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Mindfulness training for school administrators: effects on well-being and leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – Based on a need to utilize strategies and develop social-emotional competency skills of school administrators, the purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE), a mindfulness-based professional development program, on the leadership and well-being of 13 school administrators.

Design/methodology/approach – The empirical data consist of in-depth interviews with 13 administrators before and after the implementation of CARE program, observation notes from shadowing their activities during school time and attending the CARE program as a participant observer. Employing the pro-social classroom model (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009) as a theoretical foundation, the paper is based on an ongoing, iterative data analysis process, following the coding and interpretive techniques of grounded theory.

Findings – The positive outcomes that emerged from the data relate to improved leadership skills, such as increased self-reflection, better relationships and attendance to self-care. These skills are tied to increased self-awareness, self-management and self-compassion. Participants also reported an improved ability to recognize their emotional reactions, which enabled them to better understand their leadership roles in shaping their school climates.

Research limitations/implications – The findings reveal significant insights about the implementation of social-emotional, mindfulness-based professional development with school administrators and potential outcomes. Implications for professional development that fosters school administrators' social-emotional competencies are discussed.

Originality/value – As a study of one of the first implementations of mindfulness-based professional development programs among school principals, this research illuminates the specific benefits of such programs for school leaders and how mindfulness could be integral in their lives and education. Specifically, this study is one of the first to reveal how the CARE professional development program influences principals' well-being and leadership.

Keywords Principals, Continuing professional development, Mindfulness, Social-emotional learning, School administration, School climate

Paper type Research paper

When contemplating school improvement and best practices that lead to student success, people typically consider teachers, curricula and standards, yet overlook how principals play a key role "by shaping a culture that cultivates motivated, engaged, and effective teacher leaders" (Patti *et al.*, 2015, p. 438). A healthy, positive school culture is created by leaders with emotional stability. Thus, school administrators need to develop skills that enable them to interact with others consciously, with full awareness of how their actions impact themselves, others and their environments. They must understand how to exhibit empathy, compassion, self-control and self-awareness (Tickle, 1999), because these factors affect their decisions and relationships with others.

This capacity to voluntarily focus one's attention is referred to as mindfulness—the ability to be self-aware, to observe and accept the thoughts, sensations and emotions one experiences without attempting to alter them (Baer, 2003; Grossman *et al.*, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Marlatt and Kristeller, 1999). Practicing mindfulness could help principals contemplate their thoughts and sensations, remain aware and attentive, break habitual think-feel-act patterns and become more open and attentive to the environments around them and others (Siegel, 2010).

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Although evidence suggests that mindfulness practices could improve awareness and buffer the negative effects of burnout on teachers (Abenavoli *et al.*, 2013; Frank *et al.*, 2013; Jennings *et al.*, 2013; Roeser *et al.*, 2013; Schussler *et al.*, 2016), the effects of mindfulness practices on education leaders remain unexplored. A cursory examination of the types of professional development offered to school principals reveals that policy initiatives and directives have failed to include programs that build mindfulness capacity, which could help principals improve school leadership and performance (Jennings *et al.*, 2011). I address this research gap by exploring the influence of the Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) professional development program—a mindfulness-based professional development program—on school administrators' leadership and well-being. Specifically, I ask: How do school administrators describe their experiences with the CARE program and how does the program influence their well-being and leadership?

First, I review literature on leadership and mindfulness. Then, I introduce CARE as a program for teachers and the theoretical framework that guides this study: the pro-social classroom model. After describing my research design and methods for data collection, analysis and synthesis, I present my findings, describing educational leaders' experiences with the CARE program influences on their well-being and leadership. I discuss the findings and their implications before concluding by highlighting opportunities for future research.

Effective leadership

Several studies have revealed the influence of principals' relationship-oriented behaviors (Amabile *et al.*, 2004; Hoy and Hannum, 1997; Karareba and Clarke, 2011). Leaders set the tone for the overall mood of their schools by how they convey emotions to the school community and interact with others (Crawford, 2009). Principals who express compassion and care promote a positive culture in which teachers feel passionate about their jobs with reduced fear and anxiety (Berkovich and Eyal, 2015; Cherkowski, 2012; Slater, 2005; Roffey, 2006).

Findings also suggest that principals affect school-level outcomes by promoting or undermining a culture of caring. When leaders are highly self-aware and have clear goals and values, they are able to help others develop these same characteristics (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). A good self-regulator pays attention to tasks, persists through difficulties, demonstrates flexibility and is confident that additional effort will lead to positive outcomes (Schunk, 2005).

Therefore, principals need to utilize strategies and develop skills that enable them to be effective leaders through emotion regulation, self-awareness and promotion of care and compassion. One way of acquiring such skills is through the practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a particular state of consciousness or awareness (Baer, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Smalley and Winston, 2011) "that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to unfolding experience" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). By focusing on the present moment, mindfulness could lead to awareness of moments of reactivity (Smalley and Winston, 2011).

