Mindfulness-based programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand schools: A qualitative meta-synthesis

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Certification Of Authorship

I certify that the research presented in this thesis is my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others. The work presented in this thesis has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other degree or diploma at Massey University or any other institution. I also certify that this thesis complies with the Massey University regulations and that all ethical requirements applicable to this study have been met.

Signed: 

Dated: 12/02/2026

Dedication

To my husband, Ted Ashby, for your steady patience, encouragement, and belief in me throughout this work.

To my daughters, Katie and Francesca Ashby, whose everyday experiences and questions about the world helped inspire this exploration of wellbeing in schools, and who continue to remind me why this work matters.

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Abstract

Mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs) have become increasingly visible in schools in Aotearoa New Zealand as part of wider efforts to support student wellbeing and early mental health intervention. Although a growing body of qualitative research has examined mindfulness in New Zealand school settings, this work remains dispersed across different programmes, school contexts, and perspectives. As a result, there is a limited integrated understanding of how mindfulness-based programmes are experienced in practice and how their effects are shaped by contextual conditions.

The aim of this study was to synthesise qualitative research on mindfulness-based programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand schools to develop a more coherent and contextually grounded understanding of how these programmes operate. A qualitative meta-synthesis was undertaken using meta-ethnography, informed by a critical realist epistemological stance. Qualitative studies and the qualitative components of mixed-methods studies conducted in primary, intermediate, and secondary schools were systematically identified, appraised, and analysed.

Findings suggest that MBPs are associated with perceived psychological benefits for students, including increased emotional awareness and regulation, greater calm and attentional focus, increased awareness of changes in classroom relationships and learning environments. Teachers and counsellors described personal wellbeing benefits and professional shifts, such as decreased stress levels, greater emotional presence and reflective capacity, a stronger sense of collegiality or kotahitanga among staff, and changes in how they responded to student behaviour and emotional needs. These outcomes emerged from interacting psychological, relational, and meaning-making mechanisms and were strongly shaped by context, including how programmes were introduced, facilitated, and supported within each school. Within this context, factors such as teacher engagement, leadership support, time constraints, and cultural framing played a key role in

how programmes were taken up and sustained, particularly where mindfulness was aligned with Māori models of wellbeing such as Te Whare Tapa Whā.

This thesis contributes an integrative qualitative account of MBPs in Aotearoa New Zealand schools and highlights the importance of cultural responsiveness, implementation conditions, and school context in shaping wellbeing initiatives.

Key words: mindfulness in schools, mindfulness in Aotearoa New Zealand, qualitative meta-synthesis, wellbeing in schools, culturally responsive programmes

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Context

Concerns about the mental health of children and young people have increased internationally over the last two decades. Global reports point to rising anxiety, stress, and emotional difficulties among young people (Solmi et al., 2022; World Health Organisation, 2021). These trends are also evident in Aotearoa New Zealand, where wellbeing challenges continue to affect students' engagement, learning, and overall development (Auditor-General, 2024; Ministry of Health, 2024).

Schools have become increasingly important in prevention and early intervention efforts because they provide daily access to large numbers of children and can offer support that is less stigmatising and more cost-effective than specialist services (Denston et al., 2022; Sheinman & Hadar, 2017; Weare, 2018). As part of this shift, many education systems have introduced wellbeing initiatives aimed at strengthening emotional awareness, resilience and self-management skills.

Mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs) have gained significant attention within this space. Internationally recognised programmes such as MindUP, the Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP), and Still, Quiet Space have been used to support students' attentional control, stress regulation, and emotional literacy (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Saltzman, 2019; Weare, 2018). While some school-based interventions are formal mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs), others integrate mindfulness within broader wellbeing or socio-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks, and these distinctions are not always clearly defined within the literature. Their popularity can be explained by their adaptability, relatively low cost and alignment with the growing focus on holistic approaches to learning.

Aotearoa New Zealand has followed this trend. Wellbeing is emphasised through the NZ curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and national policy priorities (Ministry of Education, 2020),

so many schools have incorporated mindfulness as part of their wellbeing efforts. Despite this growing uptake, less is known about how MBPs are experienced, understood and implemented across diverse New Zealand school communities.

Although schools in Aotearoa New Zealand are increasingly turning towards mindfulness, existing studies show a very mixed and uneven picture. Some report improvements in students' emotional awareness, relationships, and classroom calm (Bernay et al., 2016; Jamieson, 2015; Mazza-Davies, 2015; Rix, 2017), while others highlight challenges such as limited time, teacher confidence, and uncertainty about long-term sustainability (Bernay, 2012; Kenwright et al., 2023). Research also shows that cultural framing matters, with programmes drawing on Māori models such as Te Whare Tapa Whā often described as more meaningful for students (Ketu-McKenzie, 2019; McAllister, 2020; McDonald et al., 2021). This suggests that mindfulness in NZ schools is shaped by context, including its introduction and facilitation, its cultural fit, as well as the pressures that each school is facing. In the current literature, the development of MBPs appears fragmented, with studies emerging from different programmes, settings, and aims. A clearer and more integrated picture is needed to understand how mindfulness actually works in the day-to-day life of schools across the country.

Problem Statement and Rationale

Existing qualitative research in Aotearoa New Zealand is still developing, with studies examining a range of mindfulness-based programmes (Bernay et al., 2016; Devcich et al., 2017; Jamieson, 2015; Mazza-Davies, 2015; Rix, 2017). Overall, this work suggests potential benefits for student and teacher wellbeing, while also highlighting practical challenges related to time, training, sustainability, and the need for leadership support and formalising mindfulness in the NZ curriculum (Bernay, 2012; Kenwright et al., 2023; Mazza-Davies, 2015). These studies point to a growing interest

in mindfulness in schools and suggest the need for a clearer understanding of how programmes operate across Aotearoa New Zealand.

Because existing evidence is scattered across different programmes, school types, and aims, it is difficult to see broader patterns or identify the conditions that support or limit mindfulness initiatives in practice. A qualitative meta-synthesis can help address this by drawing together findings from multiple studies to produce a more coherent interpretation of how mindfulness-based programmes are experienced and shaped by context. This is particularly important in Aotearoa New Zealand, where wellbeing approaches need to align with Te Tiriti O Waitangi, cultural responsiveness, and the realities of different school communities.

Closer examination of the existing research also shows several specific gaps that make a synthesis necessary. Most studies are small and focus on one programme or one school, which makes it hard to understand whether findings can be transferred to other settings (Bernay, 2012; Devcich et al., 2017; Jamieson, 2015; Mazza-Davies, 2015). Implementation issues such as workload, training needs, and teacher confidence appear across studies (Bernay, 2012; Kenwright et al., 2023), yet we know little about how these factors interact more widely across the school system.

Cultural considerations remain underexamined as well. Although some mindfulness approaches in Aotearoa New Zealand draw on Māori concepts (Devcich et al., 2017; Ketu-McKenzie, 2019; McAllister, 2020; McDonald et al., 2021), few studies explore how teachers and students actually understand or use these ideas in practice, or how well programmes reflect Te Tiriti expectations for cultural responsiveness.

These limitations show that the current evidence does not yet offer a clear national picture of how mindfulness is working in schools. Previous reviews have pointed to the need for NZ-focused,

contextually-grounded research (Chaplow & Frewin, 2019; Denston et al., 2022). A meta-synthesis can respond to this gap by bringing together qualitative findings and helping to explain how mindfulness is shaped by the everyday realities of school life across Aotearoa New Zealand.

Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to synthesise qualitative research on mindfulness-based programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand schools and, in doing so, to develop a deeper and more integrated understanding of how these programmes are experienced and influenced by context. Therefore, the study asks the following research question: What do qualitative studies reveal about how mindfulness-based programmes operate in New Zealand school settings? To answer this overarching question, three further questions are asked:

1. How are mindfulness-based programmes experienced by students, teachers, and school communities?
2. What mechanisms appear to support or hinder the functioning of these programmes?
3. How do cultural, relational, and institutional contexts shape these experiences and mechanisms?

These questions reflect the arguments in both broader mindfulness literature and NZ school-based research that outcomes cannot be understood without also exploring experience, meaning, and the conditions that shape practice (Chaplow & Frewin, 2019; Hölzel et al., 2011; Rix, 2017).

Theoretical and Conceptual Orientation

This study draws on widely accepted definitions of mindfulness as purposeful, present-moment awareness combined with an attitude of openness and curiosity (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-

Zinn, 1990). These ideas provide a broad conceptual anchor for the study and are explored in greater detail in Chapter 2.

A critical realist epistemology underpins the study described further in Chapter 3. This position supports attention to both lived experience and the underlying mechanisms and contextual conditions that shape educational practices (Bhaskar, 1978, 1998). This also aligns with the interpretive aims of meta-synthesis.

Methodological Overview

A qualitative meta-synthesis was undertaken using meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988). This approach supports the translation of concepts across studies and allows the development of new, higher-level interpretations rather than simply summarising findings.

The synthesis draws on qualitative studies on mindfulness-based programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand in primary, intermediate, and secondary schools, including perspectives from students, teachers, school counsellors, and leadership. Detailed information about search procedures, study selection, quality appraisal, and synthesis stages is provided in Chapter 3. This method is well-suited to the Aotearoa New Zealand context because it allows attention to cultural and contextual nuances while still building a broader interpretation across studies (Cahill et al., 2018; Malterud, 2019; Noblit & Hare, 1988).

Scope and Boundaries

This study includes:

- mindfulness-based programmes delivered in Aotearoa New Zealand primary, intermediate, and secondary schools,

- qualitative research exploring experience, meaning, or implementation,
- programmes introduced for educational rather than clinical purposes.

It excludes:

- international literature,
- quantitative evaluations,
- early childhood, tertiary settings, foreign language learning centres, and clinical settings,
- wellbeing programmes where mindfulness is not a central component.

These boundaries help maintain contextual and conceptual clarity.

Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of six chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction outlines the context, rationale, and aims of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review examines research on school-based mindfulness and wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Chapter 3: Methodology explains the epistemological stance and methodological approach.

Chapter 4: Findings presents findings of the meta-synthesis.

Chapter 5: Discussion deliberates the findings in relation to theory, and mechanisms and contexts. It also considers implications for practice and policy.

Chapter 6: Conclusion closes the thesis and outlines contributions, limitations, and future research directions.

Summary

This chapter introduced the context, rationale, and aims of the study and outlined the research questions guiding the meta-synthesis. The next chapter reviews the research landscape on school-based mindfulness in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

This chapter introduces the wider policy, educational and cultural context for school-based mindfulness in Aotearoa New Zealand. It outlines key concepts from the mindfulness literature and reviews international and local evidence on school-based programmes. It then identifies gaps in existing research and establishes the rationale for the qualitative meta-synthesis that follows.

Mental Health among NZ Children and Adolescents

Mental health disorders are ranked among the top ten causes of ill health worldwide (Ferrari et al., 2022). Research shows that most psychological disorders first emerge in adolescence and early adulthood, affecting one in 10 people aged 5-24 (Kieling et al., 2024; OECD, 2018; Solmi et al., 2022). In Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), the state of youth mental health has raised significant concerns due to the rise of depression, anxiety, self-harm, low mood, and suicidal ideation in secondary school students (Auditor-General, 2024; Fleming et al., 2024; Sutcliffe et al., 2023). NZ youth suicide rates are approximately double the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average (OECD, 2018), while the mental health needs of NZ young people are the most unmet (Auditor-General, 2024).

Recent NZ data show that depression and anxiety are the most prevalent psychological conditions and have increased over the past decade (Ministry of Health, 2024). Among 15-24-year-olds, symptoms of depression and anxiety are particularly common, with 2022-2023 data showing that 52% of young people experience anxiety and 46% report depression (Ministry of Health, 2024). Among children aged 2 to 14, emotional symptoms have increased from 9% in 2017 to 13% in 2023 (Ministry of Health, 2024). These challenges are disproportionately experienced by disabled people, those living in high deprivation neighbourhoods, girls and young women, rangatahi Māori, rainbow

youth / takatāpui rangatahi, young people disengaged from education and those involved in the criminal justice system (Auditor-General, 2024; Ministry of Health, 2024). This pattern shows that youth mental health difficulties are closely related to social and educational contexts, rather than being evenly distributed across the population.

Long-term effects of developing anxiety and depression in childhood and adolescence are significant. They include poorer physical health, diminished social functioning, higher rates of criminal offending, increased severity of later depression and anxiety episodes, suicidality, and elevated risk of developing substance and alcohol use disorders in adulthood (Auditor-General, 2024; Copeland et al., 2021; Essau et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2018). The economic burden of mental health is substantial. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the annual cost of supporting people in psychological distress is 5 per cent of gross domestic product (OECD, 2018), which, in 2025, equated to approximately NZD22 billion (Stats NZ, 2025).

Recent shifts in government funding also shape the broader mental health landscape affecting young people. In 2019, the government released the Child and Wellbeing Strategy, which positioned mental health as central to overall wellbeing and expanded access to primary mental health and addiction services, increasing support by 33 per cent (Auditor-General, 2024; New Zealand Government, 2019). Following the 2023 election, the new centre-right coalition government revised the strategy, addressing mental health more indirectly by focusing on prevention, maternal mental health, and early years, framing psychological challenges as a response to social risk factors such as poverty and harm (New Zealand Government, 2024). During this period, several key services experienced funding reductions: the Suicide Prevention Office faced at 6.5% cut (Doocey, 2024), and key organisations such as the Mental Health Foundation did not receive an increase in funding despite rising costs leading to significant redundancies (Howell, 2024). However, some funding was redirected to community initiatives, including NZD 24 million for I Am Hope's youth counselling

programme (Swift, 2024). These shifts point to an uneven and changing support landscape, where access to services can depend on location, funding cycles, and eligibility rather than need alone.

The combination of rising need and inconsistent funding has contributed to a significant gap in the provision of services, reinforcing the urgency of preventative approaches and early interventions in settings where young people spend much of their time, including schools (Abbott et al., 2024; Auditor-General, 2024; Denston et al., 2022; Goldberg et al., 2019; Solmi et al., 2022).

Wellbeing in Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand

To understand how schools in Aotearoa New Zealand approach wellbeing, it is first necessary to clarify how wellbeing is conceptualised and the domains through which it is commonly understood. These ideas are then situated within Māori perspectives, education policy, and the practical realities of the NZ schooling system that shape how wellbeing is enacted in practice.

Wellbeing and Its Domains

Wellbeing is a complex multidimensional concept that encompasses various aspects of human functioning. Classical models for adults identify eight dimensions: physical, social, environmental, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, occupational and financial (Das, 2015; National Wellness Institute, n.d.). Psychological models extend this understanding to include positive emotions, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relationships, accomplishment, and self-acceptance (Ryff & Singer, 2006; Seligman, 2011).

For children and adolescents, wellbeing is thought to be influenced by early attachment relationships (Beebe & Lachmann, 2013; Bowlby, 1979) and by the dynamic between the child, family, and wider societal systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Building on these foundations, contemporary child-focused frameworks typically identify seven broad domains of wellbeing

summarised in Figure 1: physical, psychological, social, educational, spiritual and cultural, safety and protection, and material (ARACY, 2014; New Zealand Government, 2024; OECD, 2009; Sirgy, 2021; UNICEF Innocenti, 2020; World Health Organisation, 2018). These domains highlight that wellbeing is broader than the absence of illness; it encompasses multiple interrelated conditions that support a child's capacity to thrive. This breadth means that school-based wellbeing initiatives may shape some domains more than others, which has implications for how programme outcomes are defined and assessed.

Figure 1
Seven domains that influence a child's wellbeing

Type of wellbeing	What is involves
Physical	Health, nutrition, physical activity, sleep, and access to healthcare
Psychological wellbeing	Self-esteem, resilience, emotional regulation, and coping skills
Social wellbeing	Relationships, belonging, support, community connectedness
Educational wellbeing and learning disposition	Engagement, curiosity, participation, and achievement
Spiritual and cultural wellbeing	Sense of identity, purpose, values, spirituality, and cultural connection
Safety and protection	Feeling safe at home, at school, and in the community

Material wellbeing	Access to basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, and other resources necessary for healthy development

In Aotearoa New Zealand, mainstream standardised approaches to wellbeing and policy tend to overlook indigenous perspectives (Bright & Boyd, 2024; Denston et al., 2022; Durie, 1985; Pitama et al., 2014) even though the commitment to the nation's founding document Te Tiriti O Waitangi requires that te ao Māori / Māori worldviews be embedded in education and healthcare (Crocket, 2013).

One of the most influential Māori models of wellbeing is Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1994), which conceptualises wellbeing as a house supported by four interconnected walls: taha tinana (physical health), taha wairua (spiritual health), taha whānau (family health), and taha hinengaro (mental/emotional health), all grounded in whenua, or ancestral land. The strength of the house depends on the balance between all four dimensions. Through this model, wellbeing is understood as relational and collective rather than as an individual state alone. Māori understandings of wellbeing situate individuals within their whānau, whakapapa, wider community, environment, and land, emphasising connection, belonging, and continuity across generations (Durie, 1985).

Within te ao Māori, illness may arise from disruptions to these relationships, including transgressions of sacred laws (tapu), a curse, or shame (whakamā) that diminishes mana, understood as authority, dignity, and spiritual standing (Best Practice Advocacy Centre (BPAC), 2010; Durie, 1994; Durie, 1985). Conversely, wellbeing is strengthened through cultural connectedness, including ancestral ties, sense of belonging, proximity to whenua, and freedom from discrimination (Durie, 1994; Muriwai et al., 2015; Pitama et al., 2017; Russel, 2018).

These perspectives have become increasingly visible in national wellbeing and educational frameworks and are particularly relevant for evaluating the cultural appropriateness of school-based interventions such as mindfulness programmes. At the same time, they raise questions about whether school-based programmes engage with Māori understandings of wellbeing at a structural and relational level, or only through selective concepts and language. In practice, the way these questions are addressed depends on the structures, policies, and resourcing of the NZ schooling system.

NZ Schooling System and Its Approach to Wellbeing

New Zealand schooling spans 13 years, covering primary (Years 1-8) and secondary (Years 9-13) education for children aged 5-19 (Ministry of Education, 2025). Years 7 and 8 may be taught in dedicated intermediate schools or within primary or secondary schools (New Zealand Education, 2025). Most schools are public and free, educating approximately 85 per cent of students, with state-integrated schools serving 11 per cent of pupils (Figure NZ, 2025).

Historically, school funding has been shaped by socio-economic context. The previous decile system allocated additional resources in areas with higher socio-economic disadvantage based on measures such as income, education level, and household size (PPTA, 2013). Although intended to promote equity, the system was criticised for stigmatising low-decile schools and failing to reflect teaching quality (Vester, 2018). In 2023, it was replaced by the Schooling Equity Index, which uses 37 socioeconomic factors linked to academic achievement to allocate funding more finely (Ministry of Education, 2024). While this shift aims to improve fairness in resourcing, it also highlights the extent to which educational outcomes and student wellbeing are shaped by wider social conditions.

Wellbeing has gradually become more prominent in NZ education policy. Socio-emotional learning and wellbeing initiatives began appearing internationally in the late twentieth century

(CASEL, n.d.), concurrently with the introduction of mana atua, a wellbeing strand in the NZ early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki, emphasising physical and emotional safety, nurturance, and respect (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017). This strand laid the foundation for the explicit inclusion of wellbeing in the New Zealand School Curriculum 11 years later (Ministry of Education, 2007). Over time, wellbeing has moved from an implicit concern to an explicit expectation within schooling.

The Youth Mental Health Project, launched in 2012, further strengthened support for young people aged 12-19 by funding early intervention initiatives, improving access to services, and expanding school-based health services, particularly in low-decile schools (Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit, 2016). Further, the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities and Tertiary Education Strategy reinforced this focus by prioritising socio-emotional, behavioural, and mental wellbeing in education (Ministry of Education, 2020). These developments reflect a growing policy expectation that schools contribute to both learning and wellbeing outcomes.

