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Contemplative practices and teacher professional becoming

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ABSTRACT

The last decade has witnessed increasing interest in the potential place of contemplative practices (such as mindfulness, meditation and yoga) in education. Regarding the lives and work of teachers, research in this area has focused almost exclusively on mindfulness-based interventions and related outcomes of stress, burnout and wellbeing, neglecting important questions regarding teacher professional identities, ethics and agency. This paper presents findings from an in-depth qualitative study that examined the role of contemplative practices in the professional becoming of seven beginning teachers using research interviews, ethnographic observation and participatory visual methods. The study explored how participants understood, imagined and enacted contemplative practices in their lives as teachers, revealing a complex ecology of personal histories, multiple practices, secular/instrumental and spiritual/transformational aims, the expression of which was mediated by intersecting personal and institutional contexts. Practices of contemplation acted as nodes of stability within the spaces of considerable vulnerability, uncertainty and flux which characterise early experiences of teaching. Specifically, they inflected professional becoming by providing a distinctive *telos* to teaching activity, making available existential ways of being grounded in calm, compassionate, presence and, for some participants, stimulated radical questioning of the nature of the (teacher) self, itself. These findings add much-needed complexity to debate about the uses of mindfulness and other contemplative practices in education, and provide an important new evidence-base for considering the role of contemplative practices in initial teacher education and professional development.

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Introduction

The last decade has seen a surge of scholarly, practitioner, and policy interest in the use of practices such as mindfulness and meditation in educational contexts (Ergas & Hadar, 2019; Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016; Waters et al., 2014). One important segment of research in this area concerns the use of these practices by teachers. This research is,

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however, largely circumscribed by two limiting factors: empirical studies in this area (1) are positioned, almost universally, in relation to a distinctly secularised notion of mindfulness and (2) focus narrowly on matters of teacher wellbeing and stress reduction as outcomes. While these foci are undoubtedly of importance, they fail to account for the broader pedagogical and ethico-political implications of contemplative practices for the lives and work of teachers. “Contemplative practice” is used here as an umbrella term, including in its scope meditative activities such as: mindfulness (in both its secular and more traditional forms), concentration and *mantra* meditations, loving-kindness practices, contemplative prayer, yoga, and Japanese tea-ceremony.¹

The present paper, therefore, seeks to extend and enrich existing scholarship in this domain by (1) widening the focus of analysis to consider contemplative practices beyond secular mindfulness and (2) directly addressing matters of professional identity, ethics and agency, drawing on the concept of teacher professional becoming (Mulcahy, 2011; Ovens et al., 2016). Key findings are reported from an in-depth qualitative study of seven beginning teachers, each of whom had a substantial commitment to forms of contemplative practice.² The uptake of contemplative practices by these teachers, in addition to supporting wellbeing, had significant implications for several dimensions of professional becoming. From the analysis, implications are developed regarding the introduction of contemplative practices in both school and initial teacher education (ITE) settings, and for the scholarly understanding of teacher identities.

Existing research on contemplative practices and the teacher

Educational scholarship concerning the use of contemplative practices by teachers has been marked by a shift from more theoretical, speculative and individual-reflective accounts (Miller, 1994; O’Reilly, 1998; Seidel, 2006; Tremmel, 1993), towards more systematic empirical studies. Mindfulness-Based-Interventions (MBIs) dominate this burgeoning empirical literature (Ansley et al., 2021; Birchinall et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2016; Schussler et al., 2018; C. Taylor et al., 2016; M. J. Taylor, 2018; S. G. Taylor et al., 2021), with an accompanying near-universal focus on wellbeing-related outcomes such as stress reduction, burnout, and resilience. Several reviews have sought to take stock of existing evidence regarding mindfulness for teachers (Hwang et al., 2017; Lomas et al., 2017), and support the general claim that MBIs are supportive of teacher wellbeing, while emphasising the inconclusive and limited nature of the existing evidence-base. Within this body of literature, contemplative practices are generally framed as tools for mental training with which teachers may adapt to, and flourish within, schooling environments which are recognised as highly stressful (Birchinall et al., 2019; Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Generally highly optimistic in tone, these studies tend not to foreground the Buddhist origins of mindfulness (McCaw, 2020) or acknowledge (let alone respond to) the various criticisms of mindfulness in education (Brito et al., 2022; Forbes, 2017; Langer Primdahl, 2022; Reveley, 2016). These criticisms include concerns that the ethical components of mindfulness become stripped away in the translation to educational contexts (Hyland, 2016a), and that individualised and therapeutic forms of mindfulness may actually work to obscure (and thus serve to perpetuate) systemic causes of suffering (Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). These MBI studies also tend not to acknowledge the wider varieties of meditation-related experiences (Lindahl et al., 2017) and how these might be significant for teaching (Nugent et al., 2011).

Empirical studies working with qualitative approaches have explored a wider range of experiences and outcomes. These include teachers' experiences of time, place, body and identity (Smith et al., 2016; Solloway, 2000; Soloway, 2012); the principles and practices of contemplative teaching (Byrnes, 2012); professional knowledge and disposition (Soloway, 2012); teacher reflexivity and engagement with policy (Holmes, 2015; Keck, 2015); and student-teacher interactions (Singh et al., 2013). Common findings in these studies relate to an enhanced sense of teacher agency (*responding* rather than *reacting* to classroom events), a capacity to let go of control and striving to take risks and accept failure. Contemplative practices, through enhancing the quality of moment-to-moment awareness, may also facilitate forms of self-inquiry. For example, teachers may discover that "they were not who they always thought they were", when assumptions about themselves did not match their actual behaviour in the classroom, (Solloway, 1999, p. 135). This may lead to a clarification of core values and beliefs (Soloway, 2012), as well as increased self-acceptance (Bernay, 2014). Notably, engagement with contemplative practices could also produce experiences of disequilibrium, as teachers reinterpreted their professional role, their relationships to students, and to the powers organising school life (Keck, 2015).

This body of qualitative work, although marginal within existing scholarly discourses, indicates the broader significance of contemplative practices for teachers and teaching, beyond wellbeing and resilience. It demonstrates that qualitative research approaches are essential to developing a complex and nuanced picture of how mindfulness and other contemplative practice are understood and applied by teachers in their professional practice – as acknowledged by several scholars working with MBIs for teachers (Reiser & McCarthy, 2018; Roeser et al., 2012; Schussler et al., 2018; Sharp & Jennings, 2016). The present study responds methodologically to these specific research needs, enacting a rich, extended and multi-modal engagement with the lived experiences of teachers engaging in contemplative practices.

Conceptual framing: teacher professional becoming

To conceptualise the place of the self in teaching, this research takes up the notion of *teacher professional becoming* (Mulcahy, 2011; Ovens et al., 2016; Scanlon, 2011). This term indicates the ongoing, embodied and enacted series of existential transformations by which individuals enter the lived worlds and material practices of teaching. This view embraces the full, situated complexity of the teacher self, recognising teacher identities as multiple, dynamic, relational, and subject to plays of power and agency (Beijaard et al., 2004; Gee, 2000; Lasky, 2005; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018). Teacher identities, in this view, only ever emerge as a "momentary positioning" (Kelchtermans, 2018, p. 236), the outcome of the "continuous work of pulling disparate identities together with context, practices, objects, places and people playing constitutive roles" (Mulcahy, 2011, p. 235). From this perspective teacher identities are "partly given yet they are also something that has to be achieved, offering a potential site of agency within the inevitably social process of becoming" (Clarke, 2009, p. 187). Significantly for the present work, there are "unavoidable relationships between professional and personal identities" (Day et al., 2006); the attempted integration of these may result in significant experiences of ambiguity, tension and vulnerability (Alsup, 2018; Kelchtermans, 2005, 2018).

