ABSTRACT

Gretchen DePoint, UTILIZING WELLBEING PRACTICES TO DEEPEN CONNECTIONS AMONG INTERNATIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERS (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, December, 2023.

"Put your oxygen mask on first" is a critical motto for educational leaders not only to espouse, but to enact. In the fast-paced environments of international schools, leaders often lack the time to make use of the wellbeing principles that keep themselves physically and emotionally healthy and connected to their communities. During a span of nine months and within two cycles of inquiry, I worked with a middle school leadership team deeply impacted by the pandemic to identify and practice wellbeing practices to deepen connections within themselves and a cohort of middle school leaders. Using participatory action research (PAR) as the methodology, I collected and analyzed data about how the leadership team used wellbeing practices and how these practices affected connectedness within the leadership team and within the middle school cohort. As a result of the PAR study, I identified two findings. First, educators who engage in emotionally centering wellbeing practices deepen connections between themselves and others. Second, international school administrators provide a holistic space in which teachers can engage in wellbeing practices and explore feelings and emotions that support them in their dual roles of personal and professional. By emphasizing the importance of leaders actively modeling practices to cultivate inclusive learning environments, study participants embraced mindfulness and reflection; as a result, the educators prioritized their wellbeing, built relational trust with their teams, and integrated their personal and professional lives and roles. The study showed the transformative potential of intentionally embedding wellbeing practices into regular practice, stressing educational leaders' importance in supporting themselves and their teams to deepen connections. The PAR study offers insights to schools worldwide, suggesting ways to improve

wellbeing practices through professional learning. The findings have implications that extend beyond the study's specific context and emphasize the importance of wellbeing practices to educators as they care for themselves so they can be effective leaders for others. The study draws attention to potential further research to explore how wellbeing practices can positively affect a more supportive environment in which leaders nurture trust among teams and ensure a sense of belonging in educational communities.

UTILIZING WELLBEING PRACTICES TO DEEPEN CONNECTIONS AMONG
INTERNATIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERS

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

By
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Well-being: An experience of holism as integration of mind, body, spirit, and identity. We can't transform instruction if we are cognitively and emotionally overloaded…. Our primitive brains kick into high gear to protect against stress (Safir & Dugan, p. 124).

School leaders and leadership teams must be intentional about nurturing their own wellbeing so that they can support others to integrate the mind, body, spirit, and identity into their personal and professional lives and responsibilities. The common challenges and multi-dimensional roles of educators contribute to significant levels of stress, which, in turn, impacts work-life balance and physical wellbeing (Education Support Partnership, 2019). Education leads all professions in work-related stress and burnout issues (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008) and both leaders and teachers experience stress related to their professional roles (DeMatthews et al., 2021). The toll of work-related stress in education correlates with questions of self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, diminished motivation, and job satisfaction (Agyapong et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2014). However, effective school leaders recognize how to counteract the stress factors so they can support themselves and their school staff to develop resilience (Aguilar, 2020; Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021).

Burnout is more than a resilience problem, as the emotional and relational stresses experienced in schools can stifle professional growth and wellbeing (Parker & Martin, 2009). Steiner et al. (2022) found that teachers and principals are experiencing job-related stress at twice the rate as other professions. Additionally, the precipitating factors behind teacher attrition generally stem from feelings of isolation, the lack of support from the community, and being powerless to initiate the changes needed to foster student achievement and personal growth (Howard & Johnson, 2004; McCarthy et al., 2014). Moreover, teachers face a poor work-life balance due to the expectations of working long hours and the inability to detach themselves

from pressing classroom needs (Education Support Partnership, 2019). The resulting condition, often described as burnout, is simply the exhaustion of the physical and mental resources required to effectively plan, execute, and assess learning. Teacher burnout negatively impacts student achievement because burned-out teachers prioritize their survival and not the learning (Hattie & Yates, 2014). Therefore, teacher wellbeing can affect student wellbeing and achievement because "well teachers promote well students" (McCallum & Price, 2016, p. 20). Hence, school leaders must prioritize the wellbeing of the teachers, but they need to start with "putting on their oxygen masks" first so they can better enact practices that support the teachers. Principals who are strongly supported feel a stronger connection to community and are able to be more empathetic to those they serve (Beausaert et al., 2016).

Defining the concept of wellbeing is complicated and has led to a diverse range of theoretical perspectives on how it is best to address the factors that contribute to teacher attrition. "Positive wellbeing is a stable emotional state and balances between the teacher and the school context and its demands. Given that student learning is the core business of schools, for students to be well, teachers themselves must be well" (McCallum & Price, 2016, p. 184). Teachers must develop the knowledge and structures to manage the stress that comes with leading learning, while leadership should explore strategies and systems that mitigate the multitude of tasks that burden educators.

Because teacher wellbeing is vital to supporting student learning, in this participatory action research (PAR) study, I explored wellbeing in the context of the school leaders that included the three administrators in middle school who comprise the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT) and a small group of teacher-leaders. Because educational leaders can affect their community and teacher wellbeing either positively or negatively (Klap et al., 2021), how do we

ensure school administrators take care of their wellbeing? Even though educational leaders have a great responsibility to help their staff tend to their wellbeing, they are often under high levels of stress themselves (Klap et al., 2021), making this a challenging task. Therefore, leaders must tend to their personal and professional wellbeing to support others.

Additionally, because humans are social beings (Leal Filho et al., 2021), education leaders worldwide were reminded by the COVID-19 pandemic of the importance of mental wellbeing and the positive health benefits of social interaction. As stated in the resilience manifesto by Aguilar (2020), taking care of the self is a critical step in taking care of others. An appropriate analogy of this need is the oxygen mask directions on an airplane; the passenger is directed to put their own mask on before helping others.

Just as oxygen is vital for survival in a crisis situation on an airplane, wellbeing is essential for educational leaders, particularly in challenging times. Leaders often need to make several decisions daily at a rapid pace, and a leader's state of emotional, intellectual, and physical wellbeing can affect the greater school community. When educational leaders neglect to put on their own oxygen mask, they may diminish their ability to empathize, connect with others, and support wellbeing in the community. A leader's lack of "oxygen" can detrimentally impact the community and potentially lead to isolation. Therefore, a leader's wellbeing supports the individual leader and the school community. School leaders must proactively engage in wellbeing practices to ensure they are ready to face day to day challenges. By tending to their wellbeing, they can cultivate deepened connections through wellness practices to support themselves and be better positioned to support teachers and students.

Rationale and Context

As international educational professionals responded globally to the COVID-19 pandemic, attention to self-care and wellbeing surfaced. In my role as Middle School Principal, I am keenly aware of the environmental factors and school context that affect leaders, teacher-leaders, and teachers, including the added stress of the pandemic. Thus, I concentrated the focus of practice (FoP) on this query: How does a middle school leadership team enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections? In this study, I worked with members of a middle school staff in a large, high-pressure, international school in Singapore, which was deeply impacted by the pandemic complexities and shifting toward an endemic stage. I focused on two groups: (1) the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT), two principals and myself who met twice weekly, and (2) the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC), other teacher-leaders and teachers who met once during PAR Cycle One and three times during PAR Cycle Two. First, the two vice-principals and I (MLT) needed to concentrate on our wellbeing before we could transfer practices to the MLC (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Then I studied how the MLT engaged in wellbeing practices (see Figure 1).

High Pressure and Rigorous Expectations

Many international schools have adopted wellbeing as a central focus, articulated in school-wide goals and mission statements. Despite well-crafted statements and commitments to improving an increased focus on wellbeing, students, teachers, and school leaders in Singapore continued to experience stress related to high expectations. In a study on Singaporean students, Davies (1990) describes how these students, well-known for their academic excellence, concurrently experience high anxiety levels. In 2021, Channel News Asia reported the results of a National Youth Poll that 52% of school members claimed mental wellbeing was a challenge

"UTILIZING WELLBEING PRACTICES TO DEEPEN CONNECTIONS AMONG INTERNATIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERS"

Focus of Practice: How do middle school leaders enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections?

Co-Practitioner Research (CPR) Group were comprised of the **MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAM (MLT: Principal + 2 Vice-Principals)**
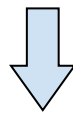
Participatory Action Research Cycle 1
+
Participatory Action Research Cycle 2

Middle School Leadership Team (Principal + 2 Vice-Principals) n=3

Middle School Leadership Cohort (n=4-10)
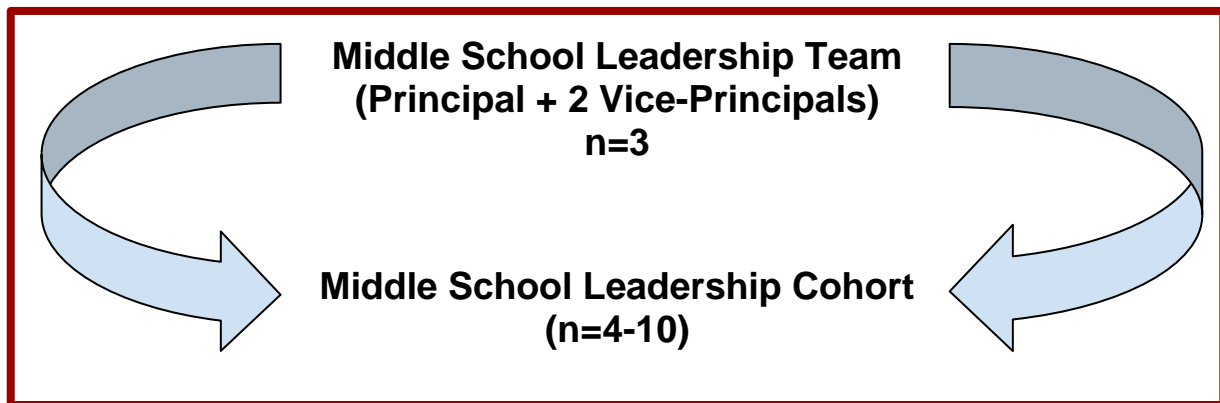
Figure 1. Middle School Leadership Team and Middle School Leadership Cohort.

(Tham, 2021). Additionally, in 2020, Singapore recorded its highest number of deaths by suicide since 2012, up by 13% compared to 2019 (Chin et al., 2022). This alarming data indicates that school leaders must address the wellbeing of the school community.

Uncertainty and Complexity Due to COVID-19

In addition to the rigorous demands of international schools, COVID-19 exacerbated the uncertainty of how to address self-care and wellbeing for the staff and school leaders (Steiner et al., 2022). As school doors closed, educators felt taxed and overwhelmed for extended periods with organizing and supervising various home-based learning models, including hybrid models. Equity issues quickly emerged as students had differing access to technology and support. An empirical study conducted during the onset of COVID-19 in the United States, primarily among elementary teachers, explored the significant predictors of heightened anxiety, including stress and communication (Pressley et al., 2021). As schools reopened worldwide, many educators were exhausted and lacked the necessary support to sustain wellbeing (Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021). Principals and school leaders can get entrenched in the work and quickly become disconnected and isolated (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). Through interviews and listening conversations during my first year as Middle School Principal in the Singapore-based international school, I learned from middle school members of the need to concentrate on wellbeing practices and enact activities that would further the sense of connection.

Middle School Context

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term Middle School Leadership Team (MLT) as the middle school administration, consisting of myself (the principal) and two vice-principals, one who is responsible for academics and one who is responsible for pastoral care. However, the organization of the entire school is more complex because of the size of the faculty and the

leadership structure for managing teachers, instructional coaches, and departments. The Middle School faculty is organized to serve a large international school with a K-12 total enrollment of 2,500 students, with approximately 640 in the middle school. Due to the sheer number of different departments, the numerous staff members in Middle School, and a higher-than-normal staff turnover rate of 12-13%, some members did not yet know each colleague by name. In this study, I examined how wellbeing practices influenced a stronger connection within the middle school staff. While the overlap of language use and designation of who occupies official and unofficial leadership roles were clear internally, I describe the organization in Figure 2 for the purposes of clarification.

Additionally, we use the term Middle School Middle Leaders (MML), which includes Heads of Grade (HOGs), Heads of Department (HODs), and Instructional Coaches. The three HOGs are responsible for one grade level of students and teachers. In addition, the HOGs work closely with the Vice-Principal of Pastoral Care to support the entire Personal and Social Education (PSE) program that includes the units of instruction about learning how to understand self and developing supportive relationships with others. Teachers work to build a sense of belonging and inclusion through the PSE curriculum. The Middle School Middle Leaders (MML) is a collective group of 30 staff members: 27 being teacher-leaders in various capacities in the middle school and the three-person Middle School Leadership (MLT) team. The PAR project and study worked with a smaller team, the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC), of teacher-leaders and teachers who desired to further develop their leadership skills and enact wellbeing activities. The MLC was composed of eight members of the MLT, MML, and teachers from the middle school who joined the meetings and participated in the project and study. The MLT co-facilitated wellbeing learning in their meetings and transferred those practices to the

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Middle School Organizational Chart

Middle School Principal
(n=1)

Middle School Vice-Principal of Pastoral Care
(n=1)

Middle School Vice-Principal of Academics
(n=1)

Heads of Grade
HOGs
(n=3)

Heads of Department
HODs
(n=21)

Instructional Coaches
(n=3)

Middle School Teachers
(n=79)
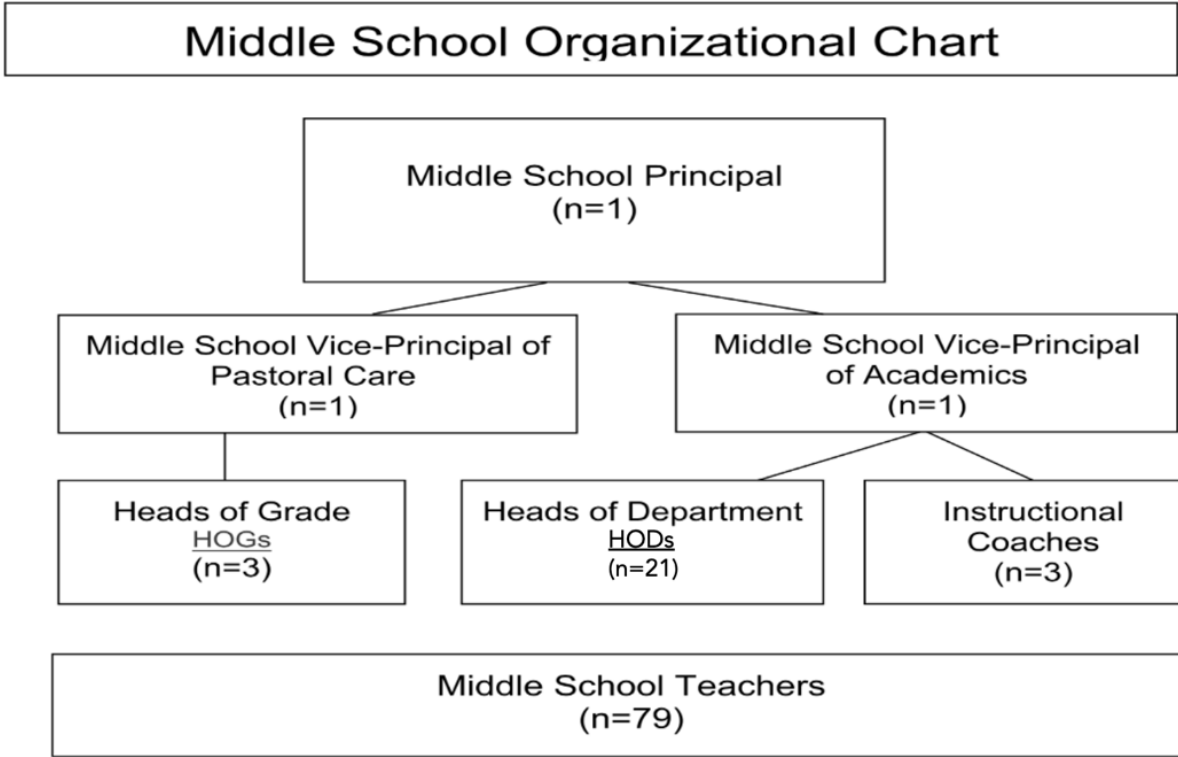
Figure 2. Organizational chart for the middle school.

MLC gatherings. I expected the persons at the MLC gatherings to take an active interest in the gatherings and become a vanguard of leadership for wellbeing across the middle school. During the period of this project and study (one academic year), I documented the MLT and MLC meetings to determine how middle school leaders designed and used wellbeing practices and develop connections.

Developing the Middle School Leadership Team

When the pandemic began, I was a middle school principal at an international school in Thailand. While actively learning about the importance of supporting wellbeing, I experienced many personal and professional losses, which made my own wellbeing challenging to sustain. I moved to the school in Singapore in the school year 2021-2022. However, strict COVID-19 guidelines meant my entry into Singapore was delayed and meetings were conducted virtually. In addition, due to Singapore's travel restrictions, the staff had not seen their extended families and friends for two to three years. With the shift to virtual interactions, colleagues became physically separated. Singapore's policies would not allow colleagues to be in the same room due to COVID-19 safety protocols. As an experienced middle school leader, but new to a significantly larger school in Singapore, I prioritized meeting all staff members to build connections. I started the 2021-2022 school year by working virtually with the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT).

I quickly realized that the staff felt overwhelmed and isolated from one another. Unfortunately, the notion of overburdened staff is not uncommon among educators worldwide. Kaufman and Diliberti (2021) found that 24% percent of teachers reported working over 56 hours a week during the pandemic compared to 5% of teachers working that quantity before the pandemic. In the same study, teachers said their workloads increased with the pandemic and

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have yet to decline. Steiner et al. (2022) confirms these data and, although that study is based in the United States, international schools are facing similar outcomes. More than ever, teachers and leaders needed to attend to their wellbeing. As I established one-on-one meetings to build relationships and listen and learn about what the staff at the middle school needed, I learned that cultivating connectedness through wellbeing practices with the middle school team would be a useful FoP.

Next, I present the rationale for the participatory action research (PAR) study and the FoP. Then, I analyze the assets and challenges of the FoP and present its significance of the FoP, including the context, policy, and research. I draw equity connections to the PAR and then present the purpose of the participatory action research (PAR) project and the significance of the study to practices, policy, and research. Finally, I discuss the ethical considerations and limitations of the research.

Overview of the Study

In this study, I aimed to support the Middle School Leadership Team to enact practices centered on wellbeing to deepen connections in the small group and then used these practices more widely in the school. Frequently, schools focus on what needs to be done for the students' wellbeing, but often overlook the educational leaders and teachers. Caleon et al. (2019) present principles about how teachers can create environments where students flourish with their wellbeing in Singapore schools; school systems must do the same for our school leaders. One middle school staff member used the oxygen mask metaphor to indicate that the MLT needed to put on their oxygen masks before they could support others. Hence, the FoP was to engage the MLT to enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections. As a result of this project and study, I expected the middle school leadership team members to feel deepened connections with each

other that supported their individual and collective wellbeing. I then expected the MLT to transfer these practices to the Middle School Cohort gatherings. All persons in the MLC voluntarily participated after I issued an invitation to teacher-leaders and teachers.

I used the Community Learning Exchanges (CLE) principles and practices with the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT) to co-design wellbeing activities. In the PAR study, the MLT worked directly with a team of middle school leaders and teachers in an international school's Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC). As Guajardo et al. (2016) stated:

> As the CLE organizes around a certain topic, participants are invited to engage by sharing their individual and community stories and experiences around the CLE topic. Such engagement fosters a creative agency that helps people find their power and voice. The process responds to the need for the local communities to own their destiny, though not in an individualist manner. On the contrary, theirs is a collective destiny. The collective process puts the power back into the hands of the people most impacted by the conditions and decisions of the day. (p. 25)

Next, I examine the macro, meso, and micro assets and challenges related to the FoP.

Analysis of Assets and Challenges

A vital part of any participatory action research is to understand and acknowledge the existing assets and the perceived challenges. Guajardo et al. (2016) state, "Others involved in human development have observed and commented that when we focus on problems and deficiencies, the problems and deficiencies become larger. When we focus on assets, strengths, and solutions, then there is hope" (pp. 33-34). When I started the school year as principal, I facilitated initial onboarding activities virtually with the entire middle school staff. Although this process was daunting, I learned new systems and the perceived needs of the new staff through

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examining assets and challenges. The macro-level focused on the context of a large international school in Singapore. The meso-level included the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC). The micro-level of this study focused on the Middle School Leadership (MLT) team, which included my leadership role as Middle School Principal and the interactions with two vice-principals in a high-functioning school system.

Macro Assets and Challenges

In looking at the assets of the international school where I serve as Middle School Principal, the school has a unique mission and a focus on wellbeing that provides a foundation for our work. Over the last two years, the school has provided support for mental health and wellbeing. In terms of school culture, people are increasingly able to say they are "not okay." The school's mission centers on the purpose of education as a force to unite people, nations, and cultures for peace and a sustainable future. Similarly, the community members uphold and are accountable to a set of values that include:

- be honest and act with integrity

- avoid prejudice by developing views based on evidence, reasoning, and understanding

- be compassionate and morally responsible

- embrace challenges in order to maximize their potential

- help other people

- take an interest in and enjoy friendship with people of all cultures and backgrounds

- minimize their harmful impact on the environment

The school's mission and stated wellbeing principles (illustrated in Figure 3) has the potential to influence and shape the educational program. Throughout this dissertation, I use the

Connected	We feel connected when we feel known by others, heard by others and cared for by others. This means we seek to provide opportunities so that we feel: **Cared for, and that we have opportunities to care for others;** we seek opportunities to forge strong, trusting relationships that recognise, appreciate, celebrate and honour a diversity of perspectives. **United by a strong sense of shared purpose;** we ground our thinking, communication and actions in our foundational purposes - that is, our Mission, Vision and Values and Norms of Collaboration.
Autonomous	We want to feel we can self-regulate our actions, where possible, and make our own meaning of events. This means we seek to create a culture so we feel: **Empowered to make choices with regard to our own individual wellbeing;** for example, to preserve boundaries so that one aspect of our lives (eg, work) does not overwhelm other areas (family, social life). We also seek to create open and respectful community conversations to support choices around issues related to wellness such as sleep, digital devices, mental health. **We have opportunities for self-awareness building and reflection;** this is built in to our coaching approach; our Professional Learning Programme / Performance Management Programme; and supported, where possible, through a focus on mindfulness and gratitude.
Competent	A sense of competence arises when we feel effective and that we can continually develop craftsmanship around our work. We recognise that our ambitions to seek excellence across a broad range of educational experiences places significant demands on us, and we understand and recognise that we cannot all be experts in all areas. We seek to create conditions so that we feel competent because we are: **Supported in achieving professional growth** through a rich programme of professional learning, from a variety of sources. **Able to match the demands on us with our capacities;** this means ongoing attention to systems and schedules, and a need for flexibility to ride the peaks and troughs of demand.

Figure 3. Wellbeing principles of the international school.

spelling of wellbeing as it matches my school's spelling and documentation. More specifically, the wellbeing principles highlight the importance for members of the school community to experience *connectedness* through a strong sense of shared purpose, the ability to make *autonomous* choices related to wellbeing, and support for professional growth and leadership with *competence*.

Despite the assets within the school community, there are challenges. Due to its reputation, strong mission, and values, the organization is a highly desirable school to attend. Therefore, the admissions criteria are academically rigorous, and incoming students must meet all criteria. As a result, students experience pressure to excel, so school demands are fast-paced and competitive, even if it is not intentionally designed to be stressful. Additionally, the pandemic presented challenges; specifically, COVID-19 psychologically impacted people in Singapore schools, isolating them from others and, ultimately, affecting their wellbeing. Some initial studies indicate that anxiety, depression, and stress are elevated, mainly due to the pandemic's psychological pressure that weigh heavily on many individuals (Wang et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2020). Meta-analyses on the impact COVID-19 had on the mental health of the general public and health care workers showed high levels of psychophysiological stress in both populations analyzed in the studies (de Sousa, 2021). Singapore had extremely stringent guidelines, including mask-wearing outdoors, and there has been tremendous fatigue due to the duration of COVID restrictions.

Meso Assets and Challenges

The meso-level assets and challenges of the FoP are related to the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC). The School MLC's commitment to growth is a strong asset to this work. MLT created the leadership cohort as an optional meeting space to further support one

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another through wellbeing activities and develop the leadership skills of the group members. The reflective, open nature of this team is strengthened by a culture of conversation founded on the norms of collaboration and cognitive coaching; thus, the participants co-established safe spaces through the shared value of respect. The MLC functioned as a professional learning community (PLC) for adults. According to DuFour et al. (2016) "in a PLC, collaboration represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently to impact their classroom practice to lead to better results for their students, for their team and their school" (p. 24). The MLC collaboratively worked toward identified goals with the intended outcome of supporting ourselves and our colleagues. However, challenges exist at the meso-level with the MLC. As the mission and values drive the school's holistic program, community members embrace and are engaged in all aspects of the program: academics, outdoor education, personal social emotional (PSE), service, and activities. Specifically, service and activities add to an already full teacher workday and happen during lunch or after school. As a result, the staff often lack sufficient time to practice wellbeing activities and connect with their colleagues. Specifically, the MLC staff expressed that they do not have sufficient time for themselves to recharge or engage in a conversation with a colleague, which has impacted the lack of connections. While the MLT was generally cohesive, ample time to build authentic and deep relationships with one another was lacking. An additional challenge that connected to time, structure, and size is that the entire MML did not meet on a frequent basis. Finally, due to COVID guidelines, staff did not gather in groups in one location until recently.

Micro Assets and Challenges

Lastly, the micro assets and challenges focus on the MLT (myself and the two middle school vice-principals) within a high-functioning system at the school. The experience I had as a

middle school international principal for over a decade is a strength. As I entered the Singapore-based international school in August 2021, I began the year by asking questions and listening to all the staff. I intentionally wanted to nurture relational trust and listen to their personal and collective stories, including staff experiences at the school. During conversations, staff shared that they wanted a leader to foster an environment of wellbeing, increase the staff's connectedness, and integrate personal and professional growth. Although I found building relationships challenging because of the large number of staff members and the virtual context, the staff members were open and transparent. I learned that staff were overwhelmed by the demands on their time and communicated that there was little I could immediately do to change contractual obligations.

Another micro-level asset is that the MLT had regularly scheduled meetings each week. The two vice-principals and I regularly discussed various topics and worked toward collective Middle School strategic and personal goals. A large part of our meetings centered on the wellbeing of staff or students who needed additional support. Furthermore, the MLT team has become a small cohesive unit due to these open conversations and processes.

Despite the numerous assets, challenges existed. Specifically, the MLT had a similar challenge as the MLC; we simply did not seem to have sufficient time to build authentic and deep connections with staff. Finally, the MLT team lacked sufficient time to recharge and take care of their wellbeing, making the study crucial to our own individual and collective wellbeing. If the Middle School Leadership Team enacted practices centered on wellbeing, *then* the members experienced deepened connectedness. Finally, leadership turnover was a challenge within the MLT; currently, one vice-principal was new to the school and the other vice-

principals were transitioning out of our school. The fishbone analysis in Figure 4 summarizes the macro, meso, and micro assets and challenges.

Significance

The intent of the FoP was to enact wellbeing practices with the MLT and the MLC as a critical component of school actions. Kantor et al. (2016) state that the increased demands on principals are not matched with the proper support for their wellbeing and do not solve the critical problem of support they need for the high responsibilities they assume. I aimed to contribute new learning, including vital processes, routines, and conditions necessary to implement wellbeing practices and its potential to increase connectedness across colleagues.

As an experienced educational leader in her second year of entering a new system at the onset of the project and study, I first concentrated on practices to support my personal wellbeing and that of the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT). In turn, other educational leaders in the MLC practiced wellbeing activities while remaining committed to leading in a high-performing school and ongoing equity work. The project and study have implications for policy decisions at the school level and offer ways to address policies in other international settings. Finally, the research on how to fully enact wellbeing practices for the adults in a demanding international school environment informs other schools and offers ideas for future research.

Practice

The PAR findings are particularly useful to the study context as we enact practices centered on wellbeing. The school has espoused wellbeing principles, but the PAR focused on making the wellbeing principles actionable. The intent was to inform practice in the school at large by starting with a small group to reflect on useful practices and determine if and to what extent the wellbeing practices are enacted. In the PAR, I identified areas to examine within our

Assets and Challenges

Macro Assets

Strong Mission and Values of the school in Singapore

Importance of wellbeing and school wellbeing principles

Singapore's united approach to COVID-19

Impact of the pandemic and the duration

Increased psychological stressors particularly isolation

Macro Challenges

Meso Assets

Commitment to growth

Reflective nature

Open, collaborative team

Fast pace nature of environment with high expectations

Lack sufficient time to tend to wellbeing

Lack of time to authentically connect with staff

Meso Challenges

Micro Assets

Experience of MS Leadership team

Supportive, cohesive among team

Time available to meet as a team

Part of large team -alignment required

Lack sufficient time to tend to wellbeing

Lack of time to authentically connect with all staff

Micro Challenges

AIM Statement

If a middle school leadership team enacts activities centered on personal and professional wellbeing, *then* the members will experience deepened connections and experience growth individually and collectively.

Figure 4. Fishbone diagram: Analysis of assets and challenges of FoP.

school's current wellbeing leadership practices and ensure deeper connections among the MLT and MLC.

Policy

In the study, I examined wellbeing practices in the middle school, which are based on school wide policies. Initially, the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT) and the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC) explored aspects of research and wellbeing activities that support us to enact school policies more fully. As we learned about specific practices that support the leadership, there was a greater possibility of influencing policies within and beyond the middle school context as we observed the increase in the use of wellbeing practices and connectedness throughout the school. Upon data collection, analysis, and findings, I worked with the CPR to determine what policies ought to be adjusted to better enact wellbeing practices and connection in schools.

Research

Through the PAR, the CPR group and I learned about wellbeing strategies and practices that help us to deepen connectedness. Most existent research is about wellbeing itself and the attendant issues, however, in this study I focused on how to use wellbeing practices to promote self-care to shift leadership practices that deepen connections. The study's focus on specific activities that support wellbeing and determining how those support increased connectedness is useful to those researching the processes in international schools.

Connection to Equity

I focused on how a middle school leadership team enacted wellbeing practices and deepened connections as an equity action. According to the National Equity Project (n.d.), achieving equity in education means that schools must develop leaders through transformative

processes that eliminate inequitable practices (see Figure 5). How might schools consider wellness across all sectors of the school organization - leadership, teachers, students, families, and support staff?

Educators do not always tend to their wellbeing, which can negatively impact their abilities to connect and grow collectively with a team. The lack of wellbeing can influence all persons in the school organization and diminish the possibilities for equitable teaching and learning. As stated in the opening quote of this chapter, our minds, bodies, spirit, and identities must be integrated to function and fulfill our jobs as educators. Specifically, because educators bear the cognitive and emotional load of busy days, their physical and emotional wellness is an imperative. Although research often focuses on the negative components of the stress, burnout, and workloads that impact educators' wellbeing, researchers are starting to look at strategies to positively impact educators' wellbeing (Education Support Partnership, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2014; Parker & Martin, 2009; Roffey, 2012; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). For example, Quinlan and Hone (2020) examine strategies to positively impact educators' wellbeing: "Teacher and principal wellbeing are essential parts of whole-school wellbeing; there is no whole-school wellbeing without educator wellbeing" (p. 207). To promote equity throughout the school, we need to enact our espoused wellbeing principles and have the space to put them into practice as transformative leaders of equity.

In this participatory action research project, I focused on deepening connections, supporting the MLT and MLC with wellbeing practices, and integrating these practices in individual and collective ways. Two equity frames support the FoP: psychological and sociocultural.
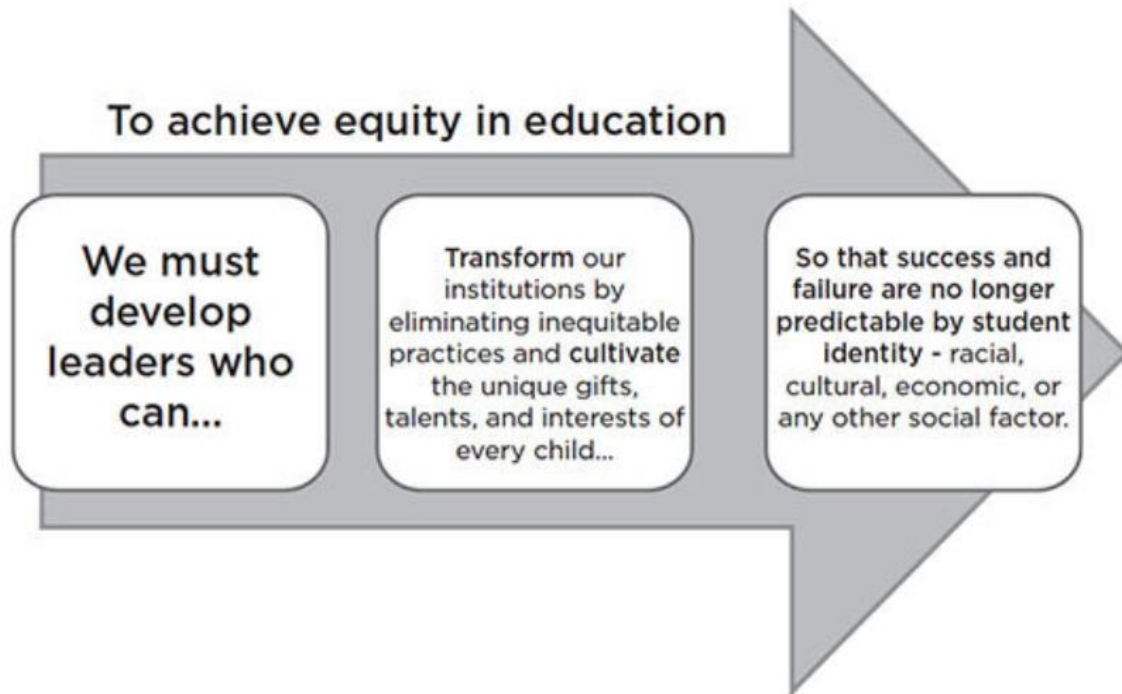
Figure 5. National Equity Project theory of action to achieve educational equity.