ERO reports situate wellbeing as integral to effective schooling and call for schools to prioritise prevention rather than responding to crises (Education Review Office, 2015b). Currently, most NZ secondary schools demonstrate coherence between wellbeing policies, practices and values, although it is less consistent where resources are limited (Education Review Office, 2015b; OECD, 2018), which suggests that the presence of wellbeing policy does not guarantee consistent practice across schools. In primary education, wellbeing provision is more variable, which highlights the need for more cohesive strategies explicitly linked to school values (Education Review Office, 2015a, 2015b).

The situation is particularly complex for year 7 and 8 students, whose academic achievement and behavioural outcomes tend to decline at this stage (Education Review Office, 2015a). However, the Youth Mental Health Project starts at the age of 12, which means that some year 7 & 8 students

fall outside its scope. They follow the primary curriculum but may be taught in separate intermediate or secondary school settings, creating structural gaps. It also suggests that Year 7 and 8 students occupy a position where developmental needs, school structures, and wellbeing supports do not always align. ERO therefore calls for a coherent system-wide approach to wellbeing with stronger processes for monitoring and responding to emerging issues (Education Review Office, 2015a).

Clear indicators of wellbeing are important for embedding wellbeing within school culture and for evaluating initiatives. Te Whāriki defines wellbeing in terms of personal worth, the ability to focus and regulate emotions, and resilience (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017). The New Zealand Curriculum weaves wellbeing into its key competencies, several of which support students' social and emotional development (Ministry of Education, 2007). Self-management is particularly important, as it involves managing emotions, building resilience, and developing confidence. Relating to others also contributes to wellbeing through positive interaction, awareness of others, active listening and openness to different perspectives.

ERO describes wellbeing as a "sustainable state, characterised by … positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships…, resilience, self-optimism and … satisfaction with learning experiences" and identifies students' satisfaction, engagement, and social-emotional functioning as critical indicators. (Education Review Office, 2015a, p. 6). It subsequently proposed nine wellbeing indicators that schools can use for evaluation: belonging and connection, achievement, resilience, social and emotional competence, physical activity, sense of being cared for, safety, security, inclusion, and pride in identity (Education Review Office, 2016).

Recent wellbeing frameworks increasingly draw on Māori models of health. In 2007, Te Whare Tapa Whā was incorporated into the New Zealand School Curriculum, acknowledging psychological, spiritual, and relational dimensions of wellbeing (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Developed in consultation with young people, the Ministry of Education's (2023) wellbeing measures set out 21 interrelated areas that reflect young people's lived experiences across academic and everyday life, including relationships with peers and teachers, emotional support, fair rules, student voice, sleep quality, and cultural connectedness. These frameworks indicate that wellbeing in NZ schools is conceptualised as multidimensional and relational, shaped by culture, identity, and context, while also leaving questions about how different aspects of wellbeing are prioritised and enacted in everyday school practice. At the same time, they raise questions about how consistently these frameworks are interpreted and enacted in everyday practice, an issue this chapter returns to when considering school-based mindfulness programmes.

Emotional Wellness Programmes at Schools

A wide range of school-based emotional wellness programmes have been implemented in Aotearoa New Zealand, including socio-emotional learning (SEL), cultural and mindfulness initiatives, supported by government and non-government funding (Thabrew et al., 2023). Internationally, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, & Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework has been influential in promoting skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social competence, and responsible decision-making (Cipriano et al., 2023). In Aotearoa New Zealand, CASEL-informed initiatives have been associated with improved relationships, restorative practices, self-management, and student empowerment (Dyson et al., 2019). The FRIENDS resilience suite, developed in Australia and introduced into NZ schools in 2013, is based on cognitive behavioural principles and has demonstrated the ability to reduce anxiety and depression (Fay, 2016; Fisak et al., 2023; Positive Behaviour for Learning, 2016). These programmes tend to focus on building specific skills and coping strategies through a structured curriculum.

Several home-grown programmes have also been developed. Sparklers, created in response to the 2016 Christchurch earthquake, offers classroom activities that build prosocial behaviour and

emotional literacy, with culturally responsive content for Māori and Pasifika students (Savage et al., 2020). The Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L), including School-Wide and Restorative Practices frameworks, emphasises respectful relationships, positive school culture, and consistent behavioural expectations, and has shown long-term benefits when implemented sustainably (Boyd & Felgate, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2014). Other examples include Mana Ake, which provides mental health and wellbeing support for primary and intermediate students (Malatest International, 2021; Ministry of Health, 2022), and Mental Health Education and Hauora, a resource for teaching interpersonal skills, emotional literacy, and mindfulness in Year 7 and above (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). These initiatives illustrate that emotional wellbeing in NZ schools is addressed through a diverse mix of universal, targeted, and curriculum-based approaches. It also reflects the emphasis on locally developed responses that are shaped by community context and recent collective experiences.

The success of these programmes depends heavily on context. Language, culture, and identity are central to the effectiveness of wellness initiatives in NZ schools (Denston et al., 2022). Interventions must meaningfully reflect Māori and Pasifika worldviews and respond to an increasingly diverse population, with over 160 ethnic groups living in Aotearoa New Zealand (Stats NZ–Tatauranga Aotearoa, 2020; Stats NZ, 2024). At the same time, socio-economic disparities remain strongly associated with poorer mental health and educational engagement (Ministry of Health, 2024). These factors highlight the need for approaches that are both evidence-based and culturally and contextually responsive, a key concern when considering the implementation of mindfulness-based programmes. Within this landscape, the question is less whether schools should address wellbeing, but more how different approaches align with the needs, values, and capabilities of particular school communities.

Understanding Mindfulness: Origins, Mechanisms, and Contemporary Applications

Definition, Origins, and Contemporary Meanings

Contemporary Western mindfulness originates from Buddhist meditation tradition, where it was embedded within broader ethical, philosophical, and spiritual frameworks concerned with awareness, suffering, and the nature of human experience (Hahn, 1987; Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2013; Thera, 1954).

In its Western adaptation, mindfulness has taken on multiple related meanings. It is used to describe a state, a psychological trait, a skill that can be developed, a process of paying sustained non-judgemental attention, a style of meditation practice, and a clinical intervention / clinical approach (Baer, 2003; Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Shapiro et al., 2006; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). These meanings are central to this thesis because they shape how mindfulness is operationalised in school-based programmes and how findings across studies are interpreted. Mindfulness as a trait refers to an individual's tendency to be attentive and receptive to present-moment experience; as a practice, it involves intentionally evoking this state through formal exercises such as breathing, body scan or movement practices; as a skill, it can be called upon in challenging situations; and as an intervention, it denotes structured programmes that use mindfulness practices to support wellbeing.

Contemporary definitions of mindfulness emphasise sustained non-judgemental awareness of present-moment experience. While these shifts enable mindfulness to be integrated into health, educational, and workplace settings, questions have also been raised about how far mindfulness has been disconnected from its ethical and philosophical roots (Bodhi, 2013; Hahn, 1987). This divergence has contributed to variation in how mindfulness is conceptualised and implemented in

applied settings. As a result, mindfulness is best understood not as a single, fixed construct, but as a family of related practices and ideas that are interpreted differently across contexts.

Mechanisms of Mindfulness

A considerable body of research has sought to identify the mechanisms that underpin the effects of mindfulness, and despite differences in terminology, the major frameworks converge on a shared set of mechanisms. They describe mindfulness as involving coordinated cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and physiological processes that improve self-regulation (Baer, 2003; Hölzel et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2006; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Across frameworks, core mechanisms include attention regulation, greater body awareness, and improved emotional and behavioural control, supported through processes such as exposure, acceptance, cognitive change, and flexibility. Despite differences in terminology, these models describe overlapping processes through which individuals relate differently to their thoughts, emotions, and bodily experiences.

Attention regulation is consistently described as a central mechanism. Mindfulness practices initially train the ability to sustain attention on a chosen object, such as the breath, and to notice when attention has wandered without judgment (Bishop et al., 2004; Hölzel et al., 2011). This may then extend to open monitoring, in which attention is paid to whatever arises in the field of awareness, approached with curiosity and acceptance (Bishop et al., 2004; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). These processes reduce distractibility and support concentration, leading to better emotional and behavioural regulation and enhanced executive functioning (Bishop et al., 2004; Hölzel et al., 2011; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Attention regulation is often treated, therefore, as a foundational mechanism that supports change in other domains.

Body awareness, or interoception, is another key process. By repeatedly directing attention to cues such as internal sensations, breathing patterns, muscle tension, bodily discomfort, or sensory

experiences associated with emotional states, practitioners become more able to detect and interpret subtle body sensations and link them to emotions (Hölzel et al., 2011), which highlights the role of bodily awareness in emotional understanding and regulation. Neuroimaging studies show that such practices activate brain regions associated with embodiment and somatic awareness (Hölzel et al., 2011).

Self-regulation is consistently identified as a key and the most desired outcome of mindfulness practice. It encompasses emotional, behavioural, and cognitive regulation, supporting the ability to manage negative emotions, reduce automatic and unconscious reactions, decrease rumination, and respond to stress with greater composure and cognitive flexibility (Baer, 2003; Hölzel et al., 2011; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Proposed mechanisms through which mindfulness is thought to support self-regulation include positive reappraisal of difficult experiences, exposure to challenging stimuli, and extinction of conditioned maladaptive responses (Hölzel et al., 2011; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). A further process relevant to self-regulation is the enhanced awareness and labelling of emotions, which provides clearer ways of recognising and describing affective experiences (Bishop et al., 2004). At a neural level, practice is commonly associated with increased prefrontal activation and reduced amygdala reactivity, alongside parasympathetic shifts linked to physiological calming (Hölzel et al., 2011; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012).

Changes in the perspective on the self, commonly described as decentring or reperceiving, represent another important mechanism. This refers to the capacity to observe thoughts and emotions as transient mental events rather than facts or fixed aspects of the self (Hölzel et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2006). Through the development of meta-awareness, individuals can shift from being immersed in thoughts to observing them from a distance, which has been linked to increased calm, self-acceptance, and psychological insight (Bishop et al., 2004; Hölzel et al., 2011; Shapiro et al.,

2006; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Vago and Silbersweig (2012) extend it to self-transcendence, in which awareness expands to include a felt sense of connection with others.

Interpersonal and prosocial aspects of mindfulness have also received increasing attention. Evidence suggests that mindfulness practice can enhance compassion, forgiveness, empathy, and other prosocial behaviours, which relate to perspective-taking, or the "theory of mind" — the ability to understand others' mental states, as well as decentring and self-transcendence (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). These processes correspond with neural activity in regions associated with empathy and shared emotional experiences (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). In developmental contexts, mindfulness can also support coregulation, where adults such as parents or teachers help a child regulate their emotional states through their own regulated presence (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Constantin et al., 2022). Studies indicate that teachers' dispositional mindfulness and emotional competence are linked to classroom climate and student outcomes (Chehayeb et al., 2025; Constantin et al., 2022; Nimmo, 2025). This suggests that mindfulness may operate not only through individual capacities, but also through relational and environmental processes.

Finally, attitudinal and intentional qualities are viewed as foundational for all other mechanisms. Intention gives practice direction and meaning, whereas attitude shapes the quality of awareness through non-judging, patience, curiosity, and acceptance. (Bishop et al., 2004; Shapiro et al., 2006). Further, mindfulness supports values clarification, helping individuals understand what truly matters to them and align their behaviour accordingly (Shapiro et al., 2006). These interconnected mechanisms illustrate how mindfulness functions as a multidimensional process rather than a single skill. Each component contributes to a wider capacity for awareness, flexibility, and compassionate engagement with oneself and others. They are also relevant for educational settings, where mindfulness is often introduced not only to reduce distress but also to support values-based behaviour, relational skills and resilience. However, most mechanism models are

derived from adult and clinical populations, leaving questions about how these processes are understood and experienced by children and young people in the school context.

Although substantial literature supports these proposed mechanisms, mindfulness research has also been critiqued for methodological limitations, including expectancy effects, variability in intervention design, reliance on self-report measures, and inconsistencies in outcome findings across studies (Ghanbari Noshari et al., 2023; Kreplin et al., 2018). In particular, evidence for prosocial outcomes such as compassion and empathy remains mixed, with some meta-analytic findings suggesting that effects may be influenced by study quality, instructor involvement, and the type of comparison groups used (Kreplin et al., 2018).

Mindfulness in Contemporary Clinical Context

Mindfulness entered clinical practice most visibly through Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and an eight-week group programme combining formal practices such as breathing, body scan, and meditation with education about stress and coping (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). MBSR aims to cultivate attitudes of non-judging, patience, acceptance, letting go, and loving kindness which support supports emotional regulation, self-compassion, resilience, curiosity, cognitive and psychological flexibility, intrinsic motivation, and overall wellbeing, thus making it attractive for adaptation beyond clinical settings, including within educational contexts (Donald et al., 2020; Dunning et al., 2019; Goodman, 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Neff & Germer, 2013; Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2013). Another contemporary programme, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), integrates mindfulness with cognitive behaviour principles to prevent depressive relapse by teaching individuals to observe thoughts and feelings as mental events rather than facts, which disrupts patterns of negative thinking and increases psychological resilience (Segal et al., 2012).

Meta-analytic evidence of mindfulness practice from adult populations generally shows small to moderate improvements in stress, anxiety and depression and increases in subjective wellbeing (Karl et al., 2022). Facilitator-guided mindfulness tends to produce larger effects than self-guided practice, suggesting that relational and contextual factors contribute meaningfully to change. Although these findings arise outside school settings, they form part of the rationale for the development of mindfulness-based programmes for children and young people. This literature provides useful background, while also highlighting the need to consider differences in purpose, population, and setting when mindfulness is applied in schools.

Mindfulness in the New Zealand Context

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the bicultural commitment to Te Tiriti O Waitangi requires that psychological and educational interventions be examined for cultural sensitivity, suitability, and relevance. A recent systematic review found mindfulness to be a suitable therapeutic approach for indigenous and First Nations people in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA (Li et al., 2024). However, suitability in this literature is typically discussed at a general level, rather than in relation to how mindfulness is adapted and experienced within specific local contexts.

Local studies found that mindfulness and its core principles align with Māori worldviews when appropriately contextualised (Ketu-McKenzie, 2019; Mapel & Simpson, 2011; McDonald et al., 2021). A spiritual component is recognised within this approach (Bodhi, 2013; Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2013), which resonates with te ao Māori understanding of taha wairua, the spiritual domain of wellbeing in Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985). This resonance is often described in terms of shared values and practices, without suggesting that these worldviews are equivalent.

Traditional Māori practices such as nohopuku, or silent reflection, karakia, or prayer, and mōteatea chants have long served to regulate emotions and maintain spiritual balance and healing

(Jamieson, 2015; McDonald et al., 2021; Riley, 2018). Mindfulness also emphasises interconnectedness and interdependence between people and the natural world (Hahn, 1987). This is consistent with Māori views of humans as part of nature and embedded in networks of whānau, hapu, iwi, and wider community (Durie, 1985; Karl et al., 2022). Understanding whakapapa, or genealogy, and relationship to land places them within a 'cosmological web' (Karl et al., 2022, p. 182). This connection is expressed through pepeha, in which people introduce themselves in relation to ancestral land, mountains, rivers, and whakapapa (Durie, 2014; Lockhart et al., 2019).

Even though certain facets of mindfulness appear to fit te ao Māori, its implementation in Aotearoa New Zealand requires careful adaptation. The question, therefore, shifts from whether mindfulness can align with Māori worldviews in principle to how such alignment is enacted in practice. Studies highlight the importance of using te reo Māori, incorporating tikanga and aligning with Māori frameworks such as Te Whare Tapa Whā and kaupapa Māori principles (Ketu-McKenzie, 2019; McAllister, 2020; McDonald et al., 2021). When embedded in such frameworks, mindfulness is experienced less as a Western psychological technique and more as a meaningful way of restoring balance and connection that is congruent with indigenous models of wellbeing (McAllister, 2020; Rix, 2017). This is particularly relevant given critiques that contemporary Western mindfulness has at times been decontextualised from its broader Buddhist ethical and philosophical foundations and reduced to an isolated self-regulation technique (Purser & Milillo, 2015; Samuel, 2015). This emphasis highlights the need to examine how mindfulness programmes are locally interpreted, adapted, and experienced, recognising that cultural fit cannot be assumed from programme design alone.

Mindfulness-Based Programmes in Schools

Rationale for School-Based MBPs and Implementation Considerations

Schools provide a natural context for wellbeing interventions because children and young people spend a significant proportion of their daily lives in educational settings (Abbott et al., 2024; Denston et al., 2022; Goldberg et al., 2019; Sheinman & Hadar, 2017). As a result, expectations of schooling increasingly extend beyond academic instruction. A report presented by UNESCO (2015) argues that the purpose of education in the twenty-first century is not only to develop academic skills but also to uphold and strengthen the dignity, potential, and wellbeing of each person in relation to others and to the wider world. This broader framing positions schools not only as sites for learning but also as key environments for preventive wellbeing efforts, a view reflected in the NZ policy documents that emphasise social and emotional wellbeing alongside academic learning (Education Review Office, 2015a, 2015b; Ministry of Education, 2007, 2020).

Mindfulness programmes have been introduced into schools partly because they are seen as flexible and relatively low-cost approaches that can be integrated into classroom routines (Chaplow & Frewin, 2019). However, research indicates that they require adaptation for school-aged children. Effective programmes tend to provide structure while allowing room for flexibility and creativity with short, engaging practices that involve movement and multiple use of senses (Maloney, 2015; Miller et al., 2023; Sheinman & Russo-Netzer, 2021). Clear explanations of mindfulness concepts and of the purpose of the programme are also important for student engagement (Maloney, 2015; Miller et al., 2023). This suggests that the perceived flexibility of mindfulness does not remove the need for careful design but instead shifts attention to how practices are selected and framed for educational contexts.

Implementation also raises ethical and practical questions. Mindfulness practices can be challenging for some students, particularly those with trauma histories and a high level of unprocessed distress, and teachers or facilitators may not always recognise these difficulties or might not have the psychotherapeutic skills required to respond appropriately (Arthurson, 2017; Miller et al., 2023). Other concerns include reports students preoccupied with having 'negative' thoughts or emotions, mindfulness being used to pacify behaviours considered problematic; and mindfulness practices inadvertently encouraging acceptance of harmful situations, such as bullying and family violence, without adequate support for change (Arthurson, 2017; Miller et al., 2023). These critiques highlight the risk that MBPs might focus on individual attitudes without addressing structural conditions that contribute to distress. Here, mindfulness emerges not only as a wellbeing practice but also as a site for ethical tension around responsibility, care, and the limits of school-based interventions.

Socio-economic inequities are another key consideration. School-based MBPs do not alter economic conditions and may even exacerbate feelings of deprivation if students are unable to practice at home due to the lack of resources such as access to software applications on a personal computer (Arthurson, 2017; Miller et al., 2023). In lower-income communities, mindfulness interventions are therefore likely to be most appropriate when combined with broader initiatives that seek to improve students' circumstances (Arthurson, 2017). This raises questions about the extent to which mindfulness can function equitably within schools when broader contextual conditions remain unchanged.

Given these practical, ethical, and contextual considerations, distinctions between MBPs and broader wellbeing initiatives become increasingly important. School-based mindfulness approaches overlap in some areas with broader emotional wellness and socio-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives, however, mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs) are generally distinguished by their

explicit emphasis on mindfulness practice and the cultivation of present-moment, non-judgmental awareness (Denston et al., 2022; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). In practice, programme structures, intensity, duration, and implementation procedures vary considerably across school settings, and descriptions within literature are not always clearly specified.

International Mindfulness-Based Programmes

Internationally, several MBPs have been developed specifically for children and young people that differ substantially in structure, duration, age focus, and theoretical grounding, despite often being grouped under a single label. Still Quiet Space is an American adaptation of MBSR for children with shorter sessions and movement-based activities to support engagement (Saltzman, 2019). MindUP, also from the United States, operates within the CASEL framework and provides manualised mindfulness-based MBPs and professional development for educators, with evidence of benefits for self-regulation, attention, resilience, academic performance and prosocial behaviour (HundrED, 2025; Maloney, 2015; Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

In the United Kingdom, the Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP) offers programmes for students aged 7-18 grounded in MBSR and MBCT (Mindfulness in Schools Project, 2025; Weare, 2018). Although implemented in a small number of NZ schools, findings are mixed: while one study reported positive engagement in girls (Saint Kentigern, 2014), another study found no significant effect on boys (Skogstad, 2017).