Research shows that mindfulness-based interventions are generally associated with reductions in stress reactivity, pain, negative affect, anxiety and depressive symptoms, as well as increases in acceptance and openness, especially among clinical populations (Baer, 2003; Barnes *et al.*, 2004, 2008; Gregoski *et al.*, 2011; Grossman *et al.*, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Evidence from numerous research studies shows the positive effects of mindfulness practices, including reduced psychological stress, improved immune and health states (Baime, 2011; Davidson *et al.*, 2003; Greeson, 2009, Stahl and Goldstein, 2010), increased mental flexibility (Segal *et al.*, 2007), improved healing of physical and mental diseases and

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disorders (Baer, 2015; Grossman *et al.*, 2004; Oman *et al.*, 2007) and improved attention and emotion regulation (Creswell *et al.*, 2007; Jha *et al.*, 2007). Originally developed for clinical populations, mindfulness-based interventions have been designed for professionals in the fields of law, business and education over the last 20 years (Baer, 2003, Bishop, 2002; Brown and Ryan, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The fact that mindfulness practices have become mainstream in healthcare, business and law contexts justifies their value in other professional contexts such as educational leadership.

Mindfulness for teachers

Most studies in the K-12 context focus on students; a few have focused on teachers in recent years, yet the effects of mindfulness training or practices on school leaders remain underexplored. Roeser *et al.* (2012) focused on how mindfulness training programs can improve teaching in public schools by helping teachers manage stress and the social-emotional demands of teaching. Roeser *et al.* (2013) investigated the effects of mindfulness training on 113 elementary and secondary school teachers (89 percent female) in Canada and the USA; 87 percent of teachers who participated in the program found it helpful, and exhibited greater mindfulness, focused attention, working memory capacity and occupational self-compassion, as well as lower levels of occupational stress and burnout than those in the control condition. In a qualitative study, Napoli (2004) studied four elementary teachers and found that mindfulness training helped them develop and implement curricula, deal with conflict and stress, improve the quality of their personal lives and facilitate positive changes in the classroom. Although outcomes should be interpreted with caution, findings clearly show that mindfulness training is a promising approach to improve educators' well-being.

CARE professional development

CARE professional development program is developed by Patricia Jennings, Christa Turksma and Richard Brown at the Garrison Institute. It is designed to support teachers by helping them to become more self-aware and reflective, and to learn how to effectively understand and manage their own emotions to improve their health and well-being (Jennings, 2011, 2015). It is developed based on the assumption that educators need to be equipped with tools, skills and strategies that facilitate the development of a positive school climate that is conducive to learning. CARE includes three major instructional components that are introduced, developed and modified over the course of the professional development program: mindfulness and awareness practices (40 percent), emotion skills (40 percent) and caring and compassion skills (20 percent) (Jennings, 2011; Jennings *et al.*, 2013; Schussler *et al.*, 2016). The program follows best practices in adult learning and blends direct instruction, small group discussion, dyadic interaction, reflection, role-playing and experiential exercises and mindful awareness practices at home and work. CARE modules are introduced sequentially and in order of difficulty (Jennings *et al.*, 2013). I present the instructional components in Table I.

Several research studies have been performed to investigate the effectiveness of CARE as a professional development program. It has proven feasible in two pilot studies with 50 teachers in Harrisburg, PA and 224 teachers in New York, and researchers have found that CARE seems to be more efficacious in high-poverty, high-risk settings (Frank *et al.*, 2013; Jennings *et al.*, 2011). Findings show statistically significant improvements in teachers' well-being, efficacy, burnout/time pressure, mindfulness, physical symptoms often associated with stress (e.g. headaches, stomachaches) and emotional regulation (Jennings *et al.*, 2013). During focus group interviews, program participants indicated that although they had not noticed an improvement in teaching efficacy, they had developed greater self-awareness and become less emotionally reactive (Schussler *et al.*, 2016). Overall, these

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Emotion skills instruction (~ 40%)	Mindfulness/stress reduction practices (~ 40%)	Compassion practices (~ 20%)
1. Introduction to emotions, purpose, universal expressions, relevant brain research 2. How emotions affect teaching and learning 3. Didactic information about "uncomfortable" or negative emotions (anger, fear, sadness) including physiological, cognitive and behavioral responses 4. Didactic information about "comfortable" or positive emotions (joy, appreciation) including physiological, cognitive and behavioral responses 5. Exploring bodily awareness of emotions 6. Exploring individual differences in emotional experiences (emotional profile, triggers and scripts) 7. Practice using mindful awareness and reflection to recognize and manage strong emotions	1. Body awareness reflection 2. Basic breath awareness practice 3. Mindfulness of thoughts and emotions practice 4. Mindful movement practices (standing, walking, stretching, centering) 5. Practice maintaining mindful awareness in front of a group 6. Role plays to practice mindfulness in the context of strong emotion related to a challenging classroom situation	1. "Caring practice": a series of guided reflections focused on caring for self, loved one, colleague, challenging person 2. Mindful listening partner practices: one person reads a poem or talks about a problem, partner listens mindfully, practicing presence and acceptance

Source: Jennings *et al.* (2013)

Table I. CARE program components

studies confirm that CARE could yield benefits and can effectively help teachers learn how to handle difficult emotional situations, thereby improving their teaching effectiveness and well-being (Jennings, 2015).

