

Supporting early childhood teacher well-being through the practice of mindful self-compassion

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Abstract

Internationally, there are growing concerns about the work-related well-being of early childhood teachers. There is currently limited guidance around specific practices teachers can use to support their well-being when challenges arise while teaching. Mindful self-compassion practice, which has elements of mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness, has been found to have benefits for supporting holistic well-being both 'in the moment' and in the long term. This paper reports on a research project in Aotearoa New Zealand which used a qualitative methodology of mindful inquiry to explore 12 teachers' experiences of the practice of mindful self-compassion. Findings identified that being mindfully self-compassionate supported teachers' self-awareness; enabled recognition of their common humanity; and supported the teachers to respond to challenging moments with self-kindness, which contributed to their well-being. These findings have implications for initial teacher education, those who work in the early childhood sector, and early childhood leaders and policy makers.

Keywords

Early childhood, teachers, well-being, mindfulness, compassion

Introduction

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), the early childhood curriculum of Aotearoa New Zealand, recognises that children's well-being is interdependent with the well-being of their teachers, family, and community. In New

Zealand and internationally there is increasing scholarly, professional, and public discussion about early childhood (EC) teachers' work-related well-being and the implications of this for teachers' ability to provide effective care and education which nurtures children's holistic well-being (Cumming, 2017).

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Well-being is a contested concept with a range of definitions and foci (Simons & Baldwin, 2021). Common characteristics of well-being include:

feeling good and functioning well; the experience of positive emotions such as happiness and contentment as well as the development of one's potential, having some control over one's life, having a sense of purpose, and experiencing positive relationships (Ruggeri et al., 2020, p. 1).

These characteristics of well-being are evident in Cumming and Wong's (2019) definition of EC teachers' work-related well-being as:

A dynamic state, involving the interaction of individual, relational, work—environmental, and sociocultural—political aspects and contexts. Educators' well-being is the responsibility of the individual and the agents of these contexts, requiring ongoing direct and indirect supports, across psychological, physiological and ethical dimensions. (p. 276)

This definition recognises that teacher well-being is holistic, constantly changing, influenced by the interplay between multiple elements and contexts, and is a shared responsibility between teachers, families, leaders, policy makers, and wider society.

Many of the issues contributing to the demands and intensity of EC teachers' work, and negatively affecting teachers' well-being can be directly linked to neo-liberal policy and regulatory factors such as adult: child ratios, group sizes, and lack of teacher qualifications (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). These factors, combined with historic conflations of EC teaching with mothering and "women's work" (Aitken & Kennedy, 2007) have contributed to a lack of societal value of EC education and care. This is reflected in low levels of financial remuneration and high levels of emotional labour expected of those who work in the EC education and care sector (Purper et al., 2022). In keeping with current neo-liberal approaches to EC education provision in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ritchie,

2016), the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand articulates the value of teacher well-being in relation to costs to early learning services and having "higher [staff] retention rates, increased loyalty, increased conscientiousness and less sickness" (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021, Overview). This focus fails to recognise that teachers' well-being is an issue of social justice, which goes beyond neo-liberal ideals of profitability and quality assurance (Cumming, 2017).

While EC teaching remains satisfying work for many (Karjalainen et al., 2019), there is increasing evidence that teachers are struggling to manage the demands of their teaching role (Fenech et al., 2022). When the intensity and demands of teachers' work outweigh the support and resources available to them (Wassell & Dodge, 2015), teachers are more likely to experience burnout, which negatively affects their teaching effectiveness, commitment to their teaching role, collegial relationships, and students' learning (Schaack et al., 2020). According to Maslach et al. (2013), burnout manifests in three interconnected dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and lack of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is the draining of energy in response to interpersonal and workload demands and feeling overburdened. Depersonalisation is reflected in emotional and cognitive disengagement from one's work and a distant, impersonal attitude toward it. Lack of personal accomplishment or a diminished sense of self-efficacy describes the feeling of not contributing meaningfully. It is difficult for teachers to feel that what they are doing has value or meaning when they are exhausted and distanced from those who are the recipients of their care and effort.