In Australia, Meditation Capsules provides tailored programmes for children aged 3 to 18 that integrate psychoeducation, breathing practices, and elements of yoga and Tai Chi (Albrecht et al., 2012; Etty-Leal, 2010; Meditation Capsules, n.d.). Across these programmes, common aims include improving emotional regulation, resilience, interpersonal skills, compassion, self-control and attention (Albrecht et al., 2012; Etty-Leal, 2010; HundrED, 2025; Maloney, 2015; Meditation

Capsules, n.d.; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Mindfulness in Schools Project, 2025; Saltzman, 2019; Weare, 2018).

Research on school-based MBPs expanded rapidly. Many studies report improvements in self-regulation, attention and learning abilities, resilience, prosocial behaviour, and reductions in stress and negative affect (Filipe et al., 2021; Joyce et al., 2010; Maloney, 2015; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2023; Mindfulness in Schools Project, 2025; Sheinman & Russo-Netzer, 2021; Weare, 2018). Mindfulness is found to increase self-compassion and emotional awareness, decrease negative affect, stress and anxiety, cultivate metacognition, thus disrupting automatic thinking patterns and encouraging reflexive capacities leading to overall wellbeing (Akhavan et al., 2021; Hwang et al., 2019). These findings suggest broad convergence of psychological and attentional benefits, even as the specific pathways to these outcomes vary across studies.

Research also highlights factors that shape effectiveness. Teacher commitment, personal practice and experience matter, as do structural supports such as time allocation and continuity of practice (Akhavan et al., 2021; Joyce et al., 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Klingbeil et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2023). Another major contributing factor is the whole-school approach based on the World Health Organisation's (1996) holistic school model that suggests that wellbeing initiatives are most impactful when they operate across curriculum, school culture and engagement of families and communities and outside agencies (Maloney, 2015; Miller et al., 2023; Sheinman & Hadar, 2017). Conversely, time pressures may lead teachers to omit or shorten key components, weakening the integrity of the programme. This shows that programmes work differently depending on how schools introduce, support, and sustain them.

Due to the growing number of original studies, many meta-analyses and reviews have evaluated the effectiveness of school-based MBPs. Seven key reviews differ in scope methodology:

four meta-analyses of randomised controlled trials (RCTs, Dunning et al., 2022; Dunning et al., 2019; Zenner et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2020), a meta-analysis of single-case studies (Klingbeil et al., 2017), a narrative review (Weare, 2018), and a critical review of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research (Chaplow & Frewin, 2019).

These reviews differ greatly in outcome focus. Some examined mindfulness impact on anxiety in specific age-groups (Chaplow & Frewin, 2019; Zhou et al., 2020), while others concentrated on cognitive, emotional, and behavioural outcomes (Dunning et al., 2022; Dunning et al., 2019; Zenner et al., 2014). Klingbeil et al. (2017) investigated disruptive behaviour, while Weare (2018) assessed overall effectiveness and implementation issues. Contexts were also diverse: several reviews included studies from schools, clinical environments, and community programmes (Dunning et al., 2022; Dunning et al., 2019; Klingbeil et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2020), whereas Zenner et al. (2014), Weare (2018) and Chaplow and Frewin (2019) examined solely school-based interventions. As a result, the international review literature addresses a wide range of questions under the umbrella of school-based mindfulness, limiting direct comparability across studies.

Similar to original studies, most meta-analyses reported positive but generally small effects of MBPs across emotional cognitive, and behavioural domains (Chaplow & Frewin, 2019; Dunning et al., 2022; Dunning et al., 2019; Weare, 2018; Zenner et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2020). Effects appear most consistent for self-reported mindfulness, stress reduction, emotional awareness, and emotion regulation, whereas findings for anxiety and behavioural outcomes, and academic achievement are weaker or more variable across reviews (D'Souza & Smyth, 2025; Dunning et al., 2022; Zenner et al., 2014). For example, some reviews found clear reductions of disruptive behaviour (Dunning et al., 2022; Klingbeil et al., 2017; Weare, 2018), whereas others found only small effects (Dunning et al., 2019). The evidence for sustained effects was also mixed, with some reporting effects persisting at follow-up (Zhou et al., 2020) and others diminishing (Dunning et al., 2022). The role of practice

intensity was also unclear, with contrasting findings across reviews (Dunning et al., 2022; Zenner et al., 2014). Overall, the review literature points to variability in outcomes rather than uniform effects, particularly for behaviour change and long-term impacts.

All reviews highlighted methodological and implementation limitations, vagueness and variety of treatment protocols (Dunning et al., 2019; Klingbeil et al., 2017; Zenner et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2020), varied outcome measures (Dunning et al., 2019; Klingbeil et al., 2017; Zenner et al., 2014), and heterogeneity in settings, samples, and facilitator expertise (Dunning et al., 2019; Zenner et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2020). Concerns were raised about introducing MBPs in schools without clear evidence-based guidelines, especially for interventions targeting behavioural issues (Chaplow & Frewin, 2019; Klingbeil et al., 2017). These limitations constrain confidence in effect estimates and make it difficult to determine whether outcomes should be attributed specifically to mindfulness practices or to broader features shared with other school-based interventions.

Contextual limitations were also consistently noted. Reviewed studies often lacked detail on socio-economic conditions, cultural and ethnic composition, and school climate (Dunning et al., 2022; Weare, 2018). Chaplow and Frewin (2019) specifically called for research attending to the NZ context. This gap points to the need for research that attends to Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural and educational contexts, areas that remain underexplored in previous research.

Existing reviews prioritise randomised control trials, which provide methodological rigour but often overlook the nuanced, context-dependent insights offered by qualitative research (Dixon-Woods et al., 2000). While Chaplow and Frewin (2019) attempted to include qualitative research, their scope was limited. This review, therefore, focuses exclusively on qualitative research to develop a deeper understanding of how MBPs are implemented and experienced in NZ schools.

Mindfulness-Based Programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand Schools

Mindfulness programmes have been introduced in a growing number of NZ schools for several years, though the exact uptake is unclear due to voluntary participation and programme variability. The best-documented example is Pause, Breathe, Smile (PBS), developed by the Mental Health Foundation in 2013 as the first nationally recognised mindfulness programme explicitly grounded in Te Whare Tapa Whā and te ao Māori (Bernay et al., 2016; Devcich et al., 2017; Pause Breathe Smile, n.d.; Rix, 2017). The eight-week programme includes mindful eating, walking, and breathing practices, emphasises connection with peers and nature, and is designed to align with the NZ curriculum. Pause, Breathe, Smile has been delivered in hundreds of schools with support from the Mental Health Foundation and Southern Cross[1] (Pause Breathe Smile, n.d.). This positions PBS as both a mindfulness programme and a policy-aligned intervention shaped by national wellbeing priorities.

Research on PBS consistently demonstrates positive outcomes, including increased emotional literacy and regulation, interoceptive and emotional awareness, metacognition, and overall wellbeing (Bernay et al., 2016; Devcich et al., 2017; Rix, 2017). Some studies also report sustained effects at three-months, although these gains can diminish when ongoing practice is unclear or discontinued (Bernay et al., 2016; Devcich et al., 2017). Alongside PBS, NZ studies have examined other mindfulness programmes that are not formally named or standardised, yet report similar benefits with particularly positive outcomes among students with behaviour challenges and in the context of heightened stress, such as post-earthquake settings (Jamieson, 2015; Mazza-Davies, 2015). These findings suggest consistency of reported benefits across NZ school-based mindfulness

[1] Southern Cross is a large provider of insurance cover in New Zealand.

initiatives, alongside clear dependence on contextual factors such as sustained practice and situational stress.

Interpersonal outcomes feature prominently across both PBS and unspecified programmes. Students report improved relationships, increased empathy and kindness, stronger awareness of other people's emotions, and a greater sense of belonging in the classroom (Bernay et al., 2016; Jamieson, 2015). These relational benefits also translate into calmer classroom environments, improved focus and fewer behavioural disruptions (Mazza-Davies, 2015). Teachers describe a range of personal and professional gains. Studies report increased self-compassion and self-reflection, increased wellbeing, and greater emotional presence in the classroom, alongside more constructive responses to student needs and reduced stress (Bernay, 2012; Jamieson, 2015; Mazza-Davies, 2015). These accounts suggest that relational shifts among students and changes in teachers' presence are closely intertwined, shaping classroom environments in ways that extend beyond individual wellbeing outcomes.

Anecdotal accounts in mainstream media are consistent with these findings. School teachers and leaders describe positive changes in emotion regulation, social skills, and behaviour following PBS, some of which were noted in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Education Gazette Editors, 2018, 2020; Jeffares, 2022). While not empirical research, these findings echo themes identified in formal studies and point to how mindfulness is taken up and interpreted within everyday school discourse.

In NZ research, barriers and challenges have also been identified. Teachers commonly describe time pressures, workload, limited training, uncertainty about sustaining the practice, and variable capacity to engage in their own practice (Bernay, 2012; Kenwright et al., 2023; Mazza-Davies, 2015). Teacher beliefs and attitudes are reported as central to implementation. Because

mindfulness can feel unfamiliar at first for both students and staff, programmes tend to work best when leadership provides clear support and when mindfulness is present in the formal curriculum (Bernay et al., 2016; Higgins et al., 2016; Kenwright, 2018). This pattern suggests that sustainability depends less on individual teacher commitment and more on how mindfulness is institutionally supported and normalised in schools.

Opposition to mindfulness in Aotearoa New Zealand, while uncommon, has also been documented. In one South Island school, some parents objected on religious and academic grounds, citing concerns about its Buddhist origins and potential disruption of learning (Harding, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). The school leadership, who sought out the programme due to the incidents of bullying, decided to proceed but established opt-out arrangements for students. This case illustrates that decisions about mindfulness implementation involve negotiation between school priorities and community expectations.

Research highlights promising psychological, relational, and classroom-level benefits of school-based mindfulness in Aotearoa New Zealand, alongside clear implementation challenges. However, most studies are small-scale, vary widely in design, and provide limited insight into how programmes are experienced across different school contexts. The evidence is dominated by quantitative and mixed-methods studies, and the qualitative work that does exist has not been systematically synthesised. These gaps suggest the need for research that draws together qualitative findings to better understand how mindfulness programmes are implemented and experienced in NZ schools. The present study responds to this need by conducting a qualitative meta-synthesis of NZ research to capture the psychological, contextual, cultural, and relational dimensions that shape the work of mindfulness in everyday school settings.

Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the wider context in which school-based mindfulness programmes operate in Aotearoa New Zealand, outlining national mental health trends, wellbeing frameworks, Māori models of health and the policy settings that shape school practice. It introduced key definitions and mechanisms of mindfulness and reviewed international and local research on school-based MBPs. Together, these strands suggest that while mindfulness programmes demonstrate promising psychological, relational, and classroom-level benefits, the evidence base remains fragmented and lacks a coherent qualitative understanding of implementation and experience. This study, therefore, undertakes a qualitative meta-synthesis of NZ research to address this gap, and the next chapter outlines the methodology guiding this approach.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This study synthesises research on mindfulness-based programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand schools to develop a contextually grounded account of how these programmes operate, and how their effects are shaped by contextual conditions. Guided by a critical realist epistemological perspective, the study undertakes a qualitative meta-synthesis, drawing on meta-ethnography to integrate findings from existing research. This chapter outlines the methodological foundations of this study.

Critical Realism

This study is informed by critical realism as an epistemological framework. Critical realism supports qualitative inquiry that seeks to understand how experiences are interpreted while also examining the underlying conditions that shape those experiences. It assumes that social reality is not limited to what can be directly observed, and that patterns identified in research can point to deeper processes influencing outcomes (Bhaskar, 1978; Danermark et al., 2001).

A central concept of critical realism is the relationship between agency and structure. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to act, while structures refer to the cultural, social, and institutional conditions that influence and sometimes limit action (Archer, 1995). Attending to this relationship helps explain variation in students' experiences across school environments and mindfulness programmes, even where similar practices are implemented (Bhaskar, 1998).

Critical realism also highlights mechanisms, which are understood as underlying processes that contribute to particular outcomes. These mechanisms are not directly observable but can be inferred by interpreting patterns in qualitative data (Bhaskar, 1978; Danermark et al., 2001). They operate as tendencies rather than fixed laws, with their effects depending on specific contextual

conditions (Sayer, 2000). This perspective aligns closely with research on school-based wellbeing, where psychological, relational, and contextual processes are closely intertwined.

Critical realism further suggests that social phenomena operate across micro, meso, and macro levels (Danermark et al., 2001), encompassing individual experiences, school and classroom contexts, and wider policy and cultural conditions. Educational settings are understood as open systems, in which interventions interact with local conditions and may produce different outcomes depending on context (Bhaskar, 1998; Sayer, 2000). This helps explain why mindfulness programmes do not have uniform effects across schools and supports the applied focus of this thesis, which seeks to contribute to the understanding of how school environments can better support student wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Methods

In synthesising qualitative data, multiple protocols can be found in the literature. This section discusses protocols recommended in four key contributions to qualitative meta-synthesis (QMS) (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Mohammed et al., 2016; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006), which inform the methodological approach used in this study and are summarised in Figure 2.

Qualitative Meta-Synthesis as Research Methodology

Definition of Qualitative Meta-Synthesis

Qualitative meta-synthesis (QMS) was developed in response to the growing body of qualitative research and the need for approaches that integrate findings across studies while retaining their interpretive focus (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006). Unlike integrated reviews or secondary analyses, QMS does not aggregate data or summarise findings.

Instead, it involves the interpretive synthesis of findings from existing qualitative studies to generate higher-order insights (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Mohammed et al., 2016; Zimmer, 2006).

QMS is rooted in phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions and focuses on meaning-making and lived experience rather than causal explanation (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Mohammed et al., 2016; Walsh & Downe, 2005). This orientation is compatible with a critical realist perspective, which allows attention to the underlying social and contextual processes that shape experience (Bhaskar, 1978; Danermark et al., 2001). Because QMS builds on interpretations developed within primary studies rather than raw data, it is commonly described as a third-level form of qualitative interpretation (Malterud, 2019). This enables shared meanings and patterns that might not be evident within individual accounts to be identified, thus resulting in more robust and transferable insights, particularly for applied and practice-based disciplines (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Mohammed et al., 2016; Zimmer, 2006). In doing so, QMS can inform policy, practice and future research by synthesising dispersed qualitative evidence into a more coherent body of knowledge (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Mohammed et al., 2016).

In this study, QMS was selected because research on school-based mindfulness in Aotearoa New Zealand is dispersed across small, context-specific studies. While these studies offer valuable local insights, they do not yet provide an integrated understanding at a national level. Synthesising these findings allows them to be examined in relation to one another and supports a more coherent and contextually grounded interpretation in line with calls for context-sensitive synthesis in research (Chaplow & Frewin, 2019; Denston et al., 2022).

Criticisms

As a relatively new research methodology, QMS has attracted several criticisms. These include concerns that synthesising qualitative studies may reduce contextual richness and

oversimplify original findings (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Zimmer, 2006). Questions were also raised about the challenge of integrating studies grounded in different theoretical and epistemological traditions, as well as methodological rigour (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Mohammed et al., 2016; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006).

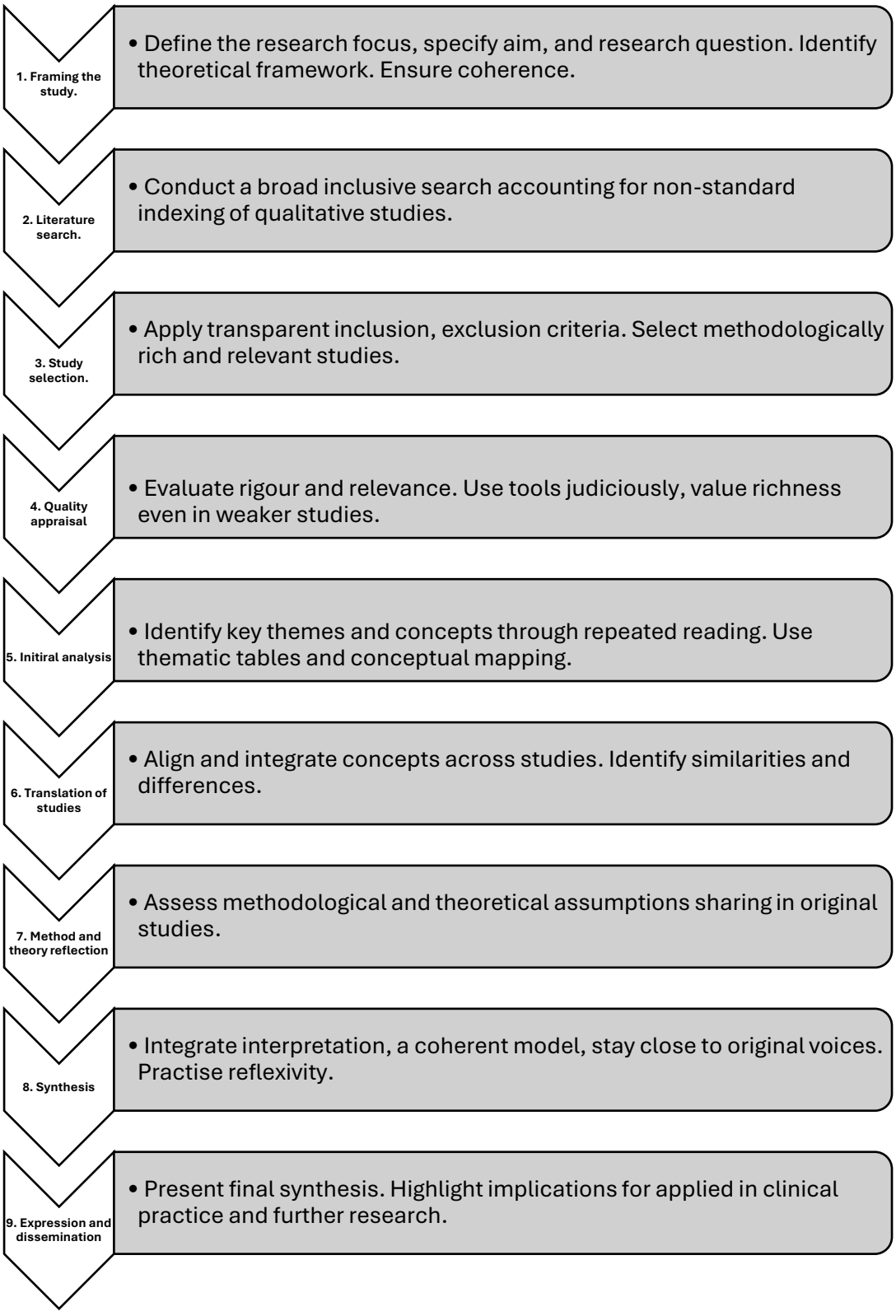
To address these concerns, the QMS literature emphasises transparency in search strategy, study selection, and analytic processes (Mohammed et al., 2016; Walsh & Downe, 2005). Rigour is supported through clear search procedures, inclusion criteria, quality appraisal and reflexive engagement with original texts to ensure that interpretations remain grounded in participants' accounts (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006). Attention to cultural and contextual features is particularly important when synthesising studies situated in specific social or cultural settings (Zimmer, 2006). In this study, such factors are treated as central to the synthesis.

Summary of protocols

Several authors outline structured approaches to QMS (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Mohammed et al., 2016; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006). Despite some variation, the protocols share common stages, including clarifying the aim of research and theoretical framework, conducting broad and sensitive literature searches, applying clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, and appraising study quality. During the analysis, key concepts are identified within studies and then translated across findings by critically examining similarities and differences using reciprocal and refutational translation (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Mohammed et al., 2016; Walsh & Downe, 2005). Interpretations are then synthesised to develop higher-order insights that extend beyond the individual findings and generate new knowledge grounded in the empirical data. (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Mohammed et al., 2016; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006). The process concludes by disseminating the synthesis to inform practice and research (Mohammed et al., 2016; Walsh & Downe, 2005).