Mindfulness and Leadership

Although abundant evidence shows that compassionate, caring, emotionally stable principals promote positive school culture and exhibit less attrition (Berson and Oreg, 2016; Fuller *et al.*, 2007; Louis and Murphy, 2017; Pijanowski *et al.*, 2009; Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2004), and that mindfulness- and social-emotional-based programs have positive effects on well-being, this evidence is not yet mirrored in state standards, university courses, licensing requirements or professional development for principals. Wells (2016) showed how mindfulness promotes experiential learning and related it to leadership. Boyce (2011) also suggested that mindfulness yields benefits that support effective leadership by helping leaders gain perspective, be in the moment, become resilient and learn to thrive in the face of problems, all of which are crucial for an educational leader (Murphy, 2011). As a study of one of the first implementations of mindfulness-based professional development programs among school principals, this research illuminates the specific benefits of such programs for school leaders and how mindfulness could be integral in their lives and education. Specifically, this study is one of the first to reveal how the CARE professional development program influences principals' well-being and leadership.

Theoretical framework

This study is informed by the pro-social classroom model (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009, p. 494), which justifies the importance of leadership as a critical factor for school improvement (see Figure 1). The pro-social classroom model illustrates the influence of educators' social and emotional competencies and well-being on the pro-social classroom and student outcomes through "healthy teacher-student relationships," "effective classroom

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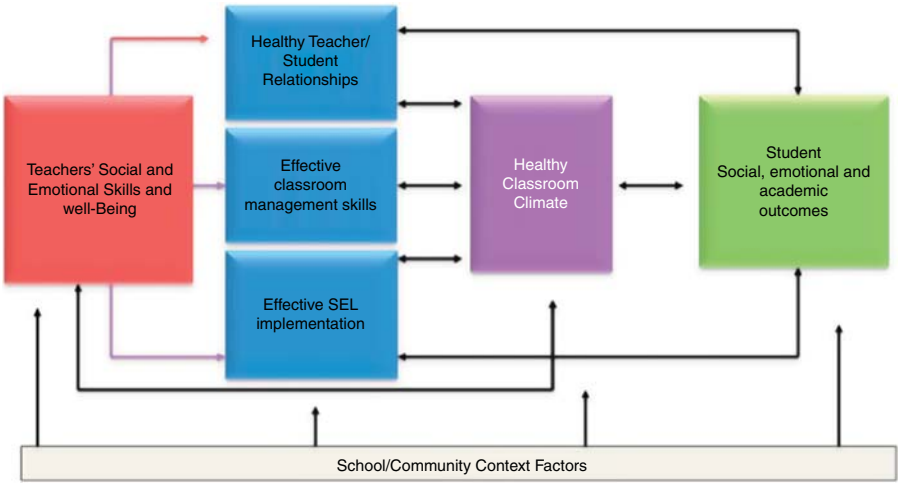

Figure 1.
The pro-social classroom model

Source: Jennings and Greenberg (2009)

management," and "effective social and emotional learning implementation," which results in a healthy classroom climate—a safe, enriching environment that facilitates positive "social, emotional and academic outcomes."

Relationships among aspects of the model not only lead to healthy classroom environments that contribute to students' positive social, emotional and academic outcomes, but also affect teachers' "enjoyment of teaching, and commitment to the profession, thereby creating a positive feedback loop that may prevent teacher burnout" (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009, pp. 493-494). Other factors such as school/community context also may influence teachers' social-emotional competence (SEC), classroom climates and educational outcomes (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). This framework highlights the importance of attending to the needs of educators to ensure a healthy classroom climate and improve students' performance. As it does for teachers, the pro-social classroom model could establish school leaders' SEC as a factor in school improvement. School leaders' well-being and SEC could influence school climate and performance, and this effect could be mediated by their relationships with others, the quality of their leadership, and the effectiveness of social-emotional learning program implementation.

Research methodology

Participants

I used a convenience sample of school administrators from a school district in a rural cluster area in central Pennsylvania for this study. The 13 participants included all school administrators in the district except for the assistant superintendent and the superintendent. Although participation in CARE program typically is voluntary, all school administrators participated so I could explore how CARE mindfulness-based professional development influences school administrators with different (and even opposing) perspectives. The CARE professional development program was implemented offsite during normal working hours.

