

Lead with the Body: Somatic Embodied Practices for Teacher Leadership and Well-being

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This manuscript explores the role of somatic embodied practices in promoting teacher well-being and resilience in educational contexts. Drawing from research in education and somatic therapy, the paper argues that somatic embodied practices support emotional regulation, enhance relational trust, and create sustainable teaching environments. By positioning teacher well-being as foundational, this study highlights how somatic embodied practices help teachers and teacher leaders attune to their bodies, notice stress responses, and simply notice or regulate emotional reactions. The role of teacher leaders in advancing somatic embodied practices is also explored, advocating for leadership models that prioritize well-being and sustainability. Practical applications, such as somatic embodied practices, provide strategies for integrating these approaches into teacher reflection and fostering well-being. This work contributes to the scholarship on teacher well-being, offering actionable tools to support educators in sustaining their practice and leadership roles over time.

Keywords: Somatic embodied practice, teacher leadership, teacher well-being, embodiment, reflection

Poetic Interlude 1: Rooted Signals

Trees commune through mycorrhizal networks of intelligence; the innate perceptiveness of the elements of Mother Earth in communicative concert. These networks, under the radar to the human eye, provide nutrients, sustenance and warnings across space and time. Similarly, we humans, upright like trees rising to the sun; our nervous system akin to mycorrhizal networks send signals through the body of relaxation, alertness, fight, or flight to attune us to the unseen rhythms of connection, danger, and grace.

Introduction

Teaching and learning are not confined to the mind alone; they emerge through the heart, body, and emotions (Anzaldúa, 2015; Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981; Johnson, 2022; Maté, 2022; Menakem, 2017). Yet educational systems often privilege intellectual rigor at the expense of emotional, bodily, and spiritual dimensions. This imbalance can contribute to emotional dysregulation, binary thinking, and disembodiment in both students and educators (Berila, 2014, 2015; Cariaga, 2019; Shapiro, 1999; Sosa-Provencio et al., 2020). As Fosco et al. (2023) note in their literature review on teacher leadership and well-being, neglecting the impact of leadership responsibilities on teacher leaders without prioritizing their well-being can hinder the effectiveness of teacher leadership and contribute to burnout and attrition. Therefore, to truly center well-being in educational practice, an integration of intellectual understanding with embodied, emotional, and spiritual engagement is a necessity.

Somatic embodied practices are approaches that engage the body to support awareness, healing, and integration. Some examples of somatic embodied practices are pausing, deep breathing, pausing, visualization, humming, rocking, orienting to the room, and engaging in

movement (see Table 1 for additional practices). In the field of somatic therapy, these practices ground learning in the body and have been shown to support emotional regulation, reduce stress, and foster deeper relational connection (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Levine, 1997; Van der Kolk, 2014).

Teacher leaders, educators who maintain classroom teaching while also taking on leadership roles, set the tone for collaborative school culture, professional learning, and justice-centered reform (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Yet they often carry the dual burden of instruction and emotional labor, heightening their risk for burnout and disconnection. For leadership to be sustainable, well-being must be at the center for teacher leaders and teachers, which ultimately impacts students' well-being and academic success.

As current political conditions heighten surveillance, devalue teacher expertise, and restrict culturally responsive pedagogy, the risk of burnout and attrition intensifies (Alves et al., 2021; Love, 2019; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Spilt et al., 2011; Wahab et al., 2024). Teacher leaders often carry the dual burden of instructional leadership and emotional labor, which heightens their vulnerability to burnout. Systemic stressors, currently exacerbated by teachers and school administrators fear of legal repercussions and parent backlash for justice-oriented teaching (RAND Corporation, 2023) demand a focus on educator well-being that centers personal agency, embodied practices, and collective care.

I define well-being as “the simultaneous, balanced, and contextually sensitive satisfaction of personal, relational, and collective needs” (Prilleltensky, 2008, p. 122). Well-being encompasses subjective and objective indicators of fulfillment, for example, physical health, connection to spirit, and access to supportive relationships. Drawing on the socio-ecological model of mental health and well-being (Erickson et al., 2024), I understand well-being as operating across interrelated societal layers: individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy. Thus, centering and fostering well-being cannot be addressed in isolation; it must be understood and supported across the multiple layers it intersects.

