

Practising Fiercely: Fulfilment through Stance, Supports and Stamina

A participatory narrative inquiry of specialist teachers' practice in Aotearoa

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' lives are multi-faceted and their practice is influenced by personal and contextual enablers and barriers to their well-being and identity. Current initiatives, including the focus on teacher well-being, pose new tensions. This research is timely as it investigates an emerging group of professionals, specialist teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand. From their own perspectives, sought through participatory narrative inquiry, we come to better understand how teachers experience and position themselves within and against pressures posed by an increasingly complex world. Research findings informed the development of a framework for teacher fulfilment through fierce practice comprised of stance, supports and stamina. This framework has utility at the individual level, supporting the fulfilment of individual teachers. At the systems level, the framework may be of interest to tertiary teachers and institutions wishing to help teachers to develop and sustain meaningful and satisfying lives.

Research paper

Keywords:

fulfilment, professional identity, teacher well-being

INTRODUCTION

This study explored the ways specialist teachers navigate and co-construct their lives and work in order to practise in ways that feel effective, fulfilling and true. Following 14 teachers enrolled in the postgraduate Specialist Teaching programme, over a 2-year period, the research considers how they integrated life, study and practice.

As experienced teachers training for and typically working in specialised roles, this group encountered the range of tensions and rewards experienced by all teachers. Additionally, having returned to study, they were integrating coursework with full-time practice, and shifting their focus to supporting systems and teachers to cater more effectively for all learners. Along the way, they (re)storied themselves as change agents for a more fair and equitable society.

Essentially, we considered the tensions and challenges specialist teachers face in an increasingly complex and demanding world, and identified an approach to navigating professional and personal demands in authentic and meaningful ways.

CONTEXT

Participants were enrolled in Specialist Teaching, a national postgraduate programme for experienced teachers and other professionals exchanging the classroom for specialist teaching roles. Mid-career, they balanced study and practice with family commitments to younger children and aging parents. For many, their professional role was new, and postgraduate study was stipulated as part of their employment conditions.

Specialist teachers work in a range of ways to implement inclusive approaches which enhance the participation, learning and well-being of *all* children and young people. This includes children identified as priority learners, such as children with disabilities and those who otherwise experience barriers to full participation and well-being. These roles bring challenges and opportunities, including the increased scope to work at a systems level. Practising in new ways, specialist teachers increasingly story themselves as change agents who challenge inequity and lift inclusive practices for children and young people who have been marginalised in education (Holley-Boen, 2017).

Participants ranged in age, ethnicity, career path, personal and professional context, professional role and specialist area. Three identified as Māori and one as Niuean; four had immigrated whilst the remainder were Aotearoa New Zealand-born. Nine worked as itinerant specialist teachers in wider Auckland, and five were based in schools/early childhood centres or site-based specialist service providers. Collectively, they had experienced numerous threats to well-being, such as divorce and burnout, and had varying degrees of enthusiasm for their jobs and study. Their interest in well-being drew them to the research; they wanted an opportunity to reflect on their lives and practices.

Together, using a participatory approach, we unpacked the connections between identity, practice and well-being and the ways teachers navigate tensions. The focus is on specialist teachers, of course, but in ways common to all teachers working in the current education context. Hopefully, every educator can glimpse aspects of their own lives within these narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We practise in an era shaped by globalisation, technology and innovation, travel and migration, and changes in community, all of which require people who can adapt, adopt new identities, and effect change within and beyond themselves (Tedder, 2009). Working effectively in inclusive education requires similar dispositions, as we continually reinvent our practices to address issues of inequity and barriers to the full participation of all learners. Seen as a journey, developing inclusive practices “begins with initial teacher education and continues throughout the teacher’s career” (Florian & Graham, 2014, p. 466). Teachers are most likely to create inclusive contexts when they care for all students, embrace diversity, reflect on their practice and their impact, and stay open to new learning (Disley, 2009). Equally, Intrator (2005) would argue, teachers can only practise well when they are well.