Without doubt, policy and regulatory changes are needed to address the structural and systemic issues impacting on the work-related well-being of EC teachers (Cumming et al., 2020). Teachers need specific strategies to support them in responding to the day-to-day

challenges of teaching, and to empower them in advocating for their workplace related well-being. In a meta-analysis of the literature, Zessin et al. (2015) found a strong correlation between self-compassion and well-being. Their analysis showed that self-compassion practice is linked to a reduction in negative mind-states such as anxiety, depression, stress, rumination, thought suppression, perfectionism, and shame; and an increase in positive mind-states like life satisfaction, happiness, connectedness, self-confidence, optimism, curiosity, and gratitude. Kotera and Van Gordon (2021) in a systematic review of self-compassion interventions in work-related contexts found that self-compassion training can improve self-compassion and other work-related well-being outcomes in working populations. The findings of these studies suggest that mindful self-compassion practice may be a beneficial resource to support the work-related well-being of EC teachers.

Mindful self-compassion

In English, “compassion” is defined as feelings of sympathy for the misfortune of others and a desire to help ease their suffering (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Jinpa (2015) argued that compassion for others can exist without self-compassion, but “neglecting our own needs can lead to emotional burnout over time, leaving us depleted and exhausted” (p. 39). Self-compassion supports a balanced integration between concern for others and concern for the self and “recognizes that all individuals should be treated with kindness and caring, and that a compassionate attitude toward oneself is needed to avoid falsely separating oneself from the rest of humanity” (Neff, 2003, p. 96).

Psychologist Kristin Neff has developed a model of mindful self-compassion (MSC) with three conceptually distinct but interconnected components:

(a) self-kindness—extending kindness and understanding to oneself rather than harsh judgment

and self-criticism, (b) common humanity—seeing one’s experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating, and (c) mindfulness—holding one’s painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them. (Neff, 2003, p. 89, p. 89)

When practising MSC, Neff (2011) proposes beginning with mindfulness, or “the clear seeing and non-judgemental acceptance of what’s occurring in the present moment” (p. 80). Mindfulness is a form of “meta-awareness” which enables internal noticing of thoughts and feelings without being swept away by them (Goleman & Davidson, 2017). Neff’s combination of mindfulness with the elements of common humanity and self-kindness offers a counterpoint to the neo-liberal appropriation of mindfulness which promotes mindfulness practice as a way for individual employees to maintain their personal well-being and manage stress in order to increase productivity and efficiency, reduce absenteeism, and foster emotional intelligence (Hyland, 2015).

While compassion and kindness are generally viewed positively, prefacing them with the word “self,” raises concerns over whether self-compassion and self-kindness are indicative of self-pity, weakness, complacency, narcissism, and selfishness (Germer & Neff, 2019). A growing body of research has debunked these misconceptions of self-compassion and shown that self-compassionate people are more likely to engage in perspective taking and be compassionate toward others (Neff & Pommier, 2013). People who are kind to themselves in times of difficulty take greater personal responsibility for their actions (Leary et al., 2007) and are more likely to try again after failing (Breines & Chen, 2012).

In short, MSC practice contributes to “feeling good and functioning well” (Ruggeri et al., 2020, p. 1). There is, however, minimal research into the practice of MSC by EC teachers and the implications of this for teacher well-being.

This article makes visible EC teachers' lived experiences of practising MSC, and explores the implications of being mindfully self-compassionate for EC teachers' well-being and teaching practice.