As part of this inquiry, I begin each section of the paper with my original poems. These poems are not supplemental, but central to the methodology of this work. They emerge from my own somatic embodied writing practice and are intended to encompass the emotional, spiritual, and embodied dimensions of well-being that the paper seeks to center. By weaving in poetic reflection, I invite readers into a slowed-down, more attuned engagement—one that mirrors the somatic embodied practices I advocate for. In this way, writing itself becomes a site of embodied knowledge-making that supported my well-being and how that is connected to writing and the earth.

This paper explores how somatic embodied practices can foster teacher well-being and resilience in both the classroom and leadership roles. Bridging research from teacher leadership, education, and somatic therapy, I argue that somatic embodied practices not only support individual emotional regulation but also cultivate relational trust in learning spaces.

I further suggest that designing and integrating somatic embodied practices serves as an act of self-care—one that begins to counter the shame and guilt teacher leaders often feel when prioritizing their own well-being, as identified by Everett and Dunn (2021). These practices offer a pathway to address the persistent stress documented across the teacher leadership literature (McCallum et al., 2017; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

When implemented systemically, somatic embodied practices can help teacher leaders model strategies that support well-being, advocate for equitable policies, and nurture cultures of collective care. This work contributes to the growing scholarship on teacher leadership and well-

being (Bradley-Levine & Bender, 2023; Cherkowski, 2018; Fosco et al., 2023; Kanold & Boogren, 2022). Somatic embodied practices offer grounded emotional and embodied framing to support teacher leadership, particularly leadership rooted in justice, which, in turn, fosters students' mental and academic success (McCallum & Price, 2010; Louis & Murphy, 2018).

In the next section, I summarize literature on how I conceptualize critical and justice-oriented teaching and learning, teacher leadership and well-being, and the emotional and embodied dimension of learning. Then, I describe somatic embodied practices and their intersections with these frameworks to support teacher leaders' well-being. Lastly, I offer examples of these practices in action to illustrate their role in advancing both well-being and justice-oriented leadership.

Poetic Interlude 2: The Call to Listen

Humans in activity spark the nerve networks of the human and earth system, requiring the listening and the grounding in ourselves and our collective home. To ground, to stillness, we go.

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on justice-oriented education and teacher leadership, with a particular emphasis on emotional and embodied engagements through somatic embodied practices. These themes were selected to address the gap in teacher education and teacher leadership research regarding the embodied dimensions of teaching and learning, and to explore how somatic embodied practices can support educator well-being and resilience.

The literature selected for this review was drawn from a range of peer-reviewed articles, books, and frameworks that focus on somatic embodiment, critical pedagogy, emotionality, and justice-oriented education. Studies were included based on their relevance to these themes and their contribution to understanding how these elements can support educator well-being. The analysis was conducted through a thematic synthesis, identifying and categorizing key themes across studies and linking them to an argument for incorporating somatic embodied practices into justice-oriented teacher leadership.

A key limitation of this review is the limited research available on somatic embodiment in teacher education and teacher leadership spaces. Additionally, while this review centers on somatic embodiment in education and teacher leadership, it does not exhaustively address all emotional and embodied practices in teacher leadership.

The conclusions from this review emphasize the value of exploring, incorporating, and researching emotional and embodied practices, including somatic embodied practices, in teacher leadership. These practices are critical for enabling educators to confront and heal from the emotional toll of working in schools.

Critical Frameworks

Grounded in Critical Teacher Leadership (Bradley-Levine, 2022), this research integrates the principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) with embodied practices to support teacher leaders in sustaining justice-oriented work. I use the terms critical pedagogy, critical frameworks, and justice-oriented education interchangeably to describe the approach that underpins this research. By attending to the emotional and somatic dimensions of teaching, this

research expands Critical Teacher Leadership to address the well-being needed for long-term, justice-oriented sustainability and transformation.

Foundational thinkers like Freire (1970) and Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995) reimagine education as a space to confront power and inequity. Freire's notion of *conscientização* (critical consciousness) calls educators to reflect and act within oppressive systems, a praxis essential not just for marginalized learners but also for white teachers to examine their own power and privilege. Ladson-Billings, through culturally relevant pedagogy, emphasizes the importance of affirming students' identities, disrupting systemic inequities, and expanding learning beyond the classroom.

Building on these ideas, I argue that focusing solely on cognition is inadequate when preparing teachers for justice-oriented work. The emotional and embodied dimensions of teaching and learning are essential to fostering the well-being necessary for educators to remain resilient and effective. Critical frameworks call for action, risk-taking, and the dismantling of the "mind/body split" in academic learning—a separation that often inhibits the incorporation of people's lived experiences and a holistic learning process (hooks, 1994, p. 16).