Figure 2

Synthesis of QMS protocols



Analytic Tools

A range of analytic tools can be utilised in qualitative meta-synthesis, with the choice depending on the purpose of the project and the depth of interpretation required (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Malterud, 2019; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006). In this thesis, meta-ethnography was selected because it offers a stronger interpretive focus that aligns with the aims of QMS (Malterud, 2019).

Meta-ethnography, first introduced by Noblit and Hare (1988), involves translating concepts and meanings across qualitative findings to develop integrated interpretations (Atkins et al., 2008; Cahill et al., 2018). Instead of aggregating data, it works with interpretations already produced in primary research, supporting the generation of higher-order insights across studies (Mohammed et al., 2016). Meta-ethnographic synthesis draws on reciprocal and refutational translation, and culminates in the line-of-argument synthesis, which brings findings together into an integrated understanding (Atkins et al., 2008; Britten et al., 2002; Noblit & Hare, 1988).

Search and Selection of Studies

Search procedure

A clear and transparent search procedure is central to qualitative meta-synthesis. It requires well-defined parameters that specify the phenomenon of interest, the target population, the methodological orientation, and the researchers' epistemological position (Mohammed et al., 2016; Walsh & Downe, 2005). These elements support transparency and coherence and form a methodological map for QMS (Zimmer, 2006). Establishing these parameters at the outset is important because relevant studies are often dispersed across different publication types and indexed inconsistently, making a structured approach essential for ensuring that important material is not missed (Walsh & Downe, 2005).

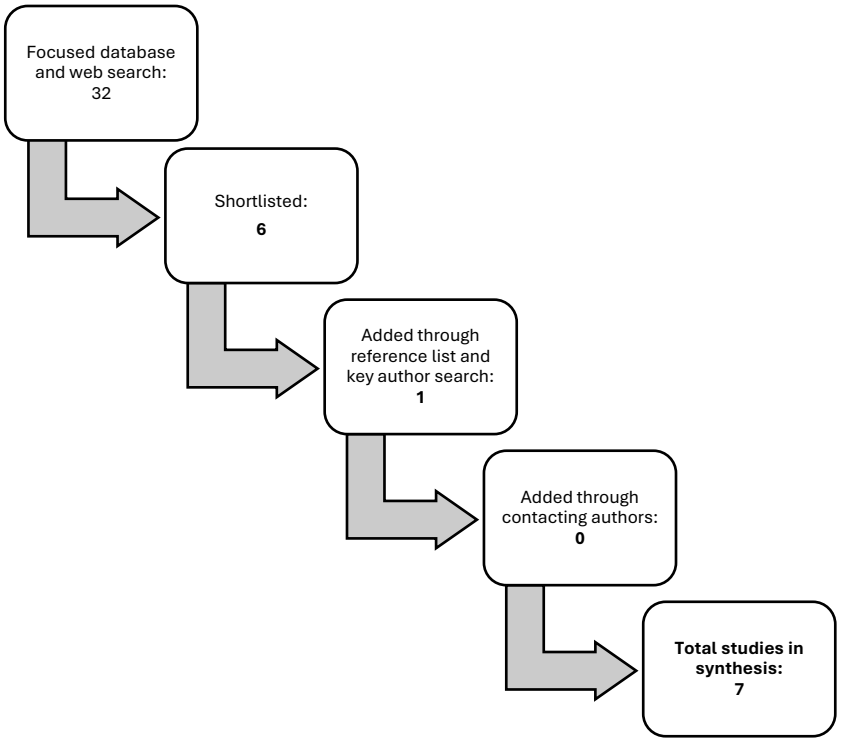
Study selection in this synthesis followed a staged process, consistent with recommendations in the qualitative synthesis literature (Malterud, 2019; Mohammed et al., 2016; Virginia Tech, 2025; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006). It began with an exploratory search in February 2025. This stage helped assess the research landscape, refine key words, and clarify inclusion and exclusion criteria (Virginia Tech, 2025). It confirmed that school-based mindfulness programmes are widely studied in Aotearoa New Zealand and that relevant research is available. Beginning with an exploratory scan is recommended in QMS because it helps identify how authors describe the topic in practice, which is crucial when terminology differs across studies (Zimmer, 2006).

A central methodological decision involved the level of structure appropriate for the search process. Some scholars support highly systematic and reproducible approaches similar to PRISMA guidelines[2] (Mohammed et al., 2016). Others argue that rigid checklists do not reflect the iterative and interpretive nature of qualitative syntheses and may restrict conceptual development (Malterud, 2019; Walsh & Downe, 2005). Taking this into account, the protocol outlined in Figure 3 was adopted. This approach allowed the search to remain comprehensive and transparent while still flexible enough to accommodate the interpretive aims of the study (Walsh & Downe, 2005).

[2] Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

Figure 3

Flowchart of search and selection of studies for the synthesis



A focused search was then undertaken in June 2025 with guidance from a subject librarian at Massey University. The decision to adopt a broad and sensitive search strategy aligns with the recommendation that qualitative syntheses should capture conceptual richness without relying on narrowly defined or purely aggregative search procedures (Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006). Librarian involvement strengthened the strategy by ensuring that search terms captured both methodological and topic-related variations, which is particularly important in fields where qualitative studies may be indexed in diverse ways or embedded in mixed-methods reports.

Searches were conducted using the following databases: Scopus, EBSCO (PsycINFO, CINAHL, ERIC), Web of Knowledge, PubMed, Web of Science, using the following terms:

(“qualitative” OR "grounded theory" OR phenomenolog* OR ethnog* OR "action research" OR “focus group*” OR “thematic analysis” OR “participatory research” OR “semi-structured

interview*” OR “lived experience*” OR “personal experience*” OR voice OR self-perception* OR "narrative theory" OR "narrative inquiry" OR "narrative enquiry" OR “narrative research” OR “historical research” OR “case study” OR “historical research” OR “case study”)

AND (zealand* OR aotearoa*)

AND (school* OR "secondary education*" OR "primary education*")

AND (mindfulness* OR mindful* OR "pause breathe smile).

A Google Scholar search was conducted using the terms “mindfulness in new zealand aotearoa schools” with the first 10 pages screened.

Scholars recommend including grey literature such as dissertations, policy documents, government reports, and unpublished work that meets quality standards to reduce publication bias and to account for the non-standard indexing of qualitative research (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Mohammed et al., 2016; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006). In line with this guidance, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global and DigitalNZ.org were also searched for relevant theses and dissertations. To ensure comprehensive coverage, reference lists were reviewed in shortlisted studies, publication histories of key authors were perused, and key authors were contacted regarding additional publications to identify any additional material that did not appear in database searches as recommended in the literature (Mohammed et al., 2016; Zimmer, 2006). These supplementary strategies are commonly required in QMS because relevant studies are often scattered across reports and theses rather than concentrated in academic journals.

Some authors encourage revisiting search parameters if new concepts emerge during early analysis, as this can strengthen interpretation and ensure conceptual completeness (Jensen & Allen,

1996; Malterud, 2019; Zimmer, 2006). In this study, no new concepts were identified, so an additional iterative stage was not required. However, keeping this option open aligns with best practice in interpretive syntheses, where researchers may refine search boundaries as insights emerge.

Selection process and inclusion criteria

As the shortlist was created, each study was assessed against the inclusion criteria. Studies were included if they were qualitative projects conducted in New Zealand schools, used a mindfulness intervention as the central component and were introduced for educational rather than clinical purposes. This criterion encompassed a range of school-based mindfulness programmes, including established programmes such as Meditation Capsules and Pause, Breathe, Smile, as well as locally developed and adapted mindfulness interventions. Although these programmes differed in structure, cultural framing and delivery, mindfulness remained the primary intervention focus across all included studies.

Studies were excluded if they did not meet methodological or conceptual requirements. Reasons for exclusion included quantitative design, review papers, settings outside the scope of the thesis, such as international language schools, early childhood centres or clinical settings, descriptive findings, unclear methodology, interventions where mindfulness was not central, prospective studies, and projects with such large amounts of data that meaningful analysis would not be achievable. These criteria were chosen to ensure that the synthesis remained focused on the core phenomenon of school-based mindfulness as an educational practice and to maintain conceptual coherence across the included studies as an approach recommended in qualitative meta-synthesis, which supports clear and transferable interpretations (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Walsh & Downe, 2005).

Mixed methods studies were considered when they met established criteria. They included studies in which the qualitative component was analysed using a recognised qualitative approach, reported separately from quantitative findings, and examined at the interpretive rather than descriptive level (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Malterud, 2019; Noblit & Hare, 1988; Walsh & Downe, 2005). To support consistent decision-making, a checklist adapted from criteria was utilised and is shown in Table 1 (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Malterud, 2019; Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski et al., 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008; Walsh & Downe, 2005). Studies that met most criteria were included. Only one mixed methods study (Bernay et al., 2016) was excluded because the qualitative component was too limited.

Table 1
Checklist for the inclusion of mixed-methods studies into QMS

Study	1. Clearly defined qualitative component?	2. Qualitative methodology described?	3. Qual findings reported separately?	4. Based on raw qual data?	5. Interpretive analysis?	6. Relevant to synthesis aim?	7. Sufficient depth/richness?	8. Appraisable (CASP/JBI)?	9. Include?
Bernay et al. (2016)	yes	yes/no	yes /no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
Hynds et al. (2020)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Rix and Rix (2018)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Rix and Rix (2019)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Quality assessment

All shortlisted studies were formally assessed using the Critical Skills Assessment Programme (CASP) checklist outlined in Table 2 (CASP, 2025). CASP is widely used in meta-syntheses because it provides structured criteria for evaluating the rigour and credibility of qualitative research (Campbell et al., 2003; CASP, 2025; Knudsen et al., 2024; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Williams et al., 2022).

Appraisal attended to methodological soundness as well as the richness and interpretive depth of the qualitative data, allowing studies that offered experiential or contextual insight to be included while maintaining a clear standard for assessing credibility and transparency (Sandelowski et al., 2006; Walsh & Downe, 2005). Even though the CASP checklist guided the appraisal, inclusion decisions also took account of conceptual depth and interpretive richness, in line with the recommendations in the QMS literature (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Malterud, 2019; Walsh & Downe, 2005). This made it possible to include studies with some methodological limitations where they offered valuable experiential or conceptual insight (Walsh & Downe, 2005), which is particularly relevant in fields such as school-based mindfulness, where research is developing.

In addition to methodological quality assessed through CASP, researcher involvement in programme development, delivery, and evaluation varied across the included studies. In Rix and Bernay (2014), one of the study authors developed the mindfulness intervention being evaluated. In Whitehead and Daniell (2016), the researchers delivered the mindfulness intervention and subsequently gathered teachers' perspectives on their experiences of the intervention. The later evaluations of Pause, Breathe, Smile (Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019) were undertaken by the researchers affiliated with the organisation delivering the programme, whereas Hynds et al. (2020) represented an external evaluation of the programme. These contextual factors are noted to assist interpretation of the included studies.

Table 2

Quality appraisal of selected studies following CASP guidelines

Shortlisted Study Name / Citation	1. Clear aims?	2. Qualitative methodology appropriate?	3. Design appropriate?	4. Recruitment strategy appropriate?	5. Data collection appropriate?	6. Researcher –participant relationship considered?	7. Ethical issues considered?	8. Rigorous data analysis?	9. Clear findings?	10. Value of the research?	Overall appraisal
Ager, Bucu Albrecht, & Cohen (2014)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	include
Albrecht, Bucu & Ager (2018)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	include
Hynds, Hindle, Kus-Harbord & Savage (2020)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	include
Rix & Bernay (2014)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	unclear	yes	yes	yes	include
Rix & Rix (2018)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	include
Rix & Rix (2019)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	include
Whitehead & Daniell (2016)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	include

Description of selected studies

Overall, seven studies have been selected for the synthesis that varied in the choice of qualitative methodology and analytic tools. Four studies used thematic analysis to process data, two unspecified, and one interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) for one group of participants. Publication formats varied, including four journal articles and three reports. Five studies were set in public schools and two in an independent school. The studies also differed in their participant groups. One study focused on students' perspectives (Ager et al., 2014), one on school counsellors' (Albrecht et al., 2018), two interviewed teachers only (Rix & Bernay, 2014; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016), one - teachers and school leaders (Hynds et al., 2020), and one - trained educators who were not necessarily school teachers (Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). Six studies used a recognised mindfulness intervention, whereas one (Rix & Bernay, 2014) introduced an unspecified mindfulness programme based on Te Whare Tapa Whā.

Table 3

Background information on selected studies

Study	Source type	Methodology	Analytic tool	Focus / RQ	Setting	Participants	MBP type
Ager, Bucu, Albrecht & Cohen (2014). Mindfulness in schools research project: Exploring teachers' and students' perspectives.	Journal article	Qualitative	thematic analysis	to explore students' perspectives on learning mindfulness practices at school	co-educational Kindergarten—Year 12 independent Auckland school	18 students: 6-7 years old; 20 students: 9-10 years old	Meditation Capsules delivered by mindfulness facilitators
Albrecht, Bucu & Ager (2018). Rome wasn't built in a day: School counsellors' perspectives of teaching children mindfulness.	Journal article	Qualitative	thematic analysis for students & IPA for counsellors	to understand the children and counsellors' perspectives and experiences of mindfulness	independent primary school	2 school counsellors & 38 NZ elementary school students	Meditation Capsules delivered by school counsellors
Hynds, Hindle, Kus-Harbord & Savage (2020). Impact evaluation for the Pause Breathe Smile Programme.	Report	mixed methods; case study design	thematic analysis	to understand the impacts on learning and behaviour for Māori and non-Māori students, teachers and their school communities.	3 schools: 2 primary, 1 unclear	Māori and non-Māori students; age not specified	Pause Breathe Smile delivered by mindfulness facilitators
Rix & Bernay (2014). A study of the effects of mindfulness in five primary schools in New Zealand.	Journal article	Qualitative/interpretive / case study design	thematic analysis	to understand the effects of an eight-week mindfulness in schools programme	5 primary schools in Auckland	126 children: 6-11 years old; classroom teachers	Mindfulness & modified yoga based on Te Whare Tapa Whā delivered by mindfulness facilitators
Rix &Rix (2018). Pause, Breathe, Smile Impact Evaluation Canterbury.	Report	Mixed methods	thematic analysis	to evaluate wellbeing benefits for students and educators, and the achievement of the intended outcomes of PBS programme	20 classes in 12 schools: from primary to secondary	children & educators	Pause Breathe Smile delivered by a trained educator
Rix & Rix (2019). Pause, Breathe, Smile Outcomes Evaluation Waikato.	Report	Mixed methods	inductive analysis	to evaluate wellbeing benefits for students and educators, and the achievement of the intended outcomes of PBS programme	a combination of schools from primary to secondary	children & educators	Pause Breathe Smile delivered by classroom teachers
Whitehead & Daniell (2016). Teachers' experiences of mindfulness.	NZCER article	Qualitative/inductive	Unspecified, identification of themes	to capture teachers' perceptions of a mindfulness programme	primary school	3 teachers and 3 classrooms of Year 7 students	Adapted MindUp delivered by study authors

Synthesis

Building on the meta-ethnographic approach outlined earlier, the synthesis began with repeated reading of the included studies to gain an overall sense of their key themes and metaphors. Study characteristics such as context and methodology were first organised in a table. A second digital matrix was then created, with each study listed across the top and themes from the original findings entered underneath, allowing themes to be rearranged as the synthesis progressed (Malterud, 2019).

Following familiarisation, relationships between the studies were explored by comparing and contrasting themes, which helped identify recurring concepts that guided the translation process (Cahill et al., 2018). Studies were then translated into one another through reciprocal and refutational analysis, enabling similarities, differences, and tensions between findings to be explored and refined (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Walsh & Downe, 2005). Attention was also given to how methodological frameworks and theoretical assumptions in the original studies shape the interpretation of findings (Zimmer, 2006).

The final stage entailed producing a third-order interpretation through a line-of-argument synthesis. At this point, second-order constructs were reduced and integrated into an overarching conceptual model using visual tools such as tables and mind maps to support integrative thinking (Cahill et al., 2018; Malterud, 2019). This step enabled diverse findings to be woven into a coherent explanation of how mindfulness-based programmes function across different school environments in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Throughout the synthesis, the analytic process remained systematic while allowing flexibility as themes developed and relationships between studies became clearer (Cahill et al., 2018; Malterud, 2019). Organisational strategies described by Malterud (2019) and Cahill et al. (2018) were

used to support the central stages of meta-ethnography, including relating studies to one another, translating their findings, and developing the line-of-argument synthesis.

Reporting of findings

The reporting of this meta-synthesis was guided by the ENTREQ (Enhancing Transparency in Reporting the Evidence from Qualitative research syntheses) protocol, which provides a framework for transparent and comprehensive reporting of qualitative syntheses (Tong et al., 2012). ENTREQ outlines twenty-one items that support clarity in how a synthesis is planned, conducted and presented. These items are organised into five key areas: introduction, methods and methodology, literature search, selection and appraisal of studies, and the synthesis of findings.

Using ENTREQ helped ensure that each stage of the process was described in sufficient detail and that the reporting was systematic and coherent. ENTREQ guidelines also supported alignment between the reporting of this study and the earlier description of the QMS process, allowing each stage of the methodology to be presented coherently and transparently.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations play a crucial part in qualitative meta-synthesis even though no new data are collected. While the researcher is not interacting with participants directly, their original data are used for synthesis and interpretation; the integrity of their voices, the context and meaning need to be honoured because overinterpretation and decontextualisation can lead to the distortion of original meanings (Aguirre & Bolton, 2014). Original authors' work and ideas need to be acknowledged to avoid plagiarism, and the synthesis needs to stay close to original findings to avoid their misinterpretation (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Walsh & Downe, 2005). These concerns are central to QMS because primary studies often contain rich and sensitive narratives that were

produced within specific relational and cultural settings. Treating these accounts with care is especially important in research involving schools and young people, where experiences are situated within unequal power relationships and may already be vulnerable to interpretation.

Another important ethical consideration is the transparency of the research process. Qualitative interpretations are subjective; therefore, the writer needs to be clear about theoretical assumptions and methodological orientations that informed them (Noblit & Hare, 1988). This chapter offers detailed descriptions of the research process, including the selection and inclusion of studies and the quality assessment procedures. Transparency reduces the risk of imposing new meanings onto participants' accounts and allows readers to understand how interpretive decisions were made. This is consistent with ethical expectations of QMS, which emphasise accountability and openness about how interpretations are produced. The reflectivity section of this chapter informs the reader about the process of interpretation to demonstrate that it is not imposed onto the data without critical scrutiny.

Meta-syntheses usually do not require the approval of an ethics committee because they work with data that has already been collected and published. Even though ethics approval was not required, ethical awareness still guided the analytic process throughout the study. This included careful attention to how participants' experiences were represented and how much interpretive distance was appropriate, in keeping with the ethical expectations for QMS. Additionally, the proposal for this project underwent perusal by the research office at Massey University and received a low-risk notification.

Reflexivity and Positionality Statement

Given the interpretive nature of qualitative meta-synthesis, it is important to acknowledge the position that I bring to this work and how it may have shaped the research process. My primary

professional background is in education, and previously I worked as a teacher before moving into the mental health field. I am now a registered counsellor working mainly with adults, although I have a strong interest in early intervention and the role that schools play in supporting students' wellbeing. I am also a certified mindfulness facilitator and maintain a personal mindfulness practice. These experiences meant that I came to this project with an appreciation of the potential value of mindfulness and with an expectation that it might be beneficial for students.

Reflexivity is essential in QMS because the researcher's prior experiences and assumptions influence how concepts are interpreted and how connections between studies are made. Recognising this influence helps ensure that interpretations are grounded in the evidence rather than shaped by personal preferences and professional commitments.