Methodology

Framework

Mindful inquiry (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998) is a qualitative, constructionist-interpretive research approach which assumes that individuals construct meaning of the same experience or phenomenon in different ways based on their cultural, historical, and social perspectives (Moon & Blackman, 2014), and is grounded in the belief that there is no single objective reality or truth (Hammersley, 2013). To reflect the particularities and nuances of this study more accurately, Bentz and Shapiro's (1998) framework of mindful inquiry was adapted, and interconnected components of mindful compassion, hermeneutic phenomenology, and care, were used to reflect the ethical, relational and contemplative approach taken in this research. Being mindfully compassionate enabled the researcher to be with the EC teachers' stories of their lived experiences with awareness and openness. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a reflective approach to working with stories of individual's lived experiences in a "cyclical, open and interrogative way to understand the person/people who produced the text, the person doing the hermeneutic phenomenological work, and ultimately, the phenomenon that is brought to awareness and made manifest as a result of the work" (Suddick et al., 2020, p. 12). Following a hermeneutic phenomenological approach inspired by the work of Gadamer (1976) enabled the researcher to fuse horizons with the research participants and deepen the researcher's understandings of the participants' lived experiences of what it is like to practise MSC as an EC teacher. Care as

concern, solicitude (Heidegger, 1962), and a relational ethic (Tronto, 2013) motivated this study—wanting to care for EC teachers as they care for others.

Ethics and participants

Human ethics approval for this study was received from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (2019/022520). Key ethical considerations included informed consent, the right to withdraw, privacy and confidentiality of data, beneficence, and minimisation of harm.

Twelve registered and certificated EC teachers were recruited via advertisements on two New Zealand EC teacher social media groups with a combined membership of approximately 1,200 teachers. To be registered and certificated by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, teachers must hold an approved qualification (Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education); Graduate Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood Education); or an equivalent approved qualification). Potential participants assessed their own suitability for the research prior to requesting a participant information sheet and consent form. The 12 teacher participants all identified as women, and their years of teaching experience ranged from 2 to 34 years. One teacher worked in a kindergarten; one in a specialist infant-toddler centre; one in a sessional EC centre; and nine teachers worked in long day care and education centres. Three teachers identified as migrants, (two from Korea and one from Iran), and the nine other teachers identified as New Zealand European/Pākehā.

Data gathering

Data gathering began with an initial focus group to explore participants' motivations for participating in the research and the practices they engaged in to support their well-being. Participants then completed an 8-week MSC course

facilitated by a certified MSC teacher which the researcher attended as an observer and support person. The MSC course took place once per week for 2 hours in the evening and covered a range of topics, including practicing mindfulness, loving kindness, and meeting difficult emotions. There was no financial cost to the participants for the course. Individual semi-structured interviews were held in the month following completion of the MSC course and participants were invited to share descriptions of a typical teaching day and their experiences of practicing MSC. A second focus group was held 2 months after the interviews during which the participants shared specific experiences of practising MSC in their teaching day and what, if anything, had changed for them in their teaching experience and/or own well-being as a result of engaging in MSC practice. Throughout the data-gathering process the researcher made research notes, and all focus groups and individual interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

In analysing and interpreting the research data, the intention was to uncover essential themes (van Manen, 1997), and provide a rich, deep account of what it is like to practise MSC as an EC teacher. Data analysis and interpretation were guided by van Manen's (1997) six interconnected phenomenological research activities. These include turning towards a phenomenon of interest, investigating the lived experience of the phenomenon, reflecting on the essential themes of the phenomenon, writing (and rewriting) descriptions of the phenomenon, staying deeply engaged with the research question and phenomenon, and recognising the contributions of the parts to the research as a whole. During data analysis and interpretation, the focus was on the last four of these research activities, beginning with reflecting on the essential themes of the phenomenon. It is important to note that

these research activities were occurring simultaneously, not consecutively. Writing (and rewriting) descriptions of the phenomenon, reflecting on essential themes, staying engaged with the research question, while moving between the individual transcripts and the phenomenon as a whole, were inextricably woven together.

During data analysis and interpretation the researcher regularly meditated as part of hermeneutic phenomenological reflection (van Manen, 2007). Each research meditation session began with focused breathing to settle the researcher's mind and body. The researcher's intention for the meditation sessions was to maintain an open awareness and simply notice any thoughts or emotions that arose in relation to the research process and the data. In some of meditation sessions no new thoughts or insights arose, while at other times after the meditation the researcher noted ideas to explore further or possible themes.