The sample reflects a fairly balanced representation of gender, years of experience in teaching and leadership, age and perceptions of the utility of mindfulness-based programs. Participants included six males and seven females who led different levels of K-12 schools (elementary school = 4; middle school = 2; high school = 3; district wide = 4). Their experience

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in administration ranged between 2 and 20 years (> 5 years = 5; 5–10 years = 3; > 10 years = 4). To protect the identities and confidentiality of the participants who all worked for one district, I do not associate their positions with their pseudonyms (Table II).

Research setting

My research setting was a mid-sized public-school district comprised of six schools (one high school, one middle school, and four elementary schools) in a rural cluster area encompassing one borough and four townships. At the time of the study, the student population was approximately evenly split by gender (49.11 percent female, 50.88 percent male), and was 95.10 percent white, 1.99 percent multiracial, 1.21 percent African-American, 0.89 percent Asian, 0.75 percent Hispanic and 0.07 percent American Indian. Approximately, 31.88 percent of students were classified as economically disadvantaged.

Each elementary school had one principal and one vice principal who floated between two elementary schools based on needs. The four elementary schools served 252, 266, 372 and 429 students. The middle school (grades 6–8) had a principal and an assistant principal and served 649 students. The high school was led by three school administrators (one principal and two assistant principals) and had 846 students enrolled in grades 9 through 12. The district's student population of 2,814 students had decreased by 5 percent over the preceding five years due to population shifts. The district also frequently lost teachers to better paying schools nearby or to districts closer to their homes, especially those who commuted long distances to their jobs (Table III).

I selected CARE as the professional development program for this research because it is one of very few programs designed to address issues related to educators' well-being, and its protocol complies with standards of quality professional development (Garet *et al.*, 2001;

Pseudonym	Administrative level	Experience
Ian	District	< 5 years
Justin	Elementary	5–10 years
Abby	District	> 10 years
Vicky	High school	5–10 years
Nicole	Elementary	> 10 years
Eric	Elementary	< 10 years
Pauline	District	> 10 years
Charles	High school	< 5 years
Cynthia	Middle school	< 5 years
Elizabeth	Elementary	5–10 years
Bradley	District	< 5 years
Adele	Middle school	5–10 years
Gabe	High school	< 5 years
Amanda	Elementary	5–10 years

Table II. Participant characteristics

School	No. of administrators	No. of teachers	No. of paraeducators	No. of special education teachers
Elementary 1	1	22	3	4
Elementary 2	2	26	15	13
Elementary 3	1	26	9	7
Elementary 4	1	23	10	6
Middle school	2	40	12	10
High school	3	58	10	10

Table III. School characteristics

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Guskey, 2003). My goal was to give voice to participants and dig deeply into their CARE experience, which may yield crucial feedback for developers of professional development programs targeting school administrators.

To ensure proper implementation, one of the CARE co-developers facilitated the program after modifying it to address the specific needs of educational administrators. For example, she consulted with scholars to create role-playing exercises for situations such as a difficult teacher who is not following instructions, and a parent who disagrees with the principal's decision. Participants attended almost all of the 5 h sessions, which were held once a week during school hours over a five-week period, with a booster session four weeks after program completion. Between each session, the facilitator sent participants e-mails reminding them of the assignments and how they could integrate mindfulness practices into their daily lives. At the end of the booster session, participants were invited to evaluate the program via survey.

Data collection

I collected multiple forms of data from the school leaders, schools and the school district using standard grounded theory techniques. The complete corpus of data includes: 26 audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews with 13 participants conducted pre- and post-program, each 45 min to 1 h in length and transcribed verbatim; participatory observations of six 5 h sessions of the program, captured in narrative notes; 21 shadowing observations of school administrators that reflect their leadership and context of school recorded in field notes; and anonymous participant feedback surveys about the program completed at the end of the booster session. I employed the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 2017), engaging in simultaneous collection and analysis of data throughout the study.

Data analysis

My analysis was guided by the requirements of theoretical sampling (Conrad, 1982). I analyzed data inductively and interpretively following processes associated with grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and constructionism (Charmaz, 2014). I used open coding to analyze the pre- and post-interview transcripts, developing an initial list of codes (e.g. stress, leadership, district tension, background) and creating new ones as necessary. I applied codes to text ranging from single lines, to sentences or paragraphs, to entire documents or interviews (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Once relationships between the codes began to emerge, I performed axial coding to identify links between the skills and strategies learned from CARE and changes in the principals' leadership practices (i.e. values, beliefs, behaviors, attitudes). I grouped some codes into themes such as "personal dispositions" or "leadership characteristics." Sometimes a theme emerged first; further refinement of the theme revealed a greater level of subtlety, which led to the development of more detailed codes. I engaged in multiple iterations of analysis until each category reached theoretical saturation. Finally, I translated my analysis into a narrative by integrating the categories to illustrate the influence of CARE.

CARE program practices

Participants in the CARE professional development program learned several practices, including setting intentions, mindful walking, mindful listening, body scan, awareness of scripts, three breaths, wait-time, centering, checking their emotional elevators and self-compassion. To participants, the most helpful practices either required minimal time and commitment to become habits, or had already been used prior to CARE, or fit their needs.