Psychological Frame of the Focus of Practice

Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, known as a tiered model of human needs, pertains to the psychological aspect of addressing individual and collective needs. In using Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a lens for this study, the assumption is that teachers and leaders have their basic physiological and safety needs met. Therefore, I focused on the psychological needs of belonging and esteem because the leadership team members needed to feel connected and valued within their roles. Seligman (2002) reinforces the positive psychology model of Maslow and focuses on areas such as gratitude, strengths, positive relationships, and achievements. By focusing on these assets, depressive symptoms can be reduced while wellbeing increases. Another version of positive psychology is the PERMA model. PERMA stands for positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaningful, and accomplishment. The PERMA study provides promising evidence of short interventions for developing hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism to counteract and reduce stress (Falecki & Mann, 2021).

In addition, the concept of a growth mindset plays a critical role with educational leaders and teachers regarding their beliefs about their capacity to change their practices and move towards educational equity, specifically regarding changing their attitudes toward their wellbeing. Heyman and Dweck (1998) state that "mindset refers to the underlying beliefs people hold about the world and their capacity for change" (p. 155). Dweck (2008) identified growth and fixed mindsets. Persons with a growth mindset see themselves as having qualities that can be changed through effort and practice, while persons with a fixed mindset see personal qualities as static and unchangeable. The mindset frame was initially applied to one's understanding of the malleability of intelligence (Blackwell et al., 2007) but has expanded to include people's underlying beliefs about the degree to which change can occur across a range of aspects such as

one's talents, character, relational abilities, and strengths (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016; Heyman & Dweck, 1998; Jach et al., 2018).

Within the psychological framework, Edmondson (2014) states in her TED talk, "psychological safety is a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes." Edmondson (2014) stresses the importance of creating a safe environment where individuals feel comfortable speaking up. Vulnerability connects to wellbeing and is vital to educational leaders so they can admit when they make mistakes and execute more positive self-talk versus negative deprecating talk. They then model that it is acceptable to make mistakes while also helping themselves deal with stress because the brain responds to kind self-talk (Gilbert, 2009). Not only does this benefit the educational leader's wellbeing, but educators can increase capacity for compassion toward others (Campos et al., 2016). Therefore, the psychological frame includes a strong sense of belonging and a growth mindset for all staff as they address their individual and collective wellbeing.

Socio-Cultural Frame of the Focus of Practice

According to Gutiérrez (2013), a school's wellbeing principles might not value all socio-cultural perspectives. Therefore, certain middle school leaders may be less comfortable engaging in wellbeing activities that support the school's wellbeing principles. The MLT is entirely white, the dominant culture, which may practice and understand wellbeing differently from staff of diverse backgrounds and cultures. As Okun (2020) states, "Being able to identify and name the cultural norms and standards you want is a first step to making room for a truly multicultural organization" (p. 9). Therefore, the MLT and I were tasked to make room within a traditional organizational culture for all identities to be embraced in the enactment of wellbeing practices and connection. I worked with the MLT and MLC and used community learning exchange

protocols to ensure a culture of inclusivity while using member input to support the team. Specifically, I was mindful of the nuances of cultural norms as cultural backgrounds are often built upon very different belief structures.

Socio-cultural frames comprehensively consider cultural, institutional, individual, and social factors as it relates to learning and growing in education. In terms of socio-cultural factors and the FoP, institutional conditions in a rigorous international school can make the implementation of wellbeing and connection quite complex. Members of the dominant western culture created the school's wellbeing principles. In fact, the school's stated wellbeing principles of autonomy and competence are more western in ideology and match most of the current staff's background. However, some members of the team come from cultures reflecting collectivist values, thinking of the group first (not standing out), which contrasts with the school's wellbeing principle of establishing autonomy.

I examined traditional organizational structures as they related to the FoP. As Leverett (2002) states, "equity warriors passionately lead to embracing the mission of high levels of learning for all students/learners, are growth-minded to develop skills continually, and the leadership needs to be shared and spread out with a collective commitment for change" (p. 1). While the Middle School Leadership Team has been intentionally hiring a diverse staff, the leadership team lacks diversity. Thus, we needed to explore approaches to maximize the diversity of voices and establish appropriate connections within our Middle School Leadership Cohort. I aimed to explore more culturally inclusive wellbeing practices with school leaders that is supported by research conducted in Singapore and based on the local community. I incorporated opportunities to reflect on the stated school wide wellbeing principles and its connection to the school community's socio-cultural context.

Participatory Action Research Design

As Herr and Anderson (2014) point out, action research is intended to improve practice and be applied to real situations, not hypothetical ones. To effectively engage in action research, I identified a focus of practice based on need. Therefore, the participatory action research (PAR) focus supported the Middle School Leadership Team and the Middle School Leadership Cohort. In this section, I further present the project's overall purpose, theory of action, and research questions. I then provide more specific details about activities that addressed the FoP.

Purpose Statement, Theory of Action, and Research Questions

The purpose of the participatory action research (PAR) was to support a middle school leadership team work to deepen connections through practices centered on wellbeing. As stated in the fishbone analysis in Figure 4, the PAR study's aim included the following theory of action: "*If* a middle school leadership team engages a leadership cohort with activities centered on personal and professional wellbeing, *then* the members will experience deepened connections and experience growth individually and collectively.

The FoP was: *How do middle school leaders enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections?* The research questions were:

1. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?

    a. Within the leadership team?

    b. Within the leadership cohort?

2. To what extent do practices centered on wellbeing influence connectedness?

    a. Within the leadership team?

    b. Within the leadership cohort?

3. How do I transform my leadership practices through the study of educator wellbeing?

Proposed Project Activities

The aim of the participatory action research (PAR) was to expand the middle school leadership team's wellbeing practices and increase connections. The MLT, MLC, and I identified growth areas during this process. We realized that using practices to support wellbeing required a better understanding of why this is critical as leaders and teacher-leaders. I intended to work with the CPR team to effectively incorporate wellbeing into day-to-day practices. In this process, the MLT, MLC, and I built and nurtured relational trust as we listened to each other and applied feedback (see Table 1 for the PAR activities).

In PAR Cycle One during Fall 2022, I worked with the CPR team to review the school's espoused wellbeing principles. As I worked with the MLT, I used Community Learning Exchange protocols, such as personal narratives and gracious space concepts, to test our wellbeing learning practices. The CPR team reflected on our personal wellbeing as individuals and as a team. I then consulted and collaborated with the CPR team to identify individual and collective assets and challenges to enact wellbeing activities within the school context. Next, the CPR team identified culturally inclusive activities to support wellbeing and deepen connections among our team using community learning exchange protocols. The CPR team co-designed and co-facilitated wellbeing activities and invited the Middle School Leadership Cohort to participate in gatherings. After the meetings with MLC, I conducted "Stop, Start, and Continue" interviews with members to learn more about their wellbeing experiences and sense of connection. The CPR team shared the identified assets and challenges, asked for the MLC's input, and clarified the limitations of school structures. Specifically, the CPR team engaged in co-created wellbeing activities with the MLC focused on personal and professional growth.

Table 1

Timeline for the Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Time Period	Activities
PAR Cycle One Fall 2022	Facilitate MLT (n= 3) meetings using CLE protocols and test out wellbeing learning practices on a weekly basis
	Consult and reflect with two vice-principals
	Co-design and co-facilitate monthly professional learning sessions with the Middle School Leadership Cohort (n= 4-10) focused on personal and professional growth
	Write reflective memos
	Conduct "Stop, Start, and Continue" follow-up interviews
	Use qualitative data to document wellbeing practices and determine connectedness based on participant interviews and meeting notes
PAR Cycle Two Spring 2022	Use information from Cycle One to inform personal and professional wellbeing practices
	Co-design and co-facilitate monthly professional learning sessions with the Middle School Leadership Cohort (n= 4-10) focused on personal and professional growth
	Continue to utilize "Stop, Start, and Continue" follow-up interviews
	Conduct member checks with the CPR team to ensure accuracy and inform data analysis
	Analyze data and evidence collected through the MLT and MLC meetings and interviews

During PAR Cycle Two in Spring 2023, I reflected on the data from Cycle One to inform personal and professional wellbeing practices with the MLT and MLC. I also conducted member checks with the CPR team to inform the analysis of collected data. The CPR and I continued to co-design and co-facilitate monthly learning sessions with the MLC focused on personal and professional wellbeing. I embedded the "Stop, Start, and Continue" follow-up interviews within the cycle to further gather participant input on wellbeing practices and its influence on connection. Finally, I analyzed data and evidence collected through the MLT and MLC meetings and interviews. Chapter 3 provides specific details about the PAR activities.

Research Data Collection and Analysis

To collect and analyze data relative to the three research questions, I invited the two vice-principals as co-practitioner researchers (CPR), making a team of three to co-design wellbeing activities to deepen connections among our team. I worked with the CPR team to co-design and co-facilitate monthly professional learning sessions with the Middle School Leadership Cohort ($n=5$) focused on personal and professional growth. Then, I analyzed the data and reflected with the CPR team to identify changes in the spaces affected by engaging in wellbeing practices with themselves and the teacher leaders in Middle School Leadership Cohort.

In Table 2, I summarize the qualitative data collection methods used and the coding processes as it relates to the research questions and cycles. I used the qualitative data collected and coded using qualitative analysis methods described by Saldaña (2016). Throughout the PAR study, data collection activities included facilitation of the CPR meetings, co-facilitation of the MLC meetings, and follow-up interviews. I collected artifacts such as meeting notes, reflective memos, interview notes, survey results, and writing reflections.

Using the qualitative analysis methods, I analyzed the collected data by coding through various processes including values coding, descriptive coding, verbatim coding, initial coding, and second coding (Saldaña, 2016). I then examined the codes and sorted them into emergent categories in Cycle One. I used the emergent themes to inform the CPR team on what wellbeing activities to stop, start and continue. In Cycle Two, I shared the data analysis with the CPR and MLC and used their input to inform the subsequent session. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasize, throughout the cycles, I conducted member checks to ensure my analysis of the evidence gathered from the data was accurate. At the end of Cycle Two, I determined emergent themes after sorting codes and identifying categories.

After Cycles One and Two, I examine knowledge gained through the findings and determine implications for the micro (MLT), meso (MLC), and macro (school wide and beyond) context in terms of wellbeing practices and strengthening connections in international schools.

Confidentiality, Ethical Considerations, and Limitations

Confidentiality when working within a school is essential. I used pseudonyms for all participants. The sample size is limited to the middle school within the larger school context, and the number of specific participants in the PAR is a small sample size. Despite the limited sample size of the MLT and MLC, the results are helpful to the middle school team and leaders.

Limitations of the PAR study include research bias, particularly since the CPR team comprised of three white (the dominant culture of the school) female educational leaders. Due to the limited scope of the study and lack of diversity among the CPR team, I captured voices and experiences from the MLC throughout this study to ensure the wellbeing of staff from diverse backgrounds and cultures. To address limitations of research bias and validity concerns, I included member checks and peer review of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña,

Table 2

Research Data Collection and Analysis Process

Research Question	Data Collection Activities	Artifacts	Data Analysis Cycle One Fall 2022	Data Analysis Cycle Two Spring 2023
To what extent do participants enact in practices centered on wellbeing? Within the leadership team? Within the leadership cohort?	CPR Group Meetings	Meeting Notes Reflective Memos	Cycle One Timeline	Cycle Two Timeline
	MSLC Meetings	Meeting Notes Reflective Memos	Collect data	Review data analysis from Cycle One with CPR Group
	Stop, Start, and Continue" Follow-up Interviews	Interview notes	Continue to collect data	Member Checks to verify accuracy of data interpretation
To what extent do practices centered on wellbeing influence connectedness? Within the leadership team? Within the leadership cohort?	CPR Group Meetings	Meeting Notes Reflective Memos	Analyze qualitative data by coding	Collect data
	MSLC Meetings	Meeting Notes Reflective Memos	Determine Emergent Categories	Analyze initial sets of qualitative data by coding
	Stop, Start, and Continue" Follow-up Interviews	Interview notes	Determine Emergent Categories	Analyze final sets of qualitative data by coding
How do I transform my leadership practices through the study of educator wellbeing?	Self-reflection	Reflective memos		Determine Emergent Themes after sorting codes and identifying categories
	"Stop, Start, and Continue" question	Reflective memo		Post-Cycle Two: Review Cycle One and Cycle Two Data to determine findings

2016). By using the qualitative research methods described by Saldaña (2016), I used the data to code to analyze emergent themes from the two cycles of inquiry to analyze and make claims from this study. The analysis process and study considerations are described in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Another possible limitation of participatory action research is the reliability of participants since they are the persons most affected by the study (Koirala-Azwed & Fuentes, 2016). Guajardo et al. (2016) support the importance of involving people closest to the context to find solutions. Therefore, I ensured the research study's reliability and avoided bias among the CPR team by using qualitative methodological design and procedures (Clarke, 2022; hunter et al., 2013).

I secured the data and the participants' confidentiality to comply with the East Carolina University Internal Review Board (IRB) requirements (Appendix A). I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training modules (see Appendix B). All participants in this study completed a consent form, and the research was approved by the administration at the school (see Appendix C). The confidentiality and ethical considerations include participants' anonymity, voluntary consent, and data storage.

Summary

Educational leaders serve in demanding roles, particularly during the pandemic and endemic, where expectations and demands constantly changed. Despite the context, this PAR project and study was essential in keeping the learning community connected and co-creating a positive learning environment for themselves, each other, the teachers, and the students. To respond to the ever-changing demands, educational leaders must be resilient and engage in practices that support their wellbeing. I engaged in two cycles of inquiry (Fall 2022 and Spring

2023) to address the wellbeing of the middle school leaders and teachers.

In Chapter 2, I review the literature which formed the foundations of the study. In Chapter 3, I discuss the context of the action research project, including the location and stakeholders involved, and outline the research design and methods for analyzing the data. In Chapters 4 and 5, I provide details of the participatory action research cycles (PAR preparation: PAR Cycle One: Fall 2022, PAR Cycle Two: Spring 2023). In Chapter 6, I connect the key findings to literature and discuss implications from this research related to middle school leadership teams that enact wellbeing activities and the experiences that deepen connections.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

School leaders who support staff and students must first take care of themselves to be effective in their roles (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). How can educational leadership teams take the time to examine and incorporate wellbeing practices to take care of themselves, support their school communities, and deepen connections? Schools are exceptionally busy places, even more so during a pandemic that requires leaders to constantly make decisions during uncertain times. Furthermore, in international schools, expectations are set high among the community for the learning to continue despite the many conflicting demands on leadership during a worldwide pandemic. Focusing on wellbeing on paper or via curriculum doesn't work because it doesn't exercise the adaptive shifts needed to get to the mind, body, spirit, and identity, as stated by Safir and Dugan (2021). Individuals require practice and space to become aware of and embody those aspects and "by weaving opportunities to learn about wellbeing into a wide range of experiences, the implicit approach allows for a focus both on content and on context" (Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021, p. 140). As school leaders have a tremendous influence on their schools, they must be mindful of taking care of their wellbeing.

Taking care of wellbeing is not selfish; rather, taking care of one's self is sustaining and necessary in equity leadership. School leaders, particularly principals, carry a lot of responsibility and weight and have staff to manage; therefore, it is essential to model and incorporate wellbeing practices. Not only is it critical for leaders and teachers to tend to their wellbeing, but as Quinlan and Hone (2020) state, "there is no whole-school wellbeing without educator wellbeing" (p. 207). Through the participatory action research (PAR) study, I explored the focus of practice (FOP): *How do middle school leaders enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections?* In this chapter, I present a review of literature that provides further foundational

knowledge in three related areas: transformative leadership in international schools; educators learning & enacting wellbeing, and teams and building connections.

Transformative Leadership in International Schools

Leadership does not only transform the life of the leader, but it also transforms the lives of those who are being led. – Gift Gugu Mona (2020)

Educational leaders in international schools must shift from traditional to transformative leadership. In the past, leadership was more about titles and power, as well as command and control. Regardless of the role, leadership has moved away from managerial, transactional leadership models to transformative ones (Hewitt et al., 2014). Leadership in organizations requires vulnerability, telling the truth, pushing outside of comfort zones, admitting mistakes, having courageous conversations, and empathy (B. Brown, 2018; Edmondson, 2014). Transformative leadership is not to be mistaken for transformational leadership. As Shields (2010) states, "Transformational leadership focuses on improving organizational qualities, dimensions, and effectiveness; and transformative educational leadership begins by challenging inappropriate uses of power and privilege that create or perpetuate inequity and injustice" (p. 564). Initially spearheaded by Burns in the 1970s, the concept of transformative leadership shifts away from being in charge and making decisions to leading collaboratively toward a vision and being inspirationally motivating (Shields, 2010). Therefore, this study looked at how educational leadership teams support wellbeing and enact the principles, not simply espousing them, to support the community.

As the Guajardo et al. (2016) community learning exchange (CLE) axioms stress, the community itself must be involved in addressing issues. Specifically, "the CLE organizers believe people residing in local communities know the issues first hand and therefore need to be fully involved in constructing the organizing focus selecting the pedagogies to these issues"

(Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 25). The PAR study involved leadership team members within the middle school closest to experiencing leadership and wellbeing. To better understand the local setting, I present research literature based on the existing culture and dynamics of international schools.

International School Culture and Dynamics

International schools have multiplied worldwide, particularly in Asia, and historically served predominantly expatriate communities, however, they now increasingly also serve wealthy local students (Rizvi, 2018). According to Tanu (2018), Bunnell (2013, 2014), and Leach (1969), international schools have grown in number from roughly 300 to 8,257 schools since 2019. Rizvi (2018) states that international schools are complex, and that although schools may espouse that they educate students to be more global-minded, school-wide practices contradict their ideals. Nevertheless, international schools are often very separated from the local community where they are situated.

Another layer of complexity is the diverse cultural, racial, and ethical backgrounds of the school community that exists in an organizational system of predominantly white educators. Allan (2003) purports that peer group interactions may support intercultural dynamics and that cultural dissonance is part of the process of achieving multiculturalism. Allan's findings also include intermediate outcomes such as ethnocentrism, adaptation, and assimilation. Most international schools embrace many intercultural practices and celebrations at the surface level. Although there are cultural celebrations, international schools worldwide are growing in their development of intercultural awareness among staff and students. International schools do not yet have processes in place to sift out which, and to what extent, community members may feel marginalized and there is very little literature available that delves into the cultural complexities

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of international schools in Singapore. Cultural rituals exist in international schools but must not be tokenistic. Choo and Chua (2021) state that Singapore is an Anglophone country that continues to deal with the tensions of an education system that incorporates both global and colonial traditions. Cultural backgrounds can affect how community members view and value the enactment of wellbeing practices. Next, I examine the deeper into the origin and current practices within schools.

Origin, Socio-Political, and Current Practices

The world is different due to globalization, and some social policies have created change in education itself and at the school policy level. Anderson et al. (2013) studied the increase in privatization in education and its influence on shifts in social policy. Privatization influences education leaders to make decisions within more of a business framework (Anderson et al., 2013). When education leaders make decisions for schools or districts, they aim to do what is best for students. However, marketing or business decisions often contradict equity-centeredness and transformative leadership actions. As Anderson et al. (2013) state in a study related to U.S.-based private schools:

> the last decade's emphasis on rapidly scaling up reforms and introducing top-down pressures, such as high-stakes testing and inducements like pay-for-performance, is in part due to the impatience with decades-long failure to systematically improve schools in areas of concentrated poverty. (pp. 47-48)

In addition, Richardson (2017) found that there is an attainment gap between minority ethnic individuals and white individuals in the educational system. As Richardson (2017) states, there are people whose potential is limited and unequal to others based on a variety of factors:

For millennia—probably at least since the emergence of class-structured societies—

scholars, philosopher-psychologists, and state authorities have told people that social

inequalities are inevitable, the consequence of immutable differences in mental potential

in people themselves. Those messages have always formed powerful ideologies, making

inequality seem just and natural, preempting protest and coaxing compliance. (p.10)

Unfortunately, many of our school systems still function with transactional ideology, and

inequality exists. The following section looks further at the context of Singapore itself.

Singapore Context

Having a basic understanding of Singapore's history is important to understand the study.

Notably, there can be a difference in the perspectives of Singapore depending on the cultural

background of the person asked. Although Singapore is a culturally diverse country, Westerners

often sometimes view Singapore as a country with strict rules, guidelines, and fines that

correspond to non-compliance (Abshire, 2011). Contrary, Singaporeans are proud that they are a

globalized city-state that grew from one of the poorest countries in the 1960s to an economic

powerhouse today due to globalization (Abshire, 2011). Reflecting on current-day Singapore and

its incredible economic growth in a relatively short period of time is an example of a fast-paced

society seen in various aspects of life, including schools.

Another notable aspect of Singapore relevant to this study is the government's

commitment to its residents' health and wellbeing, particularly in response to the pandemic,

which impacted both through the guidelines which kept the community safe. Specifically, the

government has created apps that use gratification and rewards to promote healthier lifestyles.

One app, LumiHealth, was created by Singapore's Health Promotion Board and Apple to support

life balance and improve wellbeing. LumiHealth is a free two-year program for Singaporean

residents aged 17 and above with challenges centered around staying active, food selection, mindfulness, and getting good sleep (LumiHealth, 2020). The Ministry of Health Promotion Board developed a similar app, Healthy 365, to help people to live healthier lives through fitness activities (Health Promotion Board, 2022). In addition to the apps, the Ministry of Health Singapore uses its Health Hub to promote wellbeing. Health Hub is a nationwide suite of digital services used in Singapore that allows residents to manage their healthcare needs, including making doctor's appointments and maintaining housing records for Singaporeans and their children. Furthermore, government posts provide tips to support one's wellbeing, including exercise, doing things that make you happy, time management, and positive thinking (Health Promotion Board, 2022).

The health-based digital apps are one response to Singapore's commitment to wellbeing due to the impact of the pandemic, which isolated numerous people in Singapore. Despite the lack of research on wellbeing and practices within Singaporean schools, a recent study conducted by Caleon et al. (2019) researched the dynamics of gratitude within an Asian Cultural Context to see the relationship between school resilience and wellbeing. The study with the Singaporean school showed evidence that practicing gratitude helped students deal with stress, develop resilience, and promote wellbeing (Caleon et al., 2019). As a country, Singapore prioritizes wellbeing through a variety of programmatic and research initiatives.

Kailasam et al. (2019) assessed Singapore's health-promoting practices within their communities, including healthy behaviors and mental health. Although gaps were identified in the health-promoting practices, healthy behavior such as physical activity and mental health were higher than the average of all measured domains. Studies such as this have started to draw attention to the importance of wellbeing in Singapore. Ng (2020) examined the paradox of

student wellbeing in Singapore since the education system is known for its outstanding results, competitiveness, and high pressure. Ng found that Singapore's education system took steps toward a more holistic education model that is values-based, meaningful, and engaging for students. Ng defends that a holistic education approach provides a more purposeful education and supports students' wellbeing. For leadership teams to enact wellbeing practices holistically in international schools, I reviewed essential transformative leadership principles.

Transformative Leadership: Self, Organization, and Community

For educational leaders to lead transformative work within their schools, they must understand what it looks like. Leaders must work to facilitate any change or growth centered on equity. Guajardo et al. (2016) present the RASPPA model: Relationships, Stories, Place, Politic, and Action as a theory of change because, as they state, "It weaves fundamental principles of relationships, assets, stories, places, politics, and actions with three ecologies of knowing: self, organizations, and community" (p. 36). Leaders must start with self, and through their interactions and sharing of stories, individuals can develop a truer understanding of identity and collective agency in school communities (Guajardo et al., 2016).

The RASPPA model is similar to the Furman (2012) framework of social justice, in which self is at the center working outward. Furman's conceptual framework for social justice leadership is centered around three main concepts. The first concept is *praxis* which includes reflection and action (Freire, 1972). The praxis definition aligns well with the Edwards-Groves's (2008) framework "*Praxis,* therefore, is not static or an endpoint goal, but rather an on-going dynamic and transformative process that is ever-evolving and developing" (p. 140). The framework's second part includes personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological aspects. Third, each dimension within the framework requires the development of "capacities" on

the part of the leader, capacities for "both" reflection and action (Furman, 2012). The models for social-justice, and transformative leadership can be applied to school reform.

School Reform

McDonald (1996) discusses that change requires flexibility because the individuals within an organization should take ownership in creating the new structures. Specifically, McDonald (1996) states, "To build new schools focused on teaching all students to use their minds well requires the abandonment of many conventional and deep-seated beliefs, yet one cannot abandon what one cannot first discern" (p. 25). Therefore, teachers and leaders must unlearn practices and be open to new ways of being and doing. "Every school is governed by deep beliefs. They shape the school's key relationships, and they ultimately determine the school's culture and quality of the school" (McDonald, 1996, p. 24). The theory of change implies that beliefs and culture are dynamics related to how leadership teams enact practices.

Although school reform and improvement are ongoing, Spillane (2013) stresses the importance of diagnosing specific areas and creating an articulated plan for advancement. In understanding that the brain does not acquire information by a simple input of information, psychologists suggest that experience and prior knowledge matter in school reform (McDonald, 1996). School reform is most successful when facilitated with leadership that includes beliefs, culture, and clarity of purpose.

Transformative Educational Leadership

Educational leaders have a direct impact on the culture of the school and lead for improvement. Transformative educational leadership pushes practices beyond the focus of leading a learning community focused on academics. The leadership model closely examines inequitable practices to shift toward justice and democracy in the pedagogical approaches and

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environment itself (Shields, 2010). Achieving educational equity is not easy because the intent is not only for individual change but also to influence change on a greater level for "the common good of society" (Shields, 2010, p. 583). Transformative leadership focuses on change through coaching; furthermore, the educational leader must use compassion, curiosity, connection, courage, and purpose (Aguilar, 2020). Moreover, for a transformative leader to be equity-centered, the educational leader must identify practices that uphold and perpetuate inequities (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017; Shields, 2010).

Adult development is an essential part of becoming a transformative educational leader. Drago-Severson (2012) states:

> constructive-developmental theory helps us understand the complexities of adult development, of leading professional learning and working to build internal capacity. It illuminates the fact that adults with different ways of knowing will need different supports and challenges to grow and generally thrive and in professional learning environments more specifically. (p. 24)

Drago-Severson (2009) uses the terminology *developmental capacity* and stresses the importance of building it for adult learners. Specifically, she defines developmental capacity as "the cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities that enable us to manage better the demands of leadership, teaching, learning, and life" (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 8). A vital part of the adult development process is to provide time for educational leaders to engage in professional dialogue with other leaders and learn how to create a learning community that values mistakes, creating a collaborative environment where educators can grow (Drago-Severson, 2009). Professional dialogue is one part of moving forward.

As Theoharis's (2010) qualitative study presents, to disrupt injustices, educators need professional development to understand equitable practices. Specifically, educators must invite marginalized community members to share their stories to help others better understand different perspectives and cultures:

> Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming-between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. (Freire, 1972, p. 61)

Effective educational leadership ultimately impacts student learning outcomes, and there are many intricacies in each school context, including different leadership styles. As Robinson et al. (2008) present from their meta-analysis of varying leadership studies, each school's needs are different, and the areas needed to focus on for growth are also different. Militello et al. (2009) state that although principals often utilize a program to improve their school, the more impactful leader looks closely at their school's practices by looking at classrooms with all stakeholders involved. A leader should know that the learning process should not be done alone yet through an intentional, collaborative, iterative inquiry cycle focused on teaching practice with various experienced participants (Militello et al., 2009). Next, I present research on coaching and leading for equity in schools and why it is necessary.

Coaching and Leading for Equity

Educational leaders have a lot of responsibility within schools. More than ever, educational leaders must lead with equity in our schools. Recent events, including the COVID-19 global pandemic, the "Black Lives Matter" movement, and Asian hate crimes, have

spotlighted the importance of dialogue and action. As Aguilar (2020) states, "Remember: It's not your fault that things are the way they are, but it is your responsibility to do something about them" (p. 21). School leaders must work with our adult learners to identify the inequities in our schools Additionally, educators must know what equity looks like and do something about it. Examining inequity can surface many emotions as educators reflect on practices. Educational leaders must be able to acknowledge, accept, and name emotions as they emerge to tackle them. Specifically, when leaders lead for equity, they must be vulnerable and model beliefs and practices with staff. This analysis concurs with Roegman (2017), who stresses how equity must be center stage, even if there are several variables at any given time within the specific school. A critical responsibility is that school leaders cannot remain neutral or complacent regarding equity.

To be equity leaders, school leaders must exemplify behaviors that value all students, staff, and families within the community and look at how they treat others regarding privilege, power, and oppression (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). In addition, Khalifa et al. (2016) present that educational leaders' skills and readiness to take steps to implement culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) differ significantly along with the community's specific context. Moreover, coaching as an entry point is a distinct way to provide an avenue for educators to reflect on their current practice to improve (Aguilar, 2013, 2020; Knight, 2018).

As Aguilar (2020) points out, another vital component of coaching that builds trust is to be open and transparent about embracing and challenging assumptions. Specifically, coaching is a skill that needs to be developed. If coaches are to influence instructional practices, they need to be aware of specific areas: their beliefs and behaviors, how they are coaching, and how they interact with the system and the people within it. It is not enough for educational leaders to

believe in equitable practices; they must model practices and be self-aware of how others may experience their actions. Therefore, coaching relationships heavily rely on the trust between the coach and the coached. The following section begins by looking at education leaders who are learners of wellbeing.

Educators Learning and Enacting Wellbeing

Schools are designated places in society for learning. Conversations in education often start with academic achievement. However, schools must move beyond rigor and towards overall wellbeing (Drago-Severson, 2009). Additionally, learning about wellbeing occurs for all students, but adult learning is just as crucial. Therefore, as adult learners, particularly education leaders, we need to implement wellbeing learning practices within ourselves and facilitate this learning with teachers. As a result, we can promote ongoing, purposeful, professional development to foster teachers' continual growth and improve their ability to use wellbeing strategies (Little, 2006; Mayer, 2009). Improved mental wellbeing occurs when adults participate in leisure activities (Rosbach, 2022); this study implies a relationship between personal and professional spaces and wellbeing. Next, I examine how educational leaders are learners themselves.

Education Leaders as Learners

Adults do not always learn in the same ways as children (Knowles, 1984). Increasingly, research about brain function can also be applied to how educational leaders learn. Humans are not genetically predisposed to learn, and their intellectual abilities are not solely dictated by genes (Brown & Roediger, 2014). Instead, learning is impacted and influenced by our culture, relationships, environment, and social-emotional state (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2018). A lack of stable relationships can negatively affect

the brain and neurons by stunting their growth and development (NASEM, 2018). The idea is that teaching is about significantly more than transferring information (Nachmanovitch, 1990); the whole person must be connected and activated to learn. When educational leaders develop and maintain positive, trusting relationships and learn in a trusting, safe, and equitable environment, they can more effectively reflect on their practices and apply the learning to their conduct in school communities.

Educators know about essential strategies to incorporate with our students; these strategies can be applied when working with adult learners. As Willingham (2009) states, cognitive science must be balanced with the emotional. Specifically, if an educational leader has not built a safe space for adult learners, they will not be motivated to learn or develop, personally or professionally (Drago-Severson, 2012). Additionally, in working with adult learners, Brown and Roediger (2014) present logical tips for lifelong learners that can be applied to educational leaders working with adult learners: space out the retrieval practice of the skill or knowledge, attempt to solve a problem (generation), reflect on what went well, study what did not connect to other experiences and how to improve next time, and elaborate by using one's own words to make additional meaning. Teachers and leaders construct their meaning by making personal meaning of their experiences and building (Driscoll, 1994). To increase the likelihood of educational leaders transferring their learning to practice, teacher and leader professional development and practices should include the essential factors of adult learning.

