

Elementary School Teachers Development of a Sense of Community in the Workplace through the Participation in a Fitness and Mindfulness Program

Direct Original Research

Christina Gipson¹, Jessica Mutchler¹, Arshpreet Kaur Mallhi¹

¹ Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA/USA

Open Access

Published: April 7, 2023



Copyright, 2023 by the authors. Published by Pinnacle Science and the work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Research Directs in Health Sciences: 2023, Volume 3 (Issue 1): 5

ISSN: 2768-492X

Abstract

Introduction: Stress and burnout continue to have negative impacts on teachers. Wellness programs have reported to help improve teachers' quality of life, social life, reduce stress, and increase awareness of healthy choices. The purpose of this paper is to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences of a fitness and mindfulness program.

Methods: Semi-structured interview guides were used in the three separate focus groups that were conducted following each of the three 9-week fitness and mindfulness programs serving as an intervention for elementary school teachers to reduce stress. Focus groups included all female participants between the ages of 22-64 years old with one to 21 years of experience in the classroom. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: Two themes and subsequent themes were found: (1) work-life balance (subthemes: Implementing mindfulness techniques; Feeling ok leaving work; Self-care) and (2) building community (subthemes: Developed community; Accountability; and Level of comfort).

Conclusions: The finding revealed that teachers improved their work-life balance through self-care, implementation of mindfulness techniques, accountability, and comfort with co-workers. The participants reported developing a workplace community. Overall, the results support that elementary teachers perceived a 9-week fitness and mindfulness program to have a positive impact on workplace wellbeing.

Key Words: work-life balance, work community, stress-reducing program

Corresponding author: Christina Gipson, cgipson@georgiasouthern.edu

Introduction

Teachers continue to report high levels of stress. Wu¹ defined teacher occupational stress as "the state of physical and psychological tensions occurring when teachers suffer effects from external environment on physical condition in pedagogy" (p. 311) which can lead to burnout. Following a systematic review, Agyapong et al² highlighted several factors like sex, age, marital status, and work settings and commitments to correlate with burnout, stress, anxiety, and depression. Kotowski et al.'s³ findings were consistent: 72% of teachers reported feeling very or extremely stressed, 57% felt very or extremely burned out, and 57% struggled with work-family balance. The combined pressures of work, life, and social environments can further harm teachers' physical and mental health, teaching quality, job satisfaction, and quality of life. Therefore, teachers' occupational stress



or burnout can look like indolence, slackness, physical fatigue, lower service ability, loss of enthusiasm, lack of passion and lack of professionalism, and unintentional improvement for teaching quality.¹

As concerns with teacher dropout, satisfaction, and health continue to rise, scholars have urged for school-based awareness and intervention programs,^{1,3,4} which could use mindfulness practices⁵ or health and wellbeing activities.⁶ School-wide programs as well as out of school intervention programs have reported to help improve quality of life, reduce the rate of absenteeism, positively impact health-related outcomes, improve teachers' social life at work, reduce stress, and increase awareness of healthy choices.⁷ The purpose of this paper is to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences of a fitness and mindfulness program.

Scientific Methods

This study used semi-structured interview guides with 11 open ended questions. The interview guide was used in each of the three focus groups to explore experiences and perceptions immediately following three 9-week fitness and mindfulness programs that served as an intervention for elementary school teachers to reduce stress. Focus groups were conducted in person, recorded, and ranged between 60-90 minutes.

Participants

Participants were recruited from local elementary schools and included only those in a teaching role. Focus groups included participants from the fall 2021 (n=7), spring 2022 (n=11), and fall 2022 (n=14) programs. All participants were female between the ages of 22-64 years old, 28% of the participants were women of color, and 72% were white. The participants reported between one to 21 years of experience in the classroom.

Protocol

All components of research, including interview procedures, assurance of confidentiality, and methods for obtaining informed consent, were approved by the Institutional Review Board. Upon recruitment to the program, the participants were informed that they would be invited to participate in a focus group following the conclusion of the intervention. The fitness and mindfulness program took place twice a week in the early evening following the teachers' school day for 75 minutes per session. The teachers participated in a progressive fitness program for the first part of each session, then learned and practiced basic mindfulness strategies aimed at reducing stress for the second part of each session. After the last session of the program, the participants were invited to participate in a focus group. The participants were informed that they could opt out of participation in the focus group. Each focus group used the same interview guide of 11 open-ended questions. Procedures were explained, and informed consents were signed before the start of the focus group interviews. Focus group interviews ranged between 60-90 minutes, and took place on the same day and time the group typically would meet for the program.