Contemplative practices, insofar as they are nominally “personal” activities which come to mesh with teachers’ professional selves, are therefore implicated in professional becoming.

In its focus on professional becoming, this work takes up Carvalho’s (2021) call to bring an *ontological* lens to scholarly studies of meditation. This approach “recognizes the open, multiple and contested character of meditation, as well as the fact that meditative subjectivities are not given a priori, but are entangled with specific performances, environments and associations that enact certain versions of bodies and selves” (p. 1263). Thus, it is through close empirical analysis of situated activity that the dynamics of professional becoming, and its entanglement with practices of contemplation, should be explored.

Study aims and research questions

Seeking to establish the *implications of contemplative practices for teacher professional becoming*, the study was guided by these four research questions:

- *RQi*: What styles of contemplative practice do participants engage in, and what experiences, meanings and philosophical understandings are associated with these practices?
- *RQii*: How are contemplative practices enacted, and how does this enactment inflect practices and experiences of teaching?
- *RQiii*: How do the enactments of contemplative practices, and their inflections of teaching, vary according to the different styles and combinations of practices used?
- *RQiv*: How do enactments of contemplative practice intersect with questions of power and agency?

These research questions align with the stated aims above of (1) accounting for teachers’ engagement with contemplative practices beyond (but including) mindfulness and (2) directly addressing matters of ethics, identity and agency.

Methodology and methods

To generate an experientially rich encounter with teachers’ life-worlds the study employed a “phenomenological” approach (Quay et al., 2021), combining aspects of philosophical phenomenology (Heidegger, 1927/2010; Quay, 2013), and applications of phenomenology to empirical social science (van Manen, 1990). This hermeneutic approach foregrounds the role of interpretation, involving a circular movement between the part and the whole, between the researcher’s encounters with the research site, and the prior beliefs and assumptions which these encounters may reveal (Davidsen, 2013, p. 323). The hermeneutic, phenomenological approach was complemented by a theory of social practices. This perspective shifts analytical attention away from the individual towards the bundles of organised activities which form the context for, and give meaning to, localised episodes of social life (Schatzki, 2002, 2012). Practice theories emphasise the primary role of embodied knowledge, and know-how, as well as the teleological (goal-directed) and affective structures of practices (Reckwitz, 2017; Schatzki, 2005). In this way, the context of professional becoming was conceptualised in terms of *intersecting bundles of practices*, as they “overlap, interweave, cohere, conflict, diverge, scatter, and enable as well as constrain each other” (Schatzki, 2002, pp. 156–157).

Specifically, the study sought to explore how the bundle of practices of contemplation came to intersect with the bundle of practices that make up classroom teaching, and how, as a result, practices of teaching might be *inflected* by contemplative practices.

Participants

A year-long multiple-case study was undertaken (by the author) with seven beginning teachers, each of whom had a substantial existing commitment to contemplative practice. Although professional becoming is taken to be an ongoing process, this initial period (“beginning teachers”) was selected as a time when matters of self and identity are particularly salient, an intensified site of transition and transformation (Schaefer, 2013).

The study was conducted in Australia, in a large metropolitan city. Recruitment occurred via announcements posted to ITE students at the author’s host institution, and via the author’s professional networks, specifically calling for expressions of interest from beginning teachers with an existing meditation practice. From the total pool of expressions of interest, seven agreed to participate and provided informed consent. Overall, the participant pool showed diverse variation in academic discipline, school sector, career stage, gender, and types of contemplative practices engaged in (see Table 1). This breadth supported the phenomenological aim of accessing rich and varied experiences relating to the topic (Polkinghorne, 1989). All participants were either students of ITE, or classroom teachers within five years of graduation (“beginning teachers”). The five pre-service teachers were all students of a two-year, post-graduate ITE programme. Mark, Aditi and Bob were studying to teach in primary schools, while Edward (mathematics, science) and Cecilia (drama, media studies) were studying to be secondary teachers. Of the two practising teachers, Mia (German language) was in her second year of teaching at an inner-city public secondary school, and Wren (science, outdoor education) was in his fifth year of teaching at an outer-urban public secondary school.

Participants engaged in a variety of contemplative practices, most commonly Buddhist techniques and secular adaptations of these, such as mindfulness of breath and body-

Table 1. Summary of participant characteristics.

Participant pseudonym	Age	Gender	Career stage: pre-service teacher (PST)/early-career teacher (ECT)	Sector: primary/elementary (Pri) or secondary (Sec)	Contemplative practices (in order of decreasing relative commitment)
Edward	30	Male	PST	Sec	Vipassana Buddhism, secular mindfulness, hatha yoga
Cecilia	31	Female	PST	Sec	Kadampa Buddhism, secular mindfulness, Christian contemplative prayer
Mark	27	Male	PST	Pri	Vipassana Buddhism, secular mindfulness
Aditi	33	Female	PST	Pri	Hare Krishna mantra meditation, mindfulness of breath, karma yoga
Bob	26	Male	PST	Pri	Vipassana Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism
Mia	28	Female	ECT	Sec	Hatha yoga (teacher trained); secular mindfulness
Wren	29	Male	ECT	Sec	Vipassana Buddhism, Japanese tea ceremony, karma yoga, hatha yoga

scan meditations. The *Vipassana* school of Buddhism (Goenka, 1980/2007) was prominent, with Wren, Bob, Mark and Edward, having all completed at least one ten-day retreat in that tradition. Rather than being committed to one particular form of practice, participants embraced them in various combinations. This pattern of eclectic bricolage reflects the kind of playful, pragmatic and less commitment-oriented approach to the making of lives and identities under the cultural-historical circumstances of postmodern post-secularism (Bauman, 1996; Habermas, 2008). The exception was Aditi who, as a *Hare Krishna* follower, was committed to one type of practice only: *mantra* meditation. Elaborations on each participant's personal context can be found in the [Appendix](#).

Data-collection procedures

Each participant engaged in four semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes each) and four (full- or part-) days of in-school ethnographic observations (totalling six points of contact with the researcher) over the period of one school year (see [Table 2](#)).

During school-based fieldwork, the researcher engaged in non-participant observation, accompanying the beginning teachers in their regular activities. Research interviews included short periods of shared meditation (researcher and participant) which served to anchor discussions in concrete, embodied experience, as well as to stimulate precise description of meditation-related phenomenology (Petitmengin et al., 2019). In addition, participatory visual methods were employed (Literat, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2011), comprising of an invitation to construct metaphorical drawings during the initial and final interviews. This focus on visualisation and metaphor follows a line of existing work on teacher identities (e.g. Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hamilton, 2016; Uchida et al., 2021). The drawing from the initial interview was subsequently available as a conversation piece during following research contact. The production of the final drawing was supported by the presentation to the participant of a collection of 70 colour picture cards (St Luke's Innovative Resources, 2007). Participants selected one to three cards which were metaphorically meaningful, and used these as a basis for constructing the final drawing. A selection of participant drawings is included in the analysis below. A selection of interview prompts are presented in [Table 3](#).