Creating a culture of inquiry is a paradigm shift in education that focuses on the individual's empowerment in determining the 'what' and the 'how' of learning. Critical indicators include inquiry-based learning, an ongoing cycle of feedback, and a leveled culture in which the facilitator encourages and values the learner voice. In a culture of inquiry, the

facilitator for adults or students promotes healthy conversation and agency via a problem, context, and the search for truth (Buchanan et al., 2016); the implications are significant to the adult learning context. Inquiry-based education uses a constructivist approach to examining knowledge through a self-reflective process of identifying gaps in personal knowledge (Tamim & Grant, 2013).

Operationally, the inquiry method is a mental exercise of determining the problems, challenges, and issues that educators investigate. The inquiry process helps move learning toward meaningful engagement and deepened knowledge (Avsec & Kocijancic, 2016; Buchanan et al., 2016). Inquiry-based techniques, strategies, and routines support the identification of the intersection of personal and shared knowledge to prompt a process of uncovering complexity (depth of knowledge), establishing connections, or passing judgments on coherence matters (Buchanan et al., 2016). Inquiry as a stand-alone disposition is a crucial attribute of engaged learners. The ability to question knowledge through a critical lens and ask the right questions to search for deeper meaning and reasoning contributes to personal engagement and intrinsic motivation to learn. Authentic learning is a result of some individual inquiry into personal experience (Buchanan et al., 2016).

Importance of Wellbeing Practices for Educators

Wellbeing is commonly valued in schools today, and many schools have student curricula to promote social-emotional learning and wellbeing. However, some schools do not create policies that support wellbeing. For example, as Nohilly and Tynan (2022) discuss in regards to wellbeing policies evolving in Ireland, while wellbeing has become a part of the language within schools, the term wellbeing is often hard to define precisely. Additionally, although wellbeing is different for every individual, leaders need to look beyond individuals and

consider the importance of a broader context within schools (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). When addressing wellbeing within schools, focusing only on students is insufficient; the staff must engage in wellbeing practices (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). McCallum and Price (2016) state that "educator and learner wellbeing is an individual, collective and community responsibility" (p. 128). Wellbeing includes a sense of belonging and inclusion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), as research "has shown multiple links between the need to belong and cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behavioral responses, and health and well-being" (p. 522).

Wellbeing and Culturally Responsive Theory & Practices

In the last twenty years, the quantity of resources on culturally responsive theory and practices has substantially grown. The increase in culturally responsive research and literature continues to address the inequities within our school systems. Hammond (2015) connects culturally responsive teaching practice to brain-based learning strategies. She uses the phrase "the marriage of neuroscience and culturally responsive teaching" (p. 3) to demonstrate the interwoven dynamic. Hammond draws attention to educators engaging in a reflective process. She states that teachers run the risk of being unaware of their implicit biases. Educators must reflect and develop a deeper understanding of cultural backgrounds (Hammond, 2015). Elie Wiesel said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech on December 10, 1986:

> We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant when human dignity is in jeopardy. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe. (Nobel Prize, n.d)

This same sentiment applies to wellbeing today. Leaders in our school systems can no longer be neutral about their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their community; they must act for change and consider the cultural context in wellbeing spaces.

Wellbeing Spaces

Aspects in our physical environment affect our emotional responses due to the impact on the brain (Sevinic & Osueke, 2014; Yildirim et al., 2007). Physical components such as color, layout, temperature, lighting, space, and furniture can affect individuals' emotions, moods, and experiences differently. Schools can often create more collaborative learning environments by creating open learning spaces and shifting away from traditional rooms with rows of desks (Ziegler & Ramage, 2017). However, the architecture and layout of classrooms in most schools in the 21st century have physically remained the same due to organizations lacking the financial resources to make drastic changes to their building structures. Educational leaders can dramatically affect the learning environment by redesigning layouts within the existing spaces to allow for more collaboration (Ziegler & Ramage, 2017). Educational leaders can apply these concepts to spaces where they work, including their offices, to create a more calm, welcoming environment. These adjustments affect their wellbeing and make the spaces more inviting for others. Next, I explore the dynamics of teams and building connections.

Teams and Building Connections

I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship – B. Brown (2018, p. 8).

Entering any system as a new educational leader comes with several layers of complexity. When entering a community, the first step is for the educational leader to examine the culture and build trusting relationships with open, honest, focused, compassionate

communication (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Knight, 2016; Ziegler & Ramage, 2017). Building relationships must be intentional because, as Ziegler and Ramage (2017) state, "Culture doesn't happen by accident because relationships don't happen by accident" (p. 13). Due to educational leaders' great influence on the school environment, they must possess and continually improve their communication skills (Knight, 2016). Educational leaders must ensure they have strong communication skills, intentional structures, and inclusive processes to build connected teams.

Teams

Building strong teams in school organizations can be challenging. In addition, the study and research of teams and teamwork can be problematic because team contexts vary, teams are inherently different, and the purpose and function of teams may also be unique to local contexts (Salas et al., 2003). In a literature review and case study of two teams, Tarricone and Luca (2002) identified attributes of successful teams, including open communication, interpersonal skills, and interdependence. Although the study was limited to participants who were university students, the findings and principles can be applied to adult educators concerning how teams are successful. As Tarricone and Luca found, critical attributes, such as trust (which facilitates open communication) and building capacity (which also aligns with interdependence), is vital among a team.

Building Trust

It is crucial to build trust within teams, particularly those teams of educational leaders. Knight (2016) identifies five trust factors: character (acting ethically and honestly), reliability (do what you say and not too much), competence (know what you are talking about and follow through), warmth (make others feel safe by showing you genuinely care), and stewardship (putting others first). Ziegler and Ramage (2017) emphasize that regular communication

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provides information and a window into what is happening within the school. Celebrating success is essential to building trust with all constituencies. Finally, educational leaders need to remember that an essential part of building a culture is not only providing a space for celebration but cultivating a place where everyone can safely contribute their thoughts, even when members disagree (Bryk et al., 2010).

Trust does not happen by accident. Educational leaders must be able and willing to be vulnerable, and as Nachmanovitch (1990) states, "It is the discipline of mutual awareness, consideration, listening, willingness to be subtle. Trusting someone else can involve enormous risks, leading to the even more challenging task of learning to trust yourself" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 97). Thus, trust is essential to build capacity with a faculty when working collaboratively as a team.

Building Capacity

Terminology and organization charts concerning teacher and leadership roles vary within schools. For change and growth to happen, education leaders must collaboratively work on identified goals with various team members (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Ziegler & Ramage, 2017). Education leaders must share power, not hold it among themselves, to make schools equitable. "True leadership must be for the benefit of the followers, not to enrich the leader" (Ziegler & Ramage, 2017, p. 129). In addition, a critical part of creating an equitable space is flattening the hierarchy, not just on paper but in all actions. Instead of micromanaging decisions, educational leaders can start with these two initial steps to build leadership capacity within their faculty (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Ziegler & Ramage, 2017).

A collective, collaborative approach supports what Guajardo et al. (2016) present about the importance and strength of community learning exchanges (CLE) involving the people

closest to the issue. As they state, "Such engagement fosters a creative agency that helps people find their power and voice, and the process responds to the need for local communities to own their destiny, though not in an individualist manner" (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 25).

To build capacity within a faculty, education leaders need to do several things, including having a "growth mindset" in stretching people's potential (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Drago-Severson (2012) uses different terminology and calls it "growing edges" when working with adults to grow in their capacities (p. 35). More than a small group of educators need to be involved to affect growth and improve teaching and learning. As Fullan and Quinn (2016) state, "Collective capacity building involves the increased ability of educators at all levels of the students to make instructional changes required to raise the bar and close the gap for all students" (p. 57). The goal is to improve instructional practices among educators, and as Drago-Severson (2012) emphasizes, differentiated approaches are needed to support teachers to grow their capacity. Similar to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD), leaders need to address adult learner readiness to move them forward (Drago-Severson, 2012).

Connections

As social beings, people seek connections. Stansfeld (2006) refers to connectedness as the quantity and strength of connections a person has. Crisp (2010) underscores the importance of individual connectedness to ensure inclusion. Connectedness relates to the study as the school community has been isolated from one another due to the COVID restrictions. Moreover, it is vital the leadership team seek ways to connect to improve one's mental health and wellbeing.

"Social distancing" became a common phrase used during the pandemic. Social distancing curtailed social interactions, and research shows that a lack of interaction can impact people's feelings of connectedness (Okabe-Miyamoto & Lyubomirsky, 2021). Additionally,

social connection is vital for our wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Maslow, 1943; Okabe-Miyamoto & Lyubomirsky, 2021). The final effect of the loss of social connection during the pandemic is yet unknown (Okabe-Miyamoto & Lyubomirsky, 2021). Strong connections are essential for all humans to feel connected and have a sense of belonging, which impacts emotions and cognitions, and the lack of these affects one's wellbeing (Buchanan et al., 2016). Hence, the educational leaders and the school community that experienced physical and social separation strongly need to deliberately attend to wellbeing and connect again.

Conclusion

The reviewed literature points to the importance of taking care of educators' wellbeing; particularly during the recent pandemic, we became more acutely aware of the importance of wellbeing. The specific context and history of Singapore and International Schools provide a more comprehensive understanding of the fast-paced environment with high expectations that are a critical factor in international education environments. Similarly, Singapore is a unique country that quickly developed and aims to be global while sitting in a post-colonial structure. I demonstrated the necessary shift toward transformative leadership as a critical piece to match school needs. Transformative leadership is taxing work for educational leaders, who must take care of their wellbeing. School leaders need the capacity and strength to do the work supported in this PAR.

The literature and research on wellbeing is increasing and furthers the study of the need for human attachments and connections to maintain emotional wellbeing. As Baumeister and Leary (1995) present, interactions must be consistent and frequent to create a genuine connection. The specific context of a large, fast-paced school in Singapore illustrates the need for

educational leaders to examine the espoused wellbeing practices further and put them into practice to support themselves and their community to deepen connections. Moreover, the literature supports the importance of teams and the connections necessary for people.

The literature review in Chapter 2 indicates the needs for understanding dynamics among persons on education teams as they engage in wellbeing practices and how those practices might influence connections and increase trusting relationships in international school. Therefore, this PAR study intends to contribute additional insights and findings on how educational leaders to take care of their wellbeing to support their learning community. In Chapter 3, I clarify the PAR study methodology details and explain how the research was conducted.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

International schools worldwide promote wellbeing principles but often do not fully enact those principles. As explained in the previous chapters, educational leaders need to support their own wellbeing so they can, in turn, support their learning community of teachers and students (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). Because educators, teachers, and principals are experiencing job-related stress at twice the rate than other professions (Steiner et al., 2022), educators' professional growth and wellbeing are impacted through burn out from the high levels of emotional and relational stresses (Parker & Martin, 2009). Nurturing the wellbeing of educators is required to manage the demanding "pressure cooker" culture of schools in Singapore (Ng, 2017). Rigorous expectations coupled with the sheer size (e.g., 79 teachers in the middle school) of the international school where I serve as Middle School Principal, make it a challenge to connect and care for one's wellbeing. As stated in the resilience manifesto by Aguilar (2020), taking care of the self is a critical step in taking care of others. In this participatory action research (PAR) project and study, I explored the focus of practice (FoP) on wellbeing practices in an international middle school, which was guided by this overarching question: How do middle school leaders enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections?

In the participatory action research (PAR) project, I aimed to support middle school leadership teams within a large, fast-paced international school in Singapore to deepen connections through practices centered on wellbeing. When considering educational leaders' wellbeing, the metaphor of the "oxygen mask" directions on an airplane is an appropriate analogy. Specifically, the passenger is directed to put the mask on before helping others. If the school leader does not have "oxygen," they will lack the capacity to support wellbeing in the community. I based the PAR project and study on this theory of action (ToA): *If* a middle school

leadership team engages with activities centered on personal and professional wellbeing, *then* the members experience improved wellbeing and deepened connections. I sought to understand how educational leaders (a) engage in wellbeing activities to support themselves as leaders and (b) use wellbeing practices to develop deeper connections. In addition, I sought to understand how facilitating this experience improves my role as a school leader.

In the project and study, I focused on members of a middle school staff in a large high-pressure, international school in Singapore, which has been deeply impacted by the complexities of the pandemic and shifting toward an endemic stage. I invited two groups to engage in this study: (1) the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT), which included two other administrators and myself, who met twice weekly, and (2) the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC), which included other teacher-leaders and teachers (n=8) with the MLT. First, the middle school administrators and I (MLT) concentrated on our wellbeing and how we could transfer practices to the MLC (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Then I studied how the MLT codesigns and facilitates wellbeing practices with the MLC. In both groups, I analyzed how participants deepened their connections.

In this chapter, I outline the methodology and research design of PAR study. I start by describing the research process, including community learning exchange (CLE) principles (Guajardo et al., 2016), followed by the PAR as they relate to the FoP. Next, I present information about the participants, the data collection, and the data analysis process. At the end of this chapter, I present the study's limitations and validity issues. Lastly, I explain the ethical considerations and the steps that I took to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and school.

Qualitative Research Process

In this section, I describe how I used the participatory action research (PAR) processes and the qualitative research design. I used established and respected research methods and actions to support the study through a co-practitioner researcher (CPR) team, which was composed of middle school administrators from the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT). In this study, the CPR team enacted wellbeing practices within the MLT weekly meeting structures and co-facilitated monthly wellbeing sessions with an opt-in Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC) in an international school in Singapore. In the following sections, I describe the components of the study: participatory action research (PAR), improvement science, and community learning exchange (CLE). Lastly, I present the role of praxis and how it relates to the PAR and research questions.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

In this study, I used participatory action research (PAR), a form of qualitative research. Participatory action research is unique in that there is active participation from individuals within the context of the specific study (Herr & Anderson, 2014). PAR varies from traditional research in several ways, one primary difference being that it is not conducted by outside researchers, but rather by individuals within the context of the study. Specifically, in PAR, as the researcher practitioner, I addressed issues specific to the context intended to be improved (Foulger, 2010). I was the lead researcher in this study and worked with a small group of middle school administrators, who are part of the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT), and the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC). I invited participants to be open to engage in activities and practices and be reflective in the process which is an important part of the PAR process (Herr &

Anderson, 2014). In addition to engaging in wellbeing activities, the CPR team provided vital member checks and inputs as I collected and analyzed data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

As hunter et al. (2013) explain, action research as activist research is helpful in educational contexts because practitioners can intentionally think about the equitable practices they need to improve. In the PAR process, I engaged the MLT and MLC, those closest to the issues of educator wellbeing. As Guajardo et al. (2016) purport, people affected the most by the issues at hand are most capable of deriving solutions. Therefore, the CPR team engaged and practiced wellbeing for themselves and include the MLC in identifying culturally inclusive wellbeing practices. The CPR team and I examined how the wellbeing practices influenced connectedness on the team. The PAR study included elements of improvement science through cycles of inquiry.

Improvement Science

In the PAR study, several components of improvement science, particularly the process for the cycles of inquiry, were critical (Bryk et al., 2015). Improvement science is used to improve schools by exploring positive and negative elements within an organization, and then using strategies and variations within the system to improve (Lewis, 2015). The use of improvement science practices and iterative cycles of data collection and analysis proves to meaningfully affect organizations (Lewis, 2015). The CPR team used principles of improvement science through the PAR to study how we enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections. As the CPR members incorporated wellbeing practices into their regular routines, the team reflected and adjusted toward clear aims. In addition to improvement science-based methodologies, I augmented the PAR process with inputs from the community learning exchange principles and methodology.

Community Learning Exchange (CLE) Principles

Community learning exchanges (CLEs) support the facilitation of discourse necessary to change the practices of those closest to the issue (Militello et al., 2009). I relied on the following CLE axioms (Guajardo et al., 2016) in the PAR study:

1. Learning and leadership are dynamic social processes.

2. Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes.

3. The people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns.

4. Crossing boundaries enriches the development and educational process.

5. Hope and change are built on assets and dreams of locals and their communities.

Due to the collaborative processes of CLEs, individuals tend to be open with the group as they are keen for action and change (Guajardo et al., 2016). CLEs facilitate a high level of engagement and power to people since individuals understand that their input can affect collective group actions (Guajardo et al., 2016). Therefore, CLE-based processes enabled me to collect data and reflect in meaningful, inclusive ways.

Using the CLE axioms, I invited the MLT and MLC to explore the meaning of the school's enacted wellbeing principles. The Middle School Leadership Team (MLT) and the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC) often incorporate wellbeing practices with their students, but do not incorporate educator wellbeing into their day-to-day practices. Additionally, as the learning community is a busy place and has been physically separated for an extended period due to COVID-19, as a part of the project and study, I became more intentional as the principal in providing sessions in which individuals will be able to connect with each other. I

used the CLE axioms to create safe spaces for the MLT and MLC to be vulnerable in enacting wellbeing practice and deepen connections.

The Role of Praxis in PAR Research

Praxis, as defined by Freire (1972) includes reflection and action. However, the deeper form of reflection that is committed to equity and social justice is an adjustment and a process we must undertake in order to address our work. Edwards-Groves (2008) defines praxis as "not static or an endpoint goal, but rather an on-going dynamic and transformative process" (p. 140). In the PAR study, I intended to help the educational leaders and teacher leaders within the middle school tend to their wellbeing and deepen connections among the team. The MLT (as co-practitioner researchers/CPR) and Middle School Cohort (MLC) implemented various wellbeing activities and reflect on which activities positively affected their wellbeing and connections. I wrote reflective memos, gathered artifacts from the CLEs, and conducted "Stop, Start, and Continue" interviews, and, as a participant, wrote reflection activities with the CPR team and the MLC. The CPR team used the data from participant inputs to reflect upon and inform actions. In the process, the CPR team and I challenged traditional, dominant perspectives of wellbeing and took appropriate steps ensuring the inclusion of specific identities in the practice of wellbeing and connections. Hence, the role of praxis in the PAR study played a vital role in the process.

Research Questions

The research questions guided the data collection and analysis, with the overarching question of: How do middle school leaders enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections? As presented above, in the PAR study, I gathered and analyzed data in the specific context and worked with middle school leaders in an international school to draw conclusions. I used the participatory action research process to respond to these questions:

1. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?

    a. Within the leadership team?

    b. Within the leadership cohort?

2. To what extent do practices centered on wellbeing influence connectedness?

    a. Within the leadership team?

    b. Within the leadership cohort?

3. How do I transform my leadership practices through the study of educator wellbeing?

The questions supported the PAR aims to identify and expanded the middle school leaders' engagement of wellbeing practices to increase connectedness. Throughout the study, the MLT, MLC, and I identified growth areas and practices to support wellbeing. The research questions helped the MLT, MLC, and I to better understand why wellbeing is critical as leaders and teacher-leaders. I collaboratively examined what wellbeing activities work to support the MLT and the MLC to deepen connections. I examined the espoused wellbeing practices, clarify the limitations of school structures, and practice various wellbeing activities with the MLT and MLC. Additionally, I expected the research design will help to facilitate deeper connections between the MLT and the MLC and among individual members of groups. Table 3 describes the activities and time periods in the action research cycle. The CPR team and I co-created and co-designed activities during the two cycles of inquiry in the PAR study based upon reflection, followed by action. Additionally, I used the two cycles of inquiry to learn and adjust the PAR as necessary.

Table 3

Timeline for the Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Time Period	Activities
PAR Cycle One *Fall 2022*	Facilitated co-practitioner researcher (CPR) meetings with the middle school administrators (MLT) using community learning exchange (CLE) protocols and tested out wellbeing learning practices on a weekly basis
	Consult and reflect with CPR/MLT
	CPR/MLT and I co-designed and co-facilitated professional learning sessions with the Middle School Leadership Cohort (n= 8) focused on personal and professional growth
	Wrote reflective memos
	Conducted "Stop, Start, and Continue" follow-up interviews
	Used qualitative data to document wellbeing practices and determine connectedness based on participant interviews and meeting notes
PAR Cycle Two *Spring 2023*	Used information from Cycle One to inform personal and professional wellbeing practices
	CPR/MLT and I co-designed and co-facilitated professional learning sessions with the Middle School Leadership Cohort (n= 8) focused on personal and professional growth
	Continued to utilize "Stop, Start, and Continue" follow-up interviews
	Conducted member checks with the CPR team to ensure accuracy and inform data analysis
	Analyzed data and evidence collected through the CPR/MLT and MLC meetings and interviews

Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

In this section, I provide the rationale for the participants involved in the project and study of wellbeing. Then I explain the data collection and analysis process for the research study. Finally, I provide information about the data sources and considerations for the data analysis.

Participants

I invited primary and secondary participants to engage in this PAR study. In the following sections, I describe the characteristics of the participants and the process of sampling and selection for participants in the two groups. Then I discuss the roles and responsibilities of the CPR group.

Primary and Secondary Participants

The primary participants in the PAR were the middle school administrators who were part of the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT). Possible participants from the MLT included me (the middle school principal), the vice-principal of pastoral care, and the vice-principal of academics. The primary participants, referred to throughout this study as the MLT, met weekly and engaged in the examination and practice of wellbeing. I provided the primary participants with detailed information about their role, function, and expectations (Appendix D). The primary participants joined the CPR team and worked with me to co-design and co-facilitate wellbeing sessions with a secondary group of participants.

The secondary participants were middle school leaders and teacher-leaders who opted in to be part of the Middle Leadership School Cohort (MLC). Eight middle school teachers and leaders, including staff from diverse backgrounds, volunteered to be part of the cohort which focused on transformative leadership and wellbeing. The MLC utilized community learning exchange axioms and practiced wellbeing monthly through sessions facilitated by the primary

participants/CPR team. Secondary participants (MLC) signed adult consent forms prior to the start of the PAR study (Appendix D). I clearly communicated the details related to the study's purpose, aims, theory of action, responsibilities, and time commitments prior to the study's commencement.

Co-practitioner Researcher (CPR)

The primary participants in the CPR team were members of the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT). I was especially interested in examining how middle school administrators put on their "oxygen masks" and practice wellbeing before co-designing sessions focused on wellbeing with the secondary MLC participant group. I was the main facilitator and researcher for this project and study and invited two vice-principals as co-practitioner researchers due to their first-hand experience and knowledge of the school's leadership context. The primary participants were aware of the espoused wellbeing practices and understood the related assets and challenges. For these reasons, the CPR team was a valuable data source for this study. As the lead researcher, I facilitated the activities, collected, and analyzed the data to present to the CPR team, and ensured that periodic member checks were completed. I engaged the CPR to understand the FoP for this study.

A unique asset to participatory action research is the involvement of participants closest to the issue and the fact that the participants are directly connected to the process (Hale, 2001). I collected and analyzed data from the CPR participants through the weekly activities within the MLT meetings. I analyzed artifacts used by the CPR team as they use CLE principles to co-design and co-facilitate wellbeing activities for themselves and the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC). Additionally, I collected and analyzed data from the Middle School Leadership

Cohort (MLC) sessions focused on personal and professional growth and conducted member

checks with the CPR team members to ensure validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Sampling

Purposeful sampling of participants is vital for PAR. Some members of the CPR team

had extensive middle school experience in rigorous international schools. The two vice-

principals who chose to participate brought varied levels of experience in the school; for

example, a new vice-principal of academics started in Fall 2022, while in contrast, the vice-

principal of pastoral care had been an educational leader at the school for four years The

inclusion of the secondary participant group through the monthly Middle School Leadership

Cohort (MLC) was an intentional way of ensuring that teacher-leaders of diverse backgrounds

had an opportunity to participate in the study. During the 2021-22 school year, an informal group

of teacher-leaders met on Fridays to focus on wellbeing to forge relationships and support each

other's emotional and mental health. I invited members of the previous MLC and teacher-leaders

of various specific identities to increase the level of diversity within the participants.

Patton (1990) explains the importance of using purposeful sampling when designing

qualitative studies due to often small samples and selecting "information-rich cases" (p. 169).

Patton states that "Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about

issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful* sampling"

(p.169). The criteria for inclusion on the CPR team was:

- Middle school administrator

- Member of the middle school leadership team

- Experience with middle school students and educators

- Available to co-design and co-facilitate monthly meeting time

- Willingness to engage and reflect on weekly wellbeing practices

The MLT met weekly for meetings with an ongoing agenda and minutes driven by the three-year Middle School Strategic Plan, the schoolwide Strategic Plan, and the K-12 Director of Teaching and Learning Strategic Plan. An essential part of the meeting time was to plan and discuss all aspects of the Middle School, including student and staff wellbeing. The MLT meeting time was well-established, and due to the size of the school and pressing needs, we often did not have adequate time to discuss all the items on the meeting agenda. Since the sample size of the CPR team was small due to the limited number of middle school administrators who are part of the MLT, the secondary participant group provided additional sources of data that included the experiences of teacher-leaders and wellbeing practices.

Data Collection

I used multiple sources to collect data for the study. The data assisted the CPR team in better understanding wellbeing activities and which practices influence connectedness. The CPR team was essential to the research design as they reflected and provided data on enacting wellbeing practices regularly. Additionally, members of the CPR team modeled wellbeing practices, and co-designed and co-facilitated monthly wellbeing activities with the MLC. I conducted member checks at the end of each cycle of inquiry to allow participants to check for understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I linked the research questions to sources of data collection and the source of triangulation in Table 4. The data include community learning exchange-based (CLE) artifacts, field notes, CLE-based meeting notes, reflective memos, and "Stop, Start, and Continue" follow-up interview notes.

Table 4

Research Questions, Data Artifacts, and Data Analysis including Triangulation

Research Question	Data Collection Activities (Artifacts)	Data Analysis including Triangulation PAR Cycle One Fall 2022	Data Analysis including Triangulation PAR Cycle Two Spring 2023

1. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?
  a. Within the leadership team?
  b. Within the leadership cohort?
	CPR Group Meetings (Meeting notes, reflective memos)
	
	MSLC Meetings (Meeting notes, reflective memos)
	
	"Stop, Start, and Continue" Follow-up Interviews (Interview notes)
		Cycle One Timeline
		
		Participant reflections
		
		Collect data
		
		Continue to collect data
		
		Analyze qualitative data by coding
			Cycle Two Timeline
			
			Review data analysis from Cycle One with CPR Group
			
			Conduct member checks with participants to verify accuracy of data interpretation
			
			Collect data

2. To what extent do practices centered on wellbeing influence connectedness?
  a. Within the leadership team?
  b. Within the leadership cohort?
	CPR Group Meetings (Meeting notes, reflective memos)
	
	MSLC Meetings (Meeting notes, reflective memos)
	
	"Stop, Start, and Continue" Interviews (Interview notes)
		Determine Emergent Categories after sorting codes	Analyze initial sets of qualitative data by coding
			
			Analyze final sets of qualitative data by coding
			
			Determine Emergent Themes after sorting codes and identifying categories

3. How do I transform my leadership practices through the study of educator wellbeing?	Self-reflection (Reflective memos) "Stop, Start, and Continue" question (Reflective memo)		Post-Cycle Two: Review Cycle One and Cycle Two Data to determine findings

Community Learning Exchange Artifacts

The CPR team and I facilitated community learning exchanges-based (CLE) gatherings with the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC). Precisely, the CPR team reflected on their wellbeing practice-based experiences related to the study. I collected and coded the various artifacts based on the work of the CPR team and the sessions with the MLC. Due to the active participation of the CPR team and middle school leaders from the MLC, the artifacts from the CLEs were timely, relevant, and useful to the study.

Meeting Field Notes

During the PAR, I kept and organized meeting field notes, referred to as meeting notes, as I observed participants during the MLT and MLC sessions. Patton (1990) states that documenting everything is impossible when designing research. Therefore, I learned to make decisions about what to document as I used descriptive field notes. Patton (1990) reinforces the importance of not determining what to document in advance, yet to be purposeful and take advantage of opportunities when documenting field notes rich in contextual data for analysis. The meeting field notes allowed me to code as I made sense of the data as the data related to the study (Saldaña, 2016). Furthermore, as Patton (1990) notes, as the researcher, I thoroughly explained the processes and decisions made during the study, including how the data was interpreted and reported.

Reflective Memos

I used reflective memos to document what I observed, reflected on what had been observed, how the experience connected to research, and applied the reflection (Saldaña, 2016). Writing reflective memos was an important part of the cycle of inquiry and a tool for me to reflect on the coding process to identify the emergent categories in Cycle One and themes in

Cycle Two. Specifically, I used the Kolb (1984) cycle of the experiential learning process to capture concrete observations and shift to more abstract thinking, particularly how it affected changing certain behaviors.

Interview Notes

I used interview notes as a data collection tool in the study. The CPR team provided vital information and personal perspectives throughout the PAR about what wellbeing practices work for them and how they influence connectedness among the team. Due to the personal nature of the work, the interview notes were essential. The interview notes were used according to confidentiality standards. The use of the "Stop, Start, and Continue" Questioning Protocol supported participants to process and reflect on their experiences related to wellbeing.

Data Analysis

During the two cycles of inquiry, I used the coding process described by Saldaña (2016). As the lead researcher, I collected the data for analysis and organized the data sets to start the coding processes, including process coding, values coding, initial coding, and narrative or descriptive coding. In PAR Cycle One, I created categories from the codes by sorting and organizing the data sets. The data collected from PAR Cycle One ultimately informed the activities to stop, start, and continue in PAR Cycle Two of the inquiry cycle (Bryk et al., 2015).

In PAR Cycle Two, I identified emergent themes in the PAR to share with the CPR team. To ensure triangulation, I ensured member checks were conducted with the CPR team to avoid misinterpretation. The CPR team also provided input when analyzing the data on which wellbeing activities can be regularly used to support the individuals and the team to deepen connections. I shared the data with the CPR team to analyze the data to determine which

wellbeing activities to enact and deepen connections among the team. The iterative process of examining the data informed the educational leader's actions.

Study Considerations: Limitations, Validity, and Confidentiality and Ethics

I used Saldaña's (2016) framework for data collection and analysis. During the research, I developed codes and categories. Themes emerged from the codes and categories. From the themes and data collection process, I developed findings to inform a theory of action. The depth of research, including the coding process, contributed to the validity of the research (Saldaña, 2016). External validity is the truth in real life and internal validity is the truth in a study (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). Once the internal validity has been established, the researcher can then examine the relevance of the research to other contexts. Next, I consider the limitations in qualitative research.

Limitations

First, the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT) needed to define wellbeing for themselves and the team to identify assets and barriers. Once wellbeing practices were introduced and modeled by the MLT, they were more easily identified within the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC). The CPR team and I aimed to identify certain wellbeing practices that the team regularly incorporated, then we examined how these practices influence connectedness within the team. Additionally, the CPR team and the MLC engaged in the wellbeing practices and adjusted them to their context and style as needed. The MLT team authentically incorporated the wellbeing practices in a meaningful way, to address the equity issues of the espoused wellbeing principles.

Additionally, although the MLT meets frequently, a specific challenge was that our meetings were often full of items related to the greater school wide initiatives. Hence, the CPR

team and I needed to be intentional about wellbeing practices. As the lead researcher and the Middle School Principal, I was the participants' supervisor. Therefore, I needed to intentionally work with the participants to mitigate impartiality and bias (Queirós et al., 2017). The context is not controlled, and I used data collection tools to ensure the information from participants was included in the study.

Another limitation of the study was the scope of the study. I conducted the study in the middle school with just middle school leaders and not schoolwide. Therefore, other data may pertain to the PAR study but was not collected. I worked with the CPR team to analyze and reflect on the data that pertains to the research questions and FoP. As the lead researcher, I informed the Head of Campus of the PAR study and procured approval before the research. Additionally, I periodically updated the Head of Campus to facilitate transparency through the study. Before the study, I shared the aim of the PAR study and sought interest from middle school leaders. Additionally, I informed all participants in writing that their participation was voluntary and that they could leave anytime they felt necessary. The participants completed the appropriate consent form, presented in Appendices C and D.

Validity

Creswell and Creswell (2018) stress the importance of the researcher taking steps in qualitative research to ensure the data are valid. Specifically, the researchers stressed the importance of following the steps in the research design process and checking for accuracy in the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As the lead researcher of the participatory action research, I openly communicated with the CPR team as a measure to protect from bias and malpractice (hunter et al., 2013).

Internal Validity

As Patino and Ferreira (2018) present, the internal validity depends on the extent to which the findings are true and useful to the context of the study. Using the participatory action research (PAR) model is exceptionally helpful as the research is implemented within the study context. Additionally, by using the PAR model for the research study, the participants were within the context, and they knew the issues since they lived them, so they were best suited to address the research questions (Guajardo et al., 2016; Koirala-Azwed & Fuentes, 2016). I used the various data collection tools to ensure the study's validity, but, as the lead researcher, I could not remove my experience as a leader and teacher in international education from the study. Therefore, to uphold the study's validity, I documented the process through reflective memos and used them with other corroborating data to justify emergent themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I determined the emerging themes by using multiple forms of data collection, including CLE-based artifacts, interview notes, and member checks (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The multiple sources of data and the inquiry cycles included the CPR and MLC input, feedback, and reflections, help to unearth and better understand the FoP through the analysis of the evidence (Queirós et al., 2017). The limitation of time for the study was a factor that required that I collect various data and keep communication open with the CPR team and the MLC to ensure that we maintained relational trust as the participants focused on new approaches to support the FoP (hunter et al., 2013). I considered ways to foster relational trust while prioritizing accuracy when I coded the data, determined emerging themes, and shared the findings with the CPR team to interpret the data collaboratively. I invited the CPR team to reflect and decide on the next steps as co-researcher practitioners.