The trustworthiness of this study was initially tested through sharing found data poems (Janesick, 2016) written from the focus group data with the research participants. Participants' responses indicated the poems were meaningful expressions of their lived experiences and validated that, in the researcher's crafting of the research data, something of significance to the participants had been captured. The trustworthiness of the study will ultimately be determined when readers of the research make the final interpretation and determine whether the understandings revealed through the research process resonate with them (Crist & Tanner, 2003; van Manen, 1997).

Findings and discussion

The findings discussed here are based on the researcher's interpretations of stories teachers shared throughout the data-gathering process, specifically focusing on what it is like to practise MSC as an EC teacher when challenges arise "in the moment". The teachers' stories typically

followed a pattern of discussing the challenge they experienced; explaining how they practised mindfulness of their physical responses, thoughts and emotions, recognition of common humanity, and self-kindness; and concluding with what happened next, or how the teachers felt and behaved after they had practised MSC.

Challenges experienced by EC teachers

Challenges that prompted teachers to engage in MSC practice fell into two broad categories: structural and process issues - namely workload and working conditions; and emotional and relational issues - including responding to the emotions, needs and behaviour of others. In most instances, challenges arose simultaneously and were multi-layered.

Harriet's story of a busy Friday afternoon showed how the demands and intensity of challenges can build up and exceed the resources and support available (Wassell & Dodge, 2015), thus impacting on teacher well-being.

It was a rainy Friday afternoon at about 3.30 p.m. We were short-staffed, so our unqualified centre manager was supporting me with ten 2-year-olds in the inside space. The children were all hyped up, running around, and going crazy. Unfortunately, the centre manager had injured her neck, so she wasn't able to actively help. I was due to finish at 4.20 p.m., and I was really ready to go home for the weekend. There were lots of end-of-the-day jobs and tidying up that needed to be done, and I was thinking, "I need to get this done before 4.20 p.m. because otherwise I'm going to be working late, or the rest of the team who are still there later will have to do all the jobs I couldn't get done." I also knew that I needed to be with the children and tidying up wasn't going to help the situation.

Here, structural and process issues related to staffing issues and centre routines, and issues related to helping regulate children's emotions and behaviour, impacted on Harriet's well-being. Her story highlights the multi-faceted

nature of EC teaching and how teachers are constantly balancing multiple tasks and responsibilities. As Harriet noted,

You are so busy all the time. You try to be in the moment, but you're also thinking ahead about what you're going to do to support children and support your team... You're constantly on the move, trying to keep everything as calm as possible, but you're always talking, always doing something, always moving, because there's just so much going on.

Rachel's story of the challenge of staying present to a child's distress over being separated from their parents, and the empathic distress that arose for her, further illustrates the emotional and relational challenges that arise in EC teaching.

The entire morning is a challenging time with him. He needs comfort, and sometimes there is no comforting him. He just cries all the time. Oh, I can feel my chest getting tight just thinking about him. When I'm with him and he screams and cries, I get the same tight feeling in my chest. My breathing gets shallow and my mind starts spinning.

Rachel's awareness of what she noticed happening in her own body and mind in response to a persistently crying child is a good example of the first element of MSC practice, mindfulness (Neff, 2011).

Responding to challenges with mindful self-compassion

The MSC practices the teachers used "in the moment" in response to challenges varied; some were the formal practices they had learnt during the 8-week MSC course, and others were personal adaptations of practices. Common to the practices the teachers used was the inclusion of one or more of the core elements of MSC - mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness (Neff, 2011) - and a focus on the breath.

Mindfulness. Neff(2011) defined mindfulness as being aware of and accepting what is occurring in the present moment without judgment. The first step in practising MSC for the teachers was paying attention to their physical sensations, thoughts, and emotions in challenging moments. Paying attention in this way is a form of meta-awareness which enabled the teachers to hold physical sensations, thoughts, and emotions in balanced awareness without being swept away by them (Goleman & Davidson, 2017).