Data analysis

The complete data set comprised of approximately 30 hours of interview recordings, 14 participant drawings, and several books of researcher field notes. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, n.d.). Data analysis proceeded through the parallel use of inductive (descriptive), analytical, and theoretical coding (see [Table 4](#)). Inductive coding was applied line-by-line, identifying

Table 2. Outline of research stages.

Research stage	1 Initial interview	2 School-based fieldwork A	3 School-based fieldwork A	4 School-based fieldwork B	5 School-based fieldwork B	6 Final interview
Duration	60–90 minutes	Part- or full-day ethnographic observation	Part- or full-day ethnographic observation plus onsite interview	Part- or full-day ethnographic observation	Part- or full-day ethnographic observation plus onsite interview	60–90 minutes

Table 3. Selected interviews prompts.

	Example prompts
Initial interview	• Tell me about your contemplative practice. How did it become part of your life? • Are your approach to teaching, and your ideas about teaching, informed or influenced by your contemplative practice? If so, how? • Can you draw a picture, using metaphor, that captures for you teaching, meditation or how they come together?
School-based interviews	• What was the experience of that lesson like, for you? • What events from that lesson stood out to you? • While meditating, what did you notice?
Final interview	• What are you learning or discovering about yourself as a result of your experience of becoming a teacher/teaching this year? • Inspired by the picture cards you have selected, can you make your own drawing which represents or expresses how teaching and meditation come together for you?

Table 4. Code categories used in the data analysis, with selected examples.

Descriptive code categories	Analytic code categories	Theoretical code categories
Contemplative Practice (e.g. “benefits”, “discipline/routine”)	Emotion and Mood (e.g. anger, anxiety)	Four Existentials (e.g. “time”, “space”, “body”, “relationships”) (van Manen, 1990)
Teaching (e.g. “behaviour management”, “curriculum”)	Versus (e.g. “spiritual vs secular”, “internal vs external”)	Practices (e.g. “materiality”, “telos”) (Schatzki, 2002)
Translating Mapping (e.g. “benefits for teaching”, “tensions/differences”)		
Ethico-Political (e.g. “ethics”, “authority”, “control”)		
Self-Becoming (e.g. “integrity/ authenticity”, “self-other interconnection”)		
Virtue (e.g. “humility”, “compassion”)		
Other-descriptive (e.g. “metaphor”, “difficulty”)		

topics in the data. Through subsequent interpretation, this yielded six categories of descriptive codes: “contemplative practice”, “teaching”, “translating-mapping” (between the two domains of teaching and contemplative practice), “ethico-political”, “self-becoming”, and “virtue”. An “other-descriptive” category was created to include codes not falling into the previous categories. Analytical codes were applied to track reference to emotion/mood, and conflict (“versus coding”) in the data (Saldaña, 2016). In addition, theoretical codes were applied from the methodological frameworks – phenomenology and social practices.

Working from the coded material, findings were synthesised, in regard to each of the four research questions, using NVivo’s concept-mapping tools.

Findings

The interpretation of study data indicated significant ways in which contemplative practices were enmeshed in the unfolding of professional becoming. These are organised below under three themes, relating to educational purposes, ways of being, and inquiries into the nature of the self.

Contemplative inflections of educational purpose

Practices, whether of teaching or contemplation, are constituted in part by a sense of goal-directedness or *telos* (Schatzki, 2002). This *telos* mediates how practices are made meaningful for individuals when enacted in local contexts, and thus articulates a key

dimension of professional becoming. For the participants, meditation practices provided a contemplatively-inspired *telos* to teaching activity.

Sitting on a hillside with Cecilia, after a day of fieldwork at her placement school, we entered silent meditation for a few minutes. Coming out of silence, Cecilia presented this reflection, which shows how *spiritual* aspects of contemplation, in particular, inspire a deep inquiry into her purpose and identity as a teacher:

In clarifying purpose, mindfulness meditation is like training your brain, so that you can be a good human being in whatever you're doing. But when you're doing more spiritual reflection, it's more like ... well what kind of person is that? How is your career the best place for you to cultivate the virtues that are going to ... or where does your great gladness, or great joy, meet the world's need? Is that [teaching] where those two things come together? And if so, then what kind of teacher are you going to be? Like what are the values that you are going to try and build in your classroom?

For Bob, his purpose as a teacher was figured visually in his metaphoric drawing of the teacher-as-gift-giver ([Figure 1](#)). In his vision of educational purpose, the “gift” of academic education was inseparable from the gift of meditation:

It's me offering a gift to the kids. The gift of education. The gift of meditation ... of things that will help them become happier people, is just as important as the gifts of reading or maths.

This vision involves the teacher helping students to learn (as Bob put it) “how to ‘be’” through meditation, indicating an educational *telos* that is existential, as much as cognitive or academic.

Another way in which contemplative practices inflected the purposes of teaching was through the notion of teaching work as *contemplative service*, a prominent idea for Aditi,



Figure 1. Bob's drawing (initial interview) – the teacher giving the “gift” of education/meditation to students.

Wren and Cecilia. This orientation was expressed in Aditi's visual metaphor of the teacher-as-sun, serving students-as-solar panels through the gift of endless energy (Figure 2). As she articulated: "I really try to take it with me when I go in ... I try to think that I'm serving the kids, serving the students." Wren, inspired by Vivekananda's (1896) writings, had a similar view: "ideally, I'm picturing all the work that I'm doing as service, which can be really energising". *Karma yoga* provided a *telos* to Wren's formal meditation practice that went beyond individual coping and self-improvement (what he refers to here as "life things"):

I think it [meditation] certainly helps with dealing with life things, but I don't do it for that purpose. I think my practice, at least, is working towards some ideals of service, and compassion, and a place to cultivate that, and to try and have a deeper understanding. So that I'm then able to regularly return to those things in daily interactions.

Karma yoga was a means to reach a transformed understanding of teaching, whereby the prosaic challenges and frustrations of practice could be re-framed as meaningful in relation to deeper purposes. As Wren explains: "rather than, 'Oh I've got to do this, I've got to do this.' No. I'm doing this *for* something".

Similarly, Cecilia, drawing on the prayer of St. Francis, embraced the metaphor of being "an instrument of peace", and "a servant to the craft of teaching". During an interview held at her placement school, Cecilia recited the prayer, after which we sat in silence. And then this insight arrived:

Even the first line: "Being an instrument of peace", you know? If that is what you're aiming to do, in all of your interactions with human beings, then ... maybe the focus shouldn't be on – are they [students] *engaged* enough in this education? It's like ... do you create a space that is