Analysis

Following completion of the focus group interviews, recordings were transcribed. The research team used investigator triangulation. The group did one round of open coding on one focus group and identified emergent themes. The research team then coded the other two focus groups and compared and agreed upon codes surrounding impacts the intervention had on workplace wellness.

Results

Results revealed two major themes with subsequent subthemes. The first theme, work-life balance, included subthemes of implementing mindfulness techniques, feeling ok leaving work, and self-care. The second theme, building community, included subthemes of developed community, accountability, and level of comfort. Participant quotations are detailed in the findings section and pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality.

Work-life balance

Finding balance between work and life helps reduce occupational stress. Focus group discussions revealed that the participants struggled with balancing work and life. However, through the completion of the program, they learned to detach themselves from thoughts not related to the environment they were in as they stated they learned to "just kind of be present" (Lisa). Being present and in the moment came up numerous times in focus groups as many of the participants recognized their minds often wondering. For Joan, "just awareness" was her major take away from the program. Throughout the interviews, the participants highlighted numerous work and life demands, which makes finding balance challenging. Three subthemes were revealed that helped them find balance: implementing mindfulness techniques, feeling ok leaving work, and self-care.



Implementing mindfulness techniques

The participants indicated a lack of boundaries between their work and personal activities. Without boundaries, the participants recognized the increased stress of thinking about what needs to be done. Alice stated that from the program, she learned “not to worry about tomorrow and think about today.” Lauren talked about personal life, money, and work all stressing her out. However from one session, she recalled an activity where they wrote down mantras, and hers was “Everything is ok right here right now.” Lauren explained that this was important for her because now, when she gets overwhelmed or stressed, she tells herself “I’m like right here right now, you are good, chill, you are good, calm down.” Through focus group discussions, it was evident that the women recognized that they needed to slow down in their activities and thoughts. They needed to be present with their activities and where they currently were. Joan explained that the breathing activities and the instructors “actually showing us how to do that and the practice of doing the breathing” had been helpful for her as the exercise is something she uses to help be present when at work or at home.

Feeling ok leaving work

The participants indicated that they often put work commitments over their personal and family commitments. However, Olivia and Amber both highlighted that their participation in the program made them stop working and attend. Shanice said that she had to “not feel guilty.” Amber described her understanding of this as a level of “forgiveness ... we judge ourselves more than we judge anyone else...I say you know what, I am going to leave at 4:00, and that is not going to get done but you know my kids are still going to learn tomorrow, and they are still going to do good, and they don’t need that one extra thing.” Sam agreed with this and further stated it took her to be able to “step back and really look at those tasks everyday and kind of weigh them between have to and need to. And really look at what that busy of a schedule does to your emotional health and that transfers to your physical health. And that was a big wake up call for me.” Generally, Kennedy learned to be ok with doing work “later and focus on myself, rather than just my job.”

Self-care

Throughout the three focus groups, numerous participants highlighted that because of their service roles, teacher, parent, volunteer, etc..., they found that they are always doing for others and could not identify self-care strategies. Through the program, participants made statements like “it was ok to be selfish. For once in my life, in my 46 years, that it was ok to put myself first” (Brittany). Being in the intervention was the first time some participants practiced self-care, “I told my kids, Mondays and Wednesdays they are mine and I’m pushing you out the door, get out the car, it is mine” (Lisa). The participants highlighted that self-care could be done “in my quiet time using it in a mindful way ... take those breaths, try to be clear in my mind versus just sitting there just being idol” (Gabrielle). Candice explained that she often thought self-care needed to be exercise but she “realized that both are needed. You know we would always say we would make a better self by going to workout, but we never took the time out to say, let’s do this mindful part.”

Building a community

Creating bonds and shared common attitudes were identified as positive outcomes from the intervention. As the teachers for each session came from the same school, they indicated not knowing everyone before the start of the intervention. At the conclusion of a session of the intervention, the participants revealed three subthemes linked to the intervention allowing the participants to build a community: developed community, accountability, and level of comfort.