External Validity

A limitation to the PAR study was its specificity to middle school leaders within the school; therefore, conclusions and findings were relevant to the specific context and the MLT and MLC members, and potentially less so outside of the team. Regardless, as the MLT and MLC interacted with all members of the middle school community, including staff, teachers, students, parents, and other educational leaders in the school, the evidence and data are applicable schoolwide. Specifically, the PAR study may affect policy decisions at the school level and offer ways to address policies in other international settings. Therefore, to add validity to the PAR study, I analyzed the process and findings of the study thoroughly using qualitative research tools that helped me to understand how the study findings might transfer to other international school settings. Specifically, in this research study, I wanted to enact wellbeing practices for the adults in a demanding international school environment, which can inform other schools and offer ideas for future research. The methods I used to collect and analyze the data contributed to the external validity of the study and supported trustworthiness, which contributes to the study's validity (Gerdes & Conn, 2001). Next, I ensured confidentiality and considered the ethical implications. The methods I used as the lead researcher and with the CPR team, which included careful documentation, increase the PAR study's internal and external validity and draw conclusions to inform wellbeing activities in a high-performing school.

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

I adhered to all Internal Review Board (IRB) guidelines for the qualitative study. As the lead researcher, I used the East Carolina University's IRB protocols for this study involving participants. I used the IRB standards to ensure participant confidentiality is maintained using pseudonyms. Additionally, all participants involved in this study were informed that their

decision to participate was voluntary, and they were asked to give informed consent. I paid

special attention to maintain the confidentiality of all participants due to the small sample size

that may make the artifacts used for data collection recognizable to a greater audience outside of

this study. As the lead researcher, I considered the importance of building relational trust among

the MLT and MLC and took steps to avoid research bias.

In addition to following IRB guidelines for qualitative research, I completed the CITI

training (Appendix B). Appendix C is evidence that this research study was approved by the

international school where the study will take place, and Appendix D is the consent form for all

participants. The data from this study and the participants adheres to the confidentiality in

compliance with the East Carolina University Internal Review Board (IRB) requirements for the

prescribed period of three years.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the research design of how I used PAR to support middle

school leaders to enact wellbeing practices and increase connectedness among the team. The

research design supported an inquiry to determine: (1) to what extent do participants enact

practices centered on wellbeing; (2) to what extent do practices centered on wellbeing influence

connectedness; and (3) how I transform my own leadership practices through the study of

educator wellbeing.

CHAPTER 4: PAR CYCLE ONE

In the participatory action research (PAR) project and study, I focused on enacting wellbeing practices to deepen connections among a middle school leadership team by using experiential design and feedback processes with a small co-practitioner researcher (CPR) team and a Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC). During discussions, I utilized Community Learning Exchange Axioms (CLE) to ensure I equitably included the participants' voices during the MLC gatherings. I selected wellbeing practices with the input of the CPR group, and their feedback informed the co-design of the MLC sessions. In PAR Cycle One, the CPR team and I experienced and reflected upon activities and processes within a small administrative leadership team and with the MLC to examine the research queries: (1) To what extent did participants enact wellbeing practices? and (2) To what extent did the practices centered on wellbeing influence connectedness? In this chapter, I describe the PAR context, the CPR and MLC teams, and how I collected and analyzed data for PAR Cycle One. Subsequently, I explore emergent categories that informed critical points of understanding in relation to the aim of the study's research questions. Lastly, I reflect on my leadership and explain how the findings from PAR Cycle One informed the next cycle's inquiry process.

PAR Context

The study focused on how leadership members might address and alleviate the multitude of stressors within an international middle school community by concentrating on wellbeing and connection. Relocating during the COVID-19 pandemic, I sustained personal and professional strains, which helped me reflect upon the importance of leadership as a support for staff wellbeing. One year prior to PAR Cycle One, I transitioned into the middle school principal position; however, due to strict government policies, I was entirely virtual and worked remotely

from another country during the onboarding phase, which made it difficult to connect with the middle school staff in a deeper, more meaningful way. With the commencement of PAR Cycle One, I quickly learned that staff was feeling overwhelmed by the strict policies imposed by the government during the pandemic and they struggled to connect due to the high demands of the international school. Next, I explain the context of this study, including the place and people involved in this cycle.

An International School Setting

I conducted the project and study in the middle school of a well-known, established international school in Singapore. Admission to the middle school is challenging due to the small number of spots. The middle school has approximately 640 students. The diverse middle school student demographics align with the entire school's overall student demographics (Figure 6). While 55% students have various Asian nationalities, nearly 70% staff are of British, American, Canadian, and Australian backgrounds. A small portion of individuals (5% students and 6% staff) identify as Singapore nationals, and the rest have transitioned in from different geographical locations.

As the middle school principal, I support the wellbeing and professional duties of nearly 80 staff members. During the 2021-22 school year, there was a higher-than-normal staff turnover rate of 12-13%, along with strict COVID guidelines that kept staff physically separate or in small groups all year. As a result, some members had yet to learn each colleague by name. There were also a number of administrative changes, with a high level of fluctuation in the middle school leadership, for four consecutive years. Therefore, understanding the context of this study, which examined how wellbeing practices influenced a stronger connection among the middle school staff, is relevant.
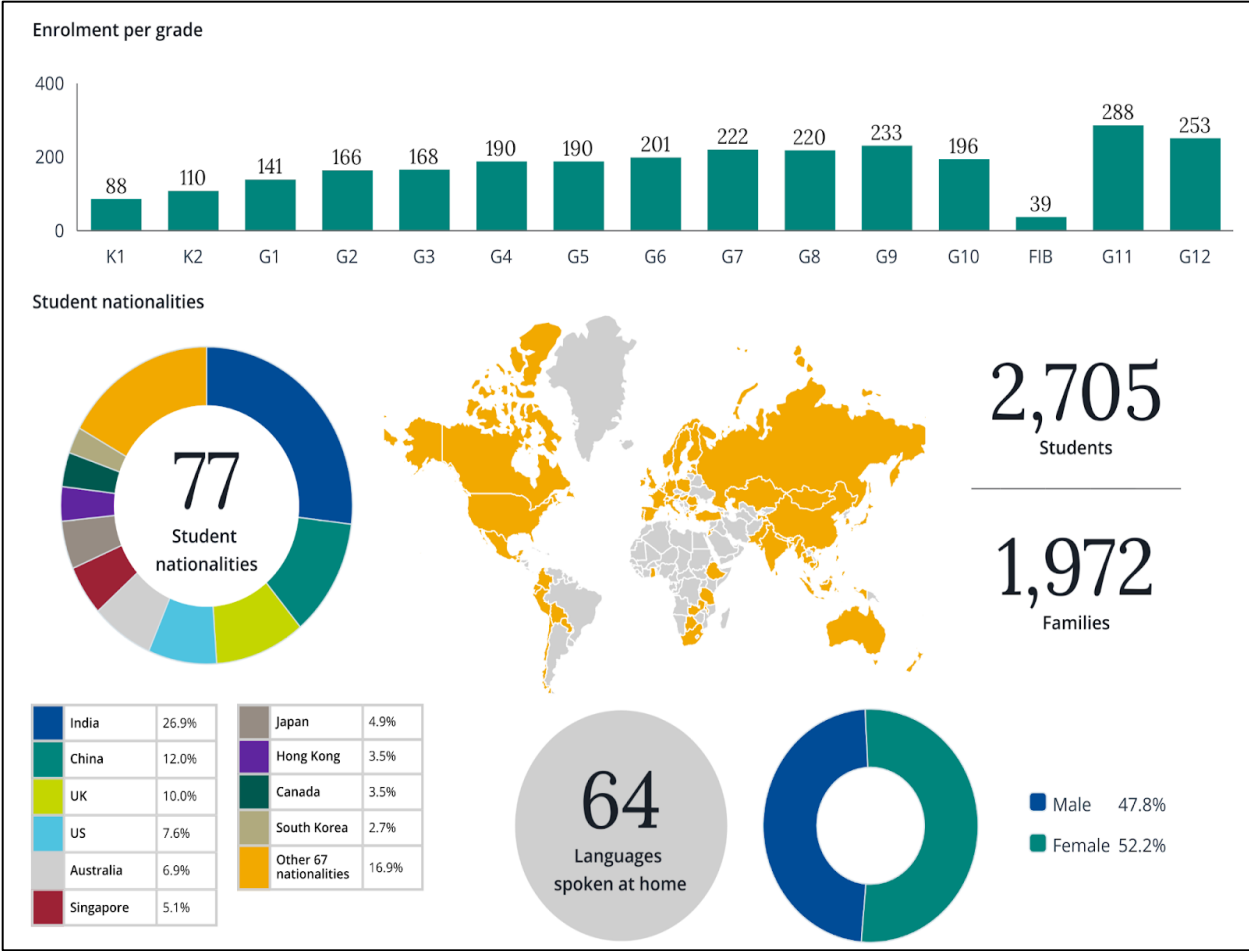
Figure 6. Demographics of the student body.

PAR Cycle One Participants

Two groups are involved in the study: the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT), which includes two vice-principals and me as the lead researcher, who met twice weekly, and the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC), which includes other teacher-leaders and new teachers who met approximately every other month (n=5) with the MLT. One of the first and most important tasks of PAR Cycle One was to finalize the co-practitioner researcher (CPR) team. As the school year started, I spoke to the two middle school vice-principals, one returning and one new vice-principal, to make them aware of the research project and study. I invited both vice-principals to participate because they are closest to the issues related to administrative decision-making. The vice-principals needed to tend to their wellbeing because they onboard new staff and support returning staff who felt disconnected due to the pandemic and the strict guidelines within Singapore. The vice-principals were eager to join the study, learn together, and be a part of the co-practitioner team (see Table 5).

The MLC consisted of recently hired teachers and the administrative MLT who were interested in joining the study. The teachers who provided consent to join the team included Teacher S, a new part-time humanities and SEED (Social, Environmental, Entrepreneurship Development) teacher; a second-year instructional coach, Instructional Coach, Teacher E; a new design technology teacher, Teacher T; a new learning support teacher, Teacher L; and a second-year math teacher, Teacher A (see Table 5).

PAR Cycle One Process

PAR Cycle One occurred in one academic semester (Fall 2022) and included meetings with the CPR team and one gathering with the MLC in the middle of the academic semester 2022. At the start of the semester, I finalized the CPR team with the two other middle school

Table 5

MLT (Middle Leadership Team) and MLC (Middle School Leadership Cohort)

Participant	Characteristics
Middle School Leadership Team (MLT)	
Admin/Teacher H MLT	Vice Principal of Academics, English and Drama teacher, international educator for twenty years, mother tongue English, new to the school, two children going to college overseas for first year, British, and active in Yoga
Admin/Teacher R MLT	Vice Principal of Pastoral Care, French teacher, international educator for over twenty years, mother tongue French, medium term at the school, three children - two graduated college and one in high school, French, and active runner
Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC) Team	
Teacher S MLC	New to the school, part-time, lived in Singapore for several years, taught for over ten years, two children that attend another international school
Teacher E MLC	Second year at the school, lived in Singapore for several years, taught for over ten years, two children that attend another international school, Australian, Instructional Coach
Teacher T MLC	New the school, first international teaching experience, taught for over ten years, two young children not yet in school, British
Teacher L MLC	New to the school, returned to international teaching after being in the USA for one year due to COVID, taught for almost twenty years, one child that attends the school
Teacher A MLC	Second year at the school, lived in Hong Kong for several years, new to Singapore, taught for over ten years, two children that attend another international school, Indian

leadership team members. The small group collectively met twice weekly for the regularly scheduled meeting times and experienced a new wellbeing practice once a week.

CPR Meeting Process

Before starting with the CPR team, I reviewed the PAR timeline, activities, Community Learning Exchange Axioms (CLE), and data collection processes to build a shared understanding of the project and study. After reviewing the research questions, the CPR team and I discussed how we would experiment with various wellbeing practices at the beginning of our weekly Thursday meetings. I provided all CPR team members with a wellbeing notebook stating they could use it for notes, drawings, and reflections throughout the process. The CPR team felt that starting both weekly meetings with a wellbeing practice was beneficial. Due to the eagerness to try new wellbeing practices, I kept a slide deck of the process to help document the activities and used the slide deck as a resource to house all the wellbeing practices.

The CPR team and I focused on building trust and connections in the CPR meetings while utilizing the wellbeing practices as a group. The physical nature played a role as I set up the meeting space in a circle formation. The use of a circle was chosen intentionally as it has shown benefits within relationships by building community by creating a safe, trusting space where voices can be shared and the power is shared (Camilleri & Bezzina, 2022; Pranis et al., 2003; Pranis & Zehr, 2005). In addition to keeping a record of each meeting's wellbeing practice, the CPR team discussed the importance of reflecting once a month to consider three questions:

1. What is a wellbeing practice we should "stop" doing? Why?

2. What is a wellbeing practice we should "start" doing? Why?

3. What is a wellbeing practice we should "continue" doing? Why?

The participants responded to a monthly survey via Google form of the three questions.

Wellbeing practices within small groups promote meaningful discussion of relevant topics. Before the CPR team met with the larger MLC, some tensions and relational challenges surfaced with the Middle Leaders, the Heads of Department, and Heads of Grade. Therefore, the MLT decided to incorporate restorative practices from the professional learning that several middle school staff and leadership had experienced. In addition to the CPR team's wellbeing practices, we used the circle structures to promote mindfulness. MLT provided a listening space for the broader group of middle school teachers to voice struggles they had experienced within the school system. Staff shared pointed feedback directed at the MLT, particularly Admin/Teacher H, the newest staff member. During the circles, I listened to staff who voiced their sentiments about how I had asked for participants in this study and the tensions related to volunteering. Instead of moving forward with the slated meeting agenda, we paused and prioritized the restorative circle.

After the CPR (or MLT) team met for nearly two months, we co-designed a meeting with the larger Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC). I provided a draft agenda to discuss with the CPR team. The team felt that a good portion of the first gathering should explain the meeting process, including the use of community learning exchange practices. The CPR team asked me to facilitate the first MLC gathering and identify top wellbeing practices for the first gathering. The first MLC gathering included the overview of the process, CLE axioms, research and guidelines around using circles for opening and closing circles, wellbeing practices; the secondary focus was on a personal narrative.

Like the CPR team, I gave MLC members a wellbeing journal to keep track of notes or drawings. The MLC session was emotion-filled. The session's open dialogue was highlighted by personal motivations for participating in the group and personal narratives about their kitchen

table based on the selected discussion protocol and what about the meeting was useful. The session ended with each participant sharing at least one significant enduring understanding generated from the contributions of others. In addition to gathering data from the CPR (MLT) and MLC, I wrote reflective memos and conducted interviews with the CPR Team members and continued to have conversations with my ECU coach and classmates throughout the semester (see Table 6 for PAR Cycle One process).

Next, I provide a detailed account of the various activities, including the data collection and analysis in the first PAR cycle. The details give a more in-depth account of the process and how emergent categories were generated from interviews, reflective memos, CPR (MLT), and MLC group gatherings.

Data Collection and Coding Processes

Throughout PAR Cycle One, I collected data from the Google form feedback, field notes, reflective memos, and interviews. I included various data forms and collated them to build a codebook to analyze what happened during PAR Cycle One. I wrote reflective memos throughout the semester after CPR or other meetings. I incorporated thoughts or experiences from other middle school meetings related to wellbeing practices or connecting through circles, restorative or relational. The ongoing CPR/MLC Process slide deck and reflective memos served as a running record of my process, which helped me to reflect upon my leadership practices and provide reflexivity to the research.

After a few weeks, I noticed and inquired as to why the other CPR members were not using their journals. The two CPR members stated that due to our small group size, they felt the journaling took away from the process and did not feel authentic to use them. I took their data collection design feedback into consideration and learned that the interviews provided ample

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Table 6

PAR Cycle One Data Collection

Research Question	Data Collection Activities	Evidence
1. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?	Co-practitioner Researcher Group Meetings	• Meeting notes • Reflective memos • Field notes
a. Within the leadership team? b. Within the leadership cohort?	Middle School Leaders Cohort Meetings	• Meeting notes • Reflective memos • Field notes
	"Stop, Start, and Continue" Google form and interview protocol	• Google form • Interview notes
2. To what extent do practices centered on wellbeing influence connectedness?	Co-practitioner Researcher Group Meetings	• Meeting notes • Reflective memos • Field notes
a. Within the leadership team? b. Within the leadership cohort?	Middle School Leaders Cohort Meetings	• Meeting notes • Reflective memos • Field notes
	"Stop, Start, and Continue" Google form and interview protocol	• Google form • Interview notes
3. How do I transform my leadership practices through the study of educator wellbeing?	Self-reflection	• Reflective memos
	"Stop, Start, and Continue" Google form	• Reflective memos

data. After collecting and triangulating data, I coded the data using the method that Saldaña (2016) refers to as exploratory coding, looking for patterns and similarities of names of codes. Next, I created a codebook based on a natural separation aligned with the two research questions. I then completed the second round of inductive coding with the assistance of the ECU coach, and we calibrated the grain size of the codes. After this, I adjusted the codebook according to the count for the codes that frequently appeared in the data. I saw patterns emerge while coding the data. From the second coding round, I sorted codes into categories (see Table 7).

Emergent Categories

Based on the PAR Cycle One data, I determined two emergent categories: wellbeing practices and connection. During the PAR Cycle One, the CPR team and I incorporated wellbeing practices in our weekly meetings and during the MLC gatherings and then reflected on what impacted our wellbeing and connectedness as a CPR team. The two emergent categories (Figure 7) included data collected from the CPR teams, MLC gatherings, interviews, field notes, and reflective memos; the categories are aligned with the research questions:

1. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?

2. To what extent do practices centered on wellbeing influence connectedness?

Wellbeing Practices

Wellbeing practices are vital for school leaders in stressful roles with high expectations to develop resiliency (Aguilar, 2018; Wells & Klocko, 2018). Over half of the evidence in PAR Cycle One is related to wellbeing practices. The incorporation of wellbeing practices into the MLT's weekly meeting supported our team collectively and individually. Once the MLT team started to experience wellbeing practices in our small team, they started to share them with the MLC and the larger teams within the middle school. Quinlan and Hone

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Table 7

PAR Cycle One Data

Category	Subcategory (Frequency)	Codes (Frequency)
Wellbeing Practices (56) 52%	Centering Activities (32) 30%	Breathing (10) Pause (10) Being Present (6) Reflective (5) Subtract (1)
	Holistic Space (15) 14%	Share (6) Psychological Safety (5) Challenges (2) Emotional Intelligence (1) Integral (1)
	Emotions (9) 8%	Positivity (6) Struggling (2) Brave (1)
Connection (51) 48%	With Others (43) 40%	Safe Spaces (17) Strengthened Connections (10) Structure (8) Building Culture (5) Communication (3)
	Within Self (8) 7%	Leadership (4) Personal Experiences (4)
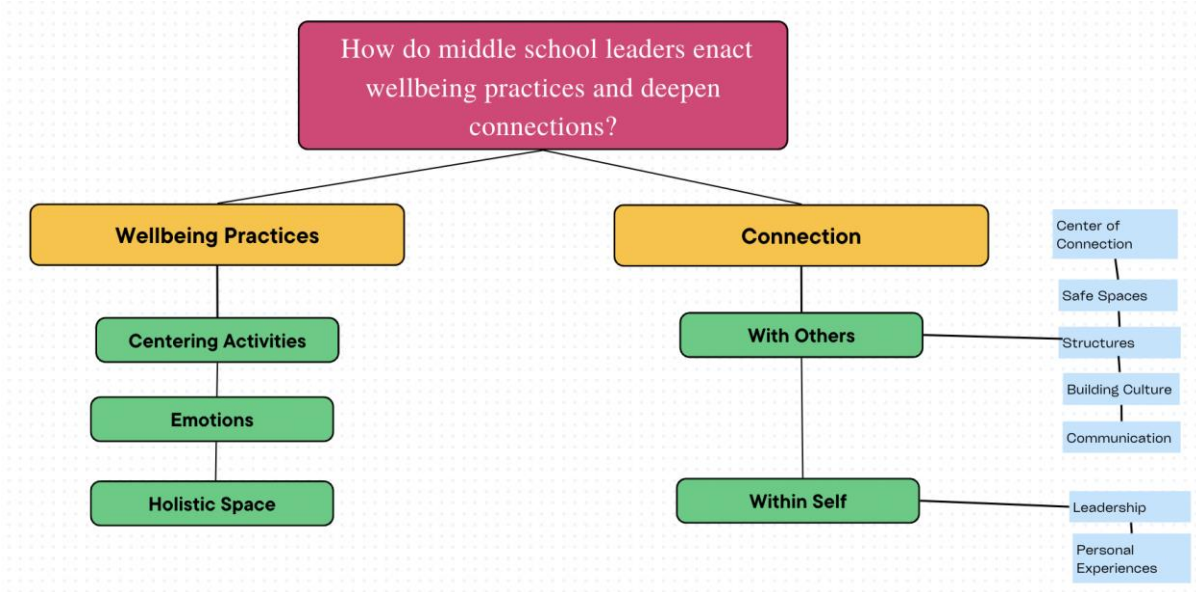
Figure 7. Data collection from PAR Cycle One.

(2020) discuss the importance of wellbeing strategies in an educational setting:

> As educators doing some of the most complex work on our community, we are the
> ones that need to build our capacity to self-regulate, our ability to form and maintain
> healthy connections, and to instill a deep understanding of wellbeing practices in our
> daily lives. (p. 290)

In the PAR Cycle One emergent themes, I identified subcategories and present the analysis of the three subcategories of wellbeing practices present in PAR Cycle One: centering activities, holistic spaces, and emotions. The previous Table 7 shows the frequency of codes within the subcategories for the category "Wellbeing Practices."

Centering Activities

In the first subcategory, centering activities (frequency of 32/56 instances, or 57%), four codes were prevalent in the various pieces of data: breathing, pausing, being present, and reflective. Crum (1997) masterfully defines the complexity of centering:

> Centering happens as the mind, body and spirit being to align. Our muscles noticeably
> relax, our body straightens, clarity of thought and action become more prevalent, and
> vitality builds. Centering is not a stoic tightrope through life keeping us from our feelings
> and passions. Instead, centering is a spacious field in which we can embrace emotions
> and events with awareness and compassion. Centering will allow us to fully feel emotions
> and will at the same time give us the strength to take action not from the ever-changing
> weather patterns of emotions but from our highest purpose. (p. 2)

The CPR (MLT) and MLC team felt intentional breathing was helpful, which they noted helped with stress and grounding. An example of centeredness came from a teacher from an MLC gathering, who stated, "I love the reminder of the impact of ABC (dynamic mindfulness). A busy

day/life makes you forget to pause and slow down. Reflecting on the table brought to the forefront a reminder of what is important in my life and what I value" (Teacher L, Google form, October 7, 2022). The school day is filled with lots of activity and not a lot of downtime, and one vice principal stated, "Pausing and making time for ourselves, tuning into some positive experiences. It feels good to be the intention and make space for this" (Admin/Teacher R, Google form, September 25, 2022). Lastly, the use of different wellbeing practices to intentionally be present for the meeting or gathering, such as "stop and jot" is seen in the data. The wellbeing practice of "stop and jot" used is as follows:

1. Take 90 seconds and jot something down that you are thinking about or need to finish to be present.

2. Tell yourself this phrase to be present, "Right here, right now, everything is okay."

3. Share ways to remind yourself of that phrase to help yourself be present.

Interestingly, nearly every member of the CPR and MLC teams commented that the "stop and jot" practice was so easy to do. Participants stated that this centering activity supported them to clear their mind to be present, and they were eager to implement and transfer this practice into their own meetings. As the data indicates, breathing and pausing had the highest frequency of 10 instances, followed by being present with six instances of frequency and reflective practices with five occurrences in the data. All five data points were from the same MLC gathering in October when we engaged in a personal narrative kitchen table exercise and read Harjo's poem, *Perhaps the World Ends Here*. A CPR member commented, "The personal narrative made me reflect on the importance of symbol table and value" (Admin/Teacher H, Google form, October 7, 2022). Activities such as the personal narrative not only provided a time to pause and become centered, but also promoted a stronger sense of self and a space for reflection. Next, I will present the

Holistic Space subcategory which had 15 instances out of the 56 (27%) in the wellbeing practice category.

Holistic Space

A holistic space is present when people can safely share emotional experiences and challenges. Wellbeing practices support any of these five areas: emotional, physical, social, workplace, and societal, so it is important that all areas are taken care of and doing well (Davis, 2019). PAR Cycle One data shows two main aspects of the holistic space: sharing and psychological safety.

Sharing came verbally from the various quotes, prompts, and visuals at the start of the CPR meetings. Sharing became more personal as time went on. Initially, the sharing from the CPR members was often about something that had happened that was connected to work. During the second session, the sharing becomes more personal and not necessarily limited to work-related topics. As this started to happen, the other members of the CPR team became more personal with their verbal sharing with the CPR team.

Psychological safety is a foundational element of the holistic space where people can fully express emotions. Edmondson (2019) describes psychological safety as:

Psychological safety describes a belief that neither the formal nor informal consequences of interpersonal risks, like asking for help or admitting a failure, will be punitive. In psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake or ask for help, others will not react badly. Instead, candor is both allowed and expected. Psychological safety exists when people feel their workplace is an environment where they can speak up, offer ideas, and ask questions without fear of being punished or embarrassed. (p. 15)

All of the MLT members shared responses that highlighted psychological safety as critical, especially when staff members asked for restorative actions and increased trust between teachers and administrators. One example of psychological safety is when a CPR team member commented:

> The fact that we are able to share how we are feeling. It would be much worse if we could not. The recent conversations with the one staff has dramatically helped because it has impacted me. The fact that we can open and share is helpful. (Admin/Teacher R, interview, November 8, 2022)

Wellbeing practices that include holistic spaces for sharing with psychological safety, such as restorative circles with CLE-based practices, were utilized in an environment where staff were experiencing challenges. Data triangulated with reflective memos indicate that PAR Cycle One challenges mainly spoke to the need to restore trust between teachers and administrators and the newness of leadership, staff, and roles. All members of the CPR team commented on the growth of psychological safety with others from using wellbeing practices.

Emotions

The next subcategory that emerged was emotions (*n*=9, 16%), particularly Positivity. The wellbeing practices helped with centering and assisted the members in focusing on positivity during PAR Cycle One activities. For example, a CPR member stated in an interview, "I always try to pay attention to the positive and Gretchen makes me find the positive and intentional (bringing us back to that). Those practices help bring me back to who I like to be. Instead of the stone in my shoe, it can be the tiniest stone, but it is helpful" (Admin/Teacher H, interview, November 8, 2022). The role of the facilitator in wellbeing practices can support the staff in the

identification of emotions and feelings. The American Psychological Association's dictionary notes the complex nature of emotions and defines emotion as:

> A complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioral, and physiological elements, by which an individual attempts to deal with a personally significant matter or event. The specific quality of the emotion (e.g., fear, shame, etc.) is determined by the specific significance of the event. (n.d.)

Participants viewed positivity as the feelings related to the openness to hear other people's stories and making time for wellbeing practices.

Although the CPR and MLC members experienced positive emotions, these emotions were counter-balanced by challenges. Nearly all the codes related to challenging experiences or struggling were from reflective memos and field notes. I captured "Struggling" emotions during the restorative circles, DEIJ professional learning sessions, and interviews with CPR members. However, in more formalized feedback, such as the "stop and jot" protocol or Google form input from participants, data tends to be on the positive side. One participant stated that is "good to share negative but not to rant" (Admin/Teacher R, CPR team meeting, 11/8/22). In a reflective memo, I self-reflected about the struggle of feeling vulnerable before sharing my personal DEIJ story. As a research practitioner, PAR Cycle One data helped me to consider ways school leaders can increase psychological safety to promote the sharing of authentic emotions. There isn't enough data to make conclusions about toxic positivity, which can be dismissive instead of affirming in nature (Princing, 2021). Toxic positivity can occur when negative emotions are avoided or denied, which can prove to be harmful (Princing, 2021). However, as a researcher-practitioner, I take on the role as supervisor to the participants, which may have had some influence in the sharing or possible withholding of emotions.

Emotive releases are complex, fluid, and dynamic. For example, as I noted in a reflective memo in regards to an early MLT meeting, "The initial feeling in the room was quite tense, and the MLT started differently with an awe moment, exercise and breathing" (9/29/22). The middle school administrators and I provided a restorative circle for a school community that was dealing with loss, change, tension, and discomfort. Offering a listening space allowed staff to experience an emotive release where staff members could cry and share their hurts. As a research practitioner during DEIJ professional learning sessions, I documented "a lot of intense emotions, including a great deal of hurt due to inequities among the staff" (Reflective memo, November 16, 2022). Participants described personal narrative activities to be "super emotive" and included keywords such as "super sad," "really miss them," and "so proud of who they are and who they've become" all in one sentence (Admin/Teacher H, MLC gathering, 10/7/2022). Emotions are personal and responsive in nature.

Summary of Wellbeing Practices

Wellbeing practices affect everyone differently, and there exists no empirical formula to suggest a singular approach to personal wellbeing. However, there are key strategies that school leaders can implement to facilitate staff wellbeing experiences in daily practice. Upon analysis of the data collected throughout PAR Cycle One, it is evident that the intentional practices of breathing and pausing were the highest frequency with 20/56 combined instances or each nearly 18% within the wellbeing practices category. Those two codes were followed by being present, sharing, and positivity, reflective, and psychological safety in wellbeing practices. These elements point to the importance of building the capacity of wellbeing strategies in an educational setting (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). PAR Cycle One data shows the importance of school leaders to take the time in the school setting for centering practices, holistic spaces, and

emotions. The overall distribution of responses in the wellbeing practices category are illustrated in Figure 8. Next, I explore the second emergent category of connection.

Connection

Connection, a sense of love and belonging, is vital to the human experience (Maslow, 1943) and, certainly, post-pandemic connections for educators are critical to wellbeing. Connections are interpersonal relationships that are a factor positively affecting the school climate, promoting social-emotional safety and respect (Cohen et al., 2009). In communities where staff feel connected to their colleagues through positive relationships, the net effect is greater personal resilience and the likelihood of prioritizing wellbeing with students (Greater Good in Education, 2020). Just under half, or 51 of 107 total instances (48%), in PAR Cycle One are related to connection. By incorporating wellbeing practices in the MLT's meeting structure, connection among the team members was facilitated. The MLT team then began incorporating intentional connection prompts into other spaces, such as a 45-second connection prompt at the start of the weekly 15-minute briefing meeting with the entire middle school staff. The aims of the activities were to promote deeper connections among staff with both one another and the school. As Fullan (2001) talks about the importance connections within an organization:

> The "soul at work" is both individual and collective: "Actually, most people want to be part of their organization; they want to know the organization's purpose; they want to make a difference. When the individual soul is connected to the organization, people become connected to something deeper—the desire to contribute to a larger purpose, to feel they are part of a greater whole, a web of connection. (p. 8)

The data from PAR Cycle One identified the second emergent category, connection. When analyzing the data, there is a clear separation in the data with the subcategory with others
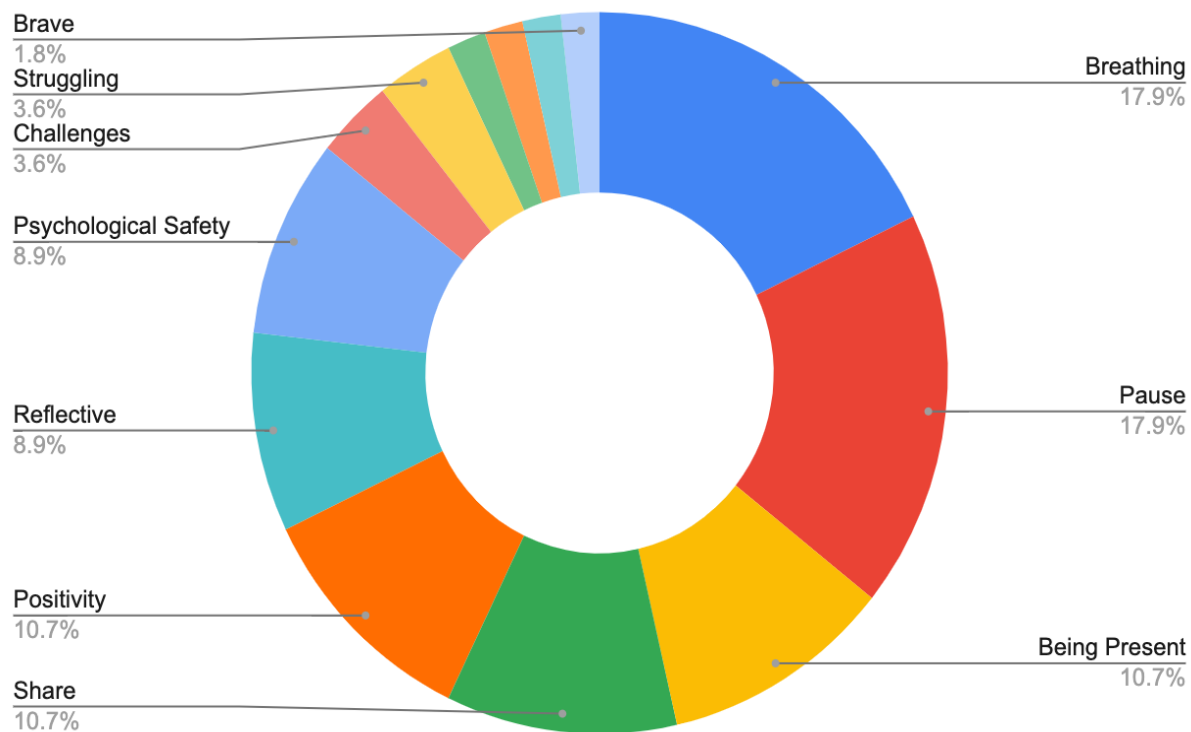
Figure 8. Summary of wellbeing practices.