Intensification, or doing more with less, characterises the modern education landscape: teachers are working harder, completing more tasks with more accountability, and have less time and other resources (Apple, 1986, in Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2008). Coupled with family demands alongside task overload in professional roles (Palmer, Rose, Sanders & Randle, 2012), and detracting from what teachers view as their core work with students (Day, Elliot & Kington, 2005), this can take a toll.

Navigating professional tensions is an ongoing challenge, evidenced by perennial difficulties with recruitment and retention of quality teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Korthagen, 2004). Initiatives designed to lift the education system can create further difficulties when they intentionally or inadvertently lock down practice (Kearney, Mentis & Holley-Boen, 2017). An increased focus on competencies, for instance, risks narrowing teaching to a set of observable skills at the expense of internal, person-centred qualities and student-responsiveness (Edwards, 2005; Korthagen, 2004). ‘Best practices’, determined from the outside, imply that what works has been determined, we must bring our practices into line, and not doing so would be irresponsible (Kelchtermans, 2015). In doing so, teachers can be treated as “passive executors of prescriptive

practices” (p. 364) and de-professionalised in the process. This approach is problematic for learners as well, as ‘best practice’ can slip into a ‘one-size-fits-all’ that disregards individual differences (Florian & Graham, 2014). Similarly, we inadvertently condone an uncritical view of ‘good teaching is good teaching’ whereby the multiple demands of diverse groups are considered irrelevant to practise (Florian & Graham, 2014, p. 467).

The current focus on teacher well-being, while necessary, reveals similar tensions. How do we prepare teachers to work in the current system while co-creating future systems, and consider both the well-being of individuals and the well-being of systems? (Margolis, Hodge & Alexandrou, 2014) These authors argue for resistance as a necessary counterpart of resilience. Resilience enhances well-being in the short-term, but risks maintaining the status quo; resistance can be uncomfortable but necessary aspect of re-visioning systems that work for everyone (Margolis et al., 2014).

Strong professional identities are crucial to the well-being of those entering teaching (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011), or changing roles within the sector, as they serve as a compass for decision-making in complex situations (Mentis et al., 2016). Viewed in this way, growing as a professional is less about “approximating better and better a reified body of knowledge. Rather it is developing a meaningful identity of both competence and knowledgeability in a dynamic and varied landscape of relevant practices” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014, p. 23). It is taking a stand, living within tensions, and preserving aspects of self less-often recognised by reductionist competencies.

In addressing issues of intensification and well-being, then, teacher agency should be foregrounded (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008; Kelchtermans, 2008). Agentic teachers “choos[e] actions that align with their commitments and values and with their sense of who they are as professionals” (Haneda & Sherman, 2016, p. 745). They have the “ability to exert control over and give direction to [their] life” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 135). Foregrounding agency recentres teachers by examining external and internal drivers; the power of context and personal meaning-making, and the myriad ways individuals can and do respond to demands on their time (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008). Agency invokes the contextualised, relational nature of teaching, and our ability to co-create systems. Alternative stories are needed as “not all teachers experience [intensification] as negative or inhibiting, or as de-professionalizing or de-skilling in its consequences. Teachers often (re)act to the intensified environment in creative and proactive ways” (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008, p. 48). The present study was undertaken to better understand

specialist teachers' experiences and understandings within the contexts of their lives, and enablers and barriers to their identities, practice and well-being.

METHODS

A participatory narrative inquiry approach was used as this methodology honours the importance of storying and re-storying our experiences individually and collectively (Bishop, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and creates space for cultures, collective understandings and contexts (Faltis, 2008). Critically, the approach is steeped in trust and *whakawhanaungatanga* (Bishop, 1996, in Rawlings & Wilson, 2013), and considers the intersection of stories, identity and well-being (Chase, 2011). In line with this approach, 34 individual interviews and 7 group meetings were conducted over a two-year period. Interviews, conceptualised as deep conversations (Kovach, 2010), elicited stories in relation to strengths-based questions such as, "Tell me about a time when your practice felt the most authentic to you."