To remain aware of these assumptions, I engaged in deliberate and ongoing reflective practice throughout the synthesis. This included staying close to the original texts, repeatedly returning to the findings of each study, and checking my interpretations against the authors' own accounts. I also made reflective notes while synthesising themes, especially when I sensed that my prior experience might be influencing the direction of interpretation. These steps helped me ensure that meanings were developed from primary research rather than from my own expectations. This was particularly important given critiques within mindfulness research regarding expectancy and facilitator allegiance effects, which may influence the interpretation and reporting of outcomes (Ghanbari Noshari et al., 2023; Kreplin et al., 2018). This also supports the trustworthiness of the synthesis by creating a traceable record of how interpretive decisions were made, which is recommended in QMS to enhance credibility (Malterud, 2019).

As an additional reflexive strategy, authors of the original studies were contacted after the synthesis was completed. This step supported reflexive checking of interpretations as recommended

in qualitative meta-synthesis (Walsh & Downe, 2005). Six authors were approached; however, two emails were undeliverable due to outdated contact details. Three authors provided feedback on the following five studies: Ager et al. (2014), Albrecht et al. (2018), Rix and Bernay (2014), Rix and Rix (2018), and Rix and Rix (2019). Overall, the feedback was positive, with authors indicating that the interpretations presented in the Findings chapter were consistent with their original findings.

Alongside these reflective considerations, it is also important to outline the position from which I approached this research. In this project, I worked as an external analyst rather than someone embedded in Aotearoa New Zealand schools, and I had no involvement in delivering or evaluating the programmes included in this synthesis. My current professional role sits outside the school setting, which means I engaged with the studies from a position of analytical distance. At the same time, my familiarity with mindfulness practice meant that I understood the practices described in the original research, but I did not have personal ties to any of the contexts or participants. This combination of distance and familiarity shaped my reading of the studies. It reduced the likelihood of personal allegiance to any particular programme while still allowing me to interpret descriptions of mindfulness practices with accuracy and nuance. Making this positionality explicit supports ethical and methodological transparency, which is encouraged in QMS to help readers understand the lens through which the synthesis was conducted.

Digital writing tools (Grammarly and QuillBot) were used for proofreading and identifying typographical and grammatical errors. These tools were not used to generate content or influence analytic decisions, and all interpretations remained the responsibility of the researcher.

Summary

This chapter has set out the methods used to conduct the qualitative meta-synthesis, including the search strategy, selection criteria, quality assessment procedures and the analytic

approach informed by meta-ethnography and critical realism. It has also outlined the steps taken to ensure transparency, coherence, and reflexive awareness throughout the process, along with ethical considerations. These foundations support the credibility of the synthesis and provide a clear basis for the presentation of findings in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative meta-synthesis exploring the impact of mindfulness-based programmes in schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. This chapter begins by outlining how the themes were developed, and after that, presents the findings. This synthesis identified recurring patterns across the seven studies and organised them into themes and subthemes, capturing experiences, outcomes, and contextual factors of the implementation of programmes. The findings were separated into two main areas: student experiences and staff experiences, reflecting two distinct sets of MBP-related outcomes reported across the seven studies. In the student section, the analysis brought together what students said about their own experiences, along with teachers', counsellors', school leaders' and researchers' observations about student outcomes. In the staff section, the analysis focused on what adults reported about their own experiences and outcomes, as well as their own observation of programme implementation and student engagement. Presenting the findings in this way allowed the distinct experiential and outcome domains to be considered clearly while still showing how they inform and intersect with each other.

The themes presented in this chapter were developed through an iterative analytic process. Initial readings provided an overview of each study's aims, contexts, and key findings. During each stage, every article was scanned in full, with recurring ideas, metaphors, and outcome patterns highlighted and briefly annotated, allowing initial similarities and differences to be noticed without being fixed into categories too early. Following this, each study was re-read in depth and examined separately. Key concepts, participant quotes, and authors' interpretations relevant to student and adult experiences of mindfulness-based programmes were extracted into a matrix. As the reading progressed, preliminary codes were refined, merged where appropriate, and extended as new patterns became apparent.

Once this study-by-study work was completed, attention shifted to examining the matrix across studies. Coded themes were reviewed horizontally, grouped into broader clusters, and tested for coherence, with multiple saved versions documenting how themes were reorganised over time. This process led to the identification of candidate themes and subthemes for both students and staff, which were then checked against the original articles. The final stage involved repeatedly returning to the primary texts to ensure that each theme was grounded in participants' accounts and authors' interpretations, and that contextual and cultural nuances were retained. Through this cyclical movement between the studies, the matrices, and the developing thematic structure, the four themes for students: 1) Psychological Impact, 2) Impact on Learning, 3) Impact on Interpersonal Relationships, and 3) Engaging in Mindfulness Practice and three themes for staff: 1) Personal Benefits; 2) Professional Benefits; and 3) Success Factors were refined into the form presented in the chapter.

Themes: Students' Experiences

Analysis of students' accounts revealed four overarching themes: 1) Psychological Impact, Impact on Learning, 2) Impact on Interpersonal Relationships, and 3) Engaging in Mindfulness Practice (see Table 4). Three of these themes are further divided into subthemes that elaborate on and illustrate the broader categories.

Table 4
Summary of themes in students' experiences

Findings of the synthesis	**Number of contributing studies**	**References**
Theme 1: Psychological Impact		
Awareness and Understanding of Emotions	6	Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Hynds et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018; Rix & Rix, 2019

Increase in Positive Affect and Mindful Attitudes	7	Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014;Hydns et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2020; Rix & Rix, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016
Coping Strategies and Resilience	6	Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018; Rix & Rix, 2019
Impact on Specific Groups of Students	4	Rix & Bernay, 2014; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018; Rix & Rix, 2019
Theme 2: Impact on Learning		
Sustained Attention and Focus	6	Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Hynds et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018; Rix & Rix, 2019
Positive Attitude to Learning and Creativity	4	Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018
Holistic Understanding of Self and One's Connection to the World	2	Ager et al., 2014; Hynds et al., 2018
Theme 3: Impact on Interpersonal Relationships		Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Hynds et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018; Rix & Rix, 2019
Theme 4: Engaging in Mindfulness Practice		
Commitment to Practice Inside and Outside the Classroom	5	Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016
Experience of Practice and Change over Time	5	Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Hynds et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016
Far-reaching Effects of Mindfulness Practice	6	Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Hynds et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018; Rix & Rix, 2019

Theme 1: Psychological Impact

One of the most prominent themes across all seven studies was the impact of mindfulness on the psychological and emotional functioning of students, as described by students themselves and observed by teachers, counsellors, and school leaders. This theme brings together evidence that MBPs increased students' awareness and understanding of emotions, fostered positive affect, and supported the development of coping strategies and resilience, including particular groups of students with higher levels of need. Within this overarching theme, four subthemes were identified: 1) Awareness and Understanding of Emotions; 2) Increase in Psychological Wellbeing and Positive Affect; 3) Coping Strategies and Resilience; and 4) Impact on Specific Groups of Students.

Awareness and Understanding of Emotions. Students reported an enhanced ability to understand and notice their affective states, recognising both positive and negative emotions and how these shape responses to external stimuli and stressors (Ager et al., 2014), which was echoed in the observations by counsellors (Albrecht et al., 2018) and teachers (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). A teacher noted that *"[t]he children's emotion/feeling vocab has been extended…"* (Rix & Rix, 2019, p. 12) and commented that children expressed their feelings more easily. Mindfulness was thought to create a safe space, in which this could be achieved: *"Overall the tamariki learnt how to share and express their feelings to others. Learning that it was all right, and they were in a safe environment to express themselves."* (p. 15). Such developments not only enabled students to communicate their needs to the teachers clearly but also improved teachers' awareness of their needs, enabling these to be met more effectively (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2019).

Increase in Positive Affect and Mindful Attitudes. Across all seven studies, students appeared calm and relaxed during practice (Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018). A student described that *"[he] felt sleepy, relaxed and nice"* (Ager et al., 2014, p. 905). The feelings of calm and inner peace extended beyond practice itself and overall, students appeared more settled and less anxious at

school and at home (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). Improvements in children's emotional wellbeing were noted in the Rix and Rix (2018) study, which introduced mindfulness in the aftermath of the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. In addition, mindfulness interventions appeared to cultivate attitudes of gratitude and appreciation, with children expressing awareness of the positive aspects of their lives (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020). Finally, teachers reported an increase in children's self-esteem and confidence (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018).

Coping Strategies and Resilience. All but one study found that students developed strategies that helped them regulate emotions such as distress, anxiety, disappointment or anger (Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). Using these techniques demonstrated to students that they could manage their internal states. For example, one student shared that the awareness of breath exercise can be useful when he is worried, whereas another added that *"he'll use the breathing when he is 'tired and angry"* (Ager et al., 2014, p. 907). A teacher similarly observed that *"[t]he children can … calm themselves and understand that they have control of their emotions and feelings"* (Rix & Rix, 2018, p. 10). Findings indicate that students learned to press the "pause button" and slow down (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014).

Mindfulness practices were also reported to cultivate resilience in the face of wider adversity. For instance, students drew on mindfulness skills during COVID lockdowns and when coping with parental separation and family suicide (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2019).

Impact on Particular Groups of Students. Four studies reported notable impacts on particular groups of students, three of which evaluated a locally developed MBP Pause, Breathe, Smile (PBS) (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019), while another applied mindfulness techniques adapted for the Te Whare Tapa Whā model of wellbeing (Rix & Bernay, 2014).

Hynds et al. (2020) noted considerable changes in the behaviour of boys across all three schools, noting their readiness to use PBS strategies, increased willingness to talk about their feelings, and an interest in the neurobiology of emotions. Substantial improvements were also observed among the students with behavioural challenges such as hyperactivity and difficulty focusing (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2019). One teacher noted *"… profound effects on a couple of children*" *who had previously been unable to sit still and were easily distracted, were now able to focus and pay attention"* (Rix & Bernay, 2014, p. 211). Students with higher levels of needs, such as those with autism, benefitted from MBPs, too. Even in more severe cases, the children were able to participate in mindfulness practice alongside others and applied strategies to cope when they were feeling overwhelmed (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2019).

These findings indicate that MBPs improve students' psychological wellbeing through increasing their emotional literacy and resilience, equipping them with valuable emotion regulation strategies, cultivating mindful attitudes, and fostering positive affect. This was particularly evident in students with learning and behavioural challenges supported by locally developed programmes.

Theme 2: Impact on Learning

Impact on Learning was another prominent theme across seven studies, reflecting important changes in students' attention, readiness to learn, and attitudes towards learning. Drawing on accounts from both students and staff, this theme shows how mindfulness was associated with students settling more easily into tasks, sustaining focus, and approaching learning with greater engagement and interest, as well as developing a more holistic sense of self and connection to the world. This was reflected in the following three subthemes: 1) Sustained Attention and Focus; 2) Positive Attitude to Learning and Creativity; 3) Holistic Understanding of Self and One's Connection to the World.

Sustained Attention and Focus. Five studies emphasised the effect of mindfulness interventions on students' ability to sustain attention and manage distractions (Ager et al., 2015; Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). Students started to slow down and found it easier to sit still despite distractions happening at school, which was noticed by the children themselves and their teachers. They drew on mindfulness techniques as reminders to bring their attention back. For example, a teacher noted that *"[t]he children's ability to focus on the learning curriculum was greatly enhanced by the skills learnt through PBS"* (Rix & Rix, 2018, p. 10). Teachers also observed that students appeared mentally refreshed, settled into tasks more quickly and that starting classes with mindfulness created a calmer atmosphere (Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). However, in one school, no such changes were observed, which was attributed to low motivation in the teacher (Rix & Bernay, 2014). By contrast, in another school, the delivery of MBP coincided with improvements in reading (Ager et al., 2014).

Positive Attitude to Learning and Creativity. Mindfulness practices were also linked to shifts in students' learning dispositions. Across five studies, they showed higher engagement with tasks, increased motivation, and an overall positive attitude towards learning (Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). For instance, a primary student's diary demonstrates the transformation. Before the practice, he wrote *"I feel tired, stressed and anxious"* and afterwards, he said *"I feel happy to learn"* (Ager et al., 2014, p. 907). Additionally, teachers observed increased levels of creativity and curiosity among students (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018). One teacher noticed an overlap between students' attitude towards mindfulness and their general approach to learning: *"I noticed the same ones who are not connecting wholeheartedly to the practice, are the ones not connecting to their learning in other times"* (Rix & Rix, 2019, p. 13).

Holistic Understanding of Self and One's Connection to the World. Mindfulness interventions appeared to foster a deeper and more holistic understanding of self in students (Ager et al., 2014; Hynds et al., 2020). They began to see themselves as embedded in and interconnected with the world and environment, feeling close to their whenua and whānau in their own reports (Ager et al., 2014) and teachers' accounts (Hynds et al., 2020). Teachers highlighted how the ideas of understanding oneself and one's connectedness to the world were cultivated by mindfulness aligned with Māori worldviews: *"These are very Māori concepts - connecting to environment and self, hikitia te hā - connecting to atua, the hā/breath is the basis for everything Māori. Children enjoyed learning about Te Whare Tapa Whā and how it interconnects"* (Hynds et al., 2020, p. 29).

The findings in theme two suggest that MBPs may not only influence immediate classroom behaviour such as sustained attention and positive view of learning, but also students' wider dispositions, including perceptions of self and their interconnectedness with the world. However, the variations in outcomes point to the importance of contextual conditions, such as teacher and student motivation and cultural framing.

Theme 3: Impact on Interpersonal Relationships

This theme captures the way in which mindfulness interventions supported students' relationships with peers and teachers in and outside the classroom and explains how enhanced emotional awareness and self-regulation contributed to more positive, cooperative, and peaceful interactions.

Several studies reported that MBPs enhanced awareness of their social connections (Albrecht et al., 2018) and deepened their understanding of how their words and behaviours can affect others (Ager et al., 2014; Hynds et al., 2020). Students and teachers in five studies described the development of qualities such as kindness, respect, acceptance, empathy and patience towards

both peers and adults (Ager et al., 2014; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). One teacher observed: *"…they seem to be interacting more positively with each other and adults around the school"* (Rix & Rix, 2018, p. 9).

Mindfulness practice appeared to support students in recognising and considering other people's perspectives, with some changes emerging gradually over several weeks (Rix & Bernay, 2014). The same study reported no positive changes in the classroom where the teacher was not motivated. Other research showed students extending kindness towards peers with special needs or behavioural challenges after PBS and responding to them with greater patience and flexibility (Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). Across studies, these developments were linked to stronger interpersonal skills. Four studies reported improvements in conflict resolution with students drawing on emotion regulation strategies they had practised during MBPs (Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix et al., 2014; Rix & Rix, 2019). Teachers noted that students learned to label their emotions, think before acting, recognise triggers, and remove themselves from conflict.

As a result, interactions became more positive and peaceful, while aggressive and bullying behaviour significantly reduced (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018). A school leader noticed *"… behaviours going down in the playground in terms of children getting angry or frustrated and getting into fights in the playground. The extent to which that has declined is massive."* (Hynds et al., 2020, p. 14). In classrooms, teachers reported calmer atmosphere and increased cooperation during group work, with students listening better to peers and teachers leading to a stronger sense of community in the school and an uplifted wairua, or spirit (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018).

The findings of the studies demonstrate that MBPs can cultivate empathy, compassion, perspective-taking, active listening, and collaboration, enabling students to interact more positively

with others. However, these changes were more pronounced in the schools in which teacher motivation was higher, which suggests that interpersonal outcomes do depend not only on individual mindfulness practice but also on teachers' enthusiasm. The emergence of enhanced wairua in schools points to the importance of cultural alignment of mindfulness interventions.

Theme 4: Engaging in Mindfulness Practice

Theme Four describes students' experience of engaging in mindfulness practice, both at school and beyond, and shows how their engagement changed over time and varied across age groups and individual needs. This theme brings together accounts of what students found enjoyable or challenging, routines and activities that supported participation, and how mindfulness strategies were taken up in everyday life. It is organised into three subthemes: 1) Commitment to Practice Inside and Outside of Classroom; 2) Experience of Practice and Change Over Time; and 3) Far-reaching Effects of Mindfulness Practice.

Commitment to Practice Inside and Outside the Classroom. Findings indicate that students generally enjoyed mindfulness practice. One teacher described the routine, which helped set up a positive tone for the day: *"The hour or so after PBS practice is Golden Learning time! We usually call the roll, sing our morning song and say our karakia and then practice mindfulness. The children are loving the routine."* (Rix & Rix, 2019, p. 13). Certain activities, such as mindful art, were particularly appealing to the students and encouraged deeper engagement (Whitehead & Daniell, 2016).

Students were also willing to use mindfulness strategies to manage negative emotions and distress to regain their inner peace (Ager et al., 2014; Rix & Bernay, 2014). They recognised the benefits of regular practice and incorporated it into their daily activities outside of school (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014). Teachers noticed that skipping practice made a negative impact because students took longer to settle and days appeared more chaotic (Rix & Rix, 2019).

Experience of Practice and Change over Time. For many students, learning mindfulness was not an easy process. Those with ADHD[3] found focusing on breathing and sitting still challenging at first (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014). As one school leader explained: *"...when you were starting into the meditation pieces, focussed on breathing, some of our children found it difficult. Especially some of our children with ADHD, it was really difficult for them"* (Hynds et al., 2020, p. 23). However, as students became more familiar with the practice and knew what to expect, their experience improved, and they were able to settle into it faster.

Initially, some students were resistant to mindfulness. Several found the practice boring at first, but their interest and enjoyment grew as the course progressed (Albrecht et al., 2018). Engagement also varied by age: younger children were more responsive and enthusiastic, while older students showed more shyness and self-consciousness (Albrecht et al., 2018). Some older students were reluctant to participate, seeing mindfulness as *"silly, uncool"*, and others were sceptical because of negative experiences at a previous school (Rix & Rix, 2019, p. 15), creating *"… a buzz of negativity…"* (Rix & Rix, 2018, p. 15). Over time, most students became more open and reported enjoying the practice. However, not all children engaged fully: some felt uncomfortable after trying it, and others opted out altogether, so schools made alternative arrangements during sessions (Albrecht et al., 2018).

Far-Reaching Effects of Mindfulness Practice. A notable finding across nearly all studies was that the effect of mindfulness extended beyond the classroom (Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). Students applied mindfulness strategies to manage difficult emotions and even taught specific techniques to parents, peers, siblings, and wider whānau as noted in one study: *"[o]ne year five child told her parents to just*

[3] Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder

breathe slowly when you get angry!" (Rix & Rix, 2019, p. 14). However, some students expressed a need for more strategies to address challenges outside the school and family context, for example, online bullying (Rix & Rix, 2018).

Overall, student engagement with mindfulness practice appeared to be shaped by enjoyment, age, prior experiences, and individual needs. At the beginning, some resistance was noted among older students; however, many became receptive over time, and practices often extended into family and daily life. These findings highlight the importance of understanding how mindfulness is introduced and supported in schools, as well as how its effects may ripple into broader social contexts.

Staff Experiences

During the analysis of original interpretations of teachers', school leaders', and counsellors' data, three overarching themes were identified: 1) Personal Benefits; 2) Professional Benefits; and 3) Success Factors (see **Table *5***). The Success Factors theme was organised into three further subthemes. Most of the discussion in the original studies centred around students' outcomes and experiences; therefore, the section on staff is more concise.

Table 5
Summary of themes in staff experiences.

Findings of the synthesis	Number of contributing studies	References
Theme 1: Personal Benefits	5	Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016

Theme 2: Professional Benefits	4	Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018; Rix & Rix, 2019
Theme 3: Success Factors		
Attitudes: Teachers and Counsellors	6	Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018; Rix & Rix, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016
Training and Method of Delivery	4	Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016
Suitability and Adaptations	6	Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Hynds et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018; Rix & Rix, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016

Theme 1: Personal Benefits

This theme examines the personal benefits of MBPs for teachers and counsellors as reflected in their accounts of how mindfulness practice affected their own sense of wellbeing. Both groups reported psychological benefits of mindfulness, including stress reduction, greater calm and an overall sense of wellbeing (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). They looked forward to mindfulness activities and valued their effects. A counsellor shared: *"…it was really nice to be able to take the time out for myself, and to learn some new ways to manage some of my own stress."* (Albrecht et al., 2018, p. 8). Moreover, the emotional stability was experienced not only at work but at home, too. Teachers reported being calmer and more engaged with their own children and spouses: *"...I'm more aware and more willing to take the time to comfort and support, when my four-year-old is having a meltdown."* (Hynds et al., 2020, p. 19).