(frequency of 43/51 instances, 84%), being significantly higher in frequency than within self (frequency of 8/51 instances, 16%), Specifically, within self, the CPR team reflected upon how their participation in the PAR process affects their leadership. Next, I present the deeper analysis of the two subcategories of Connection present in PAR Cycle One.

With Others

In the PAR Cycle One, I collected data on connection, and the first subcategory, with others, had five codes, safe spaces (17/51 instances, 33%), strengthened connections (10/51 instances, 20%), structures (8/51 instances, 16%), building culture (5/51 instances, 10%), and communication (3/51 instances, 6%).

The wellbeing practices supported connections through safe spaces (17/51 instances) in the data collected. After the horrific murder of George Floyd, many organizations started to take the necessary and urgent anti-racist stance, which includes defining different terms in relationship to DEIJ. For instance, the University of Washington (2022) defines a safe space as an environment in which everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves and participating fully, without fear of attack, ridicule, or denial of experience. Arao and Clemens (2013) speaks of the need for organizations to accept discomfort when challenging the white, dominant culture norm of feeling well and needing closure in conversations when moving from safe to brave spaces.

As a school leader, I modeled how to create a safe space. For example, when I opened with a plenary for a recent DEIJ professional learning with the middle school staff, I demonstrated the importance of being vulnerable. I shared a personal story that started my DEIJ journey as a child and acknowledged that everyone's journey is different and personal, and that it is imperative to listen with empathy. Even in discomfort, we gathered the middle school staff

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into a circle formation in our team room, engaged in dialogue, and learned from each other. We acknowledged that we were not going to get everything right. We needed to name mistakes, knowing that mistakes will still continue, and we won't have all the answers. Another example from the analysis of the data when an MLC member was asked how connected he felt about the MLC gathering and responded, "Very connected because I feel supported and not judged by colleagues" (Teacher T, Google form, October 7, 2022). As a research practitioner, seeing the data helped me to be cognizant to plan and create safe spaces. Although the use of circles can assist in developing the physical space that allows all members to see everyone and feel physically included, creating safe spaces is much more than that, and it takes time to create. As the lead researcher, knowing that I also serve as supervisor and hold positional power over participants, which in itself inherently infringes on the authenticity of a true safe space, makes this all the more important for me and the MLT.

The second most frequent code in connection with others was about strengthened connections. In the data analysis collated, members of the MLC teams commented on how their participation was helping them connect with other members. One participant stated, "Sharing things that were not related to school helped me to feel more connected to the other members of the group on a more personal level" (Teacher E, Google form, October 7, 2022). Another teacher commented that "In what ways did the wellbeing practices foster connectedness? Getting to know one another beyond our roles in the school. No longer just a teacher hat. Now it's about being mothers, father, son, daughters" (Teacher L, Google form, October 7, 2022). Connecting through their external roles supported individuals to feel connected with others.

Structures, such as circles and designated time for wellbeing practices, supported connection with others. The use of circles during the CPR meetings, MLC gatherings, and the

DEIJ plenary were intentional. Circles have been used throughout history in cultures to help bring people together in a way that everyone is included and equal, sitting shoulder to shoulder to honor everyone's voice (Pranis et al., 2003; Pranis & Zehr, 2005).

Due to the physical nature of circles, they are used to help restore relationships after harm or inequity (Pranis et al., 2003; Pranis & Zehr, 2005). The MLT planned a restorative circle to bridge relationships between teachers and administrators and address the hurt after staff harshly gave feedback in another context. In observing the conversation, the circle helped several staff feel safe to be honest and share openly. Some in the group remained guarded and focused more on blame but, based on the feedback, the restorative circle was a healing experience for everyone. For example, the MLT was able to acknowledge that "how" they gave feedback was experienced as hurtful by some teachers when they were taxed for time in a past incident. The next day, several staff apologized directly to the MLT member or thanked MLT for the circle and said that it was very helpful. The purpose of having a circle activity was to build connections, elevate feelings, and foster trust among the group.

Furthermore, other members of the MLC group acknowledged how the use of circles helped with connection. The analysis revealed where a CPR team member noted that the structure of the team's regular use of wellbeing had an effect on connectedness. She stated, "It is now a standing item on MLT. MLT is getting to know one another better; a result MLT getting to know one another better. Strong connection" (Admin/Teacher R, Google form, November 8, 2022). The CPR and MLC teams commented on how much more they felt connected after one MLC gathering and how little time it took when intentionally creating the space for themselves to openly share and listen to others.

As the data indicate, safe spaces, strengthened connections, and structures had a collective frequency of 43/51 instances, followed by building culture and communication. According to one participant, "It is coming together. Empathy and vulnerability are key, and I have been so much more vulnerable than I ever have been (in a good way)" (Admin/Teacher H, interview, November 24, 2022). Wellbeing practices were utilized in MLT and MLC meetings. Triangulating the datum from Google form responses, interviews, and reflective memos from the PAR Cycle One indicates that the use of wellbeing practices significantly affected connection with others (frequency of 43/51), Next, I analyze the data for connection and the codes for within self.

Within Self

Another subcategory emergent in the connection datum is "within self." Within self refers to how the participants feel the connection is something that they identify affects something for them and deepens an internal understanding. The second subcategory, within self, had two codes, leadership and personal experiences.

The CPR members took on leadership roles in the middle school. Leadership today strives to be transformational, shifting from the past, where it was generally transactional. Burns (1978) explains that both leadership theories have many commonalities, yet transformational leadership focus on larger, deeper ends whereas transactional leadership focuses on the action of leading. Data from the first code, leadership, the MLT members indicate wellbeing practices affect their leadership and show up in their work. One MLT member noted, "It is creating 1:1 with people. Joining the opportunities and making the time for it. As leaders, we have to. People notice" (Admin/Teacher R, Interview, November 24, 2022). Shields (2010) describes transformative leadership as, "Transformative leadership (as opposed to either transactional or

transformational leadership) takes seriously Freire's (1972) contention "that education is not the ultimate lever for social transformation, but without it transformation cannot occur" (p. 37). Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others. Transformative leadership, therefore, inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded. Thus, it is my contention that transformative leadership and leadership for inclusive and socially just learning environments are inextricably related (Shields, 2010).

The theme of leadership is prominent in the data, with another MLT member sharing their process for incorporating wellbeing practices when they lead their own meetings. Both shared responses from the MLT highlight the practices being incorporated and affecting their personal leadership. Based on Shields (2010), members experienced the wellbeing practices and transferred and utilized them in other school structures which demonstrated growth in transformational leadership.

Reflecting upon personal experience supported individuals to connect within self. Examples of when the MLT team commented on this are, "I see everything that I am doing coming together, Cognitive Coaching, this, and my own research. I am learning that being emotional is okay, especially as a woman leader. I [had previously] learned it is not okay to express emotions as a woman leader" (Admin/Teacher H, Interview, November 24, 2022). The connection to personal experiences came from the interviews and MLC gatherings in response to the questions about what to start, stop and continue with the wellbeing practices during the MLT meetings. The response connected to the MLC gathering is a result of the members not knowing one another well; the personal narrative created an opportunity for the members to share. One

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member stated, "Being open enough to share helps build that connectedness as we get to know each other and how we tick" (Admin/Teacher H, Google form, October 7, 2022). Personal experience is a key factor in how effectively leaders may utilize connections to establish a culture of wellbeing in their learning communities.

Summary of Connection

Connections are important, yet are unique to individuals and therefore experienced subjectively. Therefore, it is essential that school leaders create the space for wellbeing practices not only to care for their wellbeing, and to foster and develop connections with others and within self. The comprehensive analysis of the data collected throughout PAR Cycle One points to the importance of school leaders to create safe spaces, strengthening connections, and creating structures to ensure time and space is built in for connection. An overview of these findings is presented in Figure 9. The next section is a reflection on my leadership development and plan for PAR Cycle Two.

A Final Word on Emergent Categories

School leaders who set up a safe space for wellbeing practices can support educators in international middle schools with connections with others and within self. Wellbeing practices in PAR Cycle One largely focused on centering activities, such as breathing and pausing. In schools that are rigorous and include educators that are new to the country and local school community, building the psychological safety to share feelings and thoughts through wellbeing practices enabled individuals to reflect upon their experiences with others.

Reflection and Planning

I am a different leader, personally and professionally, because of the learning and reflection from PAR Cycle One's study on how middle school leaders utilize wellbeing practices
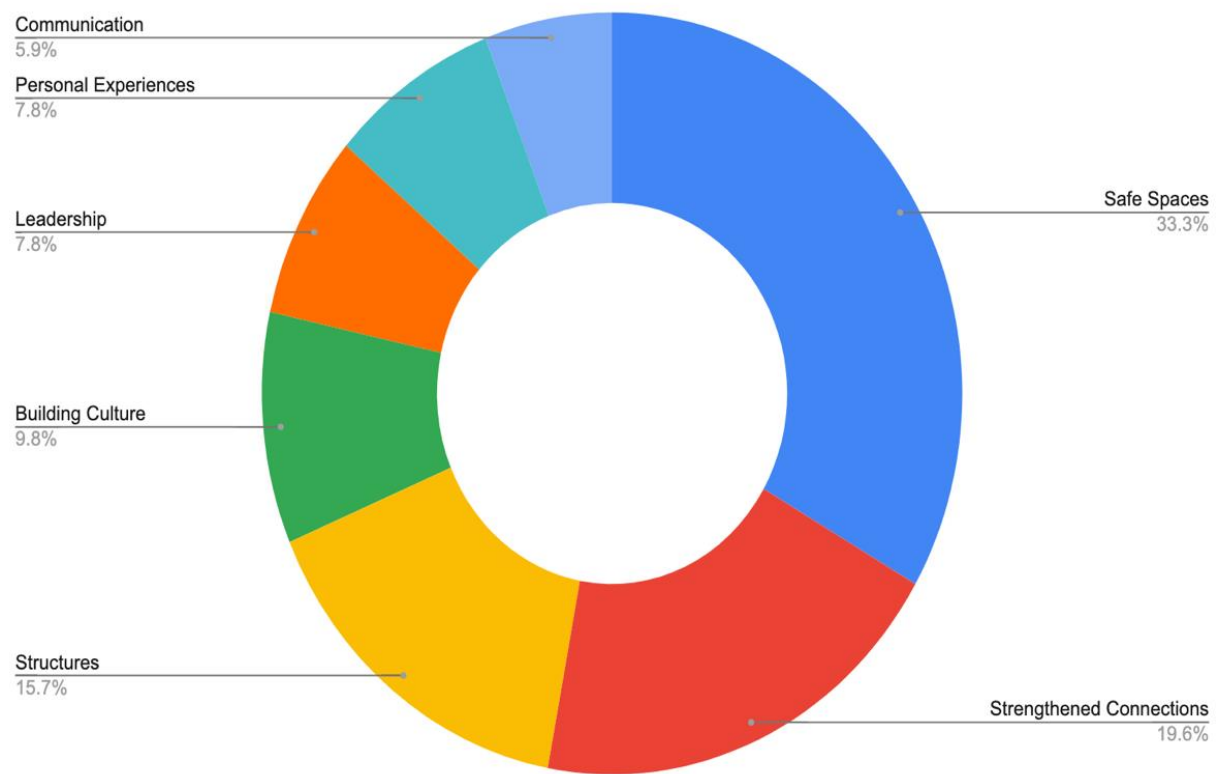
Figure 9. Summary of Connection subcategory.

and deepen connections. Specifically, the input of the participants has helped me better understand myself and my actions as a leader. I am now more intentional about building relationships and creating safe spaces for others. In this section, I explore and describe my reflections as a leader, and I discuss my role as a leader of equity and as a research practitioner. After, I explain how PAR Cycle One data analysis informed PAR Cycle 2, which took place during Spring 2023.

A large part of my growth as a leader is acknowledging the importance of community to ensure a match and crossover between what is essential to me in my *lifeworld* and the *system* in which I professionally work (Baxter, 1987; Habermas, 1987). Early on as a leader, I found myself not making healthy choices and adhering to what others said must be done without learning more and ensuring equitable processes and systems. For example, I aimed to make collaborative decisions, yet I only sometimes made sure that all voices were equitably heard. As I planned for the next PAR cycle, I was mindful of pausing, using various protocols and ensuring that everyone had a space to provide their input. I try to clearly state how decisions are made, and aim to increase collaborative input in decision-making.

Additionally, I did not see the importance of certain areas of alignment with my *lifeworld* and *system*; they were very separate and I felt inauthentic in various leadership spaces. Spurred by this program and the pandemic, I realized it is vital for me to work within a system with similar moral imperatives around equity. Now that I work within a system that strives for a better, peaceful world that celebrates differences, I feel stronger as a leader working toward that goal with other educators. Steele's (2010) book about stereotypes described a woman that was not native to Paris but felt it was her home as she is met as a whole person there. I now feel more at home by being in a community with the MLT and MLC that works alongside one another

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working toward a more peaceful future. Specifically, it was evident that the staff in the smaller subset of the greater learning community were also driven toward a much larger end goal than just the one of ensuring students understand the academic content.

Another leadership growth area is feedback. I have always valued feedback, yet it is often tricky when critical. In the past, I would shy away if feedback was critical and take it personally. I struggled with working through it to extract helpful information to grow, and I would get stuck on being hurt. I have been focusing on modeling how feedback can be used and, when it is critical, to work through it together as a community. Modeling how feedback can be utilized has been an excellent strategy, especially when certain team members sometimes struggle with providing authentic and useful feedback. A recent example is at a Heads of Department meeting, when the MLT led the meeting by intentionally pausing the slated agenda and providing a space for everyone's voice to be heard. We planned and held a restorative circle with some prompts, which led to a very open space where members were able to share feelings they were experiencing. It helped repair some relationships by staff seeing new perspectives.

I continued my research throughout the year focused on wellbeing practices and connection and continued to seek ways to build space into my regular practice and meetings. At first, when trialing various wellbeing and connection practices, there were some uneasy feelings thinking there was no time or space for these practices. Deciding to facilitate the meetings differently affected my leadership and focus during the meetings, with staff listening more attentively to others. Most of the emotions captured in the datum sets were positive, and I desired to devise ways to build psychological safety so that individuals felt more open to express the multitude of thoughts and feelings associated with their current state. I continued to embed these

practices in other settings to provide more equitable, safe spaces for people to staff and gathered feedback to help inform through an ongoing reflective process of myself as a leader.

After analyzing and using the data from PAR Cycle One and reflecting, incorporating wellbeing practices and intentional time for connections with colleagues became more a cultural norm rather than a personal opportunity to conduct academic research. Specifically, the data informed the wellbeing practices for me, the CPR, and the MLC team. The CPR team continued to utilize wellbeing practices as a standing structure within our bi-weekly meetings. As there was co-creation and sharing of practices, I encouraged other CPR team members to contribute and share. Sharing of practices started to happen more frequently, and upon showing the emergent categories and subcategories, I hoped it would encourage both CPR members to do so more.

As there were more MLC gatherings throughout PAR Cycle Two, I sought more assistance in co-designing and co-facilitating the gatherings with the Middle School Leadership Cohort. The process was so new to the CPR team they asked me to create the agenda for the MLC gathering. Later on, co-creating the gatherings helped uplift the practices and encouraged the CPR members to have more buy-in, and impacted the larger MLC group and their own leadership growth. Since both groups became familiar with the Google Form with questions about what wellbeing practices to "Stop, Start, and Continue," I continued to use this and with the same follow-up interview questions. Throughout the MLC gatherings in PAR Cycle Two, I conducted member checks with the CPR team to ensure accuracy and informed data analysis. Finally, I continued to analyze data and evidence collected through the MLT and MLC meetings and interviews (see Table 8).

A discernible change I implemented during the middle school staff weekly briefings (stand up meeting) is a 45-second to one-minute connection prompt. The weekly briefings are

Table 8

Timeline for PAR Cycle Two

Time Period	Activities
PAR Cycle Two Spring 2023	Use information from Cycle One to inform personal and professional wellbeing practices
	Co-design and co-facilitate monthly professional learning sessions with the Middle School Leadership Cohort (n= 4-10) focused on personal and professional growth
	Continue to utilize "Stop, Start, and Continue" follow-up interviews
	Conduct member checks with the CPR team to ensure accuracy and inform data analysis
	Analyze data and evidence collected through the MLT and MLC meetings and interviews

held on Tuesday mornings, in person, as documented notices and celebrations are communicated among the teachers. In an effort for the large staff to connect and build trust, I used various quotes, art images, and other materials for staff to share with a colleague at the start of each briefing. The energy and buzz from these weekly meetings started to change, and I added a celebration section. Slowly, other staff members started to add or share celebrations with the whole staff. Briefings are conducted in the staff lounge, a nice room with flexible seating, which I opened up into a larger circle instead of the segmented sections throughout the space.

Conclusion

Upon analyzing the codes collected from PAR Cycle One, it was evident that there are wellbeing practices and aspects related to connection with both the CPR team and the MLC team. Even though the CPR team meets regularly and the MLC only met once, consistent emergent themes helped guide the design of activities to include in Cycle Two of the PAR. The tensions and relational challenges amongst staff highlight the importance of examining how wellbeing is enacted in a broader sense. The vital piece of PAR Cycle Two was to continue looking for ways to incorporate the holistic work of centering, pausing, and encouraging a safe space and to make it part of the culture of the middle school.

CHAPTER 5: PAR CYCLE TWO AND FINDINGS

This participatory action research (PAR) Cycle Two took place in an international middle school and found the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT), who acted as co-practitioner researchers (CPR) for the study, and the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC) experiencing wellbeing practices and connections with increased willingness and vulnerability. The CPR members (n=2 school administrators) and I incorporated wellbeing practices in our bi-weekly meetings and co-designed the MLC monthly gatherings. The MLC consisted of five newly hired teachers. In PAR Cycle One, the CPR members focused on building relationships as a new administrative team. Similarly, the MLC did not know one another at the start of the previous cycle; hence, group activities included wellbeing practices in which participants could interact and become acquainted. In PAR Cycle Two, participants shared reflections, thoughts, and emotions and experienced wellbeing practices in deeper ways.

As the CPR team experienced and co-designed wellbeing activities, they acknowledged that teachers and leaders must tend to their stress levels since stress affects the ability to make effective decisions, support their students and teams, create a positive school environment, and model healthy wellbeing to the students (Cann et al., 2021; Collie, 2022; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Harding et al., 2019; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Significant stressors occurred outside of the typical school day during PAR Cycle Two. Specifically, the entire school and middle school community experienced several atypical, tragic losses during the inquiry cycle. Due to the nature of the response to these hardships, the staff experienced a deepened lack of trust in the middle school leadership team and the larger senior leadership team of the school. The situations magnified the perceived separation of leadership from the staff and the heightened stress levels. During the COVID-19 pandemic, educational leaders experienced several negative emotions

(with anxiety being the most common); therefore, CPR team of leaders had to incorporate strategies to help manage anxiety (Brackett et al., 2020).

Although the MLT met regularly and tested out different wellbeing practices during both PAR cycles, scheduling times for the MLC to meet was often challenging. The school's holistic program, individual teaching assignments for every MLT and MLC member, and other time commitments for services limited the MLC's meeting availability to Friday afternoons. An additional challenge arose when MLC members fell ill during overnight Outdoor Education trips, leading to canceled or postponed MLC gatherings. Despite these scheduling difficulties, there was a noted increase in the meeting frequency of the MLC meetings. The MLC gathered only once during PAR Cycle One, but three times during PAR Cycle Two for 90-minute sessions.

PAR Cycle Two included a more robust set of data than the previous cycle for a number of reasons. MLC participants required structures and time to learn about one another, and the participants had been hesitant to engage during the previous cycle. In PAR Cycle One, the MLC participants attended the sessions mainly due to professional obligation. Building trust within a team is necessary to make changes, and cultivating trust occurs over time (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Jameson et al., 2006). Therefore, PAR Cycle One included fewer activities, and the MLC increased wellbeing practices during PAR Cycle Two. Due to the large scope of the school, through PAR Cycles One and Two, the MLC members interacted sparsely during the academic day. However, the trust continued to develop from our small group gatherings, and participants increased their sharing of thoughts and emotions, including dissonant emotions in PAR Cycle Two. Unlike in PAR Cycle One when participants completed a post-gathering response, in PAR Cycle Two, I structured a post-gathering debrief conversation for PAR participants, during which they actively shared visual artifacts. In this chapter, I describe the design of the CPR and MLC

activities and how I collected data. The two emergent themes from PAR Cycle Two's data analysis confirm and extend the PAR Cycle One evidence. Finally, I identify and discuss two findings based on the data collected from two PAR cycles of inquiry.

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PAR Cycle Two Process

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In PAR Cycle Two, I introduced and facilitated one wellbeing practice with the CPR team over twelve weeks; the CPR team co-designed and facilitated three gatherings with the MLC. I collected data from the frequent CPR meetings through a Google form, and as the lead researcher, I conducted interviews and collected artifacts (see Table 9). Similarly, the MLC completed a Google form at each session, wrote responses after the gatherings, and shared artifacts. In PAR Cycle Two, participants from the MLC engaged in post-gathering debrief conversations about artifacts. Then, I coded the data into subcategories, categories, and themes.

Data Collection

Throughout the Spring of 2023, I collected data from multiple sources, including Google form feedback, field notes (taken immediately after the meetings or gatherings to capture anecdotal data on what I observed), interviews, and artifacts from the CPR meetings or MLC gatherings. As I collected data, I kept the research questions at the forefront of my mind:

1. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?

    a. Within the leadership team?

    b. Within the leadership cohort?

2. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?

    a. Within the leadership team?

    b. Within the leadership cohort?

3. How do I transform my leadership through the study of educator wellbeing?

Table 9

Data Collection of Two PAR Cycles (Fall 2022 and Spring 2023)

Source	Dates	Data	Participants

PAR Cycle One
  CPR Team Meetings
  Fall, 2022
	Weekly Meetings of CPR Team (n=18)
	September-December, 2022
		Google Form
		Interviews
		Field Notes
		CLE Artifacts
			n=3
			(H, R, G)

PAR Cycle One
  MLC Gatherings
  Fall, 2022
	October 7, 2022	Google Form
		Interviews
		Field Notes
		CLE Artifacts
			n=8
			(H, R, G, S,
			T, L, A, E)

PAR Cycle Two
  CPR Team Meetings
  Spring 2023
	Weekly Meetings of CPR Team
	January-May, 2023
		Google Form
		Interviews
		Field Notes
		CLE Artifacts
			n=3
			(H, R, G)

PAR Cycle One
  MLC Gatherings
  Spring 2023
	Jan 13, 2023
	Feb 24, 2023
	April 14, 2023
	(n=3)
		Google Form
		Interviews
		Field Notes
		CLE Artifacts
			n=8
			(H, R, G, S,
			T, L, A, E)

The CPR team met 12 times between January and May 2023 and applied their knowledge and practices at the MLC gatherings, which met three times between January and April 2023. Although I collected the same data in both cycles of inquiry, I note differences in the quality of the PAR Cycle Two's data which contained deeply reflective, visual, and written artifacts, generally absent from PAR Cycle One. Due to the oral debriefs that started after MLC gatherings, the data were less rigid and had more depth and continuity. Due to the increased commitment and frequency of sessions in PAR Cycle Two, the MLC participants were more engaged and reflective during the gatherings, which fostered high engagement among the members resulting and a greater personal connection.

CPR Meetings

As a new Middle School Leadership team started working together in August of 2022, the CPR team and I continued to focus on building trust and connections through wellbeing practices. During PAR Cycle Two, the CPR team met 12 times. The CPR Team embraced starting our weekly MLT meetings with a wellbeing practice in a circle format, and I continued to house all the Cycle Two practices on the slide deck that commenced from PAR Cycle One.

I added more proactive wellbeing practices during PAR Cycle Two to support strengthened connections and trust among the CPR team members. Being a proactive leader can help schools prepare for present and future challenges, be more innovative, and positively affect student outcomes (Hitt et al., 2007; Klar, 2012). Conversely, being reactive can impede a leader's long-term strategic planning ability, impede positive relationships and environment, and lead to increased stress. The CPR team engaged in proactive practices such as breathing exercises like "letting go breathing." At other times, we responded to the following wellbeing prompts: reflect on the Lunar New Year change from Year of the Tiger to Year of the Rabbit; identify the support

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needed for ourselves and from the team; find positive bright spots in our personal and professional lives; and use "self-care notes to self" cards. Through the various practices, the CPR members shared verbally or in written form and some drawings with the whole team.

I designed creative art experiences supported by written responses. Figure 10 displays an artifact from the artistic wellbeing practice where Admin/Teacher H led a mandala drawing exercise to activate focus within each member, followed by a spiral sentence stem writing prompt (see Figure 11). The CPR team facilitated the post-wellbeing activity discussion in which participants discussed and shared reflections. Unlike PAR Cycle One, when I facilitated the wellbeing practices, the two other CPR members facilitated wellbeing practices with the team in PAR Cycle Two.

As I incorporated responsive practices in the CPR meetings, participants demonstrated growth in wellbeing, and the processes fostered connections during points of tension among the team members. We engaged in an activity that used a strength card deck as each individual identified their strength and a strength of their neighbor. As the lead researcher, and due to the small size of the CPR team, I did not dictate which direction the circle needed to go for the time of sharing. I sensed the tension in the room among the other two CPR members, and I wanted them to feel safe and choose for whom they named a strength; it could not be forced. Therefore, the members freely chose with whom they shared a strength. When one member, Admin/Teacher H, shared a strength for Admin/Teacher R, the tension in the room quickly disappeared. Admin/Teacher R even said, "Really, you think I am thoughtful?" and thanked Admin/Teacher H for noticing. The responsive wellbeing practice used at the beginning of the meeting helped dissipate distractions and allowed the CPR team to focus on the meeting agenda that followed.

Figure 10. Mandala from an MLC member H that represents themselves in various roles.

I am feeling hopeful & in control

The challenges I'm facing are being a little stuck in The middle
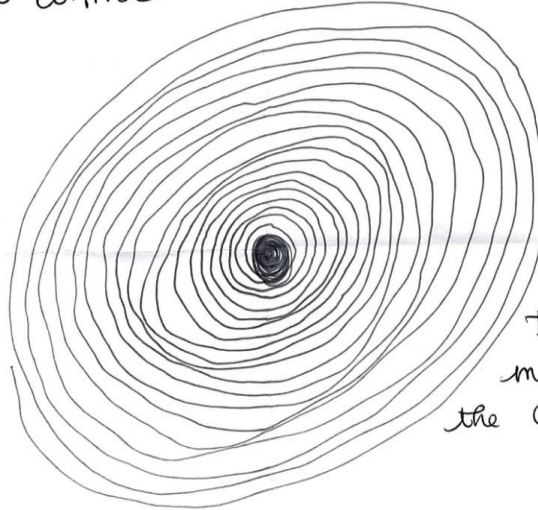
I am paying close attention to my leadership and how I must act the way I admire a leader to be.

The best thing that's happened to me this semester is the CIS visit!

Figure 11. Spiral drawing from a CPR member from a creative focus wellbeing practice.

MLC Gatherings

In PAR Cycle Two, the MLC team met more frequently, engaging as a group on three occasions for 90-minute sessions. The team feedback from PAR Cycle One stated that the members were happy with the structure of the sessions. Given that the team could only meet on Friday afternoons, the meeting time was challenging as all members were tired from the long work week. Despite this, MLC members commented that the small size of the group and the experience helped after a long week. They commented on how the gatherings helped them enter the weekend less anxious and more available for their families.

The MLC gatherings were structured; the team experimented with two short wellbeing practices to open the session, followed by an opening circle, a personal narrative activity, and a closing circle activity. Immediately after each session, the team members provided feedback via a form or narrative emails capturing their thoughts. On a few occasions, members stayed after the gathering to share their thoughts verbally, and I recorded them for data collection. I immediately jotted down field notes to capture the MLC gatherings' essence and to capture salient notes. The MLC team used the notebooks provided at the beginning of PAR Cycle One more readily during PAR Cycle Two. The CPR team co-designed three MLC gatherings in PAR Cycle Two with increased focus, generating more artifacts for the data collection.

In the three MLC gatherings, I continued to utilize the Community Learning Exchange Axioms. I primarily facilitated the first two MLC gatherings due to the limited emotional capacity of the CPR team. The CPR and MLC team members collaboratively constructed the final gathering. The first MLC gathering in PAR Cycle Two occurred in January 2023; the two wellbeing practices implemented focused on being present and included activities such as "stop and jot" and "scan your inner world." The opening circle activity followed, and all participants

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shared their bright, positive spot of the day. I presented a reading about self-knowledge by David Whyte in which participants shared how self-knowledge personally connected to them individually. MLC members reflected on a provided prompt and shared something they learned about themselves and one another.

In the second MLC gathering on February 24, 2023, we followed the same structure as the first PAR Cycle Two MLC gathering. We started with two wellbeing practices, with one focused on being present, followed by an excerpt about empathy from *The Power of Kindness: The Unexpected Benefits of Leading a Compassionate Life,* and an additional prompt to reflect and share a personal situation, occurrence, or person that made members use their "empathy muscles" (Ferrucci, 2006). As the gathering focused on empathy, the members then created a mandala with the prompt to represent themselves and how they showed empathy (or need to) in various roles (both personal and professional). After the MLC members created the mandalas, they presented them to the whole group. The mandala activity prompted most members to articulate their personal and professional roles, which are parts of themselves, and then break down the emotions or actions they take or need to take in the identified roles. They unpacked in writing and orally with the group what that meant for them. From creating the mandalas, participants clarified their personal and professional roles. They identified similar feelings and actions, such as patience, extending grace, relationships, and being kind and true to their authentic self (see Figure 12).