With the exception of two formal meetings, collective gatherings were informal. Hosted in homes over shared meals, they created space for *whakawhanaungatanga*. This 'work before the work' (Palmer, 2009, p. 103) is consistent with Māori ways of collaborating (Bevan-Brown, 2001; Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2013) which emphasise "an abiding concern for the quality of human relationships that need to be established and maintained if learning contexts are to be effective" (Macfarlane et al., 2008, p. 105).

Ketso®, a structured concept mapping tool for participatory research (Furlong & Tippett, 2013) was used in both formal group meetings to develop participants' thinking and collaboration, and to genuinely bring local knowledge to solution-finding (Tippett, Handley & Ravetz, 2007, p. 9). The tool enabled essential components of research alongside Māori, including: Māori knowledge; relationships; self-awareness; relevance; power-sharing, and unleashing potential (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2013).



Figure 1. Participants engaging in one Ketso® activity

FINDINGS

A thematic analysis of specialist teachers' stories (Braun & Clarke, 2006) guided the development of a framework for harmonising who teachers are with what they do (Korthagen, Kim & Greene, 2012). This is a framework for fulfilment comprised of five separate but interconnected elements. Fulfilment connotes teachers' sense of living and working in ways that embody their values. Practising fiercely includes the ways teachers frame and co-create their roles to enact their stance, supports and stamina in harder and softer ways. Stance and Supports contribute to our Stamina. Each construct has individual and collective aspects, signified by the diagram's wavy line.



Figure 2. Practising fiercely: Fulfilment through stance, supports and stamina

Fulfilment

For these specialist teachers, fulfilment, rather than well-being, is the superordinate construct. They view fulfilment as relational; ongoing and generative, and often gleaned from the most difficult aspects of their work/lives.

Fulfilment as Relational

When asked to identify examples of their own fulfilment, they spoke of times they had lifted the fulfilment of others. The extent to which others were fulfilled informed the extent to which they themselves were fulfilled. Ruth, for instance, discussed moments "when you step back and ... see the whānau engaged and really seeing their child, seeing their child as a learner" (in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 190). In early childhood, these moments are hard-won as "families are still coming to terms that their child has a disability and ... they've only really been told everything that their child can't do and had that hope or the rug pulled out from underneath them" (p. 191). As such, Ruth's fulfilment was inextricably linked to "those moments when the whānau recognise that their child is capable and content" (p. 191).

Fulfilment as Ongoing and Generative

Fulfilment is often conceptualised as a looking-back exercise akin to reflecting on a job well done or a life well lived. Māori participants, in particular, challenged narrow and retrospective views, highlighting the importance of finding fulfilment in the beginning and middle, and through evolving cycles of reflective practice. The notion of *mauri* (life force) resonated with the group. They approach their lives intentionally, for example, positioning parents as the experts and genuinely involving them in their work with a child. They note the momentum in the middle, once shared understandings had been generated and the pathway feels established (e.g. Finella, in Holley-Boen, 2017). Thus, fulfilment is less about reflecting on outcomes and more about specialist teachers' hope, trust and confidence that their actions are part of something ultimately constructive (Holley-Boen, 2017).

Sam's circuit metaphor, with professionals tripping various parts of the circuit to activate the light at the end, illustrates the difference. "Early on, I wanted to see the light; I wanted to make that difference. And if the light didn't come on, then I hadn't succeeded." Conflating her worth with outcomes damaged her well-being, as "fulfilment was the light going on for me and so I was sometimes frustrated with my practice because I wasn't seeing that" (in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 194).

But now I've reframed my metaphor and I am just part of the circuit. I may not see the light come on, and even if my bit doesn't work and that light never comes on, somebody else is going to pick up a different path in the circuit and go 'okay that didn't work, so I'm going to try this'. ... Now my fulfilment is knowing I fought that good fight, I made that my connection and I have faith it's going to make a difference even if I don't see it (p. 194).

Sam's metaphor resonated with the group, as it emphasises effort over achievement, and strikes the balance between outcomes and input. Accordingly, fulfilment is not just the culmination of stance, supports and stamina, but feeds back into each in an ongoing and generative way.