Drawing from hooks' (1994) wisdom, I envision justice-driven teacher leadership that goes beyond traditional Western paradigms of intellectualism, engaging the mind, emotions, body and spirit in the process of learning. This approach requires a critical perspective—one that challenges structures of power and encourages learners to know themselves better and to live more fully in the world (p. 194). Her assertion of the "mind/body split" (p. 16) underscores the importance of incorporating somatic embodiment practices to center well-being, both for the educators and the students they serve. Critical frameworks in teacher leadership challenge dominant paradigms by grounding practice in justice, reflection, embodiment, and transformation.

Contemporary scholars continue this legacy by integrating critical theory, feminist epistemologies, and embodied approaches. Cariaga (2019) offers *bodymindspirit praxis* as a method for resistance and healing, while Staley and Leonardi (2016) draw from queer theory to position unlearning as a vulnerable, embodied, and relational process. Love (2019) pushes further through abolitionist teaching, urging educators to lead not by fixing systems or students, but by radically reimagining them through care, interdependence, and visionary action. Taken together, these frameworks call for leadership that is not only intellectually critical but emotionally and somatically attuned.

Teacher Leadership and Well-Being

Teaching is widely recognized as one of the most stressful professions (McCallum et al., 2017), making it critical to place teacher well-being at the center of educational research and practice. In fact, teacher well-being is closely tied to job satisfaction; when supported through mindfulness and other relational practices, burnout and turnover are significantly reduced (Bradley-Levine & Bender, 2023; Roeser et al., 2012).

When well-being is not prioritized, teachers' experiences diminished self-efficacy (Collie et al., 2012) and report negative impacts on both their personal and professional lives. These consequences inevitably effect students and the broader school climate. Research shows that when schools invest in teacher well-being by creating environments that support teacher wellness and foster positive classroom climates, student outcomes improve (Cherkowski, 2018; Ghamrawi, 2023; Louis & Murphy, 2018).

Teacher leadership presents both an opportunity and a challenge in this context. On one hand, teacher leadership can increase retention by offering meaningful professional growth and renewed purpose through expanded roles (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). On the other hand, these leadership responsibilities often come without reductions in teaching load or adequate institutional support, leading to increased demands, role overload, and potential burnout (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Without intentional structural support, teacher leadership risks becoming an additional burden rather than a pathway for teacher sustainability.

Therefore, discussions of teacher leadership must also consider the conditions that enable teachers to thrive. A growing body of literature calls for approaches that attend to teacher identity, emotional labor, and the complex nature of leadership work (Cherkowski, 2018; Hargreaves, 2005). I build on this foundation by emphasizing the relational and embodied dimensions of leadership, recognizing that it is not only cognitive, but also deeply emotional and somatic.

Emotionality

Emotionality and affect are elements that have been studied across teacher education. Furthermore, teacher leadership literature stresses the importance of educators who not only guide students but also mentor and support fellow teachers in navigating complex, emotionally charged environments (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). This emotional labor becomes even more significant when teacher leaders are committed to justice-oriented goals, particularly in schools serving students marginalized by dominant culture, those norms, values, and practices that reflect and reinforce the perspectives of socially and politically dominant groups, where greater emotional and academic support is often required (Bottiani et al., 2019, as cited in Bradley-Levine & Bender, 2023).

Emotions and affect are not simply personal experiences—they are relational, socially and culturally constructed, political, multifaceted, and constantly evolving (Ahmed, 2013; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Matias, 2016; Ohito, 2016). According to Ahmed (2013), affect theory positions emotions as collective and embodied practices that emerge through interactions with people, objects, and the world around us. She explains that “emotions are bodily processes of affecting and being affected... emotions are a matter of how we come into contact with objects and others” (p. 208). Understanding emotions as collective and embodied practices challenges individualistic notions of emotional regulation and instead positions relationality as central to justice work.

Aligned with scholars in teacher education who discuss the emotionality of unlearning (Staley & Blackburn, 2023; Staley & Leonardi, 2016), this work acknowledges that engaging in critical frameworks centering well-being often evokes discomfort, vulnerability, and emotional resistance. These affective responses are not obstacles but essential components of the learning process, particularly when educators are asked to interrogate deeply held beliefs, norms, and assumptions about teaching, power, and identity.