The final MLC gathering in April 2022 was a collaborative effort, and all members had an opportunity to share and lead a wellbeing practice (see Figure 13). The gathering opened with a rhythmic circle led by Teacher T. Each member had a clave, and Teacher T led the group in a grounding music activity. He showed the members how to play the claves and what
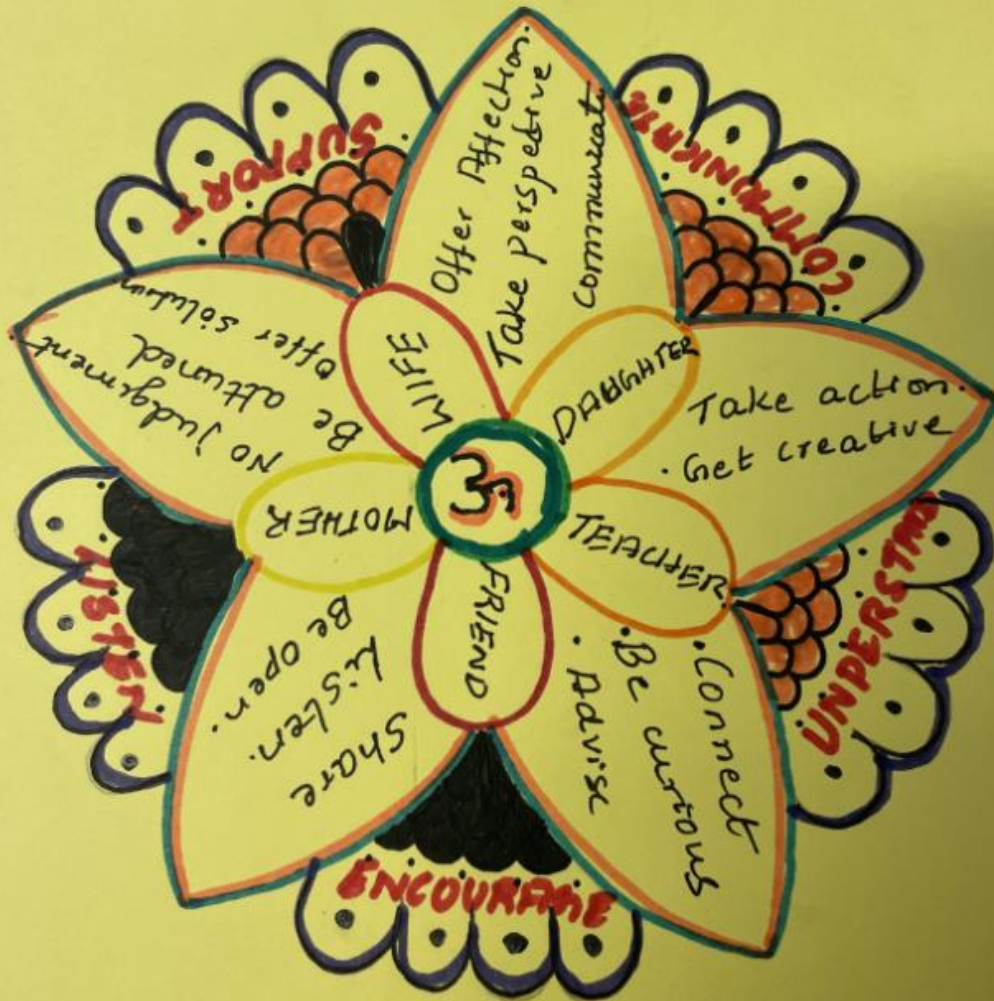
Figure 12. Mandala from an MLC member representing empathy.
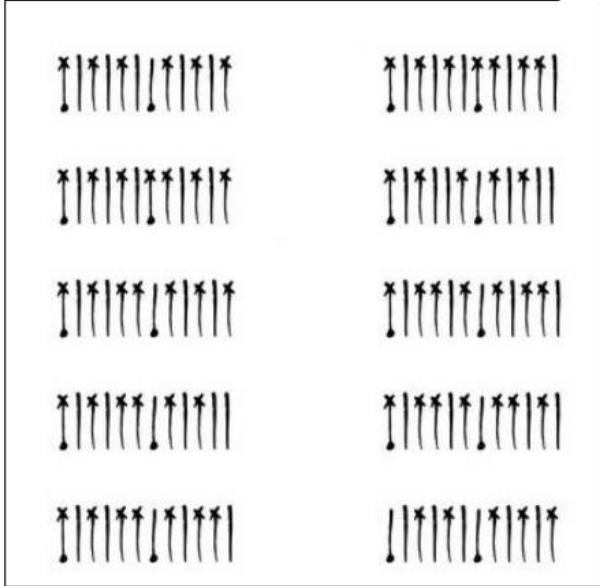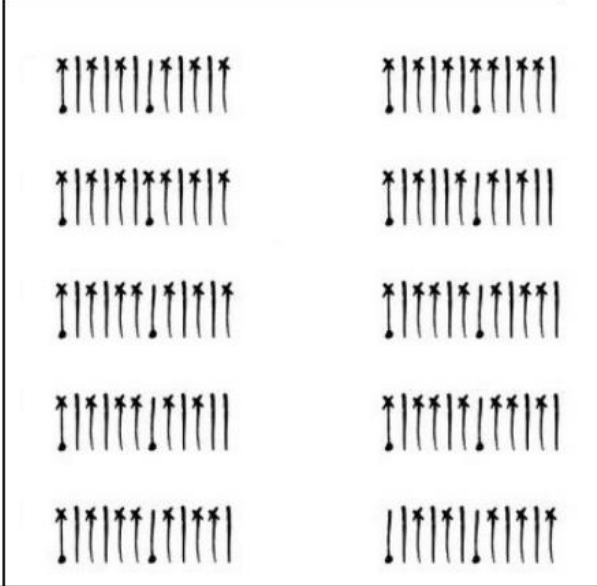
Figure 13. Claves key used for the musical grounding activity led by an MLC member.

notes to play. With the wide variety of familiarity, the group veered from the displayed visual. The session started with some emotions of trepidation of not knowing how to play but by the end of the activity, MLC members played the claves with a free, fluid flow.

After the claves, the members engaged in the spiral drawing exercise that Admin/Teacher H had led previously with the CPR group. After the spiral drawing, there was a sentence stem writing prompt to respond to and share with the MLC members.

Interviews

In PAR Cycle Two, I interviewed the CPR team members informally and formally to gather further input about the process. I interviewed the MLC members after the final wellbeing gathering to deeper information. Due to the time and challenge of meeting with the MLC members for a final interview, I provided three written prompts:

1. What is one (or more) wellbeing practices used that you may use in your personal or professional practices, and why might they be helpful? If you have already incorporated any, can you please share the details of how and where you are doing this?

2. How did the wellbeing practices and/or middle school cohort gatherings help (or not) facilitate connection? Please be as specific as possible with what you are comfortable with sharing.

3. Anything else you feel that is important or helpful to share from your experience from participating in the MLC gatherings?

The responses to these questions provided great insight for me to document and code.

Data Analysis

In PAR Cycle Two, I had substantially more data to code from the artifacts from the CPR and MLC gatherings, the formal and informal interviews, and responses to the questions referenced in the previous section. I reflected on my personal experiences after the CPR and MLC gatherings through reflective memos to document comments or sentiments shared by various team members. I created Google slides as a digital artifact to track and document the entire process to assist with the creation of an accurate codebook.

The PAR Cycle Two data collection and analysis activities supported the research questions. I used the previous codes from PAR Cycle One as a reference to confirm codes and provide continuity in data collection. I used open coding, with additional codes emerging mainly due to the quantity of data from PAR Cycle Two. I analyzed verbatim responses from the Google form, interviews, or written responses for PAR Cycle Two. For my qualitative data analysis, I exercised Saldaña's (2016) exploratory coding, looking for patterns and similarities. I reviewed the data set multiple times to look for patterns, which resulted in the need for clustering codes and developing categories. Next, I identify themes from the study.

<div align="center">

PAR Cycle Two Themes

</div>

In PAR Cycle Two, the CPR team consistently incorporated wellbeing practices, and the MLC engaged in the practices during our gatherings, resulting in two themes based on categories and codes. Table 10 shows this process where codes were identified and sorted into categories, which were then distilled into themes. As the lead researcher and principal of the middle school leadership team, I analyzed data and its effect on the leadership team. Two themes emerged from PAR Cycle Two: emotionally centering wellbeing practices (51%) and deepened connections with self and others (49%).

Table 10

PAR Cycle Two Themes, Categories, and Codes

Emergent Themes	Categories	Codes
Emotionally Centering Wellbeing Practices (*n*=203) 51%	Affirmative Emotions (59) 15%	Positivity (18) Calm (16) Connectedness(15) Strength (10)
	Dissonant Emotions (55) 14%	Struggling for Balance (32) Stressed (23)
	Centering Activities (53) 13%	Breathing (14) Focus (14) Reflection (10) Being Present (9) Pausing (6)
	Holistic Spaces (36) 9%	Sharing (22) Psychological Safety (14)
Deepened Connections with Self & Others (*n*=198) 49%	Safe Space Connections with Others (98) 24%	Safe Space / Building Culture (34) Conditions for Connections (20) Strengthened Connections (17) Practices to Connect (15) Communication (12)
	Knowing Self (62) 15.5%	Seeking Understanding (36) Personal Experiences (14) Personal Values (12)
	Reflection on Dual Roles (38) 9.5%	Personal Roles (28) Professional Roles (10)

Emotionally Centering Wellbeing Practices

In PAR Cycle Two, the CPR and MLC teams identified the importance wellbeing practices being more emotionally centered. When a leadership team is stressed, school leaders must develop tenacity, balance, and connection to ensure they care for themselves and emotionally support others (Aguilar, 2018). The theme emotionally centering wellbeing practices supported the research question: To what extent did participants enact wellbeing practices? In PAR Cycle Two, I observed the expression of affirmative and dissonant emotions through centering activities and holistic spaces in nearly one-third of the data set. Next, I present an analysis of theme's four categories: affirmative emotions (15%), dissonant emotions (14%), centering activities (13%), and holistic spaces (9%).

Affirmative Emotions

The first category, affirmative emotions, is characterized by positive emotions that support one another to develop relational trust and feel appreciated by colleagues. In the affirmative emotions category, I discuss positivity, calm, connectedness, and strength.

Positivity. Being positive and learning how to enjoy small daily pleasures in life is something that school administrators and teachers can cultivate. Positive emotions can benefit a person's health, mood, and wellbeing (Dockray & Steptoe, 2010; Fredrickson, 2001, 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Veenhoven, 2008). Fredrickson's (2001, 2013) research shows that problem-solving and resilience increase when people experience positive emotions. I developed the common practice with the CPR team of sharing a bright, positive spot in their day, such as a moment of comfort, relaxation, contentment, or something that brings them joy. Specifically, the practice of acknowledging even the smallest things, like a quiet cuddle with a pet, a smile from a colleague in the hallway, or a warm cup of tea or coffee, expanded beyond

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the CPR team. Finding bright spots is similar and supports Fredrickson's (2013) broadening and

building a theory of positive emotions research. Members of the CPR and MLC teams noted that

the intentional practice of finding "bright spots" or "awe moments" and sharing them with others

helped shift away from more negative emotions and affected their overall mood. For example,

one MLC member stated:

> It is important to see the bright spots that are worth noting and celebrating and see
>
> strength in new ways. Sometimes it's hard to find a bright spot, but once you find it, then
>
> it's easier to find another and then another. It has a snowballing effect! This is greatly
>
> helpful, especially during the times of stress and hardship. (Teacher A, Google form,
>
> January 13, 2023)

When educational leaders experience positive emotions, the learning communities are affected

by a more positive environment, resulting in more student success (Jennings & Greenberg,

2009).

Calm. Another attribute of affirmative emotions that CPR and MLC members noted was

feeling calm after engaging in wellbeing practices. Being able to develop tools or practices to

help one self-regulate and calm oneself is helpful and can be achieved through wellbeing

practices such as mindfulness meditation and has been proven to reduce stress and anxiety and

increase attention (Zeidan et al., 2014). When a state of calmness for school leaders is achieved

through mindfulness or other strategies, a trustful, positive environment can be cultivated

(Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

The wellbeing practices facilitated calmness in various meetings and gatherings. For

example, I started a full day of professional learning with all middle school department heads

with wellbeing practices. The room was hectic and busy until I led the group through a stop and

jot activity to have all members clear their minds, followed by a breathing activity that changed

the room and members into a calm, focused space (Admin/Teacher G, Field notes, February 13,

2023). The sense of calm was also noticeable and commented on from MLC gatherings of PAR

Cycle Two. An MLC member noted a sense of calm after the gathering, and the environment

was caring and kind (Teacher l, Google form, January 13, 2023). "At the beginning, when

members first came in, the room felt tense. After we scanned our inner self, the breaths in the

room got longer, and the room became quieter" (Admin/Teacher G, Field notes, February 13,

2023). A similar situation was shared when an MLC member commented:

> I would say that I come to these meetings quite stressed and anxious. I worry that I am
>
> going to get emotional about my circumstances. I start off on edge. However, I let the
>
> process flow and try to listen to others. I have realized that we all have worries and
>
> stresses and that I am not alone. After a while, I feel myself relaxing. When I leave, my
>
> head is in a better place. Much better. I'm calmer. (Teacher S, Google form, February 24,
>
> 2023)

Connectedness. Helliwell (2018) stated that connectedness is when people feel part of a

community, supported, and socially connected. CPR and MLC group members felt more

connected through experiencing practices centered on overall wellbeing. Not only do social

connections at work make school leaders happier at work, but it also helps staff feel a sense of

belonging, which facilitates positive wellbeing, increased collaboration, and aptitude in their

leadership roles (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Lindsay and Creswell (2019) suggest that group-

based mindfulness interventions can significantly improve social connection. According to one

MLC member, the small-group gatherings contributed to connectedness:

> I think the size of the group was important to be able to feel connected to others. In a

larger group (e.g., a whole staff gathering), it is harder to feel connected to the wider

group. I really enjoyed spending time with the group, and each time I came away feeling

lighter than when I walked in. (Teacher E, Final written interview, May 10, 2023)

Strength. Feeling a sense of strength is an important emotion that helps people become

more resilient, model proactive behavior, and take on challenges with confidence (Fredrickson,

2013). School leaders support their team, and when they feel strong versus stressed, the feeling

can transfer to the team members who, as a result, feel empowered, capable, and self-efficacious

(Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017a). Therefore, leaders who tend to their wellbeing can sustain their

strength to support staff. The wellbeing practices helped members to acknowledge their

strengths; for example, one MLC member shared how engaging in the MLC gatherings helped

her to learn and become more aware of her strongest attributes (Admin/Teacher G, Field notes,

January 13, 2023).

The data collected in PAR Cycle Two illustrate how wellbeing practices contributed to

CPR and MLC members experiencing affirmative emotions, including positivity, calm,

connectedness, and strength. The data support the importance of school leaders incorporating

positive practices, such as wellbeing practices, as they facilitate building affirmative emotions,

which promote a positive culture of trust and deepened connections in a learning community

(Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fredrickson, 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017b). While positive

emotions are critical to maintain, recognizing and authorizing dissonant emotions remains

important to staff expressing stress.

Dissonant Emotions

Dissonant emotions (14%) was a newly emerged category in PAR Cycle Two that had

not surfaced in PAR Cycle One. Dissonant emotions are characterized by uncomfortable

thoughts and feelings. In the dissonant emotions category, the two key areas are struggling for balance and feelings of stress. I inferred that as participants developed connections, they were more vulnerable and shared dissonant emotions more readily.

Struggling for Balance. I collected data from the CPR and MLC team; 55 dissonant emotions were expressed. I sought to create a safe space within the CPR and MLC team by using different wellbeing strategies, including sharing quotes as prompts and engaging in creative processes, that allowed members to share the emotions that were causing the concern. Quickly, we recognized that several CPR and MLC members were struggling with finding a balance between their personal and professional lives. An imbalanced personal and professional life can vastly affect one's wellbeing and their mental health through increased stress and anxiety, potentially leading to more significant health issues (Michel et al., 2011). Additionally, a lack of work-life balance can affect both personal relationships and performance at work due to hindered cognitive functions and the inability to effectively problem solve (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

During CPR and MLC meetings, members openly shared their struggles and lack of work-life balance. Following the creative spiral wellbeing practice, Teacher L shared their struggle for balance with family and work, and the spiral helped them focus by drawing a slow continuous line in a circle for two minutes (Admin/Teacher G, Field notes, April 13, 2023). During the same MLC gathering, Teacher E shared with the group responding to the prompt about their challenges with staying healthy and the lack of balance (MLC artifact, April 13, 2023). Similarly, Teacher A responded that their challenges are lack of support, work, time, and students (MLC artifact, April 13, 2023).

Stress. Data collected from Cycle Two indicated that CPR and MLC members were

experiencing high levels of stress. Similar to the lack of work-life balance, persistent stress can affect educators and lead to burnout and lack of engagement, ultimately affecting the students and learning community (Maslach et al., 2001). Educators worldwide reported high stress levels during the pandemic due to the increased workload. However, the elevated workload and expectations continue for reasons such as trying to make up for lost instructional time and having underdeveloped skills to intentionally focus and support students' social and emotional wellbeing (Cipriano & Brackett, 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017a). For example, one MLC member stated, "I think at times it was triggering for me; feelings were brought up, and I was quite emotional" (Teacher S, Google form, January 13, 2023). Additionally, a CPR member responded to the prompt about their challenges with "uncertainty, emotional, lack of trust" (Admin/Teacher H, MLC artifact, March 6, 2023).

Through the recent pandemic, and well supported by research, the importance of alleviating and maintaining healthy levels of stress and work-life balance are vital for personal and professional reasons. The CPR and MLC team learned different ways to help manage stress and shared ways to maintain a work-life balance, which is vital for leaders and educators. It promoted the importance of tending to one's wellbeing. Not only is it essential for leaders to support their wellbeing, but it is also critical to create school environments and systems that support themselves, the teachers, and students' wellbeing with reduced stress levels.

Centering Activities

Centering activities are beneficial for leaders (13%). When educators focus on being present and engaging in reflective practices, their decision-making and ability to foster relationships within teams can be more effective (Reb et al., 2014). Centering activities emerged

during PAR Cycle One with similar codes – breathing, focus, reflective, being present, and pausing.

Breathing. Several types of intentional breathing positively affect educator wellbeing by alleviating stress, which helps create a positive environment (DiCarlo et al., 2020; Skinner & Beers, 2016). The use of breathing activities in the meetings and gatherings affected the members, and one MLC member commented "I love mindful breathing and trying to be present. Quieting (pause) the mind. I have done this in the past, but life then got in the way so it was great you brought it back to the forefront" (Teacher L, Interview, May 8, 2023). I noted that the breathing activities helped the group focus on their breath and then easily shift to the professional learning workshop (Admin/Teacher G, Field notes, January 13, 2023).

Focus. Wellbeing practices supported educators to increase focus and feel more centered. Many mindfulness wellbeing practices include drawing attention or focusing on specific things such as one's breath, a particular object, or a body part to keep the person's mind focused (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Mindful breathing is a practice that helps individuals pay attention to feelings without judgment (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). An MLC member commented on how the wellbeing practices increased focus and intended to try them with students to increase focus. During the final written interview, the MLC member stated:

> I already use mindfulness (mostly on my Apple watch but sometimes a video), but this reminded me of how useful it is, especially in switching tasks. When we came in from a busy day, it helped me to refocus on our session. I also plan on using the spiraling with my students as a way to focus at the start of the lesson. I thought this was a nice simple tool that they would happily engage in. They can be resistant to using mindfulness. (Teacher E, January 10, 2023)

Another MLC member commented on how the creative, spiral wellbeing practice increased focus as they were currently struggling to develop healthy habits such as the ones we were practicing as a group (Admin/Teacher G, Field notes, April 13, 2023).

Reflection. Dedicating time to reflection is an important practice for educators that can affect their effectiveness and facilitates continual growth and development (Schön, 1983). Aow et al. (2023) defined reflection as "when individuals learn and develop through examining and considering in-depth reflections *on* actions and reflections *in* actions" (p. 176). Reflective practices for educators, such as pausing when making decisions rather than quickly responding, produce positive educational outcomes (Day & Gu, 2007). Members of the MLC commented on the effect of the wellbeing practices that affected them personally. One member stated, "Providing time for self-reflection. It is incredibly powerful for me personally to check in and in the presence of others; sharing with others validates it" (Teacher T, Google form, January 13, 2023). Another member stated that incorporating the daily practice of reflection has helped them with self-knowledge, particularly as a mother, thinking of their own childhood and life experience, personal values/beliefs, learning from students, their knowledge as a teacher, and how all of these things influence how they raise their child (Teacher L, MLC artifact, January 13, 2023).

Being Present. Educators shape the learning environment; therefore, their ability to be physically and emotionally present is essential to communicate effectively. Communication is key in relationships but often challenging to improve emotional information (Dekeyser et al., 2008; Good et al., 2016). Relationships improve with mindfulness and by having empathy for others (Dekeyser et al., 2008; Good et al., 2016). They improve with honesty, openness, and what Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) term benevolence – kindness and good will toward

others. One member commented on how mindfulness and the wellbeing practices of the group:

> The wellness practices for the day made me focus on the present, reflect on my bright
> spot for the day, and how I show up as my best self every day. These are some of the
> things that we do not normally think about on regular work days, but it made me realize
> how some of these wellness practices can help us develop self-compassion that involves
> being warm and understanding with ourselves instead of delivering self-criticism.
> (Teacher A, Google form, January 13, 2023)

Being present and incorporating wellbeing practices enhanced communication, helped build relationships, and fostered compassion for self and others. Pausing to reflect is an important companion action to pausing.

Pausing. Educators' ability to pause to make an informed, calm decision rather than an emotive quick response is a helpful and developed skill. Mindful meditation and mindfulness training helps leaders manage their emotions and be less reactionary, and be able to deal with negative emotions more effectively (Ortner et al., 2007). Several tasks throughout an educator's day take a great deal of focus and attention, and taking time out to pause and break from the task can assist with one's ability to focus; hence, it is crucial to build that into one's routine (Ariga & Lleras, 2011). After the final MLC gathering, a member commented on how the wellbeing practices of the group affected them and how they were able to incorporate them into their classroom:

> There are several well-being practices that I may use or have already incorporated in my
> professional practice. Scan your inner world to be present. It's important to teach
> ourselves and our student's mindfulness. It helps them be in the moment and be aware of
> their bodies and minds through breathing exercises, sensory activities, or how to be aware

of their surroundings and most importantly checking in with their emotions. For example, I have incorporated a calm-down corner in my room which is a sofa placed in the far-end corner of my room. Students who are not focused due to various reasons need to take step away so they can kind of take that moment to deep breathe, check in with their thoughts and emotions and do what they need to do to reground before they go back into a group setting or task. (Teacher A, Interview, May 15, 2023)

Centering activities of breathing, focus, reflection, and pausing are necessary components of co-creating holistic spaces for wellbeing since all persons need to be a part of creating and maintaining an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Holistic Spaces

Holistic spaces are intentionally designed spaces that nurture one's physical, mental, emotional and overall wellbeing (9%). Within holistic spaces, two key attributes, sharing and psychological safety, became evident in the data. Due to the holistic spaces, the CPR and MLC teams shared emotional experiences stimulated by quotes, visuals, or activities, positive and dissonant. Aguilar stresses the power of holistic spaces to foster deeper connections and understanding (Aguilar, 2013). During PAR Cycle Two, the members shared more personal experiences as time went on, which deepened the level of understanding and empathy among the members, reinforcing the idea that holistic spaces can have a great affect and improve relationships (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012).

Sharing. When people share their personal experiences through face-to-face conversations, even when they have vastly different experiences or perspectives, they can change attitudes and support persons to be genuinely heard (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). I captured this sentiment of sharing by another colleague:

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After an MLC gathering Teacher T asked if we could stay and chat, and he shared that he

did not know what happens to him during the MLC sessions. He stated that he comes in

generally frantic about everything he has to do, and that those feelings diminish quickly.

Additionally, he shared that it is quite interesting to him because he usually would not

open up so much with others, and that tends to take prompts and make jokes or not reflect

deeply. However, he has opened up to the group in both gatherings and thought about

things. (Admin/Teacher G, Field notes, January 13, 2023)

Sharing personal experiences fostered deeper connections and understanding allowing the

members to open up, reflect, and evolve in ways they did not anticipate.

Psychological Safety. Holistic spaces facilitate psychological safety and allow people to

express emotions openly and not fear negative repercussions (Edmondson, 2019). Psychological

safety is vital for successful teams because people are willing to take risks without fearing

judgment from potential mistakes (Edmondson, 2019; Rozovsky, 2015). One example of

psychological safety is when a CPR team member commented, "Members sharing experiences

candidly and honestly, and we see one another more authentically. It provided a sense of

security, inclusion, and belonging. Receiving compassion and acceptance in return when a

member describes emotional experience" (Teacher A, Google form, January 13, 2023). In

another example of psychological safety during an emotional MLT meeting, a teacher said,

We checked in on one another. It was heavy, and H got very emotional because the loss

of her mom was coming up, and it triggered it. Admin/Teacher G was also triggered by

thinking about [the loss of] Tahira. We all talked, cried, and said we were here for one

another to support. Feelings of intense loss and support. (Admin/Teacher G, Reflective

memo, January 28, 2023)

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Data from PAR Cycle Two, including CPR and MLC team members, noted the growth of psychological safety with others from using wellbeing practices. All of these practices helped us to deepen our connections to understanding ourselves and our colleagues.

Deepened Connections with Self and Others

Connections people have with one another are vital to their wellbeing. Healthy relationships heavily influence the quality of life (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023). The depth and level of connections and relationships positively affect satisfaction and reduced stress levels at work (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Three categories emerged that support the theme of deepened connections with self and others: safe space - connections with others (frequency of 98 or 24% of total data), knowing self (n=62 or 15.5%), and reflecting upon dual roles (n=38 or 9.5%). Next, I analyze these three categories.

Safe Space - Connections with Others

The wellbeing practices used in the CPR and MLC meetings of sharing personal and professional experiences were intentionally planned to create a safe space to deepen connections, increase empathy, and promote cohesiveness among the team (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). In describing how we cultivated a safe space connection with others, five key attributes emerged: safe space/building, culture conditions for connections, strengthened connections, practices to connect, and communication,

Safe Space/Building Culture. The wellbeing practices supported connections through safe spaces and building a culture among the CPR and MLC teams. As a new administrative team, our collective commitment was in cultivating a culture of inclusivity built upon trust and a stronger, more collaborative community (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). An MLC member commented that they felt more connected to other members due to the wellbeing practices:

The sharing aspect of the wellbeing practices helped me feel connected to the other

members of the group. For example, when we had to choose a card and talk about how it

relates to our goals, people were able to share things connected to their personal lives or

more personal things connected to their professional lives. This made me feel more

connected to others as I could learn more about them, and I could also relate to many of

the things they were saying. (Teacher E, Interview, January 10, 2023)

The wellbeing practices deepened connections by allowing them to openly share personal and

professional stories, which fostered understanding, relatability, and strengthened inclusion

among the members.

Conditions for Connections. Safe spaces include foundational conditions for

connections. As a new team, building trust was key and required adequate time to share

experiences and learn more about one another. "Sharing similar experiences and finding

connections with others was very helpful" (Admin/Teacher H, Google form, January 13, 2023).

The structure of the MLC gatherings in which we used the CLE axioms, open and closing

circles, and wellbeing practices fostered conversations and set the conditions to build

connections. One MLC member acknowledged the need to exercise acceptance and let go of

their ego to be better able to connect with colleagues (Teacher T, MLC artifact, January 13,

2023).

Strengthened Connections. The participants and I invested time into CPR and MLC

meetings to build connections among the members. In PAR Cycle Two, connections developed

quickly. After merely one MLC gathering, a participant stated that they experienced:

More connected in relation to other staff in the school. The ability to go beyond our roles

into our personal lives helps to remind me that we are not just the roles we hold. Difficult

to get this at work as interactions are mainly work-based. (Teacher L, Google form, January 13, 2023)

On another occasion, a CPR member commented that connections were critical for collegiality and felt positively affected by the study. Additionally, an MLC member stated:

The connections formed during our sessions have lasted. I believe that when colleagues hear patterns in feedback from others, they are more mindful when it comes to identifying areas of support for that person. E.g., Linh has spoken to me on a number of occasions to genuinely inquire after my wellbeing in relation to my children…. There have been other similar moments for me; this is one example. (Teacher T, Interview, May 15, 2023)

Through the CPR and MLC meetings, members deepened their connections and fostered genuine concern and support for one another's wellbeing which helped them connect their dual roles of personal and professional.

Practices to Connect. As the middle school's principal and lead researcher of the study, I incorporated wellbeing practices to deepen connections into the CPR meetings, MLC gatherings, and various middle school staff meetings. Specifically, I added a 45-second to one-minute connection activity during the weekly Tuesday morning briefings, where the entire middle school staff meets for a brief meeting before school for celebrations and upcoming information. Each week the time was prompted with a visual image, quote, or thought, and dedicated time for the staff to connect with another staff member in the room. After some time, the other CPR members commented on how the slight change of integrating wellbeing activities impacted how the staff connected with other staff members. Similarly, an MLC member commented on how they were using some of the wellbeing practices in the classroom:

Empathy through Mandala or any other activity I have been reading articles about

teaching empathy in the classroom, and the research has shown that emotion can and

should be taught within the classroom. In most cases, empathy has to be taught; it isn't

developed on its own but requires someone to put in an intentional effort to strengthen it.

(Teacher A, Interview, May 15, 2023)

The teacher described how teaching students to think about numbers flexibly during math can support youth to think about valuing another person's perspective and draw connections with others even when they disagree. A CPR member's reflection "I am paying close attention to... my leadership and how I must act the way I admire a leader to be," (Admin/Teacher R, Field notes, March 6, 2023), indicates that these practices involve self-examination and opportunities to interact and connect with others.

Communication. The wellbeing practices promoted communication among colleagues using CLE protocols and shared reflection. Fitzsimons and Kay (2004) found that individuals who self-reflect and adjust their communication accordingly experience deeper interpersonal interactions. Listening is a vital part of communication, and the CPR meetings and MLC gatherings included active listening to foster communication:

The wellness practices help in building meaningful connections we all need to thrive.

Most of us spend more than half our waking hours at work and this makes work an

important source of meaningful connection and social interaction. I was able to share my

experiences and knowledge of self with others without fear of judgment and curious to

listen to others. We were listening to understand. (Teacher A, Google form, January 13,

2023)

The wellbeing practices enhanced communication among the CPR and MLC members by

encouraging self-reflection, listening, and fostering an environment where they felt safe to share and genuinely understand one another. Next, I analyze the data in the category of knowing self in the theme of deepened connections with self and others.

Knowing Self

Participants experienced the concept of knowing self (15.5%) through wellbeing practices and deepened connections in PAR Cycle Two. Once one understands self and what is of value, balancing work and life contributes to one's overall wellbeing (Grawitch et al., 2013). During the CPR and MLC meetings, members had opportunities to share personal narratives. By doing so, members sought to better understand values through shared personal experiences. Cultural synchronicity is a person's ability to consider how characteristics such as age, ethnicity, race, home language, and gender, might shape others' perceptions of oneself (National Equity Project, n.d.). In cultural synchronicity, diverse members may connect in different ways and be influenced by each person's perspectives based on vastly different lived experiences. Three critical areas of knowing self were seeking understanding, personal experiences, and personal values.

Seeking Understanding. Through the opportunities to share personal narratives, members developed ways of seeking understanding of the individual perspectives of the other group members. In fact, seeking understanding had more frequency than the combined totals of the other codes in the category of knowing self. One CPR member noted that when seeking to understand "differences - sometimes, it felt good, other times it was difficult due to the dynamics of the team because of the challenge to enter authentically, but it is important to have the space and keep trying" (Admin/Teacher R, Interview, May 3, 2023). Participants shared how seeking understanding and learning about others deepened connections:

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It definitely helped to build connections. This school can get extremely busy, so most of

my communication with my colleagues is based on students and work-related topics.

These sessions help me to see beyond the professional roles we have in the school and

build branches to a personal level. These connections also helped to build understanding

and empathy, which is important when disagreements arise through our professional

interactions. It is a great reminder that we are all human with our own challenges, and we

are doing the best we can. (Teacher l, Interview, May 8, 2023)

CPR and MLC members not only sought to understand individual perspectives through sharing

their personal narratives, they built deeper connections, fostered empathy, and were reminded of

their shared humanity.

Personal Experiences and Values. The personal narratives, wellbeing activities, quotes,

or readings facilitated members to connect to their personal experiences and share their values

with the group. An MLC member commented:

I am not sure if this is an experience, but being able to make the personal connection and

realization of who I am is based on all the different areas of my life. And how they all

have shaped me as a mother, educator, and person. And how it's all connected. (Teacher

L, Google form, January 13, 2023)

Through reflection on personal experiences, educators gradually developed a more complete

understanding of their colleagues. Drawing from personal narratives and wellbeing activities,

CPR and MLC members reflect on their identities and reinforced how they understood personal

experiences as they expressed their personal values, which is a vital component for educators

(Schön, 1983).

Khalifa (2018) supports the importance of leaders discussing their values to be more equitable as leaders. Educators may espouse equity in practice, yet gaps can emerge without naming and closely reflecting on them and their correlation to practice In the mandala artifact, an MLC member articulated these values: choose kindness, inner peace, authentic self, soul, truth, values, patience, and extend grace (Teacher S, MLC artifact, February 24, 2023). As we focused on personal values, educators extended grace to others. One administrator expressed, however, that it can be challenging to maintain that lens in the professional realm. When team members shared their values with the team, they deepened their connections and began to hold each other accountable for their values.

Reflection on Dual Roles

When educational leaders are focused and know themselves, the community, and how they intersect, they can connect to the larger community as leaders of and for equity (Rigby & Tredway, 2015). Understanding the connection between their personal and professional roles was key. Because of the school structure, most teachers and administrators are often at school at minimum of 10-12 hours a day. The ability to integrate the personal with the professional is essential if the staff members are to maintain wellbeing.

Through the wellbeing practices, the CPR and MLC team members articulated how their personal roles in families and friendships affected their lives. During one personal narrative, similar personal roles were identified (ordered from highest frequency to lowest), including parent, partner, and mother; child and sibling; friend; and extended family and neighbor. One's personal roles can influence a person's professional behaviors and practice. Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) found that educators who integrate their personal experiences into their teaching practices often demonstrate a more empathetic approach. When CPR and MLC members

reflected on merging their personal and professional roles, they expressed that this understanding intensified their commitment as educators and the hours spent in school. Team members highlighted certain personal roles such as being a partner or parent, shaping their interactions with students and colleagues. When dual roles, personal and professional, are interconnected, they influence each other, and foster educators to take a more empathic approach with students and colleagues (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Day et al., 2006; Nias, 1989).

Participants identified two professional responsibilities as being a colleague and completing work responsibilities. CPR and MLC members found ways to use the practices within their professional roles to deepen connections with their students and colleagues. One MLC member stared how she would utilize activities learned from the wellbeing-focused MLC sessions with "my mentor group in the future as a technique for understanding and getting a temperature for where they [students] are from / who they are / past / present" (Teacher T, Interview, May 18, 2023). Participants shared how they could embed mindfulness practices with students "as a means of calming and settling the post lunch hype or even to allow for slowing of thoughts in preparation for designing" (Teacher T, Interview, May 18, 2023). Overall, participants hoped "to see some of these practices being implemented MS [middle school] wide so as to create an environment that fosters collaboration and a strong sense of community among educators" (Teacher A, Interview, May 18, 2023).