Developed community

Statements like “we gained a community” (Rachel) came up in every focus group. Rachel continued to explain that she met other people and got “a deeper connection, shared experiences, and bonding”. Joan mentioned knowing some of the other teachers, but explained that “once you work out with somebody, you know them a little on a different level.” Shanice explained that the intervention was beneficial as she liked “the people who I was with. You know everyone was very motivational is what made me want to keep coming back.” Through this community and commitment to the program, the participants recognized when fellow participant was stressed out and would approach them and “bring up the things that we had just talked about, or maybe learned weeks before in the classroom” (Gabrielle). Joan shared experiences of talking about the workouts in the hallways and commiserating about being “sore from the workout yesterday.” Gabrielle even talked about not seeing other members of the program at school because being too busy, but when they do, they may say “hey did you try that activity?”



Accountability

For this community to grow, the participants recognized the value and need for “accountability of just feeling like you have to be there because you signed up for it... just the commitment and the accountability, and I thought it was a great combo of the fitness and the mindfulness” (Abigail). Lisa described it as “consistency, like showing up and just being there, even if I didn’t feel like it, and just being there”. But not just for themselves, as Gabrielle highlighted “accountability for yourself and the people around you.” Alice summed up her understanding of the community and accountability well as she stated: “I like how it was for the seven of us, we were together ... as a community we got closer ..., we got to know each other better.”

Level of comfort

Throughout the focus groups, the participants highlighted that there was a level of comfort as people could “speak freely” (Gabrielle). Abigail explained that through the whole program, she felt “very comfortable, like you felt very comfortable.” This comfort gave the space for people to do what they could during workouts and open up in the mindfulness sessions. Shanice described the program as “a safe environment. Like I felt like I didn’t have to beat around the bush, like I didn’t have to keep it to myself, I just say what I want to say how I want to say it without any judgment.”

Discussion/Conclusion

Stress and burnout continue to have negative impacts on teachers. The focus group results revealed that the fitness and mindfulness program had a positive impact on the participants’ sense of workplace wellbeing. This program attributed to the participants reporting having less stress as they were able to find balance between work and life and develop a community in and out of work. Throughout the focus groups, the participants highlighted having high levels of stress and rarely putting themselves first before beginning the program. Anbalagan⁸ recommended that schools should provide standard infrastructure, work life balance training, and well-being programs to female teachers in an effort to develop workplace wellness. The participants in this study highlighted that their learned mindfulness techniques helped with dealing with occupational stress. Throughout the focus groups, participants mentioned the value of learning to slow down, being present, and just breathing as this helped with finding balance. Consistent with Anbalagan’s⁸ conclusion that if women teachers have awareness of work-life balance they would be more committed and productive, the participants in this study reported commitment and accountability to the program. These were further described as workplace wellness through their description of accepting movement between commitments, practicing self-care, and developing a community in the workplace. This short study highlighted the value of a 9-week program on building awareness of workplace wellness through work-life balance and building a workplace community.

References

1. Wu D. Relationship between job burnout and mental health of teachers under work stress. *Rev. Argentina de Clin. Psicol.* 2020;29(1):310. Doi:10.24205/03276716.2020.41
2. Agyapong B, Oboobi-Donkor G, Burbach L, Wei Y. Stress, burnout, anxiety and depression among teachers: A scoping review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health.* 2022;19(17):10706. Doi: 10.3390/ijerph191710706
3. Kotowski SE, Davis KG, Barratt CL. Teachers feeling the burden of covid-19: Impact on well-being, stress, and burnout. *Work.* 2022; 1-9. Doi:10.3233/WOR-210994
4. von der Embse N, Ryan SV, Gibbs T, Mankin A. Teacher stress interventions: A systematic review. *Psychol. Sch.* 2019;56(8):1328-1343. Doi.org/10.1002/pits.22279
5. Taylor SG, Zarrett N, Roberts AM. The relation between early adolescent physical activity and internalizing problems: Variations in exercise motivations as a critical moderator. *J Early Adolesc.* 2020;40(5):662-688. Doi: 10.1177/0272431619870612
6. Lever N, Mathis E, Mayworm A. School mental health is not just for students: Why teacher and school staff wellness matters. *Rep Emot Behav Disord Youth.* 2017;17(1):6.
7. Parker EA, McArdle PF, Gioia D, et al. An onsite fitness facility and integrative wellness program positively impacted health-related outcomes among teachers and staff at an urban elementary/middle school. *Glob Adv Health Med.* 2019; Doi: 10.1177/2164956119873276.
8. Anbalagan S. Work-life balance of higher secondary school teachers. *Journal of Positive School Psychology.* 2022;6(2):5015-5023.