All participants mentioned mindful listening as a vital practice that they started using as school leaders. For example, Cynthia explained that mindful listening enabled her to learn something new about her own leadership: "Just taking a step back and letting her have a

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voice, you know, listening, listening to her rant, and at the end she said, 'Thank you for listening!' I didn't have to fix anything." Elizabeth said that she had implemented mindful listening a long time ago: "I really decided that I was going to be a better listener, and I employed a lot of those skills right then, and allowing people to really say what they need to say before I respond to it."

Most participants described mindful breathing as relaxing and helpful. Charles said: "That was very nice to just sit there and kind of be calm and relaxed. That brought us down a lot. And that's something we don't have time to do." Body scan and wait-time were other mindfulness techniques that some participants found useful, along with deep and deliberate breathing, as ways to unwind. Abby explained: "I was having one of those nights where my brain just wouldn't stop […] I couldn't turn it off […] I didn't know what to do. I used the body scan technique, and eventually I fell asleep." Some participants began using some of the CARE practices only after they had exhausted known resources and had obtained an understanding of the importance and impact of such practices on their well-being.

Participants had mixed reactions to the mindful walking technique. Although Eric already practiced it, he felt that it was a good reminder for him to be aware of his walking, especially because "we are on our feet so much." He added: "I think I've always been decent at taking some deep breaths before reacting or responding, and same goes for being aware of my steps while walking in the hallway. Now, I know it has a name: mindful walking." Adele described how mindful walking made her aware of how teachers respond to her in the hallway:

> If [the guidance counselor and I] are together in the hallway, and we're click, click, immediately people are like, "Is everything ok? What's happening? Are we doing a fire drill?" Sometimes, when walking down the hallway, we're not on a mission, so I'm trying to remember to watch how I walk."

Others responded less favorably to mindful walking. They did not feel it was feasible or important, or it felt unnatural. However, they responded favorably to other awareness checks, such as centering, compassion for self and checking their emotional elevators. For many participants, these practices resonated in the form of awareness, well-being and better relationships. These findings suggest that participants internalized and successfully used those practices that worked for them.

One of the most salient findings reveals internalization of the CARE practices and skills through the use of CARE terms. Many participants used metaphors that promoted understanding and awareness of emotions, such as "feeling my emotional elevator going up," "flip out" and "flip my lid," which describe what happens to cognitive functions during a stressful or emotional situation (Siegel, 2010). These CARE phrases are used to describe emotional activation and subsequent outbursts caused by unchecked activation and to promote awareness of one's biases. Most participants used these types of phrases throughout the interviews. For example, Vicky described "just trying to be mindful of or pulling back and taking those breaths, and I'm a fairly passionate person, so sometimes my lid will flip." Elizabeth also described being aware of her agitation: "There were definitely times when we were feeling our emotional elevator going up."

CARE outcomes

Six participants who participated in CARE had positive perceptions of the program. They found it to be engaging, interesting, relaxing and insightful, especially with regard to their well-being, awareness and relationships. Six other participants (all male) reported mixed feelings; they found some aspects of the practices uncomfortable or totally foreign and thus difficult to adopt in their daily professional lives. Although some did not initially enjoy the program, they ultimately realized the program's benefits, even if it was "not their thing." Only one participant mentioned that she felt uncomfortable and disliked the program.

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She said it was not helpful, because it did not deliver any best practices that she could offer to her teachers.

Regardless of their feelings about CARE as a professional development program, participants reported generally positive outcomes after considering their leadership styles and applying some practices, including improved leadership skills through increased self-reflection, better relationships and attendance to self-care. These skills are tied to increased self-awareness, self-management and self-compassion.

Self-awareness

Most participants discussed various aspects of CARE that helped them to be calmer, more focused and less stressed. Some participants described increased awareness of their emotional states and an improved ability to regulate their emotions. Ian described an increased awareness of "how I react to things that do get me upset or make me angry […] Just kind of focusing on what really matters in life and realizing that some of these things don't matter."

Abby described how breathing practices and checking her emotional elevator helped her recognize where emotions manifest in her body, enabling her to regulate them:

> I would be boiling with anger, especially when I had this parent who questioned everything I said. I just sat here and took these deep breaths, aware of my feelings, and I remember I could feel my blood pressure lower. I can feel the stress relief.

The participants felt they had become better communicators and more aware of their multi-tasking behaviors. Some acknowledged reflecting on their fast-paced lifestyles by noticing when their minds became busy. This awareness reduced their stress and helped them be more effective leaders. Vicky described her calming process:

> And when you have five, 10 things coming at you, whatever it is, that all need to be done yesterday or 10 minutes ago, or if other people's emotions are high, this is when I realize that I need to step back, take those breaths, and then reprioritize.

In this way, Vicky used CARE practices to regulate her feelings and make better decisions.