While emotions are increasingly acknowledged in teacher education (Cartun, 2017; Matias, 2016; Ohito, 2016; Zembylas, 2002, 2003, 2006), we must continue pushing toward pedagogies that center discomfort and emotional praxis. Zembylas (2012) reminds us that emotions can either uphold or disrupt dominant narratives about trauma. Given the enduring charge of race, emotional and justice work demands that we “slice into the thickness of discomfort” and “linger in our feelings about racial oppression” to enact change (Ohito, 2016, p. 426).

Teacher leaders, in particular, are positioned at the intersection of instructional, emotional, and organizational demands, often carrying the embodied weight of systems change. Thus, their well-being and emotional capacity are not only personal concerns but deeply tied to collective school culture and student success.

Embodiment

While emotionality addresses the affective dimensions of teaching, embodiment expands this understanding by positioning the body as a site of both trauma and healing, critical for teacher leaders navigating justice work. The body is not just a physical vessel; it is a storehouse of stories—stories of dominance, trauma, resilience, and wisdom (Brave Heart, 1998; Maté, 2022). These stories, often passed down through generations, are embodied in the ways we move, feel, and interact with the world. Somatic embodiment practices bring the dimensions of mind, body, and spirit into consciousness. Furthermore, I elevate the work of critical somatic embodiment practices rooted in Black and Chicana feminist frameworks (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 2011; Combahee River Collective, 1977; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1978) to ground this study in the cultural and historical significance of embodied knowledge. These practices draw from ancestral wisdom and lived experience, offering ways to reclaim the body as a site of resistance, healing, and transformation. Somatic embodiment practices are ancient and they invite a tempering and expansion of the body to hold the fullness of the human experience—including the entire range of emotions from grief and rage to joy and liberation.

To deepen the understanding of how embodiment functions as both a tool of learning and a site of healing, this review must include an overview of somatic therapy. However, it is essential to recognize that the foundational concepts of somatic therapy, namely somatic healing and trauma release, are deeply rooted in Indigenous healing traditions. These practices, created and honored by Indigenous communities, have long understood the body as a site of memory and transformation, listening to the earth and rooting into it while engaging in embodied rituals and practices to heal trauma and cultivate resilience (Duran, 2019; Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022; Frost, 2022; Menakem, 2017; Mitchell, 2018; Page & Woodland, 2023).

Somatic therapy offers a framework for understanding how trauma and resilience are stored in the body and their implications for justice-oriented education. Scholars such as Levine (1997) and van der Kolk (1994) highlight how trauma manifests in the nervous system, with Levine (1997) introducing the concept of trauma trapped in the body, which requires somatic embodied practices to release it. This idea aligns with Johnson's (2022) work on embodied activism, emphasizing the role of the body in healing from systemic oppression. Johnson argues that somatic embodied practices not only support personal well-being but also create pathways for social transformation, as individuals learn to reclaim bodily awareness as a tool for resistance. Furthermore, Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) assert that emotional processes are intrinsically linked to cognition, with bodily sensations providing "somatic markers" that guide ethical reasoning and decision-making. In educational contexts, this suggests that learning occurs when teachers and students engage the body, acknowledging how emotions and bodily responses shape their experiences and decisions.

Somatic embodied practices are therefore vital to preparing justice-oriented educators who can confront and heal from the emotional impacts of systemic inequity while leaning into change from a place of grounded presence. Drawing from Kyodo Williams (2016), transformation in education requires inner change to support outer social change, beginning with the body as a site of healing and liberation. In the classroom, engaging the body as a tool for

learning and healing has the potential to empower teachers to listen to their emotional and embodied responses, cultivating a healing-centered approach to teaching and leadership.

Enacting somatic embodied practices involves not only acknowledging the sensations, emotions, meaning, and images that arise in our bodies but also shifting our relationship with those embodied signals. Somatic embodied practices serve as a bridge for teachers and educators as they engage with students and each other in spaces marked by historical trauma and systemic oppression. Johnson (2022) argues that somatic embodied practices help us restore our capacities for connection with the world. By reclaiming our bodily awareness, we shift old patterns of engagement, particularly those shaped by oppressive social systems. The body, as an essential tool of learning, brings awareness to both personal and collective experiences.