The Most Difficult Work as the Most Fulfilling

The group was somewhat surprised to note connections between fulfilment and their most challenging work, including difficult conversations, relationships hardest to cultivate, and systems most resistant to change. Fulfilment rarely came from the 'easy road', which was a central distinction between fulfilment and our earlier discussions around well-being. Focused on well-being, participants narrowed their work and put boundaries around their practice, such as saying 'no' more or not

checking emails outside of work. Fulfilment, in contrast, seems less about how much you do, and more about how much you love what you do (Holley-Boen, 2017).

Practising Fiercely

Fulfilment is the *why* for these specialist teachers, and practising fiercely is the *how*. The term grew out of conversations about well-being, in response to our realisation that how we construct well-being can serve as a barrier to our well-being. When well-being is framed in idealistic and elusive ways, we can feel a sense of failure in comparison with an unachievable ideal. Katie, for example, described well-being as:

I feel like I'm doing my job well and I'm getting good feedback; the students are improving and the parents are happy. The schools are happy, I'm happy in my work, and I feel like ... I actually have some value to add to the situation. And there is good work-life balance as well, that I am able to juggle that and feel really content, I guess. That I am meeting my own children's needs and my needs and my husband's and friends' [needs], and that's all coming together in a nice little package (in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 166).

When asked when she last experienced this, Katie started to cry. "Never. It feels aspirational ... like it is just unachievable" (p. 167). Still, rather than critiquing discourses around well-being, participants were likely to fault themselves for not living up to these ideals.

Additionally, conversations about well-being often narrowed to physical well-being and focused on being unwell rather than well. Whilst their understandings of well-being were holistic, often drawing on *Te Whare Tapa Wha* (Durie, 1985), their reflections on their own well-being centred on health scares and burnout. Their answers were apologetic, confessing to cancelling gym membership or gaining weight.

I am not very satisfied with my own well-being. It is still the first thing [to go]. I have a list of things to achieve in a day – if I have written 'walk the dog', if I have written 'do yoga' - that is the one thing that goes first. It always goes first and I don't know how to prioritise my well-being. I haven't figured that out: why it is less important to me than the other things when it shouldn't be (Sam, in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 200).

Interviewing Mia, I asked the question differently to get a fuller picture of well-being. The following conversation exemplifies narrower responses to questions focused on well-being and more expansive responses when well-being is reframed as practising fiercely.

Mia: I have a confession: I wasn't very good with my well-being this year. ... Keeping up my caseload at work, then coming straight home and doing my study, then going to bed, that was my existence. I never got time to walk on the beach ... I actually cancelled my gym membership until after I finished my study and that was a whole five months of not going to the gym.

Wendy: I am going to shift the topic for a second, because I have asked each of you to tell me about a time when you felt a sense of well-being. And I noticed that four of the six said 'I don't have one'. And when I said the same to you, you also jumped to being unwell...

What if well-being includes all of the self-care stuff, but it is also about having courageous conversations, difficult conversations, practising fiercely? Not taking the easy road ... but fighting hard for what you know is right even when it's the hard road. That sort of well-being: being able to sleep well at night because you know you did a damn good job today for some kids. If I describe it like that, can you tell me when you felt well?

Without hesitation, Mia launched into a story of working with the mother of a young boy experiencing difficulties with learning. She recounted a difficult conversation, the subsequent intervention and her own risk-taking. Mia reflected on the mother's increased confidence and her belief in the potential of their work together.

Mia: 'Oh my god, this is just what the little boy needs'. So, inside my well-being felt really good because it was for his health. ... This is going to help immensely and so my well-being felt good that day.

Wendy: So that sort of well-being: you are driving home thinking 'Yes! It wasn't easy, but man it was worth it'. How would you describe that?

Mia: I guess it is kind of like a peace or a calm that comes over you when you know you have done really well for that child. It just feels good inside; it's like sunshine in your heart really, in your beating heart (in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 202).