Interestingly, some participants used their newfound awareness to evaluate and improve their leadership skills, especially when dealing with difficult situations. They talked about how they had become more observant and attentive to others by being fully present and aware of how their actions influenced morale and productivity among their staff and students. Vicky admitted:

> [One of my] downfalls is not being in the moment. I can't say how many times I caught myself not listening to a damn word anybody is saying. Now, I can say that I am practicing to be more aware of my defensive posture. I can even know when I am trying to prove the other person wrong and stop myself.

Vicky highlighted that she was attempting to infuse mindfulness into all aspects of leadership.

Elizabeth described how she was able to help a staff member through mindful listening without needing to actively find a solution to a problem:

> This time I let her get to the end before I responded. You know, she came around my desk and gave me a hug and said that she just needed to get that off her chest! I just realized then how much they need me to be attentive to them.

This self-reflective moment shows how the CARE professional development program helped Elizabeth develop her leadership skills.

When I shadowed the participants, my observations confirmed the interview data. For example, I witnessed how a principal reacted when parents requested an urgent meeting about escalating tensions with a teacher. I observed him solicit and consider

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information from various people, speak to the student, observe the classroom context, consider the parents' relationship with the school, and mindfully listen to the parents when they barged in angry and ready to fight. By practicing CARE skills throughout, he effectively resolved the situation. He even admitted to deliberately using CARE resources to test the effects.

Self-management

Most participants mentioned emotion regulation as another positive outcome of the CARE program. They described being less emotionally reactive to situations that previously would have been triggers, especially when dealing with parents, teachers, upper administration or the board. For example, during his pre-interview, Gabe mentioned that he regretted the way he had reacted in confrontations, such as when he had assumed a kid "was still stealing some stuff, and it ended up that he wasn't" and when he had walked out on a teacher whom he had "addressed too harshly because of anger." Gabe said that CARE tools, such as three deep breaths and checking his emotional elevator, helped him handle these types of interactions and to "think things through and not just respond with such sharp language." CARE provided tools to help this younger participant improve his leadership; as I shadowed him, he highlighted his use of various CARE practices.

Nicole referred to CARE practices as "tricks" that she used to manage her emotions when she caught herself "interrupting others" and "being defensive." She explained how previously, she "could curse like a sailor," but by taking some deep breaths and centering herself, she was swearing less. By regulating her emotions and neutralizing negative emotions, she built stronger relationships with her staff and students.

Likewise, Cynthia felt she had become more accepting of others, especially staff:

> There is a teacher who I don't always enjoy listening to, but taking a step back and letting her have a voice and, you know, listening […] even if it was just a rant—I feel I started understanding her. And instead of just being annoyed at her and having this feeling that I have to fix this for you, I told her, "I appreciate you coming to me. I value you coming to me. I'm glad we have that relationship."

Cynthia added:

> If a parent tells me to f-off or whatever, I get over it quicker. I understand they are upset, and they are not attacking me, but my decision. And I wait for them to calm down to start building a constructive dialogue.

Charles acknowledged that although CARE was not a "life changer" for him, actively listening to teachers and students helped him be less reactive and more self-compassionate:

"We're so quick to be defensive as educators, because we sort of live in our own bubble […] we think that when someone questions what we do, we're doing it wrong, and now I understand that this is not the case." He eloquently summarized how CARE helped him exercise self-management and self-awareness in a difficult situation:

> We had a special event at school where one student started saying inappropriate things, and I had to call his mom and give him a suspension. This prevented him from going to a school dance, which was like his last one of his high school year. The parent was very upset. At the board meeting, in public, she was just up one side and down the other about me, why I was wrong, and presented her side of the story. You know, I had to sit there and listen. I think part of that, just being mindful and aware of my anger and my body, and understanding that there wasn't anything I was going to change about it, and knowing I had done what I needed to do, and felt comfortable in my own skin that I made the proper decision and just breathed and let it be done.

Charles regulated his own emotions and let the parent express her anger without escalating the issue. He demonstrated a capacity to maintain present-centered awareness,

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which enabled him to respond calmly. In this way, Charles developed resilience in his leadership. He credited CARE with increasing his ability to respond calmly to difficult school situations.

Self-compassion

The CARE professional development program focuses on the importance of self-care in managing stress. For many participants, this aspect of CARE made them reflect on their well-being and how they could change their lifestyles to address self-care. All participants mentioned feeling rushed and stressed due to tasks, expectations and demands. After CARE, some participants acknowledged that they felt more productive, even though they were busy with standardized testing at the end of the school year. They felt more attentive and focused on singular tasks. Some participants also were less harsh with themselves, refusing to "feel guilty if I didn't finish my to-do list on time."

For Vicky, understanding and accepting her demanding work was gratifying and helpful:

> […] because as leaders we tend to be a little OCD with our checklist and what we want to get done, and here are the 10 things I need to check off today. And it just doesn't happen. Now, I feel more empathetic with my own self.

