Saltmarsh 2014). This can cause an afflictive relationship between the 'harsh reality' of the job, their own and others high expectations and may manifest in burnout or simply


**Table 12.2** Principals' self-compassion trends, item and interview examples

Trend line time 1, time 2, time 3	Subscale and example of item and main effect for time (F)	Examples of time 2 (post-programme) interview responses
	<p><i>Self-Kindness</i>                      (e.g., "I am tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies")  <math>F(2,42) = 9.299, p &lt; 0.001</math></p>	<p><i>I used to go through this cycle for years where I would beat myself up in the holidays for not doing enough work while also beating myself up for not relaxing. I would talk to myself and I would never get rid of that. Now I do nothing on holidays, I don't feel guilty, and I don't even have to rationalize it. I think that's being kinder to myself. (Ruth)</i></p>
	<p><i>Self-Judgement (reverse scored)</i>                      (e.g., "When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself")  <math>F(2,42) = 5.389, p &lt; 0.01</math></p>	<p><i>That's what I want to be able to do is to be able to recognise that and say, 'Good choice,' or, 'Well done.' To celebrate myself when I have managed a situation. (Dave)</i></p>
	<p><i>Common Humanity</i>                      (e.g., "I try to see my failings as part of the human condition")                      No significant change over 3 times</p>	<p><i>Listening to other principals who I've known very well and they said they were ready to give up. So, my story is their story. I've been part of those conversations with them for years. (Louise)</i></p>
	<p><i>Isolation (reverse scored)</i>                      (e.g., "When I fail at something that is important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure")  <math>F(2,42) = 7.343, p &lt; 0.01</math></p>	<p><i>I felt like a mouse on a treadmill. I felt isolated and concerned about whether I was making a difference. I felt my confidence was being eroded... This has given me the confidence back. Not only in my professional life, but in my personal life. (Simone)</i></p>
	<p><i>Mindfulness</i>                      (e.g., "When something upsets me, I try and keep my emotions in balance")  <math>F(2,42) = 3.399, p &lt; 0.05</math></p>	<p><i>It probably highlighted for me how much I do react to people; and some of that is a good thing, but some of it can be detrimental. I've probably seen it with fresh eyes - just how much that can impact (Bella).</i></p>
	<p><i>Over Identify</i>                      (e.g., "When I am feeling down, I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong")  <math>F(2,42) = 7.878, p &lt; 0.01</math></p>	<p><i>I've got to step back and say, 'You can do it easily if you look after yourself and if you don't take yourself so seriously.' (Kate)</i></p>

(continued)



**Table 12.2** (continued)

Trend line time 1, time 2, time 3	Subscale and example of item and main effect for time (F)	Examples of time 2 (post-programme) interview responses
	<p><i>Overall Self-Compassion</i> Sum of subscales <math>F(2,42) = 9.01, p &lt; 0.01</math></p>	<p><i>I just want to know more. To become a better person, not for any other reason but for me. It's the first time in my life I've ever thought like that. In life we're not taught to be 'self', we're taught to think about everyone else all the time. (Dave)</i></p>




exiting the profession. However, some principals stay and just continue, weighed down with the burden of their predicament. For example, Oakley's (2012) study of eight principals in remote schools, one principal described the level of stress and exhaustion being akin to the aftereffect of war, the sense of being 'shell shocked'. This 'soldiering on' or in Jenny's case "*losing sight of what was important*" can exacerbate emotional and mental exhaustion, which can then manifest in the emotional labour required to suppress internal emotions and construct external expressions of copying to appear as one who is managing (Diefendorff and Gosserand 2003).

In our research, principals' stress and burnout were measured with the Maslach's Burnout Inventory (MBI) I-GS (Leiter and Maslach 2003). The MBI has 16 items with three subscales (professional efficacy, mental exhaustion and cynicism). Each subscale is calculated without calculation of a total score. From Table 12.3, it can be seen that principal's mental exhaustion was significantly reduced, and their professional efficacy was improved after the programme (time 2) and this continued for 6 months (time 3).

These changes provide evidence of the potential of mindfulness training to reduce stress and burnout of school principals. This is an important finding as Maxwell and Riley's (2017) research of 1320 full-time school principals found that principals displayed significantly higher scores than the general population on emotional demands at work and burnout and significantly lower well-being scores.