Psychological benefits of mindfulness practice were evident in the teachers' and counsellors' ability to pause and reflect (Hynds et al., 2020), to identify origins of stress, and to manage it using mindfulness skills (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). A counsellor shared that they were *"… under quite a lot of stress in that term, and so I found myself using breathing a lot more, and muscle flection and relaxation skills taught there"* (Albrecht et al., 2018, p. 8). Teachers spoke about a greater sense of connectedness to self (Rix & Bernay, 2014), increased self-awareness (Rix & Rix, 2018), and heightened awareness of somatic and cognitive experiences (Whitehead & Daniell, 2016).

Mindfulness practice appeared to give an opportunity to teachers and counsellors to consider priorities in their lives. It raised awareness of the importance of personal life, family, and self-care, which also appeared to contribute to the sense of wellbeing (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). A counsellor reported that *"… it was really nice to be able to take the time out for myself, and to learn some new ways to manage some of my own stress"* (Albrecht et al., 2018, p. 8).

These findings suggest that mindfulness fostered increased psychological wellbeing cultivating inner peace and patience that stretched beyond the classroom. Teachers and counsellors not only developed greater self-awareness and emotion regulation but also re-examined personal priorities, which had significant implications for their private lives.

Theme 2: Professional Benefits

In addition to improvements in their personal lives, mindfulness interventions benefitted teachers and counsellors professionally, with the studies describing a range of ways their work was affected. A key outcome was that teachers developed a deeper understanding of children's behaviour and the factors influencing it (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018). This was particularly

important when working with children with special needs and behavioural challenges. A leader reflected: "*Some children have very high needs and complex behaviours and PBS has helped the staff understand how those children can escalate so rapidly."* (Hynds et al., 2020, p. 23). Mindfulness-based programmes, specifically PBS in this case, equipped teachers with tools to anticipate conflict and tension in the classroom and to respond to those more constructively (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018). Overall, they described feeling more flexible and sensitive in their practice (Rix & Rix, 2018).

Teachers mentioned the demands of their workload and how easily they became caught up in the busyness of everyday tasks (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018). Mindfulness helped them to recognise the value of slowing down and pausing during teaching, which led to feeling calmer and more relaxed in the classroom.

Another professional benefit was the sense of kotahitanga (togetherness, coming together as one) created through whole-school participation in mindfulness (Hynds et al., 2020). Teachers commented that this collective approach created space to share their teaching experiences, and develop a common language: *"Having the whole staff involved in the programme developed a sense of kotahitanga ... where teachers had the space to engage in conversations about what they were doing in classrooms and the impact it was having."* (Hynds et al., 2020, p. 20). This collegiality extended to relationships between students and staff, strengthening collaboration and connectedness (Rix & Rix, 2019). Counsellors also described enjoying opportunities to work together and engage in reciprocal critique and feedback (Albrecht et al., 2018).

Findings indicate that mindfulness supported professional growth by enhancing teachers' and counsellors' capacity to understand and manage students' challenging behaviour, to slow down,

remain calm under pressure, and to work more collaboratively in their schools. In this way, MBPs appear to contribute not only to individual practice but also to the professional culture in schools.

Theme 3: Success Factors

This theme explores the factors that contributed to the success of MBPs, outlining the contextual conditions that shaped their implementation. In doing so, it draws on staff descriptions of the attitudes and supports that influenced how the programmes worked in their schools. Here, three subthemes were identified: 1) Attitudes of Participating Staff and parents; 2) Training and Method of Delivery; 3) Suitability and Adaptations.

Attitudes of Participating Staff and Parents. Attitudes of all those involved, that is, leadership, teachers, programme facilitators, and parents, emerged as crucial for successful implementation (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). Where programmes were not initiated by school management, securing their support was paramount (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020). For example, in the school in Albrecht et al. (2018) study, the drivers for the programme were two counsellors, who believed in the MBP. However, they were unable to implement the programme across the entire school, which they considered a disadvantage. By contrast, schools in the Hynds et al. (2020) study benefitted from enthusiastic and committed leaders who ensured that the programme was implemented holistically, resulting in stronger outcomes (Hynds et al., 2020).

Teachers' engagement was equally important. In two studies (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020), they expressed initial scepticism and concern about added workload *"… I thought, "Oh, here we go. Another initiative to put in place. Another thing to teach, on top of what you're already teaching."* (Hynds et al., 2020, p. 14). They were reassured that the programme would require minimal extra preparation. Although some discomfort persisted early on, most teachers became

more motivated once they observed positive changes in their classrooms (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020). Many began practising mindfulness in their own time and reported personal benefits (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). Over time, most became committed to regular practice in class, modelling it to students and even incorporating it in staff meetings (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). The concept of 'ako', where teaching and learning happen together, was seen as particularly valuable (Hynds et al., 2020). However, not all teachers engaged equally, with lower levels of commitment linked to weaker outcomes (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014).

Counsellors' positive attitude as facilitators was also essential (Albrecht et al., 2018). They described the importance of maintaining personal practice and were even more committed to continue with it when they began to notice positive changes in themselves and students, which, despite difficulties, gave them motivation and a sense of hope (Albrecht et al., 2018).

Feedback regarding parents' support was mixed. While most parents welcomed MBPs, several caregivers in Albrecht et al. (2018) opted out, which was met with respect and understanding: *"… two parents pulled out and said that they didn't want their children to be in the program, so we honored that"* (Albrecht et al., 2018, p. 7). These differing levels of support influenced how well mindfulness was reinforced beyond the classroom. Counsellors emphasised the value of involving parents more directly so that home and school environments could reinforce each other, and practice could be maintained.

Continuing practice both at home and in class was considered essential (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018). Studies reported that children with behaviour challenges returned to previous patterns without practice (Hynds et al., 2020). By contrast, Rix and Bernay (2014) found that children who engaged in mindfulness at least twice per week continued to show

positive effects at a three-month follow-up. Ensuring this level of continuity depended largely on the attitudes and motivation of facilitators, teachers, school leaders, and parents.

Training and Method of Delivery. Teachers and counsellors expressed strong interest in professional development and further mindfulness courses (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014). Opportunities to observe experienced facilitators were seen as particularly valuable (Albrecht et al., 2018). Whitehead and Daniell (2016) reflected that teachers would have benefited from learning mindfulness separately from the students so that they could have given it their full attention.

There were mixed views about who should deliver programmes (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018). Some favoured experienced external facilitators while others felt that this would impede students' engagement and the maintenance of the programme (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018). Some teachers thought that counsellors might be better equipped to deliver the programmes due to their understanding of psychological concepts (Albrecht et al., 2018). Regardless of the role, the engagement and enthusiasm of the facilitator was considered vital.

Suitability and Adaptations. The locally developed PBS programme was consistently regarded as culturally responsive and fitting for both Māori and non-Māori students (Hynds et al., 2020). Moreover, it could be easily adjusted to suit the culture of a place and particular communities by including karakia, waiata, and tikanga of the local iwi and hapū (Hynds et al., 2020). In comparison, the American programme MindUp was seen as less suitable, with teachers commenting about some activities having *"… Eastern and ethereal flavour"* (Whitehead & Daniell, 2016, p. 17).

Locally developed programmes were also viewed as aligning well with the NZ curriculum, particularly within Health and Physical Education, Science, and Social Sciences (Rix & Bernay, 2014;

Rix & Rix, 2019). All programmes featured in this synthesis required adaptations to meet developmental and learning needs (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). In some schools, facilitators developed their own manuals and supplementary resources, which demanded significant time and effort (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020). They expressed a desire for structured resources similar to certain NZ wellbeing programmes.

These findings suggest that the success of MBPs in schools depends on a complex interplay of factors, including the commitment of leadership, teacher engagement, parental support, facilitator training, and cultural alignment. Programmes were most effective when the enthusiasm and support of all stakeholders were strong, and when MBPs were adapted to students' developmental level and needs of students, as well as the cultural contexts of schools.

Conclusion

The findings from this qualitative meta-synthesis of seven studies on mindfulness-based programmes in schools in Aotearoa New Zealand suggest that these interventions can significantly enhance children's and adults' psychological wellbeing, academic and professional experiences, and the overall school climate, provided the practice is maintained regularly. Positive outcomes often extended beyond the classroom to playground interactions and family lives.

Only one study reported any follow-up. Rix and Bernay (2014) surveyed students three months after the final session and found that most changes were still evident. As the remaining studies did not include follow-up data, the longer-term outcomes for both students and teachers remain uncertain. The effectiveness of MBPs was not uniform and depended on factors such as student and facilitator engagement, teacher motivation, leadership commitment, and parental

support. Outcomes were particularly strong when the programmes were adapted to students' developmental needs and aligned with the culture of the school and wider community.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the qualitative meta-synthesis in relation to the wider literature, focusing on how mindfulness-based programmes in schools operate. It situates the discussion within the cultural and educational context of Aotearoa New Zealand, including relevant wellbeing frameworks and bicultural commitments. The chapter concludes with implications for practice and policy, limitations of the meta-synthesis, and directions for future research.

Mechanisms of Change

In this synthesis, mechanisms of change refer to the underlying processes through which mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs) bring about shifts in experience, behaviour, and classroom climate. The themes discussed below are interpreted in relation to established theoretical models of mindfulness. Participant accounts were consistent with several mechanisms described in the literature, including attention regulation, emotional regulation, self-awareness, and interpersonal processes. The findings indicate that MBPs operate within interconnected psychological, interpersonal, and reflective mechanisms that collectively shape learning and wellbeing. This synthesis suggests that these processes do not occur in isolation but reinforce one another: individual regulation supports positive relationships, which in turn create emotionally safe environments where reflective insight can deepen.

Understanding how these mechanisms interact helps explain why MBPs often lead to broad and sustained benefits within school communities. These interlinked mechanisms also mirror how wellbeing is conceptualised in Aotearoa New Zealand policy, where emotional functioning, relationships, engagement in learning, and identity are treated as mutually reinforcing domains, consistent with Māori models such as Te Whare Tapa Whā, which view these dimensions as

inherently interconnected (Durie, 1994; Education Review Office, 2015a, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2007). In other words, the same underlying mechanisms can produce quite different outcomes depending on how they are located within classroom relationships, school routines, and the cultural and policy settings of each school community.

Psychological Mechanisms

The findings of this study indicate that mindfulness-based programmes in schools support a cluster of psychological shifts among students and teachers, including calmer affect, improved understanding and regulation of emotions, increased resilience, and reduced anxiety (Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). These outcomes align with wider NZ and international research, which also reports improvements in attention, emotional regulation, and wellbeing (Bernay, 2012; Bernay et al., 2016; Chaplow & Frewin, 2019; Devcich et al., 2017; Dunning et al., 2022; Jamieson, 2015; Mazza-Davies, 2015; Rix, 2017; Weare, 2018; Zenner et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2020). In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, these psychological changes align with policy descriptions of student wellbeing that emphasise positive feelings, resilience, self-optimism, and satisfaction with learning experiences (Education Review Office, 2015a, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2007). They also align with Māori perspectives in which taha hinengaro (emotional wellbeing) is supported through the balance across spiritual, physical, and relational domains (Durie, 1994).

A consistent feature in the synthesised studies was improved attention and greater readiness to learn (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019), a pattern also identified in international and local evidence (Dunning et al., 2022; Dunning et al., 2019; Jamieson, 2015; Mazza-Davies, 2015; Weare, 2018; Zenner et al., 2014). Where follow-up data were available, these effects appeared to continue for several months (Bernay et al., 2016; Devcich et al., 2017; Rix & Bernay, 2014).

The findings also point to distinctive benefits of particular student groups. One study reported that teachers and school leaders perceived particular benefits for boys, especially in relation to emotional expression and understanding other's feelings (Hynds et al., 2020). This pattern mirrors international findings showing reduced impulsivity and improved coping in male adolescents engaging in mindfulness programmes (Roux & Philippot, 2020; Sibinga et al., 2013). However, effects are not uniform across all male cohorts. For example, one NZ study reported no significant changes in resilience following MBP (Skogstad, 2017). These findings suggest potential but variable responsiveness among boys, which highlights a need for closer examination of how contextual factors shape outcomes for different groups.

Students with behavioural challenges and those with ASD[4] and ADHD diagnoses also benefited across several studies in the synthesis (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2019). Wider research reflects a similar pattern: MBPs have been associated with enhanced attention and executive functioning and reductions in problematic behaviour among children with behavioural and emotion regulation challenges (Lu et al., 2018; Singh, 2016; van de Weijer-Bergsma et al., 2012). Findings specific to ASD show reductions in anxiety and behavioural challenges and improvements in interpersonal functioning (Hwang et al., 2015; Ridderinkhof et al., 2018). However, attention-related outcomes appear mixed, with one study reporting no significant changes (Ridderinkhof et al., 2020). Evidence is also unclear regarding broader behaviour outcomes: while several reviews point to reductions in disruptive behaviour (Dunning et al., 2022; Klingbeil et al., 2017; Weare, 2018), others report only small effects (Dunning et al., 2019). These patterns suggest that mindfulness may support particular regulatory processes, but its behavioural effects vary across contexts and populations.

[4] Autism Spectrum Disorder

These outcomes reflect core psychological mechanisms identified in mindfulness literature: attention regulation, embodied (interoceptive) awareness, and emotional, behavioural, and cognitive regulation (Baer, 2003; Baer et al., 2006; Bishop et al., 2004; Hölzel et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2006; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). These represent generative mechanisms, or latent capacities which mindfulness practice can activate depending on contextual conditions (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1978).

Attention regulation typically initiates this process. Through repeated redirection of attention, mindfulness practitioners begin interrupting automatic reactions, allowing space for more deliberate responses (Bishop et al., 2004; Hölzel et al., 2011). This was reflected in the synthesised studies as teachers observed reduced impulsivity and greater ability to re-focus after distraction (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014). Embodied awareness complements this by sharpening early signs of stress. When students notice somatic cues sooner, they can employ strategies, typically breathing or grounding, before escalation occurs (Baer, 2003; Hölzel et al., 2011). Several NZ accounts documented students linking emotions and sensations, and using somatic cues as prompts for regulation (Bernay et al., 2016; Mazza-Davies, 2015; Rix & Rix, 2018; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016).

Self-regulation then integrates these processes. Through enhanced attentional control, interoceptive awareness, and an attitude of acceptance, mindfulness practitioners show calmer appraisal of stressors and more intentional behaviour (Baer, 2003; Hölzel et al., 2011; Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2013). This was evident in the synthesis as children became more able to name emotions, identify triggers, and choose alternative responses (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014). This pattern is consistent with research linking mindfulness to reduced automatic thinking (Maloney, 2015) and strengthened affective and interoceptive awareness (Filipe et al., 2021). Language played a practical role too, as providing vocabulary for emotions tends to anchor regulatory shifts (Bishop et al., 2004), as shown in Rix & Rix's (2019) study, where emotional labelling became more explicit. Across the synthesised studies, these psychological shifts were described in

accounts where mindfulness was practised regularly, linked to a shared vocabulary of emotions, and supported by calm teacher modelling, suggesting that the expression of psychological mechanisms was shaped by everyday relational and organisational conditions.

Interpersonal Mechanisms

Change was also evident in interpersonal relationships, resulting in calmer classrooms, improved communication, and enhanced empathy among students and staff (Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018; Bernay, 2012; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019), a pattern also reported in other NZ studies (Bernay et al., 2016; Davis, 2021; Jamieson, 2015; McAllister, 2020). These outcomes reflect the activation of relational mechanisms that link students' developing self-regulation to shifts in the wider interpersonal environment. They also align with NZ wellbeing indicators that foreground belonging, connection, feeling cared for, and social-emotional competence as core dimensions of school wellbeing, echoing Māori concepts of whanaungatanga and collective responsibility (Durie, 1994; Education Review Office, 2015a, 2016), suggesting that mindfulness may support relational qualities that schools are asked to foster.

A central mechanism here is co-regulation, the reciprocal process through which a regulated adult helps stabilise a young person's emotional and physiological state, thereby supporting the development of regulatory capacity (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Constantin et al., 2022). In classroom settings, a teacher's calm presence serves as an anchor for students whose self-management skills are still developing (Chehayeb et al., 2025; Constantin et al., 2022; Nimmo, 2025). In this synthesis, teachers reported that when they maintained calm, students appeared more settled and attentive, and were better able to manage impulses (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014). This indicates that a teacher's affect can shape students' emotional awareness and self-management and can contribute to a reinforcing cycle of safety and trust.

A related process is empathic attunement, the capacity to recognise the feelings and perspectives of others. Mindfulness can facilitate this by enhancing sustained attention and reducing self-referential processing, which can support greater kindness, forgiveness, and compassion (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). This may also involve the mechanism of decentring and the emergence of self-transcendence, which can deepen empathy and a sense of connectedness with others (Bishop et al., 2004; Hölzel et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2006; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012).

Within the synthesis, regular shared practice contributed to a form of collective presence, a synchronised classroom rhythm that supported compassion, kindness, and collective calm (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018), which is also reported in other NZ studies (Bernay, 2012; Bernay et al., 2016). Teachers described cultivated openness, flexibility, perspective taking, and improved ability to identify emerging student needs. Staff also noted a sense of kotahitanga, understood as unity and shared purpose, and an increased enjoyment of collaboration (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020). These relational processes illustrate how individual self-regulation can contribute to enhanced group wellbeing. They also indicate that interpersonal mechanisms are expressed through teachers' way of relating and through shared classroom practices rather than operating as isolated individual processes.

Reflective and Meaning-Making Mechanisms

The synthesis indicates that mindfulness-based programmes in NZ schools supported not only emotional regulation and social connection but also reflective and meaning-making processes (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016), which is a common finding in other NZ evidence (Bernay, 2012; Bernay et al., 2016; Jamieson, 2015; Mazza-Davies, 2015). Teachers and counsellors reported increased self-awareness (Rix & Rix, 2018) and a stronger sense of connection to themselves (Rix & Bernay, 2014). For students,

mindfulness facilitated a deeper and more holistic understanding of self as well as the sense of connection with others and wider world (Ager et al., 2014; Hynds et al., 2020).

These reflective developments align with Māori understandings of wellbeing in which meaning-making is relational and grounded in connections to whānau, whenua, and the wider environment, highlighting how students' reflections on self and belonging may resonate with culturally rooted perspectives (Bernay et al., 2016; Durie, 1994; Hynds et al., 2020). They also sit comfortably with the New Zealand curriculum, which positions meaning-making as a core learning process through which students connect new experiences with prior knowledge, examine multiple perspectives, and develop deeper understandings across learning areas (Ministry of Education, 2007). In the synthesised studies, reflective and meaning-making processes were described in participant accounts that also referred to supportive classroom relationships. These accounts frequently situated mindfulness within culturally and /or curricularly grounded framings.

Participants appeared to develop meta-awareness, sometimes described as the observing self, which enables distance from automatic identification with thoughts and facilitates greater psychological clarity (Bishop et al., 2004; Hölzel et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2006; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). This shift represents a movement from subject to object, giving individuals a clearer perspective on their experiences. In the wider mindfulness literature, this transition is associated with increased calm, self-acceptance, and insight (Hölzel et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2006; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Mindfulness supports these developments through sustained non-judgmental awareness of inner states, which brings practitioners into closer contact with their inner world (Bishop et al., 2004; Hölzel et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2006). Attentional mechanisms direct awareness to events arising within the experience (Bishop et al., 2004; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012), and interoceptive awareness involves recognising bodily sensations (Hölzel et al., 2011). Previous

research links these processes to increased connection with self, self-acceptance, and self-identity (Anand & Karn, 2025; Klussman et al., 2020; Kohlenberg et al., 2009).