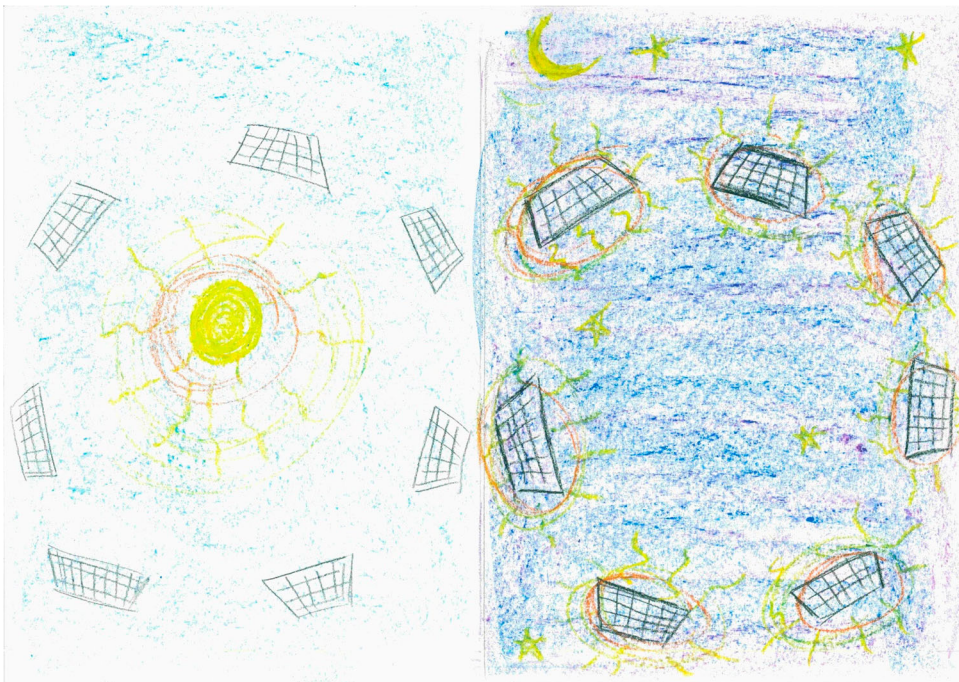


Figure 2. Aditi's drawing (initial interview). The teacher as Sun [left, centre], students as solar-panels [left, day-time; right, night-time].

peaceful? After they have an interaction with you, do they feel more joy, hope, faith, light? And maybe that's what the role is, you know? And maybe this ... desire for them to be engaged or ... desire to *shift the system* ... It's more wanting to be consoled, or wanting to have things right in my own mind and, to understand, you know? ... Maybe the focus should be – the system will *never* make sense. These things are out of, beyond my control, maybe. And so rather than grasping at these things that are big. Go – well, what you have is actually an opportunity that's quite small. It's eight kids, for 50 minutes, three times a week

In this way, Christian prayer helped Cecilia put her strong, immediate desire to “shift the system” in perspective, and bring ethical focus to the rich possibilities of the (seemingly) mundane pedagogical present.

A contemplative educational *telos* was also expressed in the participants' curricular choices. Participants conducted a variety of meditation activities with their students including yoga breathing exercises and postures (Wren & Mia), mindfulness of breathing and body-scans (Bob, Wren, Mia, Mark & Cecilia), and Japanese tea-ceremony (Wren). In the early-years primary classroom, Bob and Mark used the discourses of contemporary, secular mindfulness and Social and Emotional Learning to translate their passion for meditation into a form commensurable within their placement contexts. Others found creative cross-over points between meditation practice and disciplinary curriculum. In the secondary setting, Cecilia introduced bodily awareness and relaxation as tactics to help students “get into neutral”, before playing new characters in drama class; and Mia used German language to communicate instructions for a body-scan meditation in her German classroom.

The enactment of contemplative curriculum constituted different levels of overt resistance to existing practices and priorities in schools, entailing different measures of personal vulnerability. As a pre-service teacher on placement, Bob was certainly aware of the potential risks of using meditation techniques or language that might be perceived as religious in a secular school context. As he reflected:

Sometimes it crosses my mind when I'm at schools: if I incorporated meditation into the classroom, what the other teachers would say, or how it would be perceived by the staff. Because it could be seen as, or judged as, “indoctrination” or ... a religious thing in some way, that perhaps might not be warmed to.

Time was also a crucial factor. From classroom observation, Mia's use of meditation activities came across as rushed, squeezed-in, in an effort not to impair coverage of the formal curriculum. Her professed desire for a “spiritual” dimension to curriculum was often frustrated:

Just so many students, so many people in the classroom, so little time, so many tasks that you have to do ... And there is literally not really a time-slot. Sometimes I write on my lesson plan “meditation” at the end ... in which case I usually do remember to include it.

Aditi and Edward, as pre-service teachers, maintained aspirations towards integrating meditation into their teaching, but deferred this to a future where they imagined having more control over their classrooms.

The prominent counter-example was Wren. With significantly more teaching experience than the rest, he was noticeably less vulnerable, and more confident, in his position:

If I'm bringing something [meditation] into the classroom, it's with the goal of either developing some sense of compassion for themselves, or a quietness, which I think is so universal

that it is secular. For me ... there's no doctrine and ... it's underpinned by thousands of years of learning. I'm completely at ease with having it in a secular environment.

Correspondingly, Wren was more willing to push the formal, disciplinary curriculum aside (at times) to allow room for meditation. In relation to his Science class, he remarked:

We're learning about genetics, which is really important. But we're also developing our capacity to sit in silence. And we've got this goal of getting to ten minutes ... So, you know, those ten minutes are really valuable. And I could be saying, "right we're going to really nail mitosis, versus meiosis". But in my mind, for all the kids, I would say, there's some things that are more valuable, and that's getting these skills and all these experiences.

For Wren, these classroom choices, as momentary positionings of professional becoming, involved a deliberate distancing from a more compliant "diligent teacher-self". As he reflected:

No-one would say this [meditation] isn't important. But, if I was being my diligent teacher-self, I'd be referring to the [curriculum] standards and saying that I should be teaching this and this and this ...

What comes through, in these contrasting stories, is the significance of meditation in the curricular choices of these beginning teachers; but also the markedly different levels of vulnerability in early episodes of professional becoming: the greater vulnerability to the judgement of others faced by pre-service teachers, and the corresponding greater ease and confidence of more experienced, and more securely employed, teachers.

The struggle to balance institutionalised priorities and demands with a personal and contemplatively inflected vision of education is depicted in Mia's drawing from the initial interview (Figure 3). Represented as a spotlight on a stage, the teacher struggles to light-up various aspects of reality, while being weighed down by external standards and expectations (represented by a stack of books).



Figure 3. Mia's drawing (initial interview). The teacher-as-spotlight, weighed down by a stack of books.

Mia explains the drawing:

I see the spotlight as my role, which would be trying, trying somehow to light up all of these things [*indicates the items in purple*]. Trying to illuminate the truth of life and the universe [*laughs*], and then being weighed down by various standards and expectations from outside.

Enacting contemplative curriculum was a way for Mia, and others, to express their becoming as teachers in a way that reflected the values, priorities and *telos* of meditation. However, as demonstrated, this always required careful discernment and negotiation in relation to existing institutional structures, priorities and expectations.

In summary, this section has shown how contemplative practices inflected the professional becoming for these beginning teachers – through facilitating deep inquiry into the *telos* of teaching, through framing teaching work as contemplative service, and through the enactment of contemplative educational purposes by undertaking meditation activities with their students.

Contemplative ways of being a teacher

Professional becoming, as embodied and contextually-localised self-making, is mediated by affectively-attuned ways of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927/2010). For the participants, contemplative practices provided access to distinctive ways of being in teaching contexts. These arose via the cultivation of contemplative virtues, and by bringing meditative awareness to ego-centric patterns of thinking. These, together, provided access to the phenomenon of contemplative presence.