Practising fiercely shifts and expands the ways we consider fulfilment, combining being well with *doing* well (Steger, Kashdan & Oishi, 2008) and positions well-being as a by-product of a life well lived (Friend, in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 202). As Hannah emphasised, "Well-being isn't always taking the easy choices, but

taking the choices that feel right, that you believe to be right" (in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 202).

'Fierce' connotes discernment and empowerment, not aggression. As such, there are harder and softer aspects of fierce practice, and every professional decides for themselves how they will "go out of their way to support these families" (Daphne, in Holley-Boen, p. 203) and "fight the good fight" (Belinda, in Holley-Boen, p. 202). In unpacking *fighting*, without being seen as a *fighter*, Finella referenced the dualities of "walking in two worlds, as Māori, and working in two worlds as a Māori professional" (in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 204):

Māori actually fought depending on the seasons. So, if it was time to harvest, or if it was time to plant, that was a time of peace so they shapeshifted into farmers, cultivators, husbands. ... But then during times of war, they have to shape shift into warriors. That serves two purposes: they are warriors and fighters in order to be the protectors (p. 204).

Finella related this to her own life – discussing the times when she was a mother, sister and daughter, and also the ways she shifted from learner to teacher, and from educator to mentor. In her practice, these ideas helped Finella to decide when to go with the flow and when to stand up for something.

Stance

Fulfilment is mediated through fierce practice comprised of stance, supports and stamina. Kelchtermans (2008) introduced *stance* and *stamina* in his discussions of the professional lives of teachers, unpacking stance as the moral and political aspects of belonging, where we make clear where we stand, what we believe in and whose side we are on. Referencing Bullough (2005), he asserts "to be a teacher is to stand for something, for a particular idea of what a good life is" (p. 28).

For these teachers, stance is dynamic and relational, underscoring the reciprocal influence of others on our evolving self-understandings. Knowing ourselves – including our cultures, worldviews, identities and biases – is critical in working effectively with Māori and others (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2013). Stance, interconnected with supports and stamina, fits with Glynn's notion of learning through communities of practice. "Identity and practice are mirror images of each other. What we do, what we engage in, and the range of communities of practice in which we can fully participate all define who we are" (2015, p. 171).

Focused inward, stance is deep, integrated self-understanding. Stance is predicated on genuineness, the space where espoused theory meets actual practice (Argyris and Schön, 1974) or when "who I think I am

[matches] who other people think I am" (Belinda, in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 209). Participants hope for inside-outside coherence, whereby the words used by others to describe them mirror the words they themselves would use. "What would be the key adjectives I would want people to say about me? If I lay down on the ground and they drew around my body, what would I want them to write about me?" (Belinda, in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 210)

Focused outward, their connections to others were fundamental to forming and revisiting their stance. "Without genuine relationships, a lot of those other aspects fall apart. ... You said about values, which is personal – but what we share of our values is the relationship aspect. If we don't have relationships we don't have anything" (Kirsten, in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 210).

These specialist teachers conceptualise stance as combining stable aspects of self they bring to every interaction with fluid elements they co-construct with others. Sam unpacked the 'bit of me, bit of we' that continues to evolve her stance. "How other people see me does influence my stance as well. Sometimes I have to reframe what I'm doing because I realise I'm not being perceived the way I think I'm being, or I want to be. (p. 211)" In this way, stance looks inward and acts outward, and is composed of both enduring and dynamic qualities. These findings reinforce Kelchtermans' original ideas around the importance of self-study, self-understanding, and reciprocal learning through our actions and interactions (2008).