Mindfulness also appeared to clarify participants' values, a meaning-making mechanism described as the process through which individuals discern what matters to them and align their behaviour with those priorities (Shapiro et al., 2006). Within the synthesis, teachers and counsellors became more reflective and reconsidered the importance of self-care, life balance, and relationships beyond the classroom (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). These shifts contributed to greater wellbeing and professional sustainability. Similar mechanisms were noted in Bernay's (2012) work, where increased awareness allowed teachers respond to children's needs and conflicts more constructively. These meaning-making processes mediate between structural pressures, such as workload and curriculum demands, and personal agency, enabling educators to act in ways consistent with their values and professional purposes. Therefore, findings suggest that mindfulness may function not only as a set of techniques for improving attention, resilience, and interpersonal skills, but also a practice that supports self-enquiry, encourages self-care, and helps participants develop a more meaningful orientation in their lives.

In summary, the mechanisms of change that emerged in this synthesis show mindfulness as a dynamic and interconnected process rather than a single skill. While these patterns were evident across mindfulness programmes that differed in structure, delivery, and cultural framing, they represent shared themes within the available evidence rather than effects attributable to any single programme model. Attention regulation, emotional balance, and reflective insight reinforce one another through relational and contextual feedback loops. When enacted consistently within supportive classroom and school environments, these mechanisms extend beyond individual wellbeing to shape collective calm, relational safety, and professional resilience.

Contextual Conditions: Enabling and Constraining Factors

Findings show that mindfulness mechanisms operate depending on conditions that either allow or limit their expression. Contextual factors such as teacher commitment, leadership support, and cultural fit play an important role in shaping whether latent capacities for attention, regulation, and reflection become realised.

Enabling Conditions

Teacher Embodiment. Teacher embodiment, understood as the extent to which teachers personally practice mindfulness and model it to the students (Van Aalderen et al., 2014), emerged as a central enabling condition. Teachers who engaged in their own practice reported greater calm, patience, and capacity to model these qualities to students (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). When teachers valued mindfulness and integrated it into classroom routines, students appeared more settled and attentive (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2019). Where teachers appeared confident or consistent, reported outcomes were stronger (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014). Several noted that once external facilitation ended, continuity depended on teachers' commitment (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014).

These findings align with broader evidence that teachers' own practice enhances authenticity, classroom climate, and emotional modelling (Arthurson, 2017; Higgins et al., 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Regular practice also supports teachers' wellbeing, interactions with students, and capacity to integrate mindfulness meaningfully into lessons (Akhavan et al., 2021), which underscores the importance of accessible and structured professional development.

The quality of training was emphasised in several studies where teachers and counsellors expressed interest in guidance from experienced facilitators and noted that learning alongside students limited their capacity to engage fully (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). Similar concerns appear in recent research highlighting variability in facilitators' expertise and the need for consistent professional learning to maintain programme effectiveness (Kenwright et al., 2023). Teachers with prior mindfulness experience reported higher readiness and perceived implementation success (Higgins et al., 2016; Kenwright et al., 2023; Van Aalderen et al., 2014).

Overall, teacher embodiment and professional learning functioned as interconnected enabling conditions. Personal practice provides the emotional and attentional grounding required for authentic modelling, while structured training builds the competence vital for sustained, confident implementation.

Supportive Leadership and Curriculum Fit. Leadership commitment and organisational flexibility were central to programme success (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). Senior leaders who endorsed mindfulness and provided structural opportunities for practice signalled that wellbeing was a shared priority. This support strengthened teachers' motivation and reduced concerns about mindfulness, adding to existing responsibilities. Leadership also interacted with workload pressures. When leaders created timetable space or incorporated mindfulness into established routines such as staff meetings, morning transitions, teachers found it more feasible to deliver the practice consistently. These patterns reflect wider NZ and international evidence showing that time pressures and competing demands do not leave space for teachers' own and classroom practice unless school leaders create favourable conditions for this (Bernay, 2012; Joyce et al., 2010; Kenwright et al., 2023; Mazza-Davies, 2015).

From an organisational perspective, these findings align with models that emphasise shared vision and alignment of school culture with values of care and reflection (Harris, 2013; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). When leaders model openness and prioritise staff wellbeing, they establish a school climate in which mindfulness can be practised meaningfully. As Schein (2016) argues, leadership shapes organisational culture by reinforcing norms of trust and learning, which determine how new practices are interpreted and adopted.

Leadership support also strengthened the conditions needed for whole-school approaches. Mindfulness appeared most effective when embedded across school structures rather than introduced as an isolated intervention. Schools that integrated mindfulness into shared routines and staff participation reported stronger and more cohesive outcomes (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2019). Where leadership was limited, implementation was fragmented (Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018). This reflects broader evidence that whole-school approaches enhance wellbeing outcomes in Aotearoa New Zealand (Education Review Office, 2016; Savage et al., 2020) and internationally (Savage et al., 2020; Sheinman & Hadar, 2017; World Health Organisation, 1996).

This discussion suggests that successful implementation depends not only on enthusiasm for mindfulness but also on how well it is situated within a school's organisational systems. Where leadership provides clear direction, allocates time, and integrates mindfulness into whole-school structures, practice becomes embedded rather than peripheral.

Cultural Mechanisms and Ontological Fit. Cultural alignment shaped how mindfulness programmes were received in schools. Teachers and students responded more positively when mindfulness practices resonated with cultural values and understandings of wellbeing (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). In the four studies using adaptations grounded in Te Whare Tapa Whā, mindfulness was described as meaningful and consistent with schools' broader

approach to wellbeing. These studies also reported positive impacts on students with developmental, behavioural, and academic challenges, suggesting that culturally responsive approaches might be particularly effective.

Broader NZ evidence reinforces these patterns. PBS was intentionally developed around Te Whare Tapa Whā and incorporates te reo Māori and culturally grounded metaphors that frame breathing and attention practices through concepts of “hikitia te hā”(“lift up the breath”), vitality, and wairua (Bernay et al., 2016; Pause Breathe Smile, n.d.). These features provide a culturally meaningful context and create opportunities for localised adaptation (Bernay et al., 2016; Devcich et al., 2017; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix, 2017). Likewise, the Atawhai programme demonstrated that rangatahi Māori understood mindfulness practices, particularly breathing, as coherent with Māori concepts of balance and wellbeing (McAllister, 2020). These findings suggest that culturally grounded MBPs may strengthen engagement and sustainability. In contrast, when mindfulness is framed as culturally neutral and purely psychological, it may appear disconnected from relational and spiritual perspectives central to te ao Māori (McCown et al., 2010).

Synthesised findings indicate that mindfulness aligns with te ao Māori when delivered with cultural sensitivity, which is consistent with other research (Jamieson, 2015; Ketu-McKenzie, 2019; Mapel & Simpson, 2011; McAllister, 2020; McDonald et al., 2021; Riley, 2018). Recent work further underscores the importance of cultural fit and localised adaptation (Miller et al., 2023) and highlights the broader contextual conditions that shape the effectiveness of in-school-based MBPs (Chaplow & Frewin, 2019; Dunning et al., 2022).

The discussion above suggests that cultural coherence acts as an enabling condition for mindfulness programmes. Where practices resonate with existing cultural values and frameworks, participants describe deeper engagement and clearer relevance. While cultural mechanisms were

not formally assessed, the consistency of observations suggests that cultural meaning shapes how psychological processes such as regulation and reflection are expressed in school contexts. This synthesis therefore contributes to emerging Aotearoa New Zealand scholarship by illustrating how MBPs can be embedded within Māori-informed wellbeing frameworks rather than being framed as culturally neutral techniques (Chaplow & Frewin, 2019; Jamieson, 2015; McAllister, 2020).

Constraining Conditions

Student Factors. Student engagement was influenced by developmental stage, prior experiences, and initial attitudes. Although engagement generally increased over time, early responses shaped how students' access to mechanisms of attention, regulation, and reflection (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019).

The developmental stage appeared to influence students' initial responses and how programmes needed to be delivered. Younger students tended to show greater openness, whereas older students were more likely to feel self-conscious or sceptical, a pattern noted in Jamieson (2015). Findings indicating that some older students perceived mindfulness as 'silly' and 'uncool' (Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019) suggest that resistance may reflect developmental factors rather than disengagement. In this sense, reluctance can be understood as shaped by heightened social awareness and sensitivity to peer norms, which may constrain early participation when practices are perceived as socially exposing.

The programme structure also intersected with students' age. Research suggests that younger children prefer sensory-based activities and immediate experiences, whereas older children benefit from clear explanations, simplified concepts and comprehension checks (Jamieson, 2015; Maloney, 2015; Miller et al., 2023). These distinctions were reflected in the synthesised studies, where adaptations included shorter sessions for younger learners, increased use of movement and

sensing, and simplification of complex ideas (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). By matching programme delivery to students' developmental capacities and expectations, these adaptations appear to support engagement and enable mindfulness mechanisms to activate.

Prior encounters with mindfulness further shaped students' willingness to engage. Negative expectations from earlier experiences further constrained participation for some students, and, in certain contexts, appeared to contribute to shared dynamics of scepticism or resistance (Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). These experiences shaped the expectations that students brought into new programmes, influencing early engagement.

Initial attitudes toward mindfulness played a significant role but were not fixed. Early scepticism or discomfort shaped early engagement (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019), aligning with wider research that mindfulness is often initially experienced as awkward or uncomfortable by those with no prior exposure (Bernay et al., 2016; Higgins et al., 2016). While many students became more receptive as programmes progressed, suggesting that familiarity and continued exposure can support reappraisal of mindfulness practices, some continued to opt out. This suggests that if negative expectations or social discomfort are not addressed, some students continue to disengage. Furthermore, earlier readiness among younger learners indicates that introducing mindfulness before heightened self-consciousness may encourage engagement.

These student factors function as proximal contextual conditions. They do not determine outcomes independently, but they shape the likelihood that mechanisms of mindfulness can be activated. Tailored practices, early introduction, and gradual familiarisation appear to support transitions from uncertainty to engagement, whereas insufficient adaptation or social discomfort can limit the depth of change.

Curriculum Pressures. Curriculum demands emerged as a consistent constraint, particularly regarding teachers' ability to deliver mindfulness consistently. Teachers and counsellors reported difficulty fitting mindfulness into an already full timetable and balancing it alongside existing curriculum expectations (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020). These pressures affected both frequency and quality of practice, limiting the space needed for attentional, regulatory, and relational skills to develop. Research outside the synthesis described similar patterns, including shortened lessons, reduced opportunity to check in with students, and omission of parts of programme components to meet curriculum requirements (Miller et al., 2023). Teachers in other studies also struggled to sustain practice because curriculum commitments reduced available time (Bernay, 2012; Joyce et al., 2010; Kenwright et al., 2023; Mazza-Davies, 2015). These pressures mean that mindfulness often remains secondary to core subjects. At the same time, findings show that authenticity of programmes was strengthened when mindfulness was linked to The New Zealand Curriculum (Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016), particularly through the key competencies of managing self, relating to others, and thinking. Similar conclusions appear in national evidence (Education Review Office, 2016; Kenwright et al., 2023).

Viewed collectively, these findings point to a tension within evidence. Mindfulness appears to fit conceptually within the curriculum, particularly within the Health and Physical Education learning area (Ministry of Education, 2007), which provides MPBs pedagogical legitimacy. However, conceptual fit does not guarantee allocated time, which explains calls to include mindfulness into formal curriculum (Kenwright et al., 2023). Several teachers noted that even when they saw curriculum relevance, academic priorities displaced mindfulness sessions (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020). Curriculum, therefore, operates as both an enabling and a constraining condition. It provides a rationale for inclusion but does not remove the structural pressures that limit consistency.

Home and Community Factors. Home and community contexts influenced both the implementation of mindfulness programmes and the extent to which practices can be taken up in children's wider environments. A small group of parents did not consent to their children's participation, indicating that caregivers' beliefs function as contextual conditions that shape programme acceptability, even when schools provide opportunities to explain the purpose of mindfulness (Albrecht et al., 2018). Evidence also suggests that parents' participation leads to stronger outcomes. Davis (2021) found that parent-child dyads practising PBS together reported improved communication, calmer interactions, and emotional co-regulation.

Parental responses within the wider NZ context reflect diverse interpretations of mindfulness, including concerns about its spiritual foundations and competing academic priorities (Harding, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Ethical considerations in the broader literature also note differing views on the purpose of mindfulness in schools and questions about facilitators' capacity to recognise when practices are unsuitable for certain children (Arthurson, 2017; Miller et al., 2023). These issues suggest that variations in family perspectives reflect broader beliefs, values, and experiences rather than a single concern.

Variation in family participation shapes whether mindfulness mechanisms can be activated at school and whether there are opportunities for reinforcement at home. When parents support or take up the practices, regulatory, relational, and reflective processes can be strengthened through their use in the home environment. When participation is not permitted, the mechanisms cannot be activated at school and reinforcement in the home contexts does not occur (Weare, 2018; Zenner et al., 2014). This pattern aligns with the ecological perspectives emphasising the interplay of school and family systems in shaping children's functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ethical considerations and family and community expectations, therefore, form part of the contextual conditions that influence how confidently schools can implement mindfulness.

To sum up, contextual conditions either enable or constrain the activation of mindfulness mechanisms in schools. Teacher embodiment and leadership support provide the immediate interpersonal and structural foundations for practice, while curriculum alignment and cultural coherence help anchor mindfulness within the wider educational environment. Conversely, time pressures, variation in training opportunities, and differences in family perspectives shape whether participation is possible and whether mindfulness can be taken up or reinforced outside school. These conditions influence how and when mindfulness practices can be implemented and sustained across school communities. These findings show that contextual conditions do not merely surround mindfulness practice but shape where and how the underlying mechanisms of attention, regulation, relationship, and reflection can be expressed.

Systemic Interactions and Emergent Outcomes

The study draws on findings that span micro (individual), meso (relational and school), and macro (institutional and policy) levels, aligning the analytic focus with the critical realist framework outlined earlier. Across the synthesised studies, mindfulness did not operate as a single or linear process but as a constellation of interacting mechanisms expressed across different domains of school life. No single mechanism, whether psychological, relational, organisational, or cultural, appeared sufficient on its own. The findings show that the expression of mindfulness outcomes depended on how classroom practices, school structures, cultural framing, and educational policies intersected (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2019). Variability in outcomes across schools with similar programme content suggests that interaction, rather than the presence of mechanisms in isolation, shaped the depth and stability of change.

At the micro-level, students' developing regulatory skills were closely linked to the relational environment created by teachers. Several studies highlighted that when teachers modelled calm, offered consistent guidance, and integrated mindfulness into daily routines, students were engaged

more readily and were able to develop mindfulness skills (Bernay, 2014; Hynds et al., 2020; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). In contrast, in classrooms where teachers were less confident, less experienced, or less consistent, student engagement appeared more variable (Albrecht et al., 2018; Rix & Bernay, 2014). The findings do not indicate that stress or workload directly weakened relational mechanisms, but they do suggest that teacher confidence, modelling, and regularity shaped the conditions in which individual psychological changes can take root.

At the meso level, school routines and leadership practices modulated how effectively relational and psychological processes took hold. Similar mindfulness strategies produced different outcomes depending on whether schools created structural continuity, for example, embedding mindfulness into transition time or staff meetings (Hynds et al., 2020). Where routines were absent or unstable, gains at the individual level tended to be less pronounced (Albrecht et al., 2018). These patterns suggest that practices requiring emotional presence and behavioural consistency are more fragile when institutional support is limited (Harris, 2013; Schein, 2016).

At the macro level, cultural and structural conditions shaped how mindfulness was interpreted and enacted. Cultural alignment with Māori models of wellbeing appeared to strengthen programme legitimacy and deepen engagement (Hynds et al., 2020). Curriculum structures also influenced programme implementation. Although mindfulness aligned conceptually with the New Zealand Curriculum (Rix & Bernay, 2014; Rix & Rix, 2019), this did not guarantee instructional time, which appeared to influence how consistently programmes were delivered. This appeared to shape school-level decisions, contributing to variability of how consistently programmes were delivered (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020). Cultural and curricular conditions, therefore, acted as macro-level structures framing the meaning, relevance, and sustainability of mindfulness practice.

In summary, these layers reveal a pattern of cross-level interdependence, where outcomes depended on how mechanisms at each level interacted. Individual engagement was more likely to improve when relational, organisational, and cultural conditions reinforced one another. Conversely, misalignment across levels, such as cultural resonance but limited curricular space, or motivated teachers working without structural support, contributed to variability across schools. These patterns indicate that change in complex educational settings emerges from the interaction of multiple structures rather than through linear effects. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand schools, the most substantial shifts, including calmer classrooms or strengthened relationships, appeared when psychological, relational, curricular, and cultural supports aligned to create a coherent environment for practice. This cross-level pattern echoes national wellbeing and curriculum frameworks, including Māori interpretations of wellbeing in which learning, identity, wairua, and relationships are inseparable. In this framing, student wellbeing is understood as an emergent property of interconnected relationships, learning environments, and cultural contexts rather than as an individual trait alone (Durie, 1994; Education Review Office, 2015a, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2007, 2023).

Implications of Findings, Limitations, and Suggestions for Further Research

This section considers the implications for practice, policy, and further research. These are grounded in the patterns identified across the findings and discussion and are offered as context-sensitive considerations rather than prescriptive recommendations, alongside reflection on the limits of the existing evidence base.

Implications for Practice

The findings of the synthesis indicate that effective implementation depends not on isolated mindfulness activities but on how schools create conditions that allow underlying mechanisms to

operate. The synthesis shows that the activation and expression of mindfulness mechanisms were shaped by relational, organisational, and cultural conditions; accordingly, four implications for school practice are outlined below.

1. Prioritise teacher capability and personal practice.

Teacher modelling, attunement, and consistent emotional presence were closely linked to students' engagement and to calmer classrooms. These findings suggest that teachers' own regulatory capacity and familiarity with mindfulness practices form an important relational condition through which psychological, interpersonal and reflective mechanisms are expressed. Schools should therefore prioritise access to structured professional development that supports teachers' understanding of and personal engagement with mindfulness before programme implementation, rather than relying solely on scripted classroom activities. Such preparation may increase teachers' confidence, consistency, and capacity to integrate mindfulness meaningfully into everyday interactions.

2. Integrate mindfulness within school routines and structures.

The synthesis showed that mechanisms such as attention regulation, emotional self-management, and relational attunement were described in contexts where mindfulness was practised regularly and embedded within classroom routines. When practices were positioned as add-ons competing with existing curriculum demands, implementation appeared more fragmented. Integrating mindfulness into established routines (for example, transitions or collective settling moments) and, where possible, adopting a whole-school approach may provide organisational continuity required for mechanisms to develop over time, rather than remaining episodic and superficial.

3. Deliver culturally grounded practice.

Programmes that aligned with Māori models of wellbeing were described as more meaningful and engaging for both students and staff. Within the synthesis, culturally grounded framings appeared to shape how mindfulness was understood and taken up, influencing relational and reflective experiences rather than functioning as neutral techniques. For practice, this suggests value in selecting or adapting programmes that resonate with Māori concepts of hauora and in engaging with whānau and wider communities to clarify how mindfulness aligns with local values, identities, and expectations. Such alignment may support stronger engagement without assuming uniform cultural interpretation.

4. Adapt practices to developmental needs.

Differences in responsiveness across age groups indicate that the developmental stage shapes how students engage with mindfulness practices. Younger students appeared to respond more readily to sensory and movement-based activities, while older learners sometimes expressed self-consciousness or scepticism. Adapting session length, mode of practice, and levels of explanation may therefore support more equitable access to the underlying mechanisms identified in the synthesis without assuming that a single format might be suitable across age groups.

Implications for Policy

At the policy level, national and system-wide structures appeared to shape the stability and legitimacy needed for mindfulness mechanisms to function reliably across schools. The findings also suggest that system-level decisions about curriculum, professional learning, and wellbeing priorities shape the conditions under which mindfulness mechanisms are enacted across schools. On this basis, four implications for policy can be identified.

1. Provide clearer curriculum positioning of mindfulness.

Although mindfulness aligns conceptually with the wellbeing focus and key competencies of The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), it does not have explicit curriculum status. The synthesis indicates that this ambiguity contributes to variability in implementation, particularly where competing academic demands limit time allocation. Clearer curriculum positioning could help schools allocate time and integrate mindfulness more consistently, reducing the pressure to justify practice against competing academic demands.