Contemplative ways of being-a-teacher were grounded in contemplative awareness and experiences cultivated in formal meditation. Participants reported a range of experiences during formal meditation, such as noticing and responding to mental distraction, heightened embodied awareness, altered experiences of time and space, and altered configurations of the self-world relationship. While somewhat ineffable, various phrases were used to hint at unusual experiences, such as “just existing” (Mia), “just sitting” (Wren), effortlessness (Edward), or non-separateness (Bob). These experiences represent departures from standard, reflective ways of experiencing self, world and the relationship between the two (Carvalho, 2021). Phenomenologically, they indicate shifts in being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927/2010). Contemplative practices, through such transformations of awareness, may thus establish alternative existential possibilities for teachers’ ways of being in classrooms, and thus new possibilities for professional becoming.

Contemplative practices enabled participants to intentionally craft a teacher-self via the *cultivation of contemplative virtues*; specifically, qualities of calm, curiosity, loving-kindness and compassion. These qualities were understood as both valuable in themselves, but also as having direct effects on the atmosphere of the classroom, and the quality of relationships with students. As Mark explained, the care and cultivation of the self, practiced in meditation, was ultimately ethical in nature, enabling a happier and more helpful way of teaching:

Without it, without the *vipassana*, I don’t think I would be as happy as I am. And not just happy, but being able to spread the happiness around, and being able to look after myself so that I can help others.

Similarly, for Bob, cultivating meditative peacefulness within himself might support peacefulness for his students:

When I go into the classroom, I try to be as ... it doesn't always happen, but I always try to be as meditative as possible, to help the kids feel a sense of peace or calm when they're in the room. And to help facilitate an environment of well-being and safety within in the class ... Being in a meditative state with the kids, it's more likely to help them to, perhaps, feel the calmness, or find peace, a bit, in themselves.

Loving-kindness meditation (common to all except Aditi), Aditi's practice of devotional chanting, and Wren's practice of tea ceremony, all served as sites for the formal cultivation of compassion, as an embodied experience. For Cecilia, compassion for students was a practical outcome of the Buddhist-inspired realisation that "everyone is struggling":

Well in a contemplative, Buddhist sense, everyone is struggling. I come into the classroom with my own thoughts in my head. And they're coming into a classroom with all the thoughts in their head. And an acknowledgement of that is probably a good place to start.

Via these experiences and insights, the virtue of compassion could then be brought into the experience of classroom practice, helping them to re-frame difficult student behaviours (Mark), "not tak[e] things personally" (Edward), and remain sensitive to the complex life circumstances and trauma backgrounds of students in their class (Wren).

Embodying contemplative virtues in the dynamic context of classroom practice was, however, a challenge. This was conveyed metaphorically as an "internal battle" (Mark), or a kind of "balancing act" – depicted in Aditi's drawing of the lemon-and-spoon race (Figure 4). Aditi explains the image: "It's a race ... we've got lemons. It's also to do with: 'when life throws lemons'. So, to represent how teaching and meditation come together: It's being able to be tranquil [*indicated by the peaceful landscape*] when there are lemons". Although Aditi admitted to feeling "frazzled" much of the time during her teaching placements, this vision of tranquil balance still played an important orienting role, as a projected possibility of a future professional self.

The cultivation of calm, compassionate awareness, at times, cleared the way for classroom *presence*: an alert state of openness, receptiveness, connectedness and responsivity (Meijer et al., 2009; Miller, 1994; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). Wren artfully summarised teacher presence as being "with the students" rather than "with the plan". He elaborates:

Presence for me in the classroom is really helpful in ... students feeling like they're being listened to ... But also my ability to just ... to pick up on things, to not be clouded by my own ego, or whatever is going on in my mind, but to be conscious of: "this is what's happening".

In presence, participants found themselves more responsive and spontaneous as teachers. This was described as "flowing" (Mia) or "being like water", portrayed metaphorically in Wren's drawing of the rock falling into the pond (Figure 5). Wren explains:

It's working off this idea of being like water, or a mind like water. So, you throw a rock into a pond, and the water responds just as it should. Not blowing it up, not underselling it.

Teacher presence, according to this metaphor, involves noticing what is happening, responding tactfully and proportionately, and then completely letting go, so that the



Figure 4. Aditi's drawing (final interview). The lemon and spoon race.



Figure 5. Wren's drawing (initial interview). Being like water.

“ripples” of the action fully dissipate, without any trace. For Bob, presence takes place in moments of re-engagement with the bodily-self, as he looks to:

... find times throughout the lesson to re-engage with myself and see how I’m feeling, or just release the tension ... I feel like, the more present I am the better I’ll be able to teach, and remain calm, and perhaps think on my feet, in terms of having conclusions for lessons if they go in a direction I don’t expect them to.

Presence, accessed through the meditative release of bodily tension, was a site of non-conceptual, on-the-fly problem-solving, supporting constructive pedagogical improvisation. As Bob explained, “I find that often I can fall back on this presence and then, I guess solutions come from there.”

As Miller (1994, p. 5) has suggested, presence involves the quality of non-striving, or non-attachment to the outcomes of action. Both Cecilia and Bob played with this notion of non-striving, envisioning teaching in ways that valued sincere attention to the present over always-deferred future outcomes. Bob put the striving of teaching (and meditation) into question through the metaphor of the “call” to teach (and to meditation), and of the resulting journey into the unknown (Figure 6). In pondering the drawing, Bob questions whether the fruits of meditation (and education) lie far away, in exotic (mountain) locations or, rather, in “the peace or fulfilment that is inherently there”. This inquiry stemmed from recent shifts in Bob’s meditation practice (from strict *vipassana* towards non-dual practices), and flowed through to his thinking about teaching:

Recently [in] my meditation I have been leaning away from this striving to achieve something. So, maybe, when I’m on this journey through teaching and education, I’ll know that I already have what I need, and that can feed into the teaching: that I don’t need to strive spiritually anymore, and that not-striving will then hopefully help me to teach in a way where I feel already at peace.



Figure 6. Bob’s drawing (final interview) – questioning the “call” of teaching, and of meditation.

Through questioning the metaphor of “the call” and “the journey”, Bob articulates a more immediate path to peace and presence in teaching.

Accessing and maintaining presence, however, was not a simple manner. One notable barrier to presence (as hinted at by Wren, above) was the distracting chatter of the “ego” (Miller, 1994, p. 29). Participants described ego in terms of habitual patterns of self-centred thinking; for example, the need to be liked by students (Cecilia) or a sense of indignance when students disrupted carefully planned lessons (Mark, Aditi). The operations of the ego are illustrated vividly in Mark’s drawing of the teacher with weights-in-the-head. In this image, gym weights labelled “values”, “thoughts”, “experience” and “parents” metaphorically replace the teacher’s head, preventing them from really listening to students, or honestly responding to their deep (and quite reasonable) questions (Figure 7). Mark explains:

So, you’ve got your own experience, which I think you have to question a lot ... And trying to be open-minded and to see through those things. So, I guess those are all obstacles and weights you want to try and be free of, and try and listen to what the students are saying, get to know them.