Physical sensations. When the teachers were asked how it felt physically in their bodies during challenging moments, they described feelings of tension and tightness in their heads and upper bodies, and changes in their heart rates and breathing. Rachel said, *"It's an exterior physical feeling, like prickles on the outside of my head. It's like I've got a hat with prickles on my head. I also get a tight feeling in my chest."* Ramona also experienced physical feelings of tightness. *"I was just so tight, like everywhere I was tight. I was feeling tight all around my neck and my jaw."* Louise had a total body experience of feeling hot and uncomfortable. *"I don't know how to explain it other than needing to take off my jumper, feeling stifled."* Maryam talked about having *"fast, shallow breathing and a rising heartbeat"*.

The physical sensations the teachers experienced are all typical physiological responses to stress. The teachers' sympathetic nervous systems perceived the challenges they were experiencing as potential threats, and prepared their bodies for a fight-or-flight response by inducing a state of physiological and psychological hyperarousal through the release of stress hormones (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

Thoughts. The goal of mindfulness is not to control or stop thinking, but to be aware of thoughts and note them with clarity and equanimity (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Bringing mindful

awareness to their thoughts enabled the teachers to take a mental step back from their challenging situation and notice the judgments, memories of past challenges, and predictions of the future, which flowed through their minds. Louise's example of wanting to control children's behaviour in the sleep room illustrates the thoughts that can arise for teachers in response to challenges. It also shows Louise's awareness of her thoughts, which enabled her to take another perspective on the situation:

When I was trying to settle three children to sleep and they were resisting, I noticed my frustration rising and a feeling of "Oh my god, I want to control this," but also an awareness that "I can't control this, I can't make them go to sleep." I realised I was the one presence in the room that I had control over, so all I could do was control what my body was doing and what my energy was doing in the space.

Emotions. When practicing MSC during challenging moments, the teachers were aware of emotions that arose for them, including anger, annoyance, frustration, overwhelm, resentment, sadness, self-doubt, and shame. Dulcie's example emphasised the way others' emotions can influence a teacher's emotional state:

We have a child at our centre who keeps crying and wanting her Mum. I know this child doesn't have control of her emotions, but her emotions still have an emotional effect on me as a teacher. They get to me. I feel frustrated that I can't help her. I've used all the strategies I've built up over the years and it's just not working.

Awareness of emotions as they arise can support holding them in balanced awareness without getting caught up in a cycle of emotional reactivity (Goleman & Davidson, 2017). Suppressing or pushing away difficult emotions has been linked to increased stress and burnout (Hochschild, 2003), while awareness of emotions facilitates a broader sense of perspective and the ability to self-regulate (Germer & Neff, 2019). Louise shared that:

Practising mindfulness has given me an increased awareness of what is going on for me emotionally. I'm noticing when my stress levels are rising and noticing that I'm feeling increasingly frazzled or frustrated. In the past, it's something that I might have pushed through, just tried to get through those feelings. Now that I'm being mindful and noticing my own state of mind, I'm realising I have other tools that I can bring in—but the noticing has to come first.

Being mindful and noticing what was arising for them physically, mentally, and emotionally was the first step for the teachers in practising MSC. In the space created by practising mindfulness, the teachers could respond rather than react (Neff, 2011) during challenging moments.

The breath. Without exception, the teachers' stories followed a pattern of mindfully noticing physical sensations, thoughts, and emotions; recognition that this was a moment of challenge; and some form of *"and then I took a breath"* (Harriet). Focus on the breath is a central component of mindfulness, and tuning in to the breath, and breathing slowly and deeply, "brings us right into the here and now. It immediately anchors our awareness in the body" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 41). Focusing on the breath also has a neurophysiological impact. Multiple research studies have found that taking slow, deep breaths with an extended exhalation activates the parasympathetic nervous system helping the body down-regulate and reducing levels of arousal to achieve a calm, focused and alert state, or a sleep state for rest and restoration (Gerritsen & Band, 2018).