The data from PAR Cycles One and Two informed the findings. In particular, as participants developed deeper connections, they expressed their concerns and vulnerabilities. They began to understand how to reconnect to their lifeworlds and use the emotional learning and connectedness in the lifeworld to inform the systems world of the organization – in other

words, they developed a more holistic response to their dual roles of personal and professional (Sergiovanni, 2000).

Findings

In the PAR study, I confirmed the need for international school administrators to support a middle school leadership team and teacher-leaders to practice wellbeing and deepen connections. The CPR and MLC teams engaged in wellbeing practices to support themselves as leaders and used wellbeing practices to develop deeper connections. As the lead researcher, using the CLE axioms, open and closing circles, and wellbeing practices, I modeled practices to support wellbeing and deepened connections among the team. The CPR team's collaborative work facilitated the MLC team's use and openness to engage in wellbeing practices. As a result, I determined two findings from a body of evidence from the study's two cycles of inquiry:

1. Educators who engage in emotionally centering wellbeing practices deepen connections between themselves and others.

2. International school administrators who provide a holistic space in which teachers can engage in wellbeing practices and explore feelings and emotions that support them in their dual roles of personal and professional.

See Table 11 for the two findings with connections between themselves and others.

Wellbeing Activities Promote Deepened Connections with Self and Others

The data from PAR Cycle One and Two reveal an initial finding that is a necessary step in establishing a holistic space for administrator ad teacher renewal: *Educators deepen connections within themselves and others when they engage in wellbeing practices*. When a community engages in wellbeing activities, connections deepen (Keyes & Shapiro, 2004).

Table 11

Findings from PAR Cycles One and Two

Finding	Category	Code	PAR C1	PAR C2	TOTAL *n*=508
Educators who engage in emotionally centering wellbeing practices deepen connections between themselves and others.	Safe space connections with others (141) 28%	Safe spaces/ culture	22	34	57
		Strengthened connections	10	17	27
		Conditions to connections	-	20	20
		Communication	3	12	15
		Practices to Connect	-	15	15
		Structures	8	-	8
	Knowing self (70) 14%	Seeking understanding	-	36	36
		Personal experiences	4	14	18
		Personal values	-	12	12
		Leadership	4	-	4
	Reflection upon dual roles (38) 7%	Personal roles	-	28	28
		Professional roles	-	10	10
International school administrators who provide a holistic space in which teachers can engage in wellbeing practices and explore feelings and emotions that support them in their dual roles of personal and professional.	Centering activities (85) 17%	Breathing	10	14	24
		Pausing	10	6	16
		Being Present	6	9	15
		Reflection	5	10	15
		Focus	-	14	14
	Affirmative emotions (66) 13%	Positivity	6	18	24
		Calm	-	16	16
		Connectedness	-	15	15
		Strength	-	10	10
		Brave	1	-	1
	Dissonant emotions (57) 11%	Struggling for balance	2	32	34
		Stressed	-	23	23
	Holistic space (51) 10%	Sharing	6	22	28
		Psychological Safety	5	14	19
		Challenges	2	-	2
		Emotional Intelligence	1	-	1
		Integral	1	-	1

Specifically, wellbeing activities focused on gratitude tended to build strong connections in relationships (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) while mitigating certain forms of negativity that can naturally emerge over the course of a demanding school year. Educators who practice wellbeing deepened connections with self and others (49%) by co-creating safe spaces with others, identifying and sharing self, and developing personal and professional connections.

Safe Spaces with Others

Schools are places where leaders can support safe spaces in which individuals can come together as a community to share stories and learn with and from each other (Guajardo et al., 2016); when these safe space cultures are in place, the school-based staff feels held and supported (Drago-Severson, 2012). In 141 instances or 28% of the data over two cycles of inquiry, having a safe space was identified as building a collaborative culture, setting up the conditions for connections through practices and structures, strengthening connections, and communicating. As a middle school principal, I utilized a meeting format that included personal narrative activities during the CPR and MLC meetings to cultivate a culture in which we valued and supported individual reflection and interconnectedness. Several factors, including trust and empathy, supported our individual and collective sense of deepened connections among the group members. One member said that:

> [T]rusting relationships in the group, feelings of belonging, being understood and accepted by group members, implementation of these activities, existing school culture, etc. Personally, I felt I had a good relationship with everybody in the group to begin with, and therefore felt very comfortable sharing some personal side of my life other than just professional. The wellbeing practices provided a space for us to focus on our emotional well-being and helped foster a supportive and empathetic environment where we

connected, shared our experiences, and provided emotional support to one another. It also

provided a platform for sharing ideas and best wellbeing practices. (Teacher A,

Interview, May 15, 2023)

Over time, communication became more fluid within the teams, largely due to the practices and

structures that established the necessary conditions for members becoming more open,

particularly in PAR Cycle Two for the MLC team. Since the CPR team consisted of all

administrative leaders in the middle school, the MLC gatherings in PAR Cycle One felt more

rigid, with less authentic sharing by the CPR administrators and MLC teacher members. We felt

the power difference between the CPR and MLC. Over time and by sharing personal narratives

and reflections, all members became more vulnerable. I modeled vulnerability with the MLC

team when I shared that I was trying to learn to focus on the small moments, be less competitive,

and find a balance between "getting things right" with family responsibilities, which would take

much unlearning as an adult. Additionally, I acknowledged the power held by groups of women

and supported healthy discussions and invited varied perspectives (Admin/Teacher G, Reflective

memo, January 13, 2023).

Knowing (and Sharing) Self

Throughout both cycles of inquiry in the study, the members explored self by identifying

personal and professional roles and values, which supported connecting with others in the team.

In two cycles of inquiry, 70 instances or 14% of the total data related to identifying and sharing

experiences and values with others. The CPR and MLC members spoke about their identities and

what they valued as persons and educators. As I consistently asked the team members to explore

their identities, they gained deeper empathy and respect for one another (Muhammad & Love,

2020). Teaching and leading are dependent on each individual's sense of self; Aow et al. (2023)

urges leaders to identify and share their intersectional identities within the communities. In exploring personal identity, I prompted MLC members during the opening circle to reflect on how each person carries an identity wherever you go. Therefore, fully understanding self is a first step in bringing one's best self to every situation. I used this reflection prompt: "How is self-knowledge deeply intertwined with the way you present yourself in different roles?" Teachers in the MLC analyzed their identities and explained what was necessary to authentically "show up" or engage in specific roles in life, for example, one MLC member noted:

> Being a father - losing patience… Being a husband - not providing enough space, maybe suffocating, not managing personally, and allowing this to deflect onto [my wife]. Being a colleague - modesty and acceptance. Letting go of the ego. Season some conversations. Institutionalized British School System Roman Catholic Guilt. Being a teacher - understanding that when things don't flow / go right the first port of call must be me. (Teacher T, Field notes, January 13, 2023)

As a leader, I strived to provide ample opportunities for members to share aspects of self. Upon reflection as a teacher, an MLC member identified that educators must listen to the challenges, celebrate, respect their work, guide, acknowledge their challenges, slow down, and dig deeper. By the end of PAR Cycle Two, the team members reflected and shared several aspects of themselves with increased vulnerability.

Dual Roles: Personal and Professional Connections

Reflection, exploration, and sharing their personal and professional roles among the groups occurred in more depth in PAR Cycle Two. The commonality among all members was that everyone was an educator and held a deep personal connection to the school's mission to educate to make the world better by teaching for peace and a sustainable future. Additionally, all

members shared a common experience of working in a large school environment. Through the professional connections, over time members found personal connections. One MLC member stated: "Being in these sessions reminds me that we are all people, regardless of our different roles. We are humans, individuals, and we need care and kindness" (Teacher L, Google form, January 13, 2023). While the data on direct discussion of personal and professional dual roles was not the prominent evidence (7% of the total data), the ability to merge the personal with the professional was critical for the participants. Opening up conversations to values and how the participants are committed to a set of professional and personal values that intersect helped participants gain some level of authority over their work-life balance and view the intersecting roles as an asset.

PAR Cycles One and Two emphasize how administrators are critical in promoting and fostering wellbeing and deepening connections with their teams. The CPR and MLC teams achieved this by experimenting with wellbeing practices, engaging on activities focused on deepening connections, creating safe spaces, understanding and sharing about self, and making personal and professional connections. This finding stresses the importance of administrators intentionally finding space to integrate wellbeing practices to deepen connection.

Holistic Spaces: Emotionally Centering Wellbeing Practices

The PAR Cycles One and Two data resulted in a second finding*: International school administrators who provide a holistic space in which teachers can engage in wellbeing practices and explore feelings and emotions that support them in their dual roles of personal and professional.* Jennings and Greenberg (2009) stress the importance of teachers' wellbeing; when they explore their emotions, they can tend to their personal wellbeing, and as a result, they can be more effective in their professional roles. Therefore, administrators should model this connection

and intentionally create and promote holistic spaces in which teachers can explore their feelings. These holistic spaces help to ensure that teachers are supported to be more resilient and well in their personal and professional roles. As a result, the total data for PAR Cycles One and Two support the finding: engaging in centering activities (17%) so that participants can express both affirmative emotions (13%) and dissonant emotions (11%) supports holistic spaces for wellbeing practices (10%).

To create holistic spaces, incorporating and exploring the use of centering activities are beneficial. Centering activities, such as mindfulness and personal narratives, affect wellbeing as they facilitate forming and nurturing relationships while decreasing burnout (Good et al., 2016). Centering activities can promote teachers' resilience, positively affecting their ability to be more stable and emotionally capable of coping with the many ups and downs educators may experience during a school year (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016). I discuss three sets of emotionally centering wellbeing practices, comprising 51% of the total data: activities, space for emotions (affirmative and dissonant), and characteristics of a holistic space. International school administrators who invest time focused on centering activities that support emotional wellbeing can establish holistic spaces (PAR Cycle One data) that support themselves and educators to express a multitude of positive and dissonant emotions as members more deeply engage in wellbeing practices (PAR Cycle Two data).

Centering Activities

As the lead researcher, I set the structures and tested out wellbeing practices with the participants of the study. Centering activities supported the educators and were transferable to teaching practices as well. MLC members who practiced "bright spot" centering activities applied those activities to different personal and professional contexts:

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I spend 5-10 mins every Monday morning asking kids to share any highlights from the

weekend or anything good that happened over the past week. It's a great way to kickstart

the week having heard happy positive things from the students and I share one bright spot

with my students. Being able to remain positive and look at things with optimism is an

invaluable life lesson which the kids need to be taught early on. This has also greatly

motivated me to think about my bright spot during the cab ride on my way to school.

(Teacher A, Interview, May 15, 2023)

A centering activity of creating a personal mandala supported self-reflection on four levels and

helped educators articulate their moral imperatives for their work. For example, "with the

mandala, I wanted to do something uplifting as mandalas are usually interesting, spiritual, and

pretty. Looking back - maybe that is what I would like to emulate or at least try to" (Teacher S,

Google form, January 13, 2023).

Personal narratives for each session included multiple types of setting the necessary

conditions for effective school improvement (Militello et al., 2009; Tredway & Militello, 2023).

These go well beyond the typical icebreakers or connectors that educators often use at meetings

to foster participant self-examination and risk-taking. The evidence from the relational trust

literature (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000) support that a school leader

must establish an ethic of care to foster greater authenticity and openness so that the

organizational actors, in this case teachers, are willing to be vulnerable and reveal self and be

open to ideas and emotions of others.

Emotions: Affirmative and Dissonant

CPR and MLC members exhibited a difference in emotions in PAR Cycles One and Two.

In PAR Cycle One, members primarily shared positive or affirmative emotions. As their comfort

and trust levels increased, they expressed dissonant emotions in PAR Cycle Two in regards to their high levels of stress and concerns about work-life balance. As an international middle school administrator, I, with my two administrative colleagues, provided the time and space for teachers to share personal narratives; as we instituted regular practices, including dynamic mindfulness for centering and personal narratives to tell their personal and professional stories, educators expressed other emotions and demonstrated increased vulnerability:

> I found the kitchen table [personal narrative prompt] particularly powerful as a means of unlocking some part of my subconscious that I hadn't accessed for a long time. Some of which were positive and some elements negative. On reflection, this is why it was so powerful as it provided me with a perspective from which to view incidents in the past that have formed myself in the present. Ultimately, I think all of the activities we did during our sessions in which we shared our thoughts, feelings, or current psychological status were powerful on their own. I think we all appreciate being 'heard' and listened to intentionally and in a safe and unjudged space. It's the first time I've done anything like it and found it therapeutic. (Teacher T, Interview, January 13, 2023)

Leadership is demanding in several ways, notwithstanding the commitment to inclusivity within a large education system. During an MLC gathering, one CPR member, Admin/Teacher R shared that she is a people pleaser and that they were having "mom guilt" of not doing everything right. Admin/Teacher R shared that she was trying to focus on themselves rather than everyone else, which is hard to do (Admin/Teacher G, Field notes, January 13, 2023). When team members shared dissonant emotions, they emphasized and related over similar struggles, primarily concerning the lack of balance and stress levels. An example is after a centering activity in an MLC gathering, Teacher E revealed her struggles with perfectionism and the lack of balance.

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She shared that spending two minutes drawing a spiral highlighted the tight and precision of her drawing compared to the other MLC members (Admin/Teacher G, Field notes, January 13, 2023).

Holistic Space

International school administrators can create safes through intimate groups and settings such as the CPR group and the small MLC cohort team. As the lead researcher, I intentionally used several strategies to create open, authentic sharing conditions. For the MLC gatherings, I used a consistent agenda format that included an opening circle wellbeing practice, a personal narrative activity, and a closing circle wellbeing practice. The teams always met in a circle formation for all meetings to ensure all members could participate and see one another. The CPR and MLC teams consistently based our work using the CLE axioms particularly since the study involved individuals directly affected and who actively sought solutions through the engagement of conversation throughout this study.

Throughout the PAR study, I surfaced multiple examples of evidence from participants who referenced safe environments and holistic spaces. During an MLC gathering, Teacher E shared about struggling with perfectionism and the lack of life balance which connected to how they completed the spiral activity using tight, controlled lines. Teacher H commented on how the wellbeing practices created conditions for trust building among the teams: "The level of trust is something I value and it is very evident how emotional it can make people as they unearth hidden feelings they were unsure existed" (Google form, January 13, 2023). Through the use of the CLE axioms as the framework, members became more vulnerable and shared their stories.

In PAR Cycles One and Two, creating holistic spaces and having the CPR and MLC teams engage in wellbeing practices benefited them building trust among the team. As a result of

the increased levels of trust, the data reflected the shift in emotions from primarily positive in PAR Cycle One to deeper, dissonant emotions in PAR Cycle Two. The centering activities that facilitated reflection and grounding influenced the emotion shared. The CPR and MLC teams found value in sharing their personal narratives which fostered greater authenticity and openness. As a result, a space was created for more genuine connections. Structures used consistently, such as the CLE axioms and circles, assisted the development of holistic spaces which were key to building trust and vulnerability when the teams experimented with wellbeing practices.

Integration of the Lifeworld with the Systems World

Through the PAR study and wellbeing centering activities and holistic spaces, I recognized the intersectionality of lifeworld connections with the systems world (school level). Our daily lives play out in two spheres – the lifeworld includes our personal interactions with family and society and the system world in which the school organization operates – often technical and bureaucratic; Habermas analyzed the interactions between the spheres and stated that the systems world can colonize the human world (Fultner, 2011). The responsibility of those in schools is to ensure that schools are human places for work, and, as Sergiovanni (2000) interpreting Habermas says, schools need to function as communities with shared values and traditions, not merely as a formal organization driven by policy. In addition, the lifeworld should inform how the systems world operates so that the organizational actors can humanize the systems world and not feel a tension between the personal and professional.

Yet, people often struggle with finding a balance between the lifeworld and the systems world due to the systems' inherent influence. In this small-scale experiment, primarily our professional interactions within one institution (Culmsee & Awati, 2013), the CPR and MLC teams sought and struggled with finding the balance. Through wellbeing practices, I offered a

space for educators to pause and reflect about their personal and professional roles – roles that play out in the lifeworld and the system in any school. A CPR member was "grateful to work with people who cherish wellbeing and mindfulness as a practice that is part of life and leadership" (Admin/Teacher, Google form, January 13, 2023). In the CPR and MLC meetings, I intentionally created a holistic space where participants felt held and secure enough to express critical reflection related to wellbeing and take the steps required to improve healthier dynamics in the school. They learned that merging the personal and professional is useful in fostering an open environment – a space where they can bring their authentic selves, feel valued, offer mutual respect toward one another, and grow toward collective goals. I designed the CPR and MLC meetings so that participants would leave feeling more connected, calm, and centered than they felt prior to the gathering. Through the use of wellbeing practices, members made deep connections with others and worked to integrate their lifeworlds to the system in place.

Conclusion

Based on the data from this small-scale PAR study, I witnessed learning and growth in the educators with whom I work. The administrative team and the middle school teacher team engaged in wellbeing practices and connections formed among team members. The team members dedicated themselves to wellbeing by learning new practices that helped to support personal and professional growth and strengthened positive connections. While the study number is small, for me, the ability to work in small groups to achieve these results was a crucial starting point to test out the processes so that we could gain momentum to work in the entire middle school. By stressing the significance of centering activities and wellbeing practices to improve individual and collective experiences in education systems, the data confirm that: (1) Educators who engage in emotionally centering wellbeing practices deepen connections between

themselves and others, and (2) international school administrators who provide a holistic space in which teachers can engage in wellbeing practices and explore feelings and emotions that support them in their dual roles of personal and professional.

International school administrators who implement centering activities facilitate a more comprehensive space where educators can express their emotions. Establishing structures and embedding wellbeing practices created a positive environment where emotions are allowed to be expressed. CPR administrators and MLC teachers who participated in wellbeing practices fostered a more profound sense of self-connection and formed bonds with others. The connections created from the safe spaces and the members sharing about themselves enhanced their connections with others on the team. As we explored the integration of the lifeworld and the systems world, I could see how the processes could transfer to the full middle school so that we could all function at a high level of wellbeing (Sergiovanni, 2000).

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We are a part of the world around us and cannot separate ourselves and our sense of "being well" from our wider communities, friendships and relationships (Aow et al., 2023, p. 101).

Wellbeing is an integration of mind, body, spirit, and identity, and schools should offer educators the space to tend to their wellbeing (Aow et al., 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021). A lack of attention to wellbeing among educators can hinder the ability to effectively connect and develop as a cohesive team. Furthermore, wellbeing is an equity issue since educators who experience high-stress levels have increased difficulty serving the school community. The participatory action research (PAR) study took place during a period of extreme challenges in a large, high-pressure international school serving approximately 640 middle school students based in Singapore. The study was conducted during the endemic period of COVID-19, when many schools needed guidance on how to best prioritize self-care and wellbeing for the staff and school leaders (Steiner et al., 2022).

In the PAR study, the overarching research question was: *How do middle school leaders enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections?* The research sub-questions were:

1. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?

   a. Within the leadership team?

   b. Within the leadership cohort?

2. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?

   a. Within the leadership team?

   b. Within the leadership cohort?

3. How do I transform my leadership practices through the study of educator wellbeing?

As the lead research practitioner, I supported the Middle School Leadership Team (MLT), which functioned as the co-practitioner researcher (CPR) team (*n*=3 school administrators), to enact

wellbeing practices and deepen connections. In the early stages of PAR Cycle One, I worked with the MLT to engage in wellbeing practices. The MLT administrators then introduced wellbeing practices to the Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC), composed of the CPR team and five newly hired teachers. The goal of the MLC sessions was to deepen connections with each other and the MLT administrators; ultimately, we hoped the wellbeing practices would be more widespread throughout middle school. The theory of action of this study was *if* a middle school leadership team engages with activities centered on personal and professional wellbeing, *then* the members experience improved wellbeing and deepened connections. I sought to understand how educational leaders engage in wellbeing activities to support themselves as leaders and use wellbeing practices to develop deeper connections. I explored how this experience enhanced my leadership as a middle school principal. In this study, I examined ways schools emphasize wellness to benefit everyone.

The international school where the study took place has a unique mission, which is underpinned by its wellbeing principles. Even with a strong commitment to the mission and wellbeing principles, students, teachers, school leaders, and community members were deeply affected by the complexities and strictly enforced COVID-19 safety protocols. Staff shared their feelings of being overwhelmed and isolated from one another. According to some long-time staff members, years ago, the school used to be a close-knit, inclusive community. Notably, the school recently experienced a higher-than-normal staff turnover and leadership changes. Furthermore, the MLT team composition changed for four consecutive years. During the study, a new vice-principal joined the team, and near the end of the study, the other vice-principal prepared to exit the school. Recognizing the current context of the middle school, I identified a need to emphasize wellbeing practices and enact activities to foster deepening connections in the community.

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Throughout PAR Cycle One and PAR Cycle Two, various activities supported the study's aims (see Table 12). As the lead researcher, I facilitated the CPR and MLC gatherings using the CLE (Community Learning Exchanges) axioms, open and closing circles, and wellbeing practices to support wellbeing and deepen connections among the team. I used the CLE axioms during the gatherings to support the facilitation of listening and discourse necessary to change the practices of those closest to the issue (Guajardo et al., 2016; Militello et al., 2009). CLEs encourage people to be open to changing behavior due to their collaborative nature. People feel empowered knowing their input can directly affect the group's actions. I used the CLE axioms throughout PAR Cycle One and PAR Cycle Two to design the CPR and MLC gatherings. I created a holistic space encouraging members to share and engage in conversations conducive to building connections.

In this chapter, I discuss the PAR findings and connect them to the research questions and relevant literature. Based on the study findings, I present implications for practice, policy, and research. Finally, I reflect on my leadership and discuss my journey and the effect of this study on my practices personally and with my team.

Discussion of Findings

The CPR team and I explored the impact of utilizing wellbeing practices on deepening connections among international middle school leaders and staff. Through the study, I learned that leaders must model wellbeing practices and foster strong connections within the leadership team and with staff to build a culture of an inclusive learning community. When reviewing the PAR research findings alongside the research questions, I compared them with the literature review and additional sources. I developed a framework for leadership that shows that educators who engage in centering activities and creating safe spaces that facilitate holistic space and

Table 12

PAR Cycle One and PAR Cycle Two Frequency of Activities Per Week

Activity	PAR CYCLE I (Fall 2022) (September – December 2022)	Review Data PAR Cycle One	PAR CYCLE II (Spring 2023) (January – May 2023)
Weekly / Biweekly Meeting with CPR Members (3 admin)	* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *	*	* * * * * * * * * * *
MLC Gathering (8 staff)	*	* *	* *
Reflection with ECU Professors/ Coach	* * *	* *	* * * * *

Note. Asterisks indicate activities and frequency for the given weeks of each cycle.

reflection that ultimately allowed for dual roles, personal and professional, to be integrated. The two key findings from a body of evidence from the study's two cycles of inquiry are:

1. Educators who engage in emotionally centering wellbeing practices deepen connections between themselves and others.

2. International school administrators provide a holistic space in which teachers can engage in wellbeing practices and explore feelings and emotions that support them in their dual roles of personal and professional.

Next, I discuss the two findings and draw connections to relevant literature. Then I propose an emergent framework based on the PAR cycles of inquiry. Related to the two findings, five critical aspects are related to wellbeing and connection: centering activities, safe spaces, holistic spaces, reflection, and dual role integration.

Centering Activities

Pertinent to the first finding of this study, educators who engage in emotionally centering wellbeing practices deepen connections between themselves and others. Centering activities like mindfulness foster a supportive and inclusive environment (Good et al., 2016). The centering activities enabled the school leaders to actively listen and foster a culture of trust and mutual support among the teams. Research collated by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) supports this, demonstrating that SEL programs within schools benefit students and educators by improving their practice and their well-being through the supportive climate and culture created, which fosters positive relationships (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Mindfulness can also positively enhance educators' wellbeing, specifically affecting their mindfulness and self-compassion (Dave et al., 2020; Roeser et al., 2013).

Centering activities that include trauma-informed practices and mindfulness support

individuals to reconnect with themselves and their bodies for self-care. Throughout the PAR

study, participants engaged, developed, and deepened their engagement in centering activities.

For example, CPR member Admin/Teacher H found that her participation in the study helped her

start meditation again, particularly focusing on her breathing, which she found beneficial

personally and professionally. Van der Kolk (2014) presents that being mindful of one's bodily

needs is essential for self-care. He states, "If you are not aware of what your body needs, you

can't take care of it" (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 275). In line with this, many centering activities in

the study focused on helping participants pay closer attention to their bodies and present

emotions. These activities included breathing exercises designed to link emotional states with

bodily sensations, fostering awareness and self-care (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Mindfulness and centering activities effectively promote well-being during the PAR

study. For example, CPR members and I engaged in a "letting go" breathing exercise during an

MLT meeting. I read a short passage instructing participants to pay attention to their bodies,

identify potential stress points, slow their breathing, and release tension. By the end of the

centering activities, participants were focused on breathing, reduced room tension, and elongated

breaths, creating a palpable sense of calm. The ABC concept of Dynamic Mindfulness from the

Niroga Institute (Bose et al., 2017) emphasizes the interconnectedness of action, breathing and

centering. Dynamic Mindfulness helps to manage stress, regulate emotions, and improves

attention, by combining insights from neuroscience and trauma research. Teacher L reported that

dynamic mindfulness, particularly focusing on Action-Breathing-Centering (ABC), was a

valuable reminder to focus on wellbeing; it helped to manage stress busy daily life activities

(Google form, October 7, 2022). The benefits observed in the study and examples shared by

participants affirmed that mindfulness and centering activities are valuable tools for enhancing wellbeing.

Safe Spaces

To foster personal and professional growth, school leaders must actively create these safe spaces and implement wellbeing practices. "More than anything else, being able to feel safe with other people defines mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying" (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 354). Practices included in culturally responsive teaching (CRT) emphasizes the significance of creating inclusive and emotionally supportive educational environments (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Although the study did not focus on classroom practices, I applied the safe space idea from CRT as I worked with middle school leaders of diverse backgrounds through wellbeing practices.

Culturally responsive leadership (CRL) supports the importance of creating safe, supportive environments. The tenets of CRL are that people seek to understand, respect, and include students' diverse cultural backgrounds, which also extends to educators. Educators who are emotionally centered and connected to their communities create safe environments by fostering relationships with students (Gay, 2018; Gooden et al., 2023; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). To build inclusive, safe spaces for individuals, participants on the CPR and MLC team throughout the study consistently used the CLE axioms. In the PAR study, the safe spaces supported authentic, meaningful connections with foundations built upon trust and mutual respect more deeply in PAR Cycle Two; hence, it takes time to cultivate and develop safe spaces.

With the shared purpose of supporting wellbeing in the study, the CPR and MLC teams mostly shared positive emotions during PAR Cycle One. The positive emotions shared helped build connections and created a space for teachers to feel supported. Teacher/Admin H

exemplified this when she said that empathy and vulnerability are key. She also noted how she has been so much more vulnerable than she had been (in a good way) due to her participation in the study. In PAR Cycle Two of the study, the teams shared dissonant emotions, which allowed them to reveal authentic expressions of challenges and frustrations. Such emotional openness is essential for deepening connections and enhancing a sense of belonging among team members. Expressing concerns, challenges, and frustrations in a safe and supportive environment promotes open communication and empathy among educators. A study by Elkins and Keller (2003) examined the impact of authentic communication on teacher collaboration. They found that when teachers genuinely expressed emotional concerns through authentic communication, they collaborated and connected effectively. The research supports that sharing dissonant emotions within centering activities can deepen connections.

In creating a safe space, members' emotional exploration is essential for building the necessary conditions for connection. Edmondson's (2019) research on psychological safety in teams and organizations supports centering activities and emotional exploration in a safe space to create a supportive and inclusive environment where individuals feel comfortable expressing and exploring their emotions. Team psychological safety is a belief shared by members of a team where they can speak up without fear of negative consequences. Psychological safety positively affects a team's learning, innovation, and performance. Edmondson's (2014) research supports that centering activities contribute to developing psychological safety and connection-building among school leaders. For example, an MLC member stated, "Members share experiences candidly and honestly, and we see one another more authentically. It provided a sense of security, inclusion, and belonging. Receiving compassion and acceptance in return when a member describes emotional experience" (Teacher A, Google form, November 13, 2023).

Another MLC member stated how the gathering was triggering at times, bringing up feelings, and as a result, she was emotional. Other educators opened up about their struggles, like perfectionism or work-life balance, leading them to realize they were not alone and encouraged a supportive atmosphere. Sharing positive and dissonant emotions within the safe space allowed the teams to recognize that they were not alone in experiencing certain stressors and emotions. This realization promoted a sense of belonging and encouraged the participants to feel more comfortable openly expressing their feelings among the CPR and MLC teams.

Educators who engage in emotionally centering wellbeing practices deepen connections between themselves based on the importance of connection for people and connectedness, as supported by this study and research that indicates the vital role of connectedness in inclusive settings (Crisp, 2010; Stansfeld, 2006). As an educational leader in a new context, I found it essential to intentionally dedicate time to build trust through open, honest communication supported by research (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Knight, 2016; Ziegler & Ramage, 2017). The findings from the PAR study underscore the value of emotionally centering activities and safe spaces in educational settings to foster trust, inclusion, and overall wellbeing.

Holistic Spaces

The study's second finding reveals that international school administrators provide a holistic space in which teachers can engage in wellbeing practices and explore feelings and emotions that support them in their dual roles of personal and professional. A holistic space integrates mind, body, and soul by engaging the mind and nurturing the spirit (Stoewen, 2017). Mindfulness and centering activities create holistic spaces for emotional exploration and reflection, enhance work relationships, and reduce stress (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Aguilar (2013) and Edmondson (2019) further support this, emphasizing that holistic spaces deepen interpersonal connections and where psychological safety exists and enable open

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communication, such as speaking up and asking for help, without the fear of judgment or penalty.

The second finding aligns with Bryk's work that building relational trust among teams is crucial for school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). They emphasize the significance of strong relationships built on relational trust, collaboration, and shared goals for collective learning and improvement. Relational trust is also at the core of Freire's concept of "education as the practice of freedom" (Freire, 1972, p. 18). Cultivating holistic spaces is, therefore, vital for educational leaders who aim to foster positive, trusting school environments.

The study provides practical examples and suggests holistic spaces' effectiveness. In PAR Cycle Two, the frequency of sharing personal experiences among participants increased, affirming research on the role of holistic spaces in deepening relationships (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). For this to happen, educational leaders must authentically listen, even when in disagreement, and intentionally create spaces for community members to share their opinions, ultimately fostering trust and connectedness among staff (Bryk et al., 2010). One MLC member testified to the psychological safety in the group, noting the absence of judgment and the value of meaningful connections. Multiple examples during the study model the cultivation of holistic spaces.

In PAR Cycle Two, as the frequency of sharing personal experiences among members increased, so did the levels of empathy and mutual understanding within the group. Supporting this idea, Edmondson (2019) discusses the importance of psychological safety in holistic spaces, emphasizing the absence of judgment. For instance, one MLC member highlighted this absence of judgment in an MLC gathering:

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The wellness practices help build meaningful connections we all need to thrive. Most of us spend more than half our waking hours at work, making work a significant source of meaningful connection and social interaction. I could share my experiences and self-knowledge without fearing judgment and be curious to listen to others. We listened to understand, not merely to respond. (Teacher A, Google form, January 13, 2023)

The holistic spaces provided the container for the CPR team to share feelings and reflections with increased openness. Early in PAR Cycle One, Admin/ Teacher R commented that existing connections with the team allowed for open and honest communication (Interview, November 24, 2022). Administrators felt the wellbeing practices built trust by creating an environment where they could be comfortable sharing with the MLT, which furthered the trust and sense of connectedness from honestly sharing. Through reflective memos, I noted my heightened sense of attention towards team members, an extension of grace, and the resulting non-judgmental environment attributed to the sharing, open communication, and connections from the wellbeing practices enacted with the CPR and MLC teams. This collective engagement reflects the insights of Freire (1972), who felt that meaningful dialogue is contingent upon participants' expectations, stating, "If the dialoguers expect nothing to come of their efforts, their encounter will be empty and sterile, bureaucratic and tedious" (p. 65). This study showed that the CPR and MLC team members were engaged in the process and had come to expect something meaningful.

Reflective Practices

The findings of the study underline the critical role that international school administrators play in providing holistic spaces where teachers can engage in wellbeing practices, including the vital practice of reflection. Educators use reflection as a practice to

pause, learn from their experiences, and make proactive decisions, which helps them navigate their complex roles, both personal and professional. In addition, educators use the reflection process to explore their feelings and emotions through meaningful conversations with others, which Freire (1972) supports. Freire (1972) felt that dialogue is deeply intertwined with critical reflection, active engagement with the world, and a courageous commitment to change and action (p. 65). Extending this idea, Hammond (2015) argues that educators must engage in a reflective process to address the inequities and become culturally responsive to others. Expressly, educators must reflect to understand better their backgrounds and roles to make them more aware of their implicit biases (Hammond, 2015).