In the time 2 interviews, it became apparent participants had previously used ineffective ways to cope with their levels of stress and dealing with the pressures and emotions of being a principal. One way of coping reported by 70% of participants was 'surface acting'. Jenny explained: "*most people would find me a very calm person. But internally, that doesn't mean there's not a lot of stuff going on. I'm pretty good at keeping it internal.*" The tendency of principals to hide emotions, artificially suppress or amplify emotions depending on the context was also noted by Maxwell and Riley (2017), where it was framed as a 'display rule' of presenting their most rational response. This constant 'modelling' leads to physical and emotional fatigue (Roffey 2007). In the leadership literature, 'surface acting' and 'impression management' are noted as the most "important and most frequently studied depleting self-regulatory behaviours" resulting in a less authentic leadership style, as mental resources are

**Table 12.3** Principals stress and burnout trends, item and interview examples

Trend line time 1, time 2, time 3	Subscale and example of item and main effect for time (F)	Examples of time 2 (post programme) interview responses
	<p><i>Professional efficacy</i> (e.g., “In my opinion I am good at my job”) F(1,19) = 10.254, p &lt; 0.05)</p>	<p><i>I am more effective, (it) helps me work with my work problems more easily, but it’s been a bit more than that, I think. It’s discovering the joy.</i> (Robert)</p>
	<p><i>Mental Exhaustion</i> (e.g., “I feel emotionally drained at the end of the workday”) F(2,38) = 6.246, p &lt; 0.01</p>	<p><i>I’m conscious of not letting things drag me down and make me feel as though there’s no way out. So, when people are coming in, talking to me, I’m not being weighed down by their concerns or their worries.</i> (Dave)</p>
	<p><i>Cynicism</i> (e.g., “I doubt the significance of my work”) No change over time</p>	<p><i>I’m pretty critical of myself ... I never realized that I was doing things well, now I can step back and go, “I know that that’s good, that I’m doing okay.</i> (Sonya)</p>

absorbed with the energy required to portray a self that may be inconsistent with the inner self, contributing to less engagement and higher stress (Weiss et al. 2018, p. 311).

When a school principal’s well-being is continually compromised by lack of self-care and attention to their personal needs, as they try and cope with the exhausting demands and pressures of their role, stress can become chronic (Leiter and Maslach 2003). Under such conditions, it can become increasingly challenging for principals to be resilient and sustain leadership effectiveness when their personal well-being resources are depleted (Boyatzis and McKee 2005). It is quite ironic then, that principals are also tasked with managing and taking care of their staff’s well-being. How they manage that can at best build, or at worst, hinder teachers’ resilience (Gu and Day 2013). The *Mindful Leaders* programme supported principals to develop new ways of approaching their work to reduce exhaustion and improve professional efficacy and for participants such as Susan, the experience was transformative.

*I was heading for burnout at the beginning of this year. I was at a stage where I thought, ‘I can’t keep doing this’. I’m working as I hard as I did before. But now my whole world in myself has completely changed. Completely! I’m not letting this go. It really has transformed how I think. Absolutely.* (Susan)

## 12.6 Principals Impact on Teachers' Resilience

*To me, leaders must be calm and resilient. A principal, more than anyone, has to be resilient, and I wasn't being resilient. Prior to the program, I wasn't sleeping. I was physically exhausted. The cortisol, I could feel it through my body all the time. (Beth)*

Beth was aware that she needed to be resilient and hadn't been prior to participation in the *Mindful Leaders* programme. The literature supports the view that school leaders can have an impact on teachers' resilience and in "sustaining a sense of resilience, commitment and effectiveness" amongst their staff (Gu and Day 2013, p. 39). For example, Gu and Day (2007) found that school leaders' capacity to respond sympathetically to pressures in teachers' personal lives had a direct effect of teachers remaining resilient. However, if they displayed unsympathetic responses this resulted in a decrease in the teacher's resilience. Similarly, Peters and Pearce (2012, p. 260) noted how challenging it is for principals to manage their own and teachers' emotions and called for "increased support for principals in recognition of the important role they can play in enhancing the resilience of early career teachers". As Andrea recognised:

*Putting myself in the centre of being well and open about it, allowed that freedom to talk about things that you don't normally talk about. People come and stand in the doorway and chat. They didn't do that before. It's allowing the humanity to come into the space, whereas it didn't before, so that's magnificent. (Andrea)*