The neurophysiological effects of focusing on the breath were clear in Louise's sharing. *"Everything kind of softens and I feel my body cool down a bit. If I can just sit there and breathe for a little while, everything cools and settles, and it just feels a lot more calm and flat."* When the mind and body are in a calm, aware state, then it is possible to take a broader, more balanced perspective in response to challenging situations (Neff, 2011). Once they had used the

breath to help themselves feel calmer, the teachers could apply the second component of MSC—recognition of common humanity.

Common humanity. Recognising our common humanity means being able to see our experiences as part of the larger human experience (Neff, 2003). This is not to deny or minimise challenging experiences, but recognises that we are not alone in having them. This can be a source of comfort, and help create a sense of connection and belonging (Germer & Neff, 2019) as noted by Ruby, who said,

I find the idea of common humanity really comforting. I've always felt really weird [laughs], like I was the only person who felt inadequate or overwhelmed by challenges. It's quite comforting to think that other people have these feelings too. Listening to the other teachers ... and hearing that everyone has challenges surprised me. It doesn't feel that way in everyday life because everyone puts on their best face. Now when I'm feeling weird, or alone, or like I'm the only person who has these feelings, I think, "Wow, there are billions of other people in the world and other people might feel this way too."

Ruby's story highlights how focusing on common humanity and shared experiences counteracts feelings of isolation (Germer & Neff, 2019), and it also helped shift her self-talk to be more positive and encouraging. Ruby said, *"It's like I give myself a pep talk. I say to myself, 'This is hard, but that's okay. Other people would find this hard too. This is a difficult situation.' Those sorts of words help quite a lot."*

Recognising the shared nature of human experience also opened the teachers' awareness to the feelings of others. Louise highlighted how recognition of common humanity supported her to stay present with a crying child.

Practising mindful self-compassion and seeing our common humanity has really allowed me to be more relaxed in those situations and say, "This is really hard for the child, and it's really hard for me.

I'm doing what I can with what I have at this point in time. It's not ideal, but it's not my fault, and it's not the child's fault. I can just be here with the child, and for the child."

Louise's story illustrates the essence of compassion, recognising the shared experience of suffering and being motivated to help ease it for herself and the child. By offering herself words of comfort and affirmation, Louise was engaging in the third component of Neff's concept of MSC—self-kindness.

Self-kindness. The acts of self-kindness the teachers engaged in when practising MSC were both tender and fierce (Germer & Neff, 2019). For some teachers, self-kindness meant leaning into difficult emotions and offering themselves solace (comforting), physical support, warmth, and tenderness (soothing), or accepting the reality of their current experience (validating). For other teachers, self-kindness meant stepping back from the challenge (protecting), figuring out what they needed and giving it to themselves (providing), or encouraging and supporting themselves to make a change (motivating).

After taking a breath, one of the first things many of the teachers did in response to a challenging situation was offer themselves soothing touch. Rachel shared how she used soothing touch to bring awareness to what was happening in her body during times of challenge.

I scanned my body to see where the stress was. When I realised it was in my shoulder, I put my hand there and breathed. I find that kind of touch is really helpful with soothing myself through moments of stress.

Soothing, comforting, and validating tender self-kindness provide the emotional support and safety needed to engage in fierce self-compassion and take action to improve or change a situation (Germer & Neff, 2019). Responding with fierce self-compassion meant the teachers used strategies to protect, provide for, and motivate themselves during times of

challenge. For example, as an act of self-kindness, the teachers sometimes stepped back momentarily from their teaching role for some time out, as described by Rachel.

I had been dealing with an upset child for a while, and I realised my usual techniques for calming the child weren't cutting it. I needed a break because I was getting frustrated. Instead of pushing my feelings aside and staying in the situation, I asked one of my colleagues to swap out with me.