Aligned with Aguilar's (2015) recommendations, the emphasis of reflection is not only focused on professional growth but also on personal growth and emotional wellbeing. Aguilar (2015) stresses the need for educators to engage in self-reflection and explore their biases. This reflection is vital to help educators create equitable learning environments by facilitating deeper connections between other colleagues and their students. Supporting this work, Radd et al. (2021) define an "Equity Champion" as a leader attuned to their own biases and those of others. This type of leader proactively works to disrupt inequities in their educational environment, creating a culture of clear expectations and a strong stance on equity (Rigby & Tredway, 2015; Theoharis, 2010). Throughout the study, I took steps to act as an equity champion by enacting wellbeing practices with the CPR and MLC teams.

Multiple examples throughout the PAR study emphasize the importance of reflection in wellbeing practices. For example, as Teacher E stated:

> people were able to share things connected to their personal lives or more personal things connected to their professional lives. This made me feel more connected to others as I

could learn more about them, and I could also relate to many of the things they shared.

(Interview, January 10, 2023)

Personal reflection helped in developing a broader understanding of self and others; for instance, one participant shared that "By providing opportunities to know ourselves, we can be more cognizant of others both in how we are perceiving them and how we are being perceived" (Teacher T, Google form, January 10, 2023). (Kegan's (1995) model of adult development connects to this, emphasizing reflection, personal growth, and wellbeing, which are stages in one's journey to a deeper sense of self. The teachers' shared experiences about the wellbeing practices represent this development ethos. One can move beyond one's identity by exploring themselves through personal and professional reflections (Kegan, 1995). The wellbeing practices fostered reflections and deepened the CPR and MLC teams' understanding of self and others.

When educational leaders actively foster holistic spaces that encourage self-reflection and emotional exploration, educational leaders can cultivate an environment that contributes to improving relationships and addresses issues of equity and inclusion. These safe, holistic spaces are vital in establishing an equitable learning environment. By taking these steps, educational leaders can enact transformative educational practices where all members of the community benefit.

Dual Role Integration

In this study, I examined the integration and enactment of wellbeing practices in an educational setting rather than simply espousing the importance of wellbeing. To address inequities, the educators in the study first identified and examined practices within their professional roles that perpetuate inequities (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017; Shields, 2010). The findings indicate that when educators intentionally implement wellbeing practices, they deepen

connections through centering activities and creating safe spaces that foster a holistic space for reflection. The approach helped the educators to integrate their personal and professional roles. By aligning their dual roles, the educators created opportunities for connection and fostered a sense of belonging and shared purpose within the school community, ultimately promoting equity and inclusion. Across all the participants, I learned that administrators and teachers became more reflective of connections and the dual-role aspect of personal and professional lives. For example:

> It definitely helped to build connections. This school can get extremely busy, so most of my communication with my colleagues are based on students and work-related topics. These sessions help me to see beyond the professional roles we have in the school and build branches to a personal level. These connections also helped to build understanding and empathy, which is important when disagreements arise through our professional interactions. It is a great reminder that we are all human with our own challenges and are doing our best. (Teacher L, Interview, May 8, 2023)

The study's findings show how incorporating wellbeing practices can transform educational settings. Doing so in educational settings can help educators align their personal and professional roles and foster a more equitable, inclusive environment.

Leadership Development

Based on the PAR project and study, I developed an artistic representation of leadership development to enact wellbeing principles and to deepen connections that includes the critical of elements of centering activities, safe spaces, holistic spaces, reflection, and dual role integration. The CPR and MLC teams engaged in various wellbeing practices, incorporating different creative modalities, particularly during personal narrative activities. Figure 14 represents the

Figure 14. A visual representation of wellbeing practices for leadership development.

framework for change in leadership based on the PAR findings. The mandala epitomizes the journey experienced by the CPR and MLC teams. By participating in wellbeing practices, our middle school leadership team enhances our personal wellbeing and deepens connections that occurred with our CPR team through wellbeing practices and extended to the MLC team.

Because the participants and I used mandalas as a tool during the personal narrative activities to explore discuss personal and professional roles, I visualized the necessary components of wellbeing that represents images from our cultural and geographic setting. Early in the PAR study, the CPR team found the mandala activity effective in providing a safe space, assisting team members to delve deeper into more personal sharing. The process helped members open up creatively and made sharing more comfortable. Jungian theory suggests that mandalas represent self and assist people in expressing feelings and experiences (Slegelis, 1987); the visual supports this observation and creates a representation that provides a way for the school community members to remember the elements of wellbeing that resulted from the study.

Each mandala segment represented an aspect of the leadership development process derived from our PAR study: centering activities, safe spaces, holistic spaces, reflection, and dual role integration. The leadership development journey is similar to the mandala, natural and organic growth from small starting points into larger, blossoming areas from the study. The small CPR team, comprising of the three middle school leadership members, established the foundation of the leadership development visual through participation in centering activities within safe spaces. The small group and intimate setting fostered openness and vulnerability. The CPR team's commitment to experimenting with wellbeing practices fostered the growth of

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holistic spaces and deeper reflection. Leveraging the CLE axioms as a framework, the CPR team

integrated wellbeing into the MLC gatherings. Similar data emerged from the centering activities

and safe spaces of the gatherings. I observed the result of integrating the team member's personal

and professional roles, which is reflected at the top of the mandalas. Through the study, it

became evident that the team members prioritized their wellbeing and fostered connectedness.

The findings from this study suggest that participants more effectively integrated their dual

personal and professional roles, culminating in the development of this leadership development

mandala.

Implications

The PAR study findings have implications for practice, policy, and research. As

identified, stress and burnout affect educators worldwide; therefore, beyond this small PAR

study, a focus on educators' wellbeing worldwide is imperative, and certain practices, such as

mindfulness, can help improve wellbeing and lessen stress (Dave et al., 2020; Roeser et al.,

2013). Finally, the research provides other schools with information on how to enact wellbeing

practices for adults in a demanding international school environment and suggests ideas for

future research.

Integration of the Lifeworld with the Systems World

The integration of the lifeworld with the systems world within the educational context,

underscored by wellbeing practices, has been supported by empirical research. Nguyen (2018)

explored the concept of humanizing leadership and its positive impact on teacher wellbeing and

community building. Leaders who value education's personal and emotional aspects foster a

sense of belonging, trust, and collaboration among educators. The research highlights the need to

support the lifeworld to counterbalance the bureaucratic aspects of education and deepen

connections among educators. Habermas argued that finding a balance between the lifeworld and the systems world is beneficial because this is lacking; people often feel that their dreams need to be fulfilled (Fultner, 2011). Argyris (1970) emphasizes that when individuals internalize a course of action or choice, they feel a strong sense of ownership and responsibility towards that choice and its consequences. This internal commitment occurs when an individual acts based on a choice that aligns with their needs, sense of duty, and the system's needs (Sergiovanni, 2000). Integrating the lifeworld and the system world is vital to fostering and creating a more equitable learning community with space for every individual.

In the PAR study, I aimed to successfully aid participants in integrating the lifeworld and the systems world by engaging in wellbeing practices and making changes in their daily routines. Although conducted on a small scale, I provided participants with wellbeing practices for a more balanced approach to the lifeworld and systems world. The results suggest that the wellbeing practices helped participants lay the foundation for navigating challenges and stresses with strategies they can share with colleagues.

Practice

I tailored the research activities in response to a middle school leadership team within an international school in Singapore, largely influenced by the strong mission statement and integral commitment to their wellbeing principles. Additionally, the study was unique to specific conditions, including the time period and the endemic phase of COVID-19. While rooted in a specific context, aspects of the PAR remain relevant to other educational settings as aspects of the research are applicable to challenges faced by educators worldwide.

Schools, especially international schools or those with high demands on their educators, can benefit from the wellbeing practices highlighted in this PAR. Teams can adapt these

practices to fit their specific needs and contexts. Specifically, whether a team is navigating

challenges from frequent change, a fast-paced work environment, or facing relational trust

issues, teams can adapt and benefit from engaging in wellbeing practices together. Specifically,

when teams feel a great deal stress or have experienced significant transition, they might find

support collectively through wellbeing practices. Small teams, particularly those newly formed

or with members unfamiliar with one another, are ideal. Another vital factor is that participation

should be voluntary; CLE axioms rightly emphasize that those closest to an issue are most likely

to engage actively, enhancing their development as educators (Guajardo et al., 2016).

Educators can nurture and support their wellbeing and model these practices for a broader

team using CLE axioms and protocols. By engaging in wellbeing practices, educators tend to

their personal wellbeing and become more resilient as they deepen connections with their team.

Beginning with simple practices, such as sitting in a circle and the use of personal narrative

protocols, can have profound effect fostering deeper team engagement and connectedness.

Incorporating diverse wellbeing practices that use various creative modalities such as poetry,

music, or art allows the team to experiment and discover what resonates with them and the team.

Teams should integrate the wellbeing practices into regular meetings, sharing what works best

for them personally and professionally. Group reflection is critical to discerning effective

practices. Engaging with wellbeing practices can initially feel awkward, particularly among

unfamiliar team members. Over time, the wellbeing practices feel more natural and become

regular routines that promote connectedness among the team members through a culture of

reflection and sharing. Education leaders are encouraged to utilize the CLE axioms as a

foundation to engage in wellbeing practices to facilitate more transformational leadership,

encouraging and inspiring the broader learning community to incorporate wellbeing practices for their support (Shields, 2010).

Educators often have fully scheduled days with little time for transition, to eat lunch, and to have bio breaks, let alone engage in a genuine conversation with colleagues without having to move on to the next scheduled time. Being time-poor is something that most educational leaders experience, and they must support their teams and assist others in getting things done (Hougaard & Carter, 2022). As calendars are full, it is essential to prioritize, and educational leaders must put people first, as this is what leadership is: people (Hougaard & Carter, 2022). Educational leaders must look for proactive ways to attend to their wellbeing and build structures that support all staff wellbeing (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). A community that collectively values and focuses on wellbeing, community members view the processes as than strategies; the process activates a moral imperative of reciprocity in which educators can support and hold each other accountable to prioritize their wellbeing.

Policy

Leaders or educators can use this framework as a versatile guide. The framework is not prescriptive or linear; it is intentionally designed with organic components to offer adaptability to various contexts (Morel et al., 2019). An educational leader who uses the framework should align with their mission and other guiding documents to develop appropriate wellbeing practices or strategies suitable for their context.

When developing wellbeing principles or framework, I urge schools to co-create for shared understanding and vocabulary. Language choice becomes crucial, especially in diverse international school contexts where words can have different meanings. To determine the language used and the definitions, it is vital to involve all stakeholders. It is also essential to

outline the support systems available for all community members. A crucial aspect is to clarify where the framework "lives": where it is taught, how it is understood, and who ensures that newcomers understand the wellbeing practices or framework. Often, in busy educational settings, practices or initiatives are in the spotlight momentarily and fade over time, even with the best intentions, while we say they underpin what we do. If we truly value community wellbeing, leaders must consistently emphasize and model it with action. Such consistent focus strengthens the community's connectedness.

This work addresses mental health, and those compounding stressors that have particularly impacted educators through COVID-19 and still today, by prioritizing support systems for those who struggle with their wellbeing or feel disconnected from a community. Instead of reacting to issues as they arise, proactiveness becomes paramount. Although many schools invest in programs like SafeTALK or ASSIST (suicide prevention programs by LivingWorks), there is a need to allocate equal resources to support the community proactively. Therefore, establishing such principles or framework is key as it shows the commitment to wellbeing and promotes collective responsibility. Imagine the power of a well-articulated framework where even students can identify peers or others in distress and know how to help. Thus, the recommendation is for all stakeholders in a learning community, not just a select group.

Leaders play a vital role in recognizing, valuing, and bringing forward the development of wellbeing practices or framework, starting with self-reflection. Leaders must identify blind spots and collaboratively develop wellbeing principles or framework if blind spots are identified. Reflecting on my current context, we have found that simply having wellbeing principles is insufficient, especially when several stressors challenge staff and students in high-performing

schools. Through a needs assessment, we discovered gaps and that the espoused wellbeing practices are not adequately meeting the needs of our educators. We are now looking closely with a working group question if our systems genuinely support wellbeing, and if not, how do we address these areas, not exclusive of what targeted instruction is happening for our staff and students. Part of this work, and the challenge in a larger system, is to open communication further, ensuring community members know where to go to seek support, the support channels have adequate resources, and that all areas of the system are manageable. This examination of current wellbeing practices stands to benefit our school and the community.

Research

The PAR project and study, in which the MLT and MLC teams engaged to enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections, provides a participatory action research model for educational researchers. Researchers could conduct similar studies in different schools to identify which practices are transferable to other contexts.

I served as the lead researcher and a leadership team member in this PAR study. Being in both roles provided me full access to the data, enabling me to share findings with the CPR team and informing our decisions regarding the practices introduced to the MLC team. While examining the data, I looked to support it with relevant research literature.

There is sufficient research highlighting the prevalence of stress and anxiety in our learning communities, encompassing teachers, leaders, and students. I found ample literature about strategies for fostering relational trust in educational settings, the nuances and differences between transformational or compassionate leadership and transactional leadership, and the importance of psychological safety, predominantly in business settings. However,

comprehensive research studies about building school wellbeing policies and frameworks could have been more plentiful. As Quinlan and Hone (2020) articulate:

> There is a growing body of evident suggesting this is possible: schools can develop whole-school wellbeing through explicit teaching of wellbeing and by adopting policies, processes and practices that engender belonging, inclusion, purpose, and mental agility - all factors that contribute to resilience and wellbeing. (p. xviii)

Therefore, as the growing evidence indicates , there is a need for wellbeing frameworks, they are possible to implement, and it is imperative to dig deeper.

Further research should investigate schools actively embedding wellbeing, identifying what schools currently work and what is not. Investigating schools that construct frameworks and practices that promote community wellbeing, and subsequently support the sense of connectedness and belonging, is invaluable. With the growing number of international schools worldwide, conducting action research in these settings is crucial. Due to the diverse communities of international schools, there are unique complexities; therefore, further research can assist with valuable data. Using an activist research approach necessitates researcher-practitioners embedded in the issues or subject matter they aim to explore, and that a deeper commitment to the study's aims is upheld (hunter et al., 2013). Action research customized to a school's mission and guiding documents can enhance wellbeing and connectedness among the community. Further activist research in international schools also offers a roadmap for other international schools that embarks on a similar journey to create wellbeing practices or framework.

Research Process: PAR Process/CLE-inspired Protocols

I based this study on the use of CLE axioms and protocols; the findings reflect this foundation. I reflected personally on the findings from the study. I used opening and closing circles in all CPR and MLC meetings, and the participants closest to the issues shared personal narratives through various protocols (Guajardo et al., 2016). The team members engaged in critical conversations and experimented with wellbeing practices, looking for ways to support their wellbeing and connect with others, another important aspect of the CLE axioms (Guajardo et al., 2016). Using the CLE axioms as tools and methods, I helped the participants and the overall study to develop further skills and discovered strategies that supported the aim of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Beyond this study, researchers might examine what systems within the school may be contributing to teachers feeling they lack balance with their personal and professional roles. For example, it would be helpful to look at teachers' expectations to support the large holistic program and the timetable where some teachers do not have breaks on certain days. Schools could make small adjustments to the timetable to help the staff tend to their wellbeing and connect on a deeper level with colleagues with additional transition time for staff and students. Another study might include leaders and teachers from other school sections using the CLE axioms to see the effect on these teams. I learned from using the CLE axioms and protocols, which helped guide the work to watch the growth, development, and changes through both PAR cycles. If I were to conduct the study again, I might have added a subsequent research question: "How do educators use learned wellbeing practices within their respective spaces, and in what way do they affect equity?"

Limitations

This qualitative research study has limitations typical of participatory action research studies. These included the study's small size, the duration being one academic year at a single international school, and the limited composition of the CPR team, which could present the potential for research bias. Specifically, the CPR team comprised three white female educational leaders from the school's dominant culture. I incorporated member checks and conducted peer data reviews to help mitigate the biases and ensure I heard diverse voices from the middle school community. I used Saldaña's (2016) qualitative research methods to analyze the data from PAR Cycle One and PAR Cycle Two to identify the two findings of this study. Participants had a close connection to the study. Using structures, such as the CLE axioms and Saldaña's research methods makes the findings applicable to similar educational settings.

Personal Leadership Development

Arriving in a new place, you start from an acknowledgement of strangeness, a disciplined use of discomfort and surprise. Later, as observations accumulate, the awareness of contrast dwindles and must be replaced with a growing understanding of how observations fit together within a system unique to the other culture. (Bateson, 1994, p. 27).

The quote resonates with my own leadership journey, the things I have learned, revisited, or remembered during my leadership journey through the participatory action research (PAR) project, and its surrounding circumstances. Specifically, I joined a new school with a distinct culture and context. I was confronted with unfamiliarity as I transitioned from my prior role as a middle school principal in another region of Southeast Asia. Although some aspects felt familiar, I experienced a sense of "strangeness" and, as a result, a great deal of discomfort.

When overwhelmed, I tried to turn the discomfort into inquiry, asking questions in my context as I learned to adapt to the new experiences rather than dwell on the differences. At first, I focused on what was different, and over time, I learned from the uniqueness of the new context

rather than compare. With this lens, I could adapt and integrate into the new culture of the school. My remote start to my new role as the middle school principal and the strict COVID-19 protocols that prohibited my team from being in a space together exacerbated my initial disorientation. I needed an extended period to move from disorientation to integration due to a new leadership structure and my personal challenges, including being separated from my family of five during my first year. My transition from unfamiliar to integration was prolonged, and this project and study helped with this process.

Despite experiencing many diverse settings in my 24 years in education, starting in rural USA and spending the last 18 in international schools, I have generally felt a sense of belonging. I connect this feeling with Bateson's statement (1994), "Learning to know a community or a landscape is a homecoming. Creating a vision of that community or landscape is homecoming" (p. 214) because I easily connect with a place or a group of people. My proactive approaches to understanding the new cultures of the country and school have assisted me in forming connections and feeling a sense of belonging. Despite this, navigating the nuances of equity can be challenging due to my different lived experiences compared to community members. I have increasingly learned the value and importance of listening to understand and learn from the diverse perspectives of others.

I have not struggled to know my "why" as I fight for equity during my leadership journey. Abrams (2019) stresses the importance of leaders knowing what they value. My doctoral program helped me reflect on my journey as an equity leader, tracing it back to my childhood before I knew the importance of equity work. Throughout my life and through this study, I have learned much about myself through others' stories, stretching my personal and professional growth as a leader.

Utilizing the CLE axioms and the findings from the PAR study helped me understand the importance and need to better care for myself. I learned to "let go" of things instead of holding on and stressing over long to-do lists, which kept me from being present. As Hougaard and Carter (2022) share, there is never enough time in the day to do everything and also have the necessary time for one's wellbeing; therefore, I needed to be clear about daily priorities. Using CLE axioms and strategies similar to what Hougaard and Carter (2022) suggest, I am learning to declutter my mind and be present with the task or person I am with. The PAR study amplified these practical and obvious aspects of being an effective leader, and I implemented these practices using the CLE axioms throughout the study. This is an ongoing process that I will need to continue to focus on, particularly in a large, busy school environment. I must always make time for one-to-one daily interactions as they are vital in building relational trust and take time (Bryk et al., 2010).

In addition, I need to continue to lead with inspiration and honesty, even when things are challenging. A recent example is when I executed a trust-building protocol with the middle school staff. Staff members commented on how the protocol shared so much insight on their colleagues and how appreciative they were that I openly named the erosion of trust with the leadership team last year. In taking a risk, I learned from a middle leader how much effect this had on the staff that I showed that level of vulnerability with the entire staff.

An important learning from this study and my leadership practice is model focusing and naming positives, including celebrating people and work. Admin/Teacher H, another middle school leadership team member, recognized this approach in an interview, saying, "I always try to pay attention to the positive, and Gretchen helps me find the positive and be intentional about it. Those practices help bring me back to who I like to be. Instead of the stone in my shoe, it can

be the tiniest stone, but it is helpful" (Interview, November 8, 2022). The emphasis on recognizing the positive shows the power of positivity in leadership; leaders foster a culture of appreciation by celebrating achievements, which I work tirelessly to do.

Gooden et al. (2023) stress the importance of nurturing equity-driven principals to facilitate inclusive and equitable learning spaces, and this is what I strive for. I've immensely benefited from this program and project. I have gained a deeper understanding of culturally responsive leadership, starting with learning about myself, my identity, and what I value. I have increased my self-awareness. Additionally, I continue to learn to be a leader of equity through embracing the cultural diversity of a community and ensuring their voices are shared and heard, which Gooden et al. (2023) state is critical for educational leaders.

My pursuit of expertise in cultural competence, equity, and social justice, as advocated by Gooden et al. (2023), is unwavering. Collaborating with Eeqbal Hassim, an expert in intercultural education, and utilizing tools like the Intercultural Development Inventory have been pivotal for me over the last two years, affecting my leadership growth. Engaging deeply in this work, as emphasized by Gooden et al. (2023), is essential for educational leaders. A vital aspect of my study was centered around deepening connections, which builds relationships, affirming that relational trust is critical for effective collaboration. Overall, this study assisted me in taking a comprehensive look at my leadership journey, including strengths and continued areas for growth.

Conclusion

Educational settings have increasingly incorporated wellbeing practices to support their learning communities. Focusing on educators' wellbeing is not a trend or fad and has gained additional momentum in recent years. When learning communities support educators' wellbeing,

they create a positive learning environment where students are more successful (McCallum & Price, 2016). As Quinlan and Hone (2020) emphasize:

> By deliberately building wellbeing literacy and developing and implementing personal wellbeing strategies, teachers can model wellbeing and resilience strategies to their students, share this learning experience with them and hopefully perform their roles more enjoyably and effectively. This same applies for principals who play a vital role in supporting educator wellbeing. (p. 207)

Educational leaders must prioritize their wellbeing and put on their "oxygen" masks before effectively supporting others. In the context of this study, the quest for equity involved exploring how we could enact the espoused wellbeing principles to support the leaders' and educators' wellbeing. My goals were to identify and engage in wellbeing practices so they can function at their best, personally and professionally, and deepen connections with others.

Overall, the research study findings suggest that the intentional implementation of emotionally centered practices, safe spaces, and reflective practices can affect educators' wellbeing and have the potential to deepen connections. Through the active participation of the CPR and MLC teams in the wellbeing practices, we cultivated an environment that nurtured personal growth, fostered collaboration, and enhanced overall wellbeing. The deepening connectedness among the leaders helped them put on their oxygen masks and established a more supportive learning community alongside the MLC team.

Further research offers a broad scope in this area. Exploring additional proactive strategies that prioritize promoting wellbeing and deepening connections among educators could enhance learning environments. As I continue my journey as an educational leader, I am guided by the belief that: "With more mindful awareness, you can better understand yourself, your

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mind, and how you maintain a higher level of caring presence" (Hougaard & Carter, 2022, p. 108).

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** ·
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From:	Social/Behavioral IRB
To:	Gretchen DePoint
CC:	Matthew Militello
Date:	8/10/2022
Re:	UMCIRB 22-001470
	Wellbeing Practices to Deepen Connections

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 8/10/2022. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1 & 2ab.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
DePoint Chapter 1-3 IRB Proposal(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
DePoint Participant Email Invitation(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Gretchen DePoint CLE Protocol(0.01)	Additional Items
Gretchen DePoint Informed Consent Form(0.01)	Consent Forms
Gretchen DePoint Informed Consent Form(0.01)	Consent Forms
Gretchen DePoint Interview Protocol(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Gretchen DePoint Researcher Reflective Memo(0.01)	Additional Items

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

APPENDIX B: CITI TRAINING CERTIFICATE

Completion Date 02-Jan-2021
Expiration Date 02-Jan-2024
Record ID 40160882

This is to certify that:

Gretchen DePoint

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Research
(Curriculum Group)
Group 2.Social / Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

East Carolina University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w95e04694-d4af-406c-8c23-b7fdaf05d44f-40160882

APPENDIX C: SCHOOL/DISTRICT PERMISSION

HER MAJESTY QUEEN NOOR OF JORDAN
President, UWC movement
CARMA ELLIOT CMG OBE
College President, UWCSEA

23 July 2022

To Whom It May Concern:

UWCSEA EAST recognizes the benefits of participating in relevant, well-designed research studies proposed by qualified individuals. Approval for conducting such studies is based primarily on the extent to which substantial benefits can be shown for UWCSEA EAST and its mission of educating students. The purpose of this letter is to notify you of the **approval** to use conduct your dissertation study titled, "Utilizing Wellbeing Practices to Deepen Connections Among International School Leaders" with participants in our schools. We also give permission to utilize the following spaces at UWCSEA EAST to collect data and conduct interviews for her dissertation project: "Utilizing Wellbeing Practices to Deepen Connections Among International School Leaders".

The project meets all of our school guidelines, procedures, and safeguards for conducting research on our campus. Moreover, there is ample space for Gretchen DePoint to conduct her study and ers project will not interfere with any functions of UWCSEA EAST. Finally, the following conditions must be met, as agreed upon by the researchers and UWCSEA EAST:

- Participation is voluntary.
- Participants can choose to leave the study without penalty at any time.
- Any issues with participation in the study are reported to the school administration in a timely manner.
- An executive summary of your findings is shared with the school administration once the study is complete.

In addition to these conditions, the study must follow all of the East Carolina University IRB guidelines.

We are excited to support this important work.

Respectfully,

Nicholas Alchin
Head of UWCSEA EAST

Dover Campus 1207 Dover Road Singapore 139654 | T +65 6775 5344
Company/CPE Registration No. 197000825H | CPE Registration Period 18 July 2017–17 July 2023 | Charity Registration No. 00142

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www.uwcsea.edu.sg

Informed Consent to Participate in Research
Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: Utilizing Wellbeing Practices to Deepen Connections Among International Middle School Leaders

Principal Investigator: Gretchen DePoint
Institution, Department or Division: East Carolina University, Department of Educational Leadership
Address: 59 Tampines 86 #09-31 The Tapestry Singapore 528509
Telephone #: +65-90847892
Study Coordinator: Dr. Matthew Militello
Telephone #:252-328-6131

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?
The purpose of this research is to support a middle school leadership team and teacher-leaders and to deepen connections through practices centered on wellbeing. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a member of the middle school leadership team or a middle school teacher-leader. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn to support individual and collective wellbeing and to deepen connections among the team.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 4-10 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?
There are no known reasons for why you should not participate in this research study.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?
You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?
The research will be conducted at UWCSEA East in Singapore. You will need to come to *the Middle School Office or Middle School Team Room* on a bi-weekly or monthly basis during the study. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is approximately eight to eighteen hours over the next nine months.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to do the following:
- If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to participate in an interview and/or an observation during or after a Middle School Leadership Team meeting or Middle School Leadership Cohort meeting. The interviews and observations may be recorded in addition to handwritten notes by the research team members. All of the interview questions will focus on your experience enacting wellbeing practices and to what extent wellbeing practices deepened connections?
- Participants will write (including reflections) or draw in response to prompts related to the research questions. The overarching research question: How do middle school leaders enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections?

1. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?
   - a. Within the leadership team?
   - b. Within the leadership cohort?
2. To what extent do practices centered on wellbeing influence connectedness?
   - c. Within the leadership team?
   - d. Within the leadership cohort?

- Participants will be interviewed for approximately 20-30 minutes and may be digitally recorded with the participant's verbal and/or written approval. The interview will take and be conducted in a semi-structured, informal way. The lead researcher will ask the following sample questions and participants may address self-generated questions and provide additional information relevant to the study. If the participant requires additional time, the lead researcher will extend the interview time and/or schedule a follow-up interview meeting. Sample Questions:

1. What are two vivid experiences you have had during a Middle School Leadership Team (MLT) or Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC) session focused on wellbeing practices?
2. What is a wellbeing practice we should "stop" doing?
3. What is a wellbeing practice we should "start" doing?
4. What is a wellbeing practice we should "continue" doing?

What might I experience if I take part in the research?
We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?
We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?
It will not cost you any money to be part of the research. Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?
ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?
The information in the study will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Consent forms and data from interviews, observations, and focus groups will be maintained in a secure, locked location and will be stored for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?
You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?
The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at phone number +6590847892 (weekdays, 7:00 am – 7:00 pm) or email depointg20@students.ecu.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

Is there anything else I should know?
Most people outside the research team will not see your name on your research record. This includes people who try to get your information using a court order.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?
The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

_____   _____
Participant's Name (PRINT)   Signature   Date

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

_____
Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)   Signature   Date

APPENDIX E: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT: CLE ARTIFACT

Community Learning Exchange-Based (CLE) Artifacts

Both semesters during the participatory action research study, the researcher will host monthly sessions based on Community Learning Exchange axioms on a topic related to the research question in the participatory action research (PAR) project. At these sessions, the researcher will collect qualitative data based on the activities in which the participants engage in CLE-based practices. The data will be in the form of notes that the participants write and/or draw made in response to prompts related to the research questions.

Participants will include the Co-Practitioner Researchers and other participants who sign consent forms.

Dates of CLE-based Sessions: 2nd Friday of the Month
Fall 2022 (September, October, November, and December)
Spring 2023 (January, February, March, and April)

Number of Participants: 4-10

Purpose of the CLE: The Community Learning Exchange (CLE) is an opportunity for diverse community members to meet together and learn from each other.

The five axioms of the CLE are:
1. Learning and leadership are a dynamic social process.
2. Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes.
3. The people closest to the issue are best situated to discover answers to local concerns.
4. Crossing boundaries enriches the development and educational process.
5. Hope and change are built on assets and dreams of locals and their communities.

Questions for Data Collection:

Overarching question:
How do middle school leaders enact wellbeing practices and deepen connections?

1. To what extent do participants enact practices centered on wellbeing?
    e. Within the leadership team?
    f. Within the leadership cohort?
2. To what extent do practices centered on wellbeing influence connectedness?
    g. Within the leadership team?
    h. Within the leadership cohort?
3. How do I transform my leadership practices through the study of educator wellbeing?

APPENDIX F: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT: REFLECTIVE MEMO

Reflective Memo

Date:

Kolb experiential learning process:
- Engage in an experience
- Reflect on the experience
- Conceptualize the experience (use current knowledge & possibly changing knowledge)
- Plan for experimenting

What:	Where:	When:
Who:	Why:	Other information:

Step One - Experience (feeling)
What the memo is about including specific time and event (meeting, observation, etc.)

Step Two - Reflection (watching)
What are the feelings and thoughts?

Step Three - Conceptualization (thinking)
How does the experience fit into a larger concept or idea? How does it relate to what you know or have read in the literature, for example?

Step Four- Looking ahead/experimentation (doing)
What might you do differently? Or: How does the reflection support metacognitive (learning) and meta-affective (emotional or dispositional) learning?

Interview Notes
"Stop, Start, Continue" Protocol Questions

Introduction
The "Stop, Start, and Continue" Protocol is a series of questions that serves to elicit rich qualitative data based on the participant's experience as it relates to wellbeing practices.

Prior to the semi-structured interview, the lead researcher will clarify the following disclosures:
- Participation in the study is completely **voluntary**. Participants may choose to stop participating in the interview at any time.
- The interview may be **digitally recorded** with the participant's verbal and/or written approval. All information will be kept confidential. Any information disclosed during the session will not be disclosed without the participant's permission. The information may be reviewed, coded, and sorted into general categories and themes based on the collective group data. No specific names will be disclosed.
- The interview will take **approximately 20-30 minutes** and be conducted in a semi-structured, informal way. The lead researcher will ask the following sample questions and participants may address self-generated questions and provide additional information relevant to the study. If the participant requires additional time, the lead researcher will extend the interview time and/or schedule a follow-up interview meeting.

Interview Questions

TURN RECORDER ON AND STATE THE FOLLOWING:
"This is (your Name), interviewing (interviewees Name) on (Date)," for the study on educator wellbeing in international schools.

Sample Questions:

1. 1.What are two vivid experiences you have had during a Middle School Leadership Team (MLT) or Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC) session focused on wellbeing practices?

2. What is a wellbeing practice we should "stop" doing?

3. What is a wellbeing practice we should "start" doing?

4. What is a wellbeing practice we should "continue" doing?

APPENDIX H: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT: GOOGLE FORM

Google Form
"Stop, Start, Continue" Reflection Questions

1. Email *

2. What are two vivid experiences you have had during a Middle School Leadership Team (MLT) or Middle School Leadership Cohort (MLC) session focused on wellbeing practices? (positive or negative) *

3. I am a member of which team? *
   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ MLT

   ◯ MLC

4. How did you feel during the experiences? Any other thoughts you would like share?

5. What is a wellbeing practice we should "stop" doing? Why

6. What is a wellbeing practice we should "start" doing? Why? *

7. What is a wellbeing practice we should "continue" doing? Why? *

8. In what ways did the wellbeing practices foster connectedness? *

9. In what ways did the wellbeing practices not foster connectedness? *

10. What do you feel is your level of connectedness to the team right now? *