In the organisational literature, favourable leader behaviours have been correlated with followers' positive emotions; and adverse leader behaviours correlated with followers' negative emotions (Berkovich and Eyal 2015). Compounding this, research suggests that burned out leaders can be in effect contagious, making their followers feel more burned out too (Ten Brummelhuis et al. 2014). In this study, it was evident that school leaders' mindfulness has positively impacted themselves and also how they were leading. For example, Robert discussed how his mindfulness practice has allowed for improved relationships with his staff and his approach to leadership:

*It's helping me structure my day to be a more effective principal,... I am beginning to develop more genuine relationships with staff. It's increased my awareness. I've been able to accept different points of view, I suppose there's a beginner's mind in that to resolve issues. I do listen, but it's consciously being aware of what you're doing. So that makes you become a better leader. (Robert)*

Simone had a sense of renewal, a "fresh vision" as to her leadership purpose, "I just love my job. Stresses and all. I feel like I've got a breath of fresh air as a consequence of this and getting off that treadmill, being able to look at the world with different lenses has made me think, I do have something to contribute".

## 12.7 Who Cares for School Leaders?

*We have been told for so long to 'work smarter not harder' – without the 'how to' manual. Mindfulness training has taught me these skills. It is a very powerful program that I wish I had found many years ago.* (Lydia)

Supporting this crucial leadership role and determining how best to approach school principals' continued learning and development has become a priority policy agenda in education systems, as it is becoming increasingly more difficult to attract, recruit and retain quality school principals (Darmody and Smyth 2016; Schleicher 2015). To date, most discussions have generally been limited to how principals should be spending their time, what influences or limits their practice, and best-suited leadership approaches or styles (Gumus et al. 2018). Robbins (2013) argued that there were limited supports to help school leaders manage stress and called for explicit and mandatory stress management training. The article sought to determine “who cares for school leaders?” and noted that ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders) had programmes that were directed at leaders to “manage the stress in their teams, rather than giving them tools to manage the stresses of their own role” (Robbins 2013, p. 53).

In Australia, since 2011, there have been significant reforms in education in Australia, led by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to address school principals' roles and responsibilities. The Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles (2015) is “a public statement setting out what school principals are expected to know, understand and do to succeed in their work” (p. 3). However, similarly to the UK ASCL, in the AITSL leadership guidelines, the only mention of addressing ‘stress’ in the Developing Self and Others pathway is also for leaders to “model the importance of health and well-being and to watch for signs of stress in self and others and take action to address it” (p. 16).

There have been some moves to address this. For example, in the Australian state of Victoria, the need for systemic support has been recognised and a \$5 million Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy has been implemented (Department of Education and Training, Victoria 2018). This strategy was informed by workforce consultation and the mandatory costs of stress (in the form of workers' compensation claims relating to mental health injury from principals). Between January 2011 and October 2016, principals had made 4.6% of these claims (when they constitute only 2% of the workforce), and that the average days lost for principals' mental health injury claims was 55% greater than their department average, and the average cost of a mental health injury claim, for a principal, over a 3-year period was \$103,000 per claim.

Research published during our study proposed that mindfulness may be an effective way not only to help reduce stress but also as an “inoculation against burnout” and to improve well-being to support principals to manage the high levels of emotional demands and stress (Maxwell and Riley 2017, p. 496). This can be witnessed in the positive findings regarding the impact of mindfulness on stress and exhaustion in

the educational literature for teachers and other professionals (Lomas et al. 2017). Reduction in mental exhaustion may also have a positive flow on effects for leadership, as individuals may be less impulsive and more able to self-regulate behaviours and emotions (Fetterman et al. 2010). An additional benefit of mindfulness training is that it provided this group of school leaders with a *personal* experience and a discerning insight into the potential and value of a mindful approach. This is especially pertinent as more schools are looking towards incorporating mindfulness in their student educational and well-being offerings.

## 12.8 Conclusion

The *Mindful Leaders* programme has been completed by 350 school leaders in Western Australia (up until December 2019), with very positive feedback. This chapter explored how mindfulness training can significantly support principals to take care of themselves so that they are better equipped to take care of others. The mindfulness training in the *Mindful Leader* programme had a significantly positive effect on the group of school principals' stress levels and their ability to be kind to self. The training provided preventative stress strategies that focused on the principal's personal well-being such that they could build new habits and routines that promoted their resilience.

This has exciting potential applications for the profession, as leadership does matter and ensuring that we address leaders' resilience will mean school principals will be better placed to engender resilience in their staff. It would seem that not only do mindfulness programmes for school leaders offer a resilient buffer against stress they could also be a helpful precursor to improving teacher resilience.

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