In teacher leadership, discomfort can be an essential tool for deepening understanding of critical issues. Rather than avoiding uncomfortable emotions, a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999) encourages teacher leaders to embrace these moments as opportunities for growth.

Somatic embodied practices offer an opening to be with the discomfort, such as conflict or tension in the classroom, in professional development spaces, and in relationship with others. Thus, teacher leaders can then explore the emotional and bodily responses tied to these issues, fostering deeper reflection and potentially challenging existing held beliefs, ultimately cultivating a collective understanding.

While many researchers have recognized the need for emotional and somatic embodied engagement in teacher education, there remains a gap in the field regarding how somatic embodied practices can directly address systemic oppression. By exploring what it feels like to engage in oppressive and liberatory practices in the body, we can work toward creating a more sustainable and healing-centered educational system. This is a key tenet of somatic embodiment practices: to notice the embodied experiences of dominance and liberation as tools to inform well-being in teaching practices. To deepen this understanding, I draw on Mendoza et al. (2024), who invoke “hummingbird medicine” to guide us toward healing in educational systems. They emphasize that educational institutions have long inflicted harm on racialized students, teachers, and broader learning communities. In their work, learning and healing are not separate pursuits but deeply intertwined, requiring us to engage the whole person: mind, body, and spirit. By acknowledging the academic and emotional wounds caused by schooling and embracing a more expansive, culturally rooted vision of healing, educators can begin to reimagine systems that honor dignity, transformation, and collective flourishing.

The use of somatic embodied practices in learning spaces enables us to “lay ourselves bare” (Mendoza et al., 2023) and engage in “risking the self” (Britzman, 1995, p. 165), which are essential acts of vulnerability that open the door to deeper self-awareness, relational accountability, and the possibility of healing within educational relationships. This vulnerability allows us to confront and transform the emotional discomfort and trauma embedded in our teaching, learning, and leadership roles (Boler, 1999). Somatic embodied practices demand commitment and repetitive practice, offering teachers the tools to sit with discomfort, to observe their emotions and physical sensations with curiosity and compassion. This process is essential to healing and to cultivating well-being within ourselves and our communities.

Scholars have noted that emotionality and embodiment are critical to the process of building resilience and growth within teaching and learning (hooks, 1994; Johnson, 2022; Maté, 2022). The body, in this context, becomes a site of transformation, where discomfort is transmuted into space for healing and regeneration. The phrase “to sit with” captures this practice

of being present with discomfort, not rushing to alleviate it, but allowing it to transform into healing energy for both the individual and the collective.

Taken together, these findings illuminate the importance of centering somatic embodiment and emotionality in justice-oriented teacher leadership. While traditional frameworks of teacher leadership have centered instructional expertise, policy influence, and professional learning (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017), they often overlook the central role of embodied, emotional, and relational dimensions in leadership development and enactment. As teachers navigate complex educational landscapes, their capacity to lead with clarity, care, and resilience is intimately tied to how they attend to their bodies and emotions. Integrating somatic embodied practices into leadership development is not simply a strategy of well-being, but it is a transformative, justice-centered intervention, rooted in healing.

Poetic Interlude 3: Rich Soil, Deep Body

Venturing to go deep into the soil to the center of the earth; crackling, disrupting, yet purposeful to reclaim our connection to ourselves, our bodies and the earth. These moments when there are a million things occurring in the thinking brain, allow a moment of pause and to sink into the earth-body.

Embodied Learning: Centering Somatic Embodied Practices for Justice and Well-Being

As noted in the literature review, while somatic embodied practices are increasingly referenced in contemporary educational and therapeutic contexts, the concept of healing through the integration of mind, body, and spirit is not new. These ways of knowing and being are ancient, rooted in Indigenous traditions and healing practices across the globe for thousands of years (Brave Heart, 1998; Cajete, 2009; Duran, 2006; Wilson, 2001). In harmony with these enduring practices, somatic embodied practices involve tuning into the body's sensations—pausing, taking a breath, or simply being present in the moment by noticing sounds and smells—providing a way to access deeper understanding (see Table 1). This becomes especially crucial in the context of understanding the historical and ongoing violence embedded in systems of oppression, particularly white supremacy in education (Menakem, 2017). For teachers, whether already familiar with these dynamics or new to this awareness, somatic embodied practices offer essential space to process trauma and engage in justice-oriented teaching.