When her colleague took over, Rachel took some deep breaths and offered herself some soothing touch. Taking a break did not mean Rachel was avoiding or ignoring the challenging situation. Instead, through caring for herself, she returned refreshed and with the ability to respond appropriately and professionally.

What happened next—the value of being mindfully self-compassionate

The teachers reported feeling the positive impact of practicing MSC almost immediately. For Louise, practicing MSC when she was challenged by children's disruptive behaviour in the sleep room *"felt really good and it gave me a chance to reset and find my balance again, find my centre."*

After practicing MSC, the teachers also reported feeling more clear-headed, able to make better informed decisions, communicate more effectively with others, and persist with responding to challenging situations. Lydia shared how she responded to colleagues on a busy day after calming herself with self-compassion. *"When I was calm, I could think through what needed to be done next, communicate this and guide another teacher and a reliever through the busy morning. I felt calm, in the moment, and in control."* Offering themselves compassion as a way of regulating their emotional state appeared to enable the teachers to respond more compassionately to others. After Maria practised MSC in response to the challenge of trying to settle children to sleep, her

perspective shifted and, *“I saw the children as people again. When I was feeling really frustrated by their behaviour, I almost disassociated from them as individuals, and they had become just a job to be done.”*

Limitations and future research

This study, through both the findings and limitations, has the potential to inspire future research. The small number of participants and limited diversity within the group could be viewed as limitations of this study. However, in some regards, the participant group size and composition has been beneficial and allowed for insights and understandings to emerge that would not have been possible in differently constituted groups. Carrying out future research with a larger, more diverse group would allow the sharing of a greater range of experiences, with the potential for affirmation of the essential themes identified in this study, and the possibility of new perspectives and interpretations.

Mindful self-compassion alone cannot address the structural and procedural inequities and issues that impact on EC teachers, their well-being and teaching practices. There is an ongoing need for further policy level and qualitative research into how neo-liberal influences on the provision of EC services impact on teacher well-being and practice. Additionally, there is a need for more in-depth research into how EC education and care can be provided in ways that support the well-being of teachers and children to flourish, and where the responsibility for ensuring this happens is shared by all stakeholders.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for all those who have an interest in, or are affected by, EC teachers' work-related well-being. Sharing the practice of MSC as part of a wider topic of teacher well-being in professional preparation programmes and ongoing

professional development may be a way to support EC teachers' well-being and teaching practice.

A culture of mindfulness (Albrecht, 2018) and compassion can be developed in EC settings by individual teachers practising MSC. However, the benefits of MSC practice are more likely to be experienced if centre management and other teaching staff are supportive and also actively practise MSC. For some centres, this would require a change from viewing teacher well-being as an individual responsibility to taking a more proactive approach to supporting teachers' holistic well-being. It would also require recognition by policy makers that teachers' workplace well-being is an issue of social justice that goes beyond neo-liberal ideals of profitability and quality assurance (Cumming, 2017). Rather than being the invisible conduit through which education and care are dispensed, teachers and their well-being need to be recognised as an integral part of EC education and care and supported and resourced accordingly. Such recognition requires a paradigm shift and a vision of well-being as a human right.

Conclusion

This article suggests that mindful self-compassion is a practice EC teachers can use “in the moment” to support their well-being in response to the challenges and complexity of teaching. In being mindful, teachers can acknowledge whatever is arising for them physically, mentally, and emotionally, even when it is uncomfortable, rather than ignoring or pushing aside their thoughts and feelings. Focusing on their breathing can help teachers calm themselves. Seeing challenging experiences as part of being human can be a source of comfort for teachers and help give them a sense of connection with other EC teachers. It may also help to shift their self-talk from being harshly self-critical to being more positive, encouraging, and kind. When teachers offer themselves kindness, it

supports them to feel cared for and motivated to persist in their work.

It is hoped that the teachers' stories shared in this article will resonate with readers, and that the findings of this research will prompt further discussion and investigation into the place of MSC practice in supporting EC teacher well-being.

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