Vicky had developed self-compassion. Instead of feeling guilt or anger about difficult situations, participants like Vicky became less critical and judgmental of themselves and others. Nicole, who never shut her office door, admitted, "I'm like always on high adrenaline—go, go, go, running around like a mad woman." After CARE, she intentionally decided to give herself a break during the day and shut her door for 15 minutes, just to "sit there and be like chilling. I am consciously trying to bring myself, like, down a notch, emptying my brain from all the talking, not get caught up in other people's emotions and other people's energy."

During the pre-interview, Eric said he used no self-care strategies. After participating in CARE, Eric decided to attend to his own self-care by joining an adult baseball team: "I don't have a lot of time, but it's been worth it, like I'm looking forward to this Sunday already."

It is important to note that my shadowing of the participants played a major role in subconsciously reminding them to utilize some of the CARE program practices. During one shadowing session, after resolving a tense situation with one of the students, a participant reflected that she had not been taking care of her own health or emotional well-being, and decided then and there to take a day off school to attend to her own health.

Sense of community among school administrators

All participants reported that attending the CARE sessions enabled them to learn more about each other and bond. They felt a sense of community and support from others who shared their stressors and feelings. They mentioned that CARE provided an opportunity to learn more about each other that they would not have had otherwise. Gabe mentioned that the bonding of the administrative group was "a byproduct of being in the same place and being told, 'Hey this is, you know, a safe open environment'." Similarly, Vicky noted that although outside the CARE program they have different opinions and are judged based on their alliances with either the board or the superintendent, "it was great bonding for us as a team."

Elizabeth, who was more aware of power dynamics and felt that some administrators were harshly judged due to their "introverted" leadership styles, articulated this bonding and sense of community eloquently:

> I think CARE put all of us as administrators on a more even plane as human beings […] I felt that it pushed people who typically are dominant into their discomfort zone because they were forced to listen even if they didn't want to or they are not good at practicing it.

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CARE helped participants form bonds that previously had been missing because their busy schedules had prevented them from meeting in a safe, open environment in which they could share their thoughts and feelings without being judged.

Negative cases

Although most participants reported that they derived many benefits from participating in the CARE professional development program, some did not find the experience to be entirely positive. Some participants did not like the program initially, but after several sessions, found CARE to be beneficial and planned to implement parts of it. Other participants felt the first few sessions offered intriguing new concepts, but eventually stopped enjoying the program. They mentioned that it was hard to engage in the program fully and mindfully, because they were thinking about their buildings. "It was a real struggle for me not to worry about my kids and building. What if something happens, and I am not there" (Bradley)? Others were resistant to CARE because it was imposed on them from the district administration. They felt like it was one more thing that they had to do. The principals also may have been accustomed to professional development that addresses best practices for teachers.

Charles explained that vulnerability was the main issue affecting his reaction to the program and whether it was helpful: "I don't feel confident enough to do [the practices]." Ian echoed this discomfort: "I wasn't sure what to expect going in. I think I never really got real comfortable with the silent activities and the breathing. It wasn't relaxing for me at all." Justin said that it was the hardest time of the year for him, with extensive changes and standardized testing. He felt like "we had some other better things to do" and that "maybe if we go through it in 2 years, it might be totally different, I don't know."

Only one participant reported no positive experiences with the program. She concluded that she had "better things to do" (Amanda). She felt that there was no need for this type of program for principals because these skills had already been implemented. To her, navigating the school building, understanding context, and working on what makes one happy were sufficient strategies. She did not answer any further questions about why or how CARE could address the needs of school leaders.

Discussion

In this study, I extended the pro-social classroom model (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009) to school administrators. According to Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2016), there are five dimensions of SEC: self-awareness, social-awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management and relationship management. Although these are usually applied to child development and teachers, in this study, they are applied to school leaders. The theoretical framework (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009) proposes that teachers need to exhibit a degree of SEC if they are to teach their students the same skills. Similarly, in order to promote such skills in teachers, school leaders must demonstrate SEC. This study has shown that school leaders who experience mastery over social and emotional challenges display pro-social values: they respect their relationships with others, are able to regulate their emotions and behaviors even during challenging situations, demonstrate high self-awareness, and recognize others' emotions; such school leaders thus are ready to build strong supportive relationships and make decisions after taking others' needs into consideration.

The scope of this study limited my ability to explore the validity of this model beyond direct effects on participants' leadership skills, well-being and relationships with others. The findings show that the CARE professional development program provided school administrators with various tools, skills and resources that they found helpful and essential for effective leadership. It helped participants cultivate their leadership skills in an

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experiential way. Interestingly, my presence during the shadowing activities reminded them to practice these skills and apply them in various scenarios they encountered. CARE reinforced Schön's (2017) idea of purposeful reflection as school administrators reflect in and on action. Instead of reflecting on a specific past moment to improve on future endeavors, the school administrators practiced reflection-in-action, which entails awareness and modification in real time during emotionally charged situations. The CARE program reintroduced an understanding of the self that extends to empathy, self-awareness, compassion and self-management (Tickle, 1999).