2. Provide coherent professional development pathways.

Variation in training, facilitation, and ongoing support across schools emerged as a contextual factor influencing implementation quality. The synthesis suggests that without access to consistent professional learning, schools rely heavily on individual teacher capacity, increasing variability in how programmes are delivered. Policy initiatives that establish coherent training pathways, shared quality expectations, and stable resourcing may help reduce inequities between schools and support more consistent enactment of mindfulness practices.

3. Resource whole-school approaches.

Findings from the synthesis indicate that mindfulness was more coherently embedded where leadership support, shared routines, and staff participation were present. Isolated classroom initiatives appeared more vulnerable to disruption from time pressures and competing curriculum demands. Policy settings that promote whole-school wellbeing approaches rather than isolated programmes may provide the organisational conditions required for mechanisms to be activated and sustained.

4. Support bicultural implementation**.**

The synthesis showed that mindfulness was most meaningful where programmes aligned with Māori models of wellbeing and local tikanga. However, guidance on how bicultural commitments apply to mindfulness-based programmes remains uneven. Policy direction that clarifies expectations around bicultural implementation, including collaboration with local iwi and consideration of kaupapa Māori-aligned programmes, may support culturally grounded practice without positioning mindfulness as culturally neutral or universally interpreted.

Study Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting this meta-synthesis. First, the number of eligible studies was small, reflecting the limited volume of published qualitative research on school-based mindfulness in Aotearoa New Zealand. While small samples are typical in meta-synthesis methodologies that prioritise depth over breadth, this reduces the transferability of findings.

Second, the synthesis combined a range of different mindfulness programmes, including Pause, Breathe, Smile (Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019), Meditation Capsules (Ager et al., 2014; Albrecht et al., 2018), mindfulness practised based on Te Whare Tapa Whā (Rix & Bernay, 2014), and MindUP adaptation (Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). This diversity strengthens the ecological validity of the synthesis but also introduces variation in programme structure, delivery, and theoretical orientation, which makes it difficult to identify which elements contributed to specific outcomes.

Third, programme descriptions varied in detail. Some offered structured curricula (e.g., Pause, Breathe, Smile and Meditation Capsules), while others described practices only broadly (Rix &

Bernay, 2014; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). This limits the ability to compare programme components or ascertain which pedagogical choices influenced particular effects.

Fourth, the studies involved children of different ages and developmental stages. While most participants were in primary school, two studies spanned primary to secondary levels (Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019). Evidence of different levels of responsiveness among age groups and among students with diverse needs limits comparability across studies.

Fifth, a further limitation relates to the composition of the evidence base. Across the dataset, mindfulness programmes were implemented in schools where teachers, leaders, or facilitators chose to participate and showed some interest in wellbeing initiatives, often with parental consent (Albrecht et al., 2018; Hynds et al., 2020; Rix & Rix, 2018, 2019; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016). As a result, experiences of schools or educators who opted out, disengaged, or faced stronger resistance are less visible in the evidence. Bringing together studies with similar participation conditions may therefore place greater emphasis on supportive contexts, while giving less attention to more constrained settings. In addition, several studies involved researchers who had direct roles in the development, delivery, or evaluation of the programmes under investigation, a factor that should be considered when interpreting findings.

Another limitation relates to the reporting of data collection procedures in the included studies. The information provided did not permit the assessment of whether participant accounts relating to processes such as attention regulation, emotional regulation, self-awareness, or interpersonal change emerged spontaneously or were shaped by the methods used to generate the data. Consequently, findings relating to these processes are interpreted as being consistent with existing theoretical accounts of mindfulness rather than as independent evidence of underlying mechanisms.

Finally, follow-up data were limited. Only two studies assessed outcomes beyond the immediate post-programme period (Rix & Bernay, 2014; Whitehead & Daniell, 2016), and only one examined maintenance effects at three months (Rix & Bernay, 2014). In one case, a planned follow-up study was not completed due to circumstances affecting the research team, although informal observations suggested that students drew on mindfulness practices during the COVID-19 period and found them helpful (N. Albrecht, personal communication, December 28, 2025). This limits conclusion about the durability of psychological, relational, and classroom-level changes.

However, these limitations do not undermine the value of the synthesis but clarify the boundaries within which the findings should be interpreted and highlight areas requiring further investigation.

Suggestions for Further Research

This synthesis highlights several areas where additional research would deepen understanding of how MBPs operate within the unique educational and cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

First, the durability of outcomes is largely unknown. Only one synthesised study (Rix & Bernay, 2014) reported maintained benefits at follow-up, and wider NZ evidence provides limited short-term data. Longitudinal research is needed to understand how effects develop and fade away and which conditions support sustained change.

Second, developmental differences require closer examination. Young children appeared to engage in mindfulness more readily than older students, indicating that age and developmental stage shape responsiveness. Comparative or longitudinal research could clarify how core mindfulness

mechanisms operate across age groups and how programmes can be adapted to different developmental needs.

Third, variability among specific learner groups warrants further investigation. Findings and broader evidence suggested potential but inconsistent responsiveness among boys, and indicated benefits for students with ASD and ADHD, and behaviour challenges. However, behaviour outcomes remain mixed across studies. Research is needed to determine which programme components support which groups and under what relational or structural conditions these benefits occur.

Fourth, future research would benefit from schools and educators who opt out of mindfulness programmes or experience greater resistance, as these contexts are underrepresented in the existing evidence base and may illuminate important constraints on implementation.

Fifth, further work is needed on how mechanisms interact with institutional structures. The synthesis showed that leadership, time allocation, and curriculum positioning influenced how reliably mindfulness mechanisms could be enacted. Research using ecological or organisational frameworks could map these interactions more systematically, identifying conditions that support or prevent classroom changes.

Sixth, cultural dimensions of mindfulness require deeper and more nuanced enquiry. Programmes grounded in the Te Whare Tapa Whā model of wellbeing showed strong cultural resonance and effectiveness, but little is known about how specific metaphors, tikanga-based practices, and linguistic framing activate or fail to activate psychological, relational, and reflective mechanisms across diverse iwi and school contexts.

Finally, home and community contexts remain underexplored. Parental opt-out in one study (Albrecht et al., 2018) and positive parent-child outcomes in another (Davis, 2021) indicate that

whānau beliefs and participation shape access and reinforcement of mindfulness practices. Research examining how school-home partnerships, cultural expectations, and socio-economic conditions shape engagement would strengthen understanding of how mindfulness operates across ecological systems.

These directions highlight the need for research that examines mindfulness not merely as an individual intervention but as a multi-layered, culturally situated, and context-dependent process shaped by relationships, school structures, and wider community environments.

Conclusion

This discussion examined how mindfulness-based programmes support wellbeing of students in Aotearoa New Zealand and how the underlying psychological, relational, and reflective processes unfold within broader school and community contexts. The findings show that mindfulness operates through interconnected mechanisms of attention, regulation, and reflection, and relational attunement, and that these mechanisms are shaped by the conditions in which they are enacted. When teacher modelling, school routines, cultural coherence, and leadership support align, mindfulness can contribute to calmer classrooms, strengthened relationships, and more reflective teaching. Conversely, curriculum pressures, developmental differences, and diverse family perspectives limit the extent to which these mechanisms can develop.

The synthesis therefore suggests that mindfulness is most effective when understood not as an isolated technique but as a practice whose impact depends on the interplay of individual, relational, organisational, and cultural conditions. In practical terms, this implies that decisions about training, time allocation, cultural framing, and curriculum positioning actively shape the conditions under which the mechanisms identified in the study are more or less likely to be expressed.

Framing the interactions of contextual conditions within the specific policy, cultural, and wellbeing landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand also highlights that school-based mindfulness cannot be divorced from Te Tiriti obligations, Māori models of hauora, and system-level expectations around student wellbeing. By recognising these interactions, schools and policy makers can create environments that support sustainable and culturally grounded implementation. Further research will help clarify how these processes evolve, how they differ across learner groups, and how school and whānau partnerships can strengthen the potential of mindfulness to contribute to wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand schools. While individual studies illuminate specific practices and outcomes of mindfulness in schools, bringing them together through qualitative meta-synthesis shows how mindfulness functions as a relational, context-dependent practice that shapes classroom climate and school wellbeing, extending beyond a set of techniques.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis synthesised qualitative research on mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs) in Aotearoa New Zealand schools to develop a more integrated understanding of how these programmes are experienced and how context shapes their effects. Guided by a critical realist perspective and using meta-ethnography as an analytic tool, this study asked the following research question: What do qualitative studies reveal about how mindfulness-based programmes operate in New Zealand school settings? To answer this overarching question, three further questions were asked:

1. How are mindfulness-based programmes experienced by students, teachers, and school communities?
2. What mechanisms appear to support or hinder the functioning of these programmes?
3. How do cultural, relational, and institutional contexts shape these experiences and mechanisms?

This concluding chapter summarises the insights generated, outlines research contribution, and identifies key limitations, implications for theory and practice, and directions for future research.

Integrated Summary of Findings

Across the included studies, students, teachers and staff described a series of shifts that suggest that MBPs influenced how young people felt, related, and made sense of their experiences in everyday school life. These pointed to improvements in calm, emotional balance, attention, and readiness to learn, alongside more reflective moments in which students paused, noticed what was happening for them and considered their responses. These internal changes appeared to shape the social tone of classrooms, with several studies describing more considerate interactions, greater empathy and patience, and calmer group dynamics in both classroom and playground settings.

In the Discussion chapter, these findings were interpreted as expressions of interpersonal, psychological, and reflective mechanisms that operate in combination rather than as separate processes. Emotional regulation and attentional stability supported students' ability to engage with others more constructively. Reflective awareness, including noticing emotions and recognising the effects of words and behaviour, appeared to contribute to more thoughtful and flexible interpersonal responses. These shifts were not reported uniformly across all settings, and at least one study described limited change in the classroom where teacher motivation was low. Other studies suggested that alignment with the school's cultural values, including Māori understandings of wellbeing, helped practices resonate more strongly. This variation supports the critical realist position that mechanisms do not produce outcomes in a deterministic way, but that their expression depends on the relational and cultural conditions in which practices are introduced.

Taken as a whole, this synthesis indicates that MBPs in Aotearoa New Zealand schools were experienced through a combination of emotional settling, increased attentional presence, greater reflective awareness, and more positive interpersonal engagement, all shaped by the particular contexts in which students and teachers worked.

Contributions to knowledge

In response to the aims of the study, this section outlines how the thesis advances understanding of mindfulness-based programmes in school settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. It does so by identifying three contributions: a contextual contribution specific to Aotearoa New Zealand, a theoretical contribution informed by critical realism, and a methodological contribution demonstrating the value of meta-ethnography for synthesising qualitative school-based research.

1. A contextual contribution: an integrated qualitative account of MBPs in schools in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The synthesis brings together a small but diverse body of qualitative research conducted in NZ school settings and provides the first integrative account of how mindfulness-based programmes are experienced within this specific cultural and educational context. It demonstrates that reported experiences cluster around a consistent set of psychological, interpersonal, and reflective processes, while also showing how these processes are strengthened or constrained by factors such as teacher engagement, school culture, and alignment with the NZ school curriculum, as well as local values, including Māori understandings of wellbeing. In doing so, the thesis clarifies what is distinctive about MBP implementation and experience in Aotearoa New Zealand schools instead of treating findings as context-neutral.

2. A theoretical contribution: a mechanism-focused interpretation grounded in critical realism.

By interpreting qualitative findings through a critical realist lens, the thesis advances understanding of how mindfulness-based programmes may operate in school contexts. Instead of presenting outcomes as direct effects of participation in the programme, it identifies a set of interacting psychological, interpersonal, and reflective mechanisms whose activation depends on relational, cultural, and institutional conditions. This mechanism-focused explanation contributes a theoretically coherent alternative to more descriptive and outcome-oriented accounts of school-based mindfulness, while remaining grounded in participants' reported experiences.

3. A methodological contribution: demonstrating the value of meta-ethnography for synthesising context-specific qualitative school research.

Methodologically, this thesis demonstrates the usefulness of meta-ethnography for synthesising small-scale, context-specific qualitative studies. This synthesis moves beyond theme

aggregation by constructing high-order interpretations that preserve contextual meaning while generating new explanatory insights. This approach shows how meta-ethnography can be productively used to examine complex, context-dependent educational practices, offering a methodological model for future qualitative syntheses in school wellbeing research.

Concluding Statement

This thesis has brought together qualitative studies on mindfulness-based programmes in schools in Aotearoa New Zealand to generate a coherent, contextually grounded account of how these programmes function within educational settings. By synthesising participants' experiences through a critical realist lens, the study presents a mechanism-focused explanation that links individual experiences with relational, cultural, and institutional conditions.

The conclusions are shaped by the size and scope of the available evidence, which remains limited in volume and longitudinal depth and reflects particular school contexts. These boundaries define the reach of the claims made here. The study therefore contributes an informed and situated explanation of how mindfulness-based programmes operate within Aotearoa New Zealand schools, without extending beyond the contexts represented in the evidence base.

In doing so, the thesis shows how culturally and institutionally embedded practices influence the sustainability and meaning of mindfulness in schools. It provides a foundation for further inquiry into how such programmes evolve across diverse communities and changing educational environments and offers a theoretically informed platform for ongoing development of school-based wellbeing initiatives in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of Acronyms

ADHD - Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

ARACY - Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

CASP - Critical Appraisal Skills Programme

CINAHL - Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature

ERO - Education Review Office

ERIC - Education Resources Information Centre

IPA - Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

MBCT - Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

MBP / MBPs - Mindfulness-Based Programme(s)

MBSR - Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

NZCER - New Zealand Council for Education Research

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PBS - Pause, Breathe, Smile

PRISMA - Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

WHO - World Health Organisation

Appendix B: Glossary of Terms

Attention regulation - the capacity to intentionally direct, sustain, and shift attention while noticing distractions without judgement. Supports concentration, emotional regulation, and executive functioning.

Body awareness / interoception - the ability to perceive internal bodily sensations such as breath, tension, and emotional cues. Linked to improved emotional understanding and regulation.

Cognitive flexibility - a mental capacity that enables adapting perspectives, shifting attention, and responding to experiences in more productive and less automatic ways.

Critical realism - a philosophical position that assumes that reality is shaped by observable experiences and unobservable underlying mechanisms. It emphasises the interaction between individual agency and structural conditions, and the identification of mechanisms that produce outcomes in specific contexts.

Decentring / reperceiving - a shift from being immersed in thoughts and feelings to observing them as transient mental events. Enables greater psychological distance, reduced reactivity, and increased self-awareness.

Emotional regulation - the ability to recognise, label, manage, and respond to emotions in ways that support wellbeing.

Emergence - a critical realist concept describing outcomes that arise from interactions among multiple factors which cannot be explained by any single event alone. Relevant in understanding how mindfulness contributes to wellbeing across individual, relational, and contextual levels.

Executive functioning - cognitive processes such as attention control, working memory, and inhibitory control that support learning and behavioural regulation.

Line-of-argument synthesis - a meta-ethnographic analytic strategy that integrates concepts across studies to build an overall interpretation or theoretical explanation that extends beyond the findings of individual studies.

Mechanisms of mindfulness - underlying psychological, cognitive, emotional, and physiological processes through which mindfulness produces effects. These include attention regulation, increased body awareness, emotional and behavioural regulation, cognitive reappraisal, reduced automatic reactivity, extinction of maladaptive responses, and changes in the perspective of the self, such as decentring and self-transcendence.

Mechanisms (critical realist) - underlying generative processes that offer a way of understanding how patterns or outcomes become possible within specific contexts, shaped by interactions between agency and structural conditions.

Meta-awareness - a higher-order awareness of one's own mental processes. In mindfulness, it refers to recognising when attention wanders, noticing patterns of thought, and observing internal experiences with clarity.

Meta-ethnography - an interpretive synthesis methodology that compares and translates concepts across qualitative studies to generate new, higher-order insights. Uses reciprocal translation, refutational analysis, and line-of-argument synthesis.

Mindfulness - a form of purposeful, present-moment awareness characterised by openness, curiosity, and non-judgement. Involves training attention, cultivating acceptance, and developing insights into thoughts, emotions, and sensations.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) - a structured programme integrating mindfulness training with cognitive behavioural principles to prevent depressive relapse. Helps individuals recognise thoughts as mental events rather than facts.

Mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs) - structured interventions that teach mindfulness practices to support wellbeing, emotion regulation, attention, and resilience. In school contexts, these are generally adapted for developmental needs and educational settings.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) - an eight-week programme combining meditation practices, psychoeducation, and mindful awareness exercises to reduce stress and enhance wellbeing.

Non-judgemental awareness - a core facet of mindfulness involving observing experiences without criticism, avoidance, and attempts to alter them. Supports acceptance, emotional clarify, and reduced reactivity.

Open monitoring - a mindfulness practice involving broad, receptive awareness of the present moment without focusing on a single factor. Encourages curiosity and acceptance toward whatever arises.

Open systems - a critical realist concept describing contexts where multiple interacting influences shape outcomes unpredictably. Schools are considered open systems, meaning that mindfulness programmes interact with local conditions in varied ways.

Prosocial behaviour - behaviour intended to benefit others such as empathy, compassion, kindness, and cooperation.

Reciprocal translation - a meta-ethnographic process in which concepts from one study are compared with and mapped onto concepts from another to identify similarities and shared meanings.

Refutational translation - a meta-ethnographic strategy that examines contradictions and tensions between studies to identify differences and deepen conceptual understanding.

Self-regulation - the capacity to modulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in adaptive ways. Central in mindfulness research and includes emotional, cognitive, and behavioural regulation.

Self-transcendence - an expanded state of awareness in which individuals experience a sense of connection with others and the wider world. Considered one of the advanced mechanisms of mindfulness.

Social-emotional learning - educational frameworks that develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, social skill, and responsible decision-making. Provides conceptual grounding for many school-based wellbeing programmes, including some mindfulness initiatives.

Stress regulation - process involved in recognising, managing, and reducing stress responses. Mindfulness facilitates this by promoting physiological calming, reduced reactivity, and improved coping skills.

Appendix C: Glossary of Māori Concepts and Words / Kupu Māori

Aotearoa - the Māori name for New Zealand; increasingly used in academic, policy, and educational contexts to reflect bicultural commitments.

Hapū - sub-tribe; an intermediate kinship group that is part of an iwi and connected through common ancestry.

Hauora - a holistic model of health that encompasses four interconnected dimensions: physical (taha tinana), mental/emotional (taha hinengaro), social (taha whānau), and spiritual (taha wairua).

Iwi - tribe or large extended kinship group, often associated with specific geographic regions and whakapapa.

Karakia - incantation, prayer, or ritual chant used to open or close meetings, create safety, or support grounding and intention.

Mana - authority, integrity, or spiritual power derived from whakapapa, actions, and relationships.

Māori - the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand, whose ancestors were the first settlers of the land and whose status is and rights are affirmed through Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Marae - communal and sacred meeting place where whānau, hapū, and iwi gather cultural, social, and ceremonial purposes.

Mōteatea - traditional Māori chants that carry history, emotion, knowledge, and cultural memory; often used in ceremonial or reflective contexts.

Nohopuku - quiet sitting or silent reflection; a contemplative practice sometimes used in educational and wellbeing contexts.

Pepeha - a structured introduction that locates the person within their whakapapa, whenua, waterways, and communities.

Tamariki - children

Tikanga - customs, protocols, or culturally appropriate ways of doing things within te ao Māori.

Te ao Māori - the Māori worldview, encompassing cultural values, relationships, perspectives, and ways of understanding the world.

Te reo Māori - the Māori language; one of the official languages of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi - the Treaty of Waitangi; New Zealand's foundational bicultural agreement outlining relationships, responsibilities, and protections between Māori and the Crown.

Te Whare Tapa Whā - a Māori model of wellbeing conceptualised as a four-sided house, comprising taha tinana (physical), taha hinengaro (mental / emotional), taha whānau (social), and taha wairua (spiritual), with whenua (land) as the foundation that grounds all dimensions.

Wairua - spiritual dimension or essence; often considered a foundational aspect of wellbeing within Māori models.

Whakapapa - genealogy or ancestral lineage that connects people to each other, to whenua, and the wider natural world.

Whānau - extended family network including immediate and wider kin, as well as those connected through relational bonds.