Supports

Alongside their commitment to the profession, participants recognise the influence teachers and others have on their lives and roles (Flores and Day, 2006). They view supports as the external and internal elements which lift our stamina, stance and fulfilment. As Kirsten said, "I am a firm believer that if I work on my own, I only have my perspective. If I work in a group, I have a big perspective" (in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 218). As they described their supports, there was a continual dance between the interindividual and the intraindividual. "It's important to have alone time to just sit in a quiet space. ... But in terms of stamina, it's important to have support, that sense of knowing that there is somebody there on the same journey to move you along" (Finella, in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 215). Support is given and received at each layer of the environment in active, relational and collective ways and best explored in the concentric layers of their ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

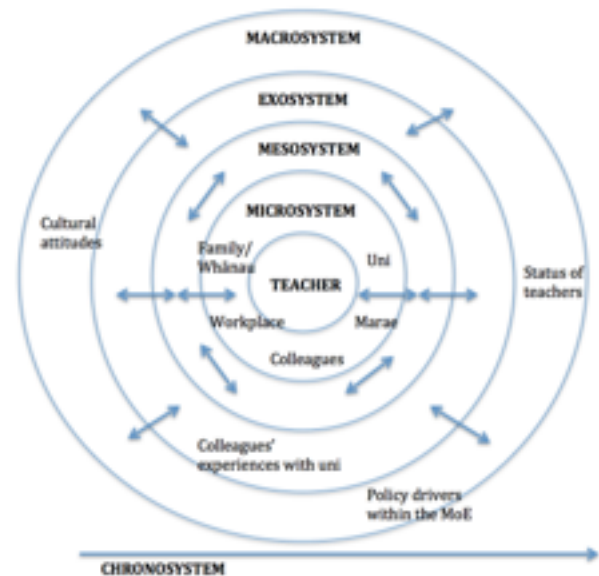


Figure 3. Example of a teachers' ecology (Adapted from "The Ecology of Human Development", Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

At the innermost layer, participants identified personal characteristics including perseverance, faith and self-efficacy. This was not a natural layer to consider; they were more likely to attribute their success to others. One layer out, they considered the reciprocal support of others within and across their microsystems. In a relational take on support, participants valued giving and receiving support equally and articulated the ways each fortified their practice. Lastly, examining their mesosystems and exosystems, they identified the supports provided by office climates, team cultures and other systems and structures.

Katie's weaves together her own passion, timely reminders from her support people, and her support of others. For her, supports are "the heart of what keeps you going. ... The relationships, and what my husband reminds me of: that I am making a difference for those kids. That's really close to my heart; I want to do something that I'm passionate about. That's where the supports come in" (in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 215).

As with every ecosystem, there was interplay within and between layers, and each participant is an active agent in their ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) with the ability to map their networks of support. Taking charge, they identified their needs before seeking support, and cultivated networks ranging from formal to informal, time-limited to long-term. Support came from friends and family, colleagues and peers, mentors, former students and others. They were mostly confident in their ability to draw on their supports. Katie, for example, mapped a range of support inside and outside of her workplace. "I draw on my networks. I am really good at ... drawing on the people that I know or that I

feel quite confident that I can trust and that will support me. ... One of my biggest strengths [is] I know who to go to and how to get that support" (Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 219).

Consistent with sociocultural messages about learning (e.g. Glynn, 2015), participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of supporting others. Doing so reinforced their identities, helping them to story themselves as 'I am the type of person who ...' supports others, and generated reciprocal benefits of getting from giving. "Learning inspires me, teaching and learning, so, ako. Learning from others and just that joy knowing that you're facilitating that learning process keeps me going" (Ruth, in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 220).

Stamina

This group experienced familiar threats to well-being, including new roles, postgraduate study, health issues and family struggles. Professionally, they grappled with ongoing tensions of time; funding; deficit attitudes and the ways they were framed as experts, gatekeepers and 'magic bullets'. Zooming out from any one experience, stamina is the longer-term ability to enact one's professional beliefs; the continual dance between comfort and disruption that keeps practice fresh, challenging and moving forward. Stamina sustains well-being, as we prioritise our efforts and practise in ways that are meaningful, fulfilling and effective.