Implications

This study extends the literature on leadership and school effectiveness. While school administrators are thought of as change leaders who are expected to maintain high quality instructional leadership and sustain supportive learning environments, it is important to attend to their social needs. This study shows that leadership effectiveness starts with the individual—the school administrator putting intentional effort into enhancing his or her leadership practices by recognizing emotions. Participants' feelings of vulnerability and discomfort during the emotion skills sessions reflect societal expectations of "professionalism" characterized by emotional detachment. Previous research has documented the aspect of loneliness school administrators feel on the job (Wildy and Louden, 2000). Similarly, in this study, participants feel lonely. They also feel a need to solve all problems and hide their fears and concerns to maintain an image of power and control. This professional identity of the school administrator has become so solidified over time that it is difficult to behave otherwise. This could pose an issue as such professional identity could make the job of the principal harder and lonelier than that of a teacher.

Although essential components of CARE are based on the notion of self-reflection, from practical and policy perspectives, school administrators are not provided adequate space and time to reflect and experiment during school hours. The upper administration granted release time from their buildings for all its school administrators to attend the CARE professional development. This opportunity does not happen often with other school districts although it is important for their growth. At the school district level, the findings suggest a need for more free time for school administrators to spend time with each other, connect, build rapport and thus become a support network in which they feel free to share their dilemmas and concerns without judgment. This, however, requires upper administration or school board members to appreciate the benefits of building a supportive community.

Improving professional learning for educators is a crucial step in transforming schools and improving academic achievement. To meet federal requirements and public expectations for school and student performance, school administrators' skills and knowledge must be bolstered to ensure effective leadership that improves teacher instruction and student learning in an environment characterized by constantly changing mandates. School administrators need to develop an acute sense of self—an awareness of how to respond in challenging situations in a legally compliant and ethically sound manner. Self-awareness and self-management skills help administrators make the right decisions and engage in authentic interactions by managing emotions to achieve desired outcomes.

In November 2015, leaders in the field of educational leadership adopted national professional standards for educational leaders to replace the former Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards adopted in 2008 to better capture the knowledge, skills and abilities of today's school leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). This updated framework emphasizes the critical importance of "promoting each student's academic success and wellbeing," a phrase that is included in each of the ten new standards. The prominence of students' well-being cannot be ignored in these standards, which ironically fail to address the well-being of school leaders, even

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though their abilities to engage in self-care and role model balanced leadership are implied. This is a critical aspect of the educational leadership domain, and until it is documented in standards, school administrators may still prioritize their work over attending to their own social and emotional well-being.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. First, findings based on qualitative interview data are not generalizable to a larger target population. I recruited participants from one mid-sized rural public-school district in Pennsylvania because it was geographically convenient and the school district was open to the goals of both the professional development program and the study. Importantly, the aim was not to establish a representative sample nor to generalize findings, but rather to gain insight into the principals' experiences with CARE and its influence on their well-being and leadership. My goal was transferability, not generalizability (Miller-Day, 2004).

Another limitation is the choice of data sources. Although school administrators' perspectives are important to understanding leadership, professional development and school climate, they rarely describe their personal experiences in educational research. The intention of this study was to highlight their voices and experiences; however, collecting data only from school administrators limits the types of claims that can be made and does not reveal the influence of CARE on school climate since these data generally reveal only one side of the story.

Future research opportunities

The implications and limitations of this study reveal several avenues for future research. First, the perceptions of other school stakeholders may shed light on the influence of CARE, not only on school administrators' leadership and well-being, but also on overall school climate, school improvement, and even academic, social and emotional outcomes for students. Data from these sources would offer opportunities for triangulation, thus adding to the credibility of the findings by clarifying the influence of CARE on school administrators' leadership practices. Second, including quantitative measures before and after the program to assess changes in certain variables such as leadership, mindfulness and creativity and comparing them to a control group would render valuable information on the influence of CARE. Third, researchers could implement the CARE program with school administrators as well as teachers to obtain a better understanding of the influence of CARE at the system level (i.e. how the program affects dynamics within classrooms, buildings and school districts). Fourth, it could be fruitful to study the influence of CARE across multiple school districts to compare how structural mechanisms affect how professional development programs are received and reveal which mechanisms support such programs and aid in their successful implementation and effects.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on the effects of mindfulness programs in school settings and extends the previous research to the field of educational leadership by focusing on the experiences of school administrators and exploring the influence of mindfulness-based program, CARE, on their well-being and leadership. The findings come from interviews with 13 school administrators. While not generalizable, the findings reveal positive experiences with the CARE program and highlight a need for SEC to be cultivated with school administrators. How can SEC be integrated into principal preparation programs and professional development? How do we ensure that principals are equipped with skills to face the daily school challenges? More research and various research methodologies are needed to explore further the SEC field with school administrators.

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