For Mark, *vipassana* meditation was the key to acknowledging, and then dissolving these weights in the head, which appear in the following passage as a harsh internal critic:

If I didn’t have the meditation, if I hadn’t worked through that ... I would still have it now, teaching. I would still have [mentor’s] voice or [supervisor’s] voice or my own voice saying: “You did it wrong! How could you do that?”. But I’ve developed that, so that I’m constantly growing, non-judging, and very in-the-moment, so responsive, and saying “Okay, this lesson

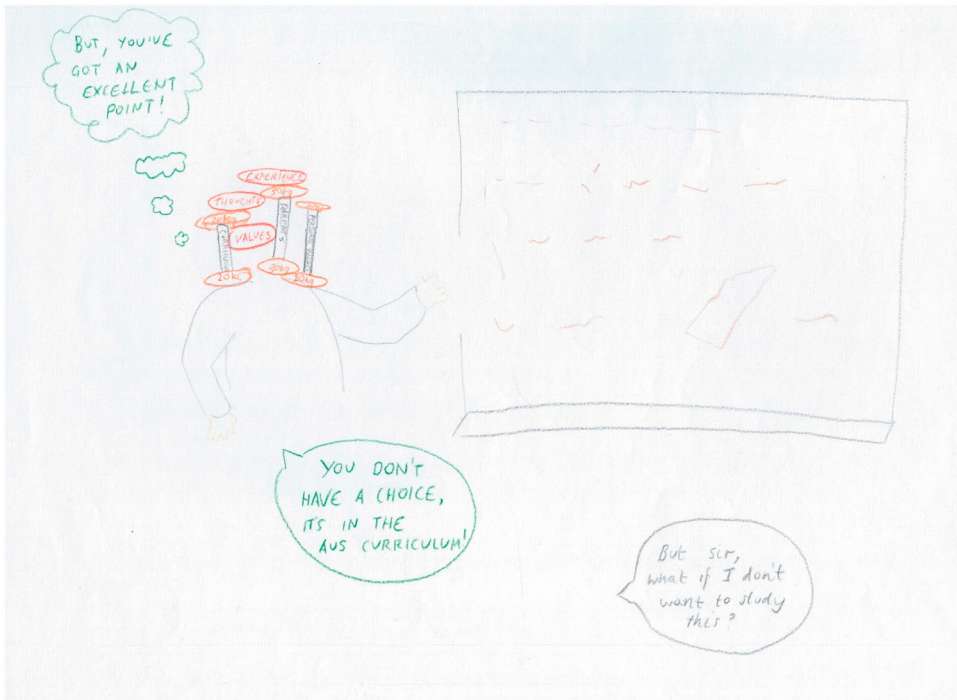


Figure 7. Mark’s drawing (initial interview). Teacher with weights-in-the-head.

isn't going right. What am I gonna do?" Rather than "You should have planned, you should have done that!".

Similarly, through providing an interior distance to thought-patterns, meditation supported Bob to listen deeply and manage differences of opinion. As he reflected:

If I'm talking to parents or staff it [meditation] would help me to understand where they're coming from, or sit back and listen to other perspectives as well ... [in meditation] you learn to watch the thoughts in your head, rather than associate or be dominated by them.

Being aware of the ego, in terms of personal likes and dislikes regarding particular students, also played an ethical role, helping the teacher to remain unbiased in their responses to students who were pushing behavioural boundaries. For Cecilia, this was accessed through "switching on" meditative detachment just at the right moment:

When kids that I really like are constantly pushing [boundaries] and not doing what they're supposed to be doing ... Then I really have to actively switch on and go "OK, detach". Because a lot of that stuff happens subconsciously. You don't even think about it. So, I really have to watch myself, that I'm not, you know, being biased towards or against certain kids.

Besides the ego, accessing presence was also frustrated by the institutional and practical conditions of teaching. In her drawing from the final interview, Mia depicted precious "opportunities to try and be more present and aware", metaphorically, as small windows set into an ancient, educational stone-wall ([Figure 8](#)).

For Mia, the stone structure represented the historical power relationships embedded in disciplinary ways of organising the formal curriculum. The fruit in the foreground



Figure 8. Mia's drawing (final interview) – windows of presence in edifice of education.

captures the encroachment of market-like ideas into schooling, carving up organically interrelated and meaningful knowledge into curriculum units, “turning the natural into something to be commodified and to be put into sections and topics” (Mia). Presence was difficult to locate amongst the cacophony of events and responsibilities of teaching, especially for those new to the profession. As Mia explains:

There’s so much going on at the one time; so many students who are doing various things and need your attention. And I suppose I have a tendency to really get caught on things, or stuck on a thought. And I guess my practice reminds me to just sort of flow with what’s happening right now and come back to the present, and I have to remind myself all the time.

To conclude this section, it is important to provide some commentary on how different contemplative practices held different possibilities for transforming ways of being in the classroom context. Specifically, the open-monitoring awareness associated with mindfulness meditation (discussed widely amongst participants) and non-dual practices (discussed by Bob, specifically) transferred most naturally to the classroom context. Formal concentration-type meditations, specifically *mantra* practice, breath focus and the *vipassana* body-scan techniques, were reported to have important residual effects, which carried over from formal practice to the classroom environment. These included a sense of calm and (in the case of *vipassana*, specifically) a heightened capacity to notice aspects of bodily experience, such as muscle tightening or changes to breathing. However, concentration practices were restricted in the extent to which they could be fully translated to the context of classroom teaching, requiring a deliberate narrowing of conscious attention to a specific focus (*mantra* syllables, subtle bodily sensations) at the exclusion of other phenomena (Dahl et al., 2015). As Bob explained:

My previous practice [*vipassana*], there was lots of body scans. And then so ... as I’d enter the day, I’d be aware from moment to moment. But with the new [non-dual] technique I can sort of just feel the stillness or the aliveness of my body in everything I do. I don’t do it a lot of the time, but it’s a lot easier to do while you’re talking to someone or listening to them, than it is to try and be scanning your body for sensations.

Needing to keep their awareness broadly on the students and the classroom, Aditi, Bob and Edward all noted this type of difficulty. Aditi’s specifically religious devotion to one highly ritualised form of concentration meditation appeared to further limit its flexibility and adaptability for classroom use.

Contemplative inquiries into (non)self

For some participants contemplative practices animated a critical, reflexive relation to professional becoming by problematising the nature of the self, itself. Notably, explicit conversations about the illusory, performed or constructed nature of identity occurred with participants whose practices were grounded in Buddhist traditions. This aligns with the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* or non-self (Siderits, 2011), which asserts that there is no essential self behind conventional personhood.³ Bob, using contemplative concepts, explicitly rejected the idea of an essentialised, unified self, and linked this to a deeper sense of self as “pure awareness”:

Before our thoughts and feelings we’re pure awareness, and getting in touch with just being that awareness more often, will then help to let go of the bad habits or the mental

conditioning – which I see as being separate to other people, where once I enter into a state of awareness, there’s no me or you, it’s just an open state of connection.

Wren, similarly, finds in the idea of no-self a complimentary, deep, sense of interconnectedness to both students and the natural world, and not a nihilistic denial of self. As he explains, “My sense of no-self is not necessarily like ‘no self’, but there’s no self without other. Like there’s such interconnectedness that it’s hard to define where one stops, and one begins”. Practically, this interconnectedness arises as common humanity and empathetic intimacy: “your pain is my pain, your joy is my joy” (Wren).