Rooted in justice, somatic embodied practices center the body as a tool for learning, healing, and transformation. These practices honor the profound connection between mind and body (Levine, 2010) and are critical for teachers seeking to build resilience, foster healing, and engage in difficult conversations. By understanding how the brain-body connection operates both individually and collectively, educators can navigate complex emotional terrains in their classrooms.

Somatic embodied practices enable teachers to be responsive rather than reactive, providing an alternative to dissociation, repression, or avoidance of discomfort. Instead of turning away from discomfort, these practices help cultivate a relationship with it, fostering resilience. This process mirrors the mycorrhizal networks of trees, which, as they reach deep into the earth, build strength and grounding. Similarly, somatic practices allow educators to ground themselves in their bodies, creating space for healing and connection in the face of challenging educational landscapes.

Through fostering "response flexibility," somatic embodied practices support well-being by helping individuals choose how to respond to life's challenges and triumphs (Maté, 2022, p. 29). These practices encourage teachers to pause, reflect, and confront discomfort, helping to temper stress and build resilience. By listening to their nervous systems and moving toward self-actualization (hooks, 1994), educators create space for healing and growth.

Pedagogy, as the fusion of the "what" and the "how" of teaching and learning, serves as a transformative site within educational spaces (Sosa-Provencio et al., 2020). Somatic embodied practices challenge the traditional mind-body dichotomy, which treats the body as "a subordinate instrument in service to the mind" (Nguyen & Larson, 2015, p. 331). My approach centers somatic embodiment as an essential aspect of learning.

Somatic embodied practices invite educators to critically examine their bodies as sites of awareness, dignity, resilience, and healing. This attentiveness requires confronting uncomfortable truths about motivations, privileges, and priorities in justice work (Johnson, 2022, p. 12). These practices provide the tools to hold discomfort and transform it into generative spaces of well-being, supporting educators in responding to systemic challenges with capaciousness and compassion.

Poetic Interlude 4: The Invitation to Remember

The earth, as she always does, supports and invites us to remember. Grounding into the earth, being in the present moment, in and of the earth, beyond the concrete slabs of colonialism and horror, as we create a new earth, a new way of being with ourselves and others.

Somatic Embodied Practices: Tools for Cultivating Teacher Well-Being

Teacher leaders committed to justice must not only develop critical awareness but also attune deeply to the body as a site of knowledge, reaction, and transformation. Power, privilege, and identity are not abstract concepts; they manifest physically, shaping the ways we engage, react, resist, and process. Our bodies hold histories of hope, joy, trauma, social conditioning, and unspoken narratives that influence our interactions in the classroom. Recognizing and working with these embodied responses is essential for the well-being of teachers, teacher educators, and teacher leaders.

Somatic embodied practices offer a pathway for both educators and students to notice, regulate, and expand their capacity for engagement, particularly in the face of discomfort. Practices such as breathwork, grounding exercises, movement, and body journaling help develop the resilience necessary to sit with difficult conversations and remain present in moments of tension. Injustice is often felt first in the body—through clenched fists, shallow breaths, and racing hearts—long before it is understood cognitively. By integrating somatic embodied practices into learning, educators create conditions where students are not just informed but also empowered, fostering classrooms where learning is holistic, relational, and potentially transformative.

The somatic embodied practices explored here offer strategies for integrating body-based awareness into everyday teaching and learning. These tools invite educators to embrace a fuller, more embodied approach to their work, one that acknowledges that learning is not just something we do with our minds, but something we feel, experience, and enact with our whole selves.

The Role of Somatic Embodied Practices for Teacher Well-Being

The root of the word “somatic” is “soma,” a Greek term meaning “body.” Somatic embodied practices are body-centered approaches that attend to the connection between mind and body (Levine, 2010). Simply shifting mindsets and behaviors is not enough for justice-oriented visions. Thus, understanding the brain-body connection and how it processes and shows up individually and collectively is essential for educators and their well-being.

The body is an incredible resource for information, strength, and wisdom. Somatic embodied practices provide tools to slow down and tap into the stories our bodies hold. In the company of others, especially those from different backgrounds, these practices help us remain responsive and centered, offering an alternative to reactivity, dissociation, or repressing feelings. Somatic embodied practices encourage us to build a relationship with discomfort, to become more resilient, and to move toward healing.

Examples of somatic embodied practices are listed in Table 1. Some of these practices include breathing, movement, pausing, tapping, and body mapping. By integrating these tools into everyday teaching and learning spaces, educators can foster a sense of ongoing awareness. The tools below invite educators to center their own well-being while creating transformative spaces for students.