Stamina acknowledges the inevitability of tensions, and how we are slightly different each time we navigate a tension. Hannah was able to spend considerable time on a funding application because her caseload was lighter and her family's well-being was intact. A year later, confronting a health scare, she might not have had the energy. We get different responses from the environment each time as well, winning some battles while losing others. Across a career, every specialist teacher is likely to experience times of diminished stance or fulfilment, and varying levels of support. Stamina allows us to consider the bigger picture, and to fortify ourselves in ways that intentionally rebuild our stance, fulfilment and supports. In doing so, we find our own combination of resilience and resistance (Margolis et al., 2014) and tensions become invaluable opportunities to walk our talk and live out our values (Chang, 2014).

"I am a [specialist teacher], I love being a [specialist teacher], but I am a [specialist teacher] in my way. Yes, there are certain things I have to follow, and certain processes, and that's fine ... but there are also times when I fully intend to dig my heels in and say, 'No, I'm not doing that bit' or 'I am not accepting that' or

something like that (Hannah, in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 254).

Every participant identified more and less tangible strategies for sustaining their stamina. However, there were common threads in the extent to which they integrated versus compartmentalised their lives, tried to honour their own non-negotiables and endorsed the importance of time away from work. Each of these is about 'balancing distance and commitment' (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002, p. 762), caring for and about the children/whānau whilst remaining detached enough for personal well-being. Hannah endorsed "finding time to turn off" in theory, but confessed that "it is one of the hardest things to do" (Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 227).

I think the first student that you get emotionally involved with breaks your heart, if you like. And then from then on you don't care any less, you still care just as much. But you do learn – you have to – to keep you sane and make you any use to them. You have to learn to have periods when you turn off and leave it at the door (Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 227).

Stamina is nimble and intentional. Each participant planned for stamina and revisited their plan as necessary. The specifics of the plan are less important than the act of having one. Knowing this, and giving ourselves permission to find what works best for us alone, supports us in bolstering our long-term stamina.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

These teachers became specialist teachers to extend and enact their passions; specifically, they chose to support children who are marginalised by the current system. In doing so, they have positioned themselves as advocates for fairness and equity, relationships and inclusion (Holley-Boen, 2017). As Kelchtermans (2008) argues, there are inevitable political and moral consequences of taking a stand; aware of this, this group makes clear where they stand and whose side they are on.

Specialist teachers' practice is complex, filled with intrinsic rewards and perpetual tensions. No two days are the same, and every practice context is different. In the face of numerous tasks and tensions, our values support us in determining our next steps: what becomes a priority, and what falls to the wayside (Chang, 2014). Intensification can be positive, providing us with lifelong learning opportunities to revisit and embody our convictions. Agency is "not something that people have, but something that people do" (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 136) and chances to act potentially reinforce our values, beliefs

and identities. Supported by others, we make our roles our own, refining our practice in responsive and nimble ways.

In an era of intensification, the current focus on teacher well-being is encouraging. However, “the rapid adoption of the term, alongside its multidimensional, subjective nature, creates the risk that it becomes a much celebrated but little understood concept” (Graham, Powell & Truscott, 2016, p. 367).

Well-being is too often misconstrued as “a synonym for ‘cocooning,’ for ‘wellness’ (the kind of happy physical and mental state that is promised in fitness centres)” (Kelchtermans, 2008, p. 31). This echoes my experience, whereby querying well-being evoked responses about physical well-being, often with an emphasis on being unwell. As Kelchtermans suggests, well-being inadvertently connotes pulling back, saying no, and putting tighter boundaries around one’s life: “an alibi for keeping things the way they are, for opposing any change or improvement” (2008, p. 31). Shifting to discussions of *fulfilment* and *practising fiercely* alters the conversation, tapping into people’s inner strength and passion for making a difference.

The participants in this study underscored the importance of stance, supports and stamina in sustaining their ability to practise fiercely and find fulfilment. They noted strong connections between their stance and stamina, as how they see themselves influences the chances they take, and how they interpret success, challenge and setbacks. Supported by the combination of these three elements, enacted in their practice and rooted in their ‘why’, they found greater fulfilment in the job (Holley-Boen, 2017). Or, as Mia puts it, that “kind of calm that comes over you when you know you have done really well for that child. ... Like sunshine in your heart really, in your beating heart” (in Holley-Boen, 2017, p. 202).

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