But having a self is a hard habit to break. Somewhat ironically, meditation itself became woven into narratives of participants’ identities. As Bob remarked in the initial interview, “it’s [meditation] such a big part of who I am”. Cecilia wryly reflected on her own emerging self-narrative that “this is what I do, and this is who I am. I’m a person who exercises and meditates daily ... and feeling a bit smug about that”. As with the phenomenon of presence, Mia experienced a frustrating gap between her own understanding of no-self (“the construction of self is mainly just ego ... it’s an illusion”), and the realities of school life:

In theory, that’s something that I believe: there really is no self and that the only true essence of who we are, and what all living beings are, is just some sense of awareness. But yeah, you feel like a lot more than that, and you feel like you’re separate a lot of the time, from others ... In teaching, there’s a lot of ... you as different to the students and you as different to other teachers ... And there’s that Rate My Teacher website, and kids talk about their favourite and least favourite teachers ... and hold grudges and everything. And that is constantly challenging this idea that I’m trying to understand all the time, of me not having a self.

This section has shown, if briefly, how contemplative practices might activate critical inquiry into the nature of self for beginning teachers, albeit mediated by complex factors in the cultural and work environment. Via radical concepts such as *anatman*, and associated practices, there is the potential for beginning teachers to suspend attachment to fixed notions of teacher identity, and (thereby) to access a rich sense of ethical connectedness in teaching practice.

Discussion and conclusions

As a study of professional becoming, this work explored the ongoing, embodied and enacted pathways by which seven beginning teachers entered the lived worlds and material practices of school education. In research conversations, metaphoric drawing, and school-based fieldwork, participants represented, constructed, and enacted themselves as teachers – always in relation to interconnected social, cultural, material and institutional contexts (Mulcahy, 2011, p. 235). Hermeneutic engagement with the research material revealed how participants’ personal – and often spiritual – engagement with meditation in their lives outside of school became woven intimately into their unfolding professional identities. Contemplative practices inflected teacher professional becoming in several educationally significant ways – beyond merely supporting teacher wellbeing. They provided a distinctive *telos* to teaching activity, made available existential ways of being grounded in calm, compassionate, presence and, for some participants, stimulated radical questioning of the nature of the (teacher) self, itself. Still, none of this was achieved without the ongoing discipline of formal meditation practice, the willingness to tolerate risk and vulnerability, and careful navigation through the practices, priorities, and power relations of school life.

A contemplatively-inflected educational *telos* may have particular salience in the current policy and ideological contexts of school education. As Biesta (2010, 2015) argues, the current “learnified” educational environment tends to systematically obscure questions of purpose. For the beginning teacher, to be without an anchoring sense of purpose is to acquiesce ahead of time to the contingent purposes of the *status quo*. Predominant managerialism, furthermore, tends to erode teacher autonomy, agency and commitment (Skinner et al., 2021), inducing a kind of “ontological insecurity” (Ball, 2003, p. 220). In this destabilising context, contemplative practices appear to provide an anchor for crafting an agentic teacher identity, expressed here in a holistic educational *telos* characterised by an ethic of compassion and service. This is significant, as the existence of such “moral purposes and ethical values provide important intellectual, emotional and spiritual strengths which enable teachers to be resilient” (Day et al., 2006, p. 26). Rehabilitating a frayed sense of meaning and purpose, in this fashion, may be a more sustainable way to buttress resilience and retention for teachers (Loonstra et al., 2009), as opposed to merely treating stress and burnout at the symptom level.

Contemplative practices provided discourses through which these beginning teachers could not only express agency, but also conceive of themselves as educational agents – for example through Christian prayer (Cecilia) and notions of contemplative service (Wren, Aditi, Cecilia). Concretely, the use of meditation activities with students were expressions of a contemplatively-inflected *telos*, and acts by which participants constituted themselves as a particular sort of teacher (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). In this experimentation, each was engaged in micro-political negotiation (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2018), navigating tensions between their personal commitments and schooling environments which, in many ways, embedded neoliberal priorities of standardised curriculum, assessment and academic outcomes (Reeves, 2018).

As practices of awareness and self-inquiry, contemplative practices appear capable of crystallising a fundamental pedagogical insight: that the problems of practice are not solely constituted (“out there”) in the action of the classroom, but significantly also in the teacher’s own assumptions, interpretations, habits, and identities (Moore, 2007; Quay & McCaw, 2019; Tremmel, 1993). Mark’s drawing of the weights in the teacher’s head (Figure 7) captures this insight with remarkable clarity. By first making these “weights” visible, contemplative awareness may facilitate new existential ways of being a teacher, opening spaces of authenticity, presence, non-separation, and alternate possibilities for action. The contemplative focus on accessing calm, present-centred awareness, and on non-striving, further rubs against the grain of a future-focused, and outcomes-driven educational environment (Ergas, 2019b; Seidel, 2006).

Ultimately, meditation held a seemingly paradoxical relationship to teacher identities: working in parallel constructive and deconstructive ways. Contemplative practices served as nodes of stability within the liminal, dynamic and turbulent spaces of teacher professional becoming, but did so without reifying teacher identity as something to be uncritically strengthened, reified, or finally achieved. As practices of self-inquiry, particularly when articulated via the Buddhist idea of no-self, they helped call into question the common assumption of a “continuing struggle to construct and sustain a stable identity” as a teacher (Day et al., 2006, p. 613). This study hence re-affirms the centrality of the teacher-self in understanding teaching, but argues that the ongoing questioning, and potential *un-making*, of teacher identities may be just as important as their making.

These various findings provide further warrant to existing efforts to integrate contemplative practices, in some form, into ITE and teacher professional development programmes (Ergas & Ragoonaden, 2020; Miller, 1994; Sharp & Jennings, 2016). However, they highlight the need to embrace complexity – to acknowledge the diversity and richness of contemplative practices and traditions, and to avoid their reduction to a minimalist version of mindfulness as mental training. Indeed, the research material presented here provides illustration of how mindfulness co-exists and interacts with a diverse range of other contemplative practices as it enters education. Furthermore, the presence of distinctly *spiritual* aspects of contemplative practice (e.g. notions of service, *karma yoga*, no-self, and non-striving) appeared to attenuate the potential for mindfulness, in a decontextualised form, to become a mere tool for competitive self-improvement or individual responsabilisation (Reveley, 2016; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). These findings thus validate Hyland’s (2016a,b) assertion of the importance of maintaining organic connections between secular mindfulness and its ethical and spiritual roots as it is translated into educational contexts. Different types of meditation, and their related conceptual frameworks, appeared to prefigure the expression of contemplative practices in teaching in different ways – an insight which bears further research investigation.

Policy-makers and school administrators considering the incorporation of mindfulness into school curricula should be aware of the broader web of practices with which mindfulness, as the basis for popular MBIs, is often entangled. These other contemplative practices, and their spiritual goals, may not always sit comfortably within the boundaries of institutionally non-religious public education systems, but may nonetheless support mindfulness to fulfil its significant transformative potential in education. For school leaders, it is a reminder that staff members with commitments to contemplative practice may be valuable contributors to school-based discussions around educational purpose, and to the cultivation of a caring and compassionate school climate.

What this study shows is that the most educationally powerful implications of contemplative practices for teachers lie beyond the scope of mindfulness conceived as a “thin” form of psychological self-improvement (McCaw, 2020). That is, they provide an embodied route to an enlivened questioning of taken-for-granted educational purposes and identities, and to existential ways of being that support an ethical and responsive orientation to professional work. They potentially generate alternative forms of subjectivity that contrast to common-sense Western understandings of bounded, unitary selfhood (Carvalho, 2021, p. 1270), and thus may suggest new ways of being, and new action-possibilities for professional educators. All of these implications exceed the boundaries of a practice imagined (merely) as a psychological training technique to improve individual wellbeing and productivity, the practical value of these instrumental aims notwithstanding.