Teacher leaders have the opportunity to introduce somatic embodied practices into both their teams and classrooms to foster more open, reflective, and resilient educational environments. This might be as simple as taking a walk outside before a coaching conversation or encouraging relationship-building through outdoor conversations, weather permitting. In professional learning spaces such as workshops or team meetings, teacher leaders might offer brief introductions to various somatic embodied practices, such as those listed in Table 1, alongside quick regulating tools like pausing, humming, rocking, or visualizing. These practices can be useful not only during professional development but also in classroom settings, especially when emotions are heightened. These practices are valuable not only during professional development but also in classroom settings, especially when emotions run high. For example, a teacher might gently rock back and forth while engaging in an intense conversation with a student. Additionally, teachers can invite students or the entire class to pause silently together. While these moments may seem minor or even imperceptible, they draw from ancient wisdom and hold the potential to shift collective energy, cultivate awareness, and create space for something new.

More specifically, a teacher leader might introduce a “pausing and noticing” technique (see Table 1) during a faculty meeting by inviting participants to take a deep breath and observe their physical and emotional responses to a challenging topic before continuing the conversation. Teachers can then reflect individually or share with a partner about the emotions and sensations arising in their bodies. This same practice can be adapted for classroom use—particularly when committed to critical, justice-oriented learning that requires engaging students in discussions. For example, before small group conversations or collaborative projects, specifically when students are working with peers who hold different viewpoints or when conflict arises, as it inevitably does and often signals meaningful learning, teachers can guide students through a brief pause to check in with themselves. These embodied strategies help build the capacity to sit with discomfort, foster emotional regulation, and promote more grounded, just, and generative dialogue.

Table 1.
Somatic Embodied Practices List

Somatic Embodied Practice	Explanation
Body Scan	Begin by sitting comfortably with normal breath. You may choose to close your eyes. Notice your breath as it flows in and out, following it for 30 seconds or more. Bring attention to the bottom of your feet and sense the support of the ground beneath you. Slowly move your awareness up your body—legs, back, stomach, heart, shoulders—pausing to notice sensations without judgment. Then gently scan back down to your feet. End when you feel complete. This practice cultivates awareness of bodily presence and supports grounding.
Body Map	Use a blank figure or draw a simple outline of your body. While engaging in learning—whether reading, listening, or discussing—note where in your body sensations, emotions, or reactions arise. Use color, symbols, or words to express what you feel and where. This helps shift attention from the cognitive to the embodied, enhancing awareness of how learning 'lands' in your body.
Grounding and Orienting	Slowly look around your environment, turning your head and including the space behind you. Notice the details: colors, textures, objects, sounds, and smells. If outside, observe plants, animals, temperature, and movement. Then return attention to your own body—your posture, breath, and areas of tension. This practice helps reorient to the present moment and build a sense of safety and rootedness.
Tapping (EFT)	Tapping is a somatic technique rooted in Chinese medicine that uses acupressure points to help regulate emotions and reduce stress. Begin by identifying an issue and rating its intensity (1–10). Create a self-affirming phrase such as, “Even though I feel [emotion], I deeply accept myself.” Tap gently through a series of points on the body (e.g., side of the hand, eyebrow, under eye, collarbone, etc.) while repeating your phrase. This technique can calm the nervous system and support emotional regulation.
Resource Yourself	This practice involves identifying inner and outer resources to support well-being and resilience. Outer resources include people, places, or objects (e.g., a friend, nature, a favorite song). Inner resources are strengths or practices that offer internal support (e.g., positive memories, mantras, prayer). Accessing resources helps you stay present with discomfort without becoming overwhelmed.
Notice Your Breath	Engage in intentional breathing to support regulation and presence. Try three-part breathing (inhaling through belly, ribs, chest; then exhaling), square breathing (inhale-hold-exhale-hold, four counts each), or diaphragmatic breathing (lie down and use a light object on your belly to guide deep breaths). These practices connect you to your body and calm the nervous system.
Pausing and Noticing	When you feel overwhelmed, stressed, or activated, pause. You can close your eyes or keep them open. Ask yourself: What sensations, emotions, or thoughts are arising? What might be causing them? This moment of pause creates space to become aware and respond with intention rather than reactivity.