These findings further affirm that close empirical study of contemplative practices *in context* is invaluable in adding complexity to debates about their potential place in education and other social domains (Carvalho, 2021; Ergas, 2019a; Kabat-Zinn, 2017). Methodologically, the study provides evidence for the value of participatory visual methods, and metaphoric drawing in particular, in the exploration of human identities. The findings also hint towards the potential of meditation itself as a research tool, to support phenomenological intimacy in research interviews. More broadly, the cases presented here demonstrate the power of pre-existing practice commitments to modulate the entry of new teachers into the bundles of practices that make up school teaching. They reveal the

complexity and richness of the personal contexts which inflect teacher professional becoming; contexts which must, therefore, not be ignored in the planning and enactment of teacher education and professional development.

Notes

1. While diverse in their technical procedures, socio-historical origins, and ethico-philosophical framing, these practices share a family resemblance through (1) their emphasis on the cultivation of volitional, stable and non-judgmental modes of present-centered awareness, and (2) their orientation towards a positive transformation of the practitioner (Dahl et al., 2015).
2. Full details of the study are presented in a related doctoral thesis (McCaw, 2019).
3. This topic, notably, never arose with Aditi, whose Hare Krishna faith contains a view of the (true) self as *atman*, and arose ambivalently with Cecilia, who during the study period was exploring both Buddhism and Christianity. The latter subscribes to the existence of a soul, and so is fundamentally in tension with the Buddhist theory of *anatman*.

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Ethical clearance

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Data availability statement

The full data set underlying this research cannot be made available in accordance with the ethical requirements to maintain participant confidentiality.

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Appendix

Contemplative practices and teacher professional becoming

This appendix provides a brief summary of the personal and socio-historical context of each of the seven participants, presented in alphabetical order by pseudonym.

Aditi

Aditi, 33 years old at the time of the study, was training to be a teacher in primary schools. Aditi was something of a global citizen, growing up in an Indian family in the Middle East, and undertaking university studies in the United States. Aditi became thrilled by the curiosity of young children when doing some casual tutoring while in the USA, propelling her to eventually move to Australia to study to be a teacher. She undertook two, twenty-day teaching placements during the study period at government primary schools.

For Aditi, engagement with contemplative practices began with a fascination for the lifestyle and impressive character of the Hare Krishna practitioners who she encountered while at university. She had become involved with the movement, and eventually took formal vows in the tradition. Her regular meditation practice involved singing, chanting or mentally repeating the Hare Krishna mantra, sometimes alone, and sometimes with her community.

Bob

Bob, 26 years old at the time of the study, was studying to be a teacher in primary schools. Bob was motivated to become a teacher, in part, by the seemingly intractable challenges posed by climate change, which had become apparent to him during his university studies. Helping young people to establish a deep knowledge of and appreciation for the environment was a key driver for his entry into teaching. He undertook two, twenty-day teaching placements during the study period at government primary schools.

Bob was led to meditation practice in part by curiosity, sparked by experiences of altered consciousness when using psychedelic drugs. But his engagement with formal, Buddhist training was ultimately catalysed by a specific moment of existential crisis during his undergraduate studies. After completing an initial ten-day *Vipassana* retreat, he had gone on to participate in several more, over subsequent years. During the period of study, Bob was beginning to question some of the methods of *Vipassana*, and was exploring teachings by non-dual contemplative teachers.

Cecilia

Cecilia, 31 years old and the daughter of two school-teachers, was studying to be a secondary school teacher of drama and media studies. Prior to this, she worked as a practising artist, and her experiences working with school-age children through the avenue of community arts, had led her to a self-conscious move from outside the (school) system to the inside. She undertook two, twenty-day teaching placements during the study period at government secondary schools.

Cecilia initially became familiar with mindfulness meditation as a form of mental-health care, before exploring the deeper and more spiritual aspects of practice through her involvement in Buddhism. This had included regular meditation teachings and short retreats of a few days' duration. She sometimes uses meditation apps to support her daily practice. Her experience with Buddhism had led her to re-explore her own religious background (Roman Catholic), which she had largely chosen to leave behind previously. As part of this, during the period of study, Cecilia began to experiment with contemplative prayer as a form of meditation practice.

Edward

Edward, 30 years old and the youngest of five siblings, was studying to be a secondary mathematics teacher. He was driven to teaching by a strong dissatisfaction with the "corporate" and "money-focused" environment of his previous engineering jobs, and saw teaching as a way to be "more beneficial to the world". Edward was keen to share his passion for mathematics with others through teaching work. He undertook two, twenty-day teaching placements during the study period at government secondary schools.

Edward's engagement with meditation was the outcome of a gradually emerging curiosity, which led him to undertake an initial *Vipassana* ten-day retreat. During the period of study, Edward went on a second ten-day retreat. He also practiced *hatha yoga*.

Mark

Mark, 27 years old at the time of the study, was studying to be a teacher in primary schools. He had previously trained as a classical musician and worked as a professional performer for several years. His inspiration to study teaching came when working as a teaching assistant in a special needs school. The level of structure, the social connections and learning from the experience all motivated him to return to study. Mark undertook two, twenty-day teaching placements during the study period at government primary schools.

Mark first became introduced to mindfulness in relation to managing stress related to music performance, and managing what he admitted was a "bad temper". He had since explored spiritual aspects of meditation through *Vipassana* training, on the recommendation of a friend. Prior to the study, Mark had completed three ten-day *Vipassana* retreats. During the period of study, Mark was also undergoing personal training a few mornings per week, and completed an additional 10-day *Vipassana* retreat.

Mia

Mia was 28 years old at the time of the study. Mia reported that she “always thought in the back of my mind that I would like to be a teacher”, and was particularly motivated to teach by a desire to share her passion for her subject specialty, German language. During the study period Mia was working full-time, employed as a graduate teacher on a one-year contract at a government secondary school in the inner city, teaching German language.

Contemplative practices had been part of Mia’s family culture since childhood, and she describes the family as “big on self-improvement”. Yoga, initially, was a way to balance out her “high energy, high-adrenaline, and hard-working” personality. After something of a “personal crisis”, Mia had left a previous job and went to India to study *hatha yoga* intensively. This experience led Mia to prioritise the more spiritual dimensions of yoga practice. Mia practices yoga and meditation regularly, and had taught yoga prior to beginning her current school teaching role. She sometimes uses meditation apps to support her daily practice.

Wren

Wren, 29 years old, was the most experienced educator out of the seven, beginning his fifth year of teaching at the commencement of the study. Like Bob, Wren was motivated to become a teacher as a result of his appreciation of the challenges posed by climate change. This was a way, as he put it, to turn “anger into action”. Wren had entered teaching through a fast-track programme, and had subsequently worked at an outer-suburban government secondary school, which serviced a diverse population of significant disadvantage.

Similar to Edward, for Wren engagement with contemplative practices was the logical endpoint of a gradually developing curiosity. The decision to engage in intensive training, initially in the *Vipassana* tradition, was influenced by a mentor figure. In addition, Wren engaged in *hatha yoga* (for which he had completed teacher training), and Japanese Tea Ceremony. He was also strongly influenced by the notion of *karma yoga*, or the contemplative practice of work.