Somatic Embodied Practice	Explanation
Movement	Embodiment doesn't always mean stillness. Movement can help reconnect you to your body. Choose any form that feels grounding: dance, stretch, sway, garden, walk barefoot, hug yourself, hum, stretch joints, or splash water on your face. These actions can help release tension and reestablish connection with self.
Writing, Poetry, Drawing	Use expressive arts to externalize feelings and sensations. Free write without censorship—even repeating a word or phrase until something shifts. Try poetry to explore emotions through metaphor or rhythm. Use drawing to visualize feelings with color, shape, or imagery. No need for artistic perfection—the goal is embodied expression.

Somatic embodied practices offer a profound way to support teachers in their emotional and physical well-being. By integrating these practices into daily teaching routines, educators not only attend to their own well-being, but also model holistic approaches to learning for their students. These practices foster greater awareness of the body, encouraging educators to confront discomfort, build resilience, and create more inclusive, transformative classrooms.

Poetic Interlude 5: From History to Heart, Rooted in Presence

But, as we ground in the knowing of the past, the histories, the lineages, the legacies, while being in the present, grounding, here, we forge to the center of the earth via our nervous system, building capaciousness in our bodies for our well-being.

Discussion

As we pursue truth for justice, teacher leadership must create and engage in learning experiences that go beyond cognitive awareness and move into a deep excavation of self—an ongoing, emergent process that supports critical and ethical teaching and learning environments. Teachers, teacher educators, and teacher leadership are key factors in cultivating school cultures that center well-being (Cherkowski, 2018). When teacher leaders engage in somatic embodied practices, there is the potential to slow things down and center what is meaningful at the level of the sensate. Somatic embodied practices are a means toward that never-ending disruption. The disruption is rooted in the action of learning when to sit up, listen, stand up, and/or stand beside the messy and uncomfortable unknowability—both alone and with each other.

Somatic embodied practices serve as a tool with high leverage to create change that centers well-being while also building resilience and capacity to hold the tapestry of emotions and demands required of teachers now more than ever. These tools can be used at any time and can also spill over into classroom practice, enabling teachers to engage with students in a more attuned, grounded, and responsive way. This has the potential to transform the way educators interact with their students, especially when navigating difficult, emotional, or sensitive topics, creating an environment where well-being and learning can thrive simultaneously.

One concrete example of how somatic tools can empower and tackle injustice lies in how teachers respond to microaggressions, which are intentional or unintentional comments or actions that express a biased attitude or belief of a marginalized group of people. Knowing that ignoring microaggressions can cause further harm on those being impacted (Sue, et al., 2009),

teachers with a knowing of somatic embodied practices can pause, notice their physiological responses, and choose how to respond with care and clarity. A deep breath, a hand placed over the heart, or a moment of stillness can offer a path back into presence and clarity to address the microaggression, this can be a pathway towards healing. This capacity to regulate in the moment allows educators to intervene in harmful dynamics while staying connected to themselves and their students. Over time, this builds classrooms rooted not in fear or control, but in safety, co-regulation, and justice.

Well-being must include the emotional and embodied components of teaching and learning. Drawing on Bradley-Levine and Bender's (2023), guidance which emphasizes the need for ongoing opportunities for school leaders and teachers to learn how to maintain well-being, this paper advocates for a critical shift in how we conceptualize learning and well-being: to include the body.

Research underscores the significance of supporting educator well-being, not only for job satisfaction but also for reducing burnout and turnover. Roeser et al. (2012) emphasize that when teachers' well-being is prioritized, it contributes to a healthier, more sustainable teaching environment, ultimately improving teacher retention. This highlights the critical need to center well-being in our educational frameworks. By doing so, we not only create more resilient and effective educators but also foster a more supportive and enduring school culture.

This shift toward prioritizing well-being reimagines teacher leadership, expanding it beyond traditional cognitive and behavioral frameworks. It underscores the inseparable link between well-being, justice, and relational learning, and emphasizes the vital role of somatic embodied practices in nurturing this holistic approach. By framing teacher leadership as a bodily, relational phenomenon—shaped by the intra-actions of educators within the shared fabric of educational communities (Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Payne & Jääskeläinen, 2023)—we embrace a more embodied view of teaching and leadership. Somatic embodied practices offer the tools for educators to connect to their own bodies, fostering awareness and resilience, which strengthen their capacity for justice-oriented transformation and enable them to better navigate complex emotional dynamics in the classroom.

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