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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"It Gave Us an Outlet": School Staff Perspectives on Implementing and Sustaining Culturally Relevant Well-Being Initiatives in Schools

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ABSTRACT

School staff are exposed to high levels of occupational stressors and often work within significant resource constraints, putting them at risk for burnout and secondary traumatic stress (STS). Initially developed to support community-based social workers, the Stress-Less Initiative (SLI) is a 12-session, team-based, and internally facilitated intervention intended to build personal, team, and organizational resilience to mitigate STS and burnout. Our pilot of SLI among school staff providing after-school programming in two under-resourced K-8 public schools explored its feasibility and impact in the school setting. To evaluate this pilot, we interviewed five school staff with varying levels of participation in SLI to understand their experiences, perceived outcomes, and opportunities to optimize and sustain SLI and other supportive well-being initiatives for school staff. Interviewees described SLI as timely, relevant, and personally meaningful and pointed to several associated individual, team, and interpersonal outcomes. They also highlighted opportunities for optimizing school-based well-being initiatives to support their sustainability and impact and staff engagement as well as more general staff needs and preferences for professional development. These results further our understanding of how workplace-based strategies can be implemented in school settings to support staff facing myriad stressors that impact their health, well-being, and effectiveness.

1 | Introduction

High rates of occupational stress among teachers and other student-facing professionals working in the K-12 educational system (hereafter referred to as "school staff") have been well documented (Gallup 2013; Johnson et al. 2005). For school staff working in high-poverty schools with limited resources, these baseline stressors can be intensified by additional contextual challenges that drive increased workplace demands (Blitz et al. 2016; Camacho et al. 2021; Schmidt and Jones-Fosu 2019;

Shernoff et al. 2011). In addition to responsibility for student academic achievement, school staff are tasked with the socio-emotional development of students, serve as first responders to emotional and behavioral crises, and, through their empathetic engagement with students, are exposed second-hand to students' own traumatic experiences and stressors (Blitz et al. 2016; McCann and Pearlman 1990). These responsibilities require significant emotional labor, particularly when working in communities highly affected by collective trauma due to racism and discrimination, poverty, community violence, and historic

Summary

- Championing and facilitation of well-being initiatives by internal school community members may enhance their perceived cultural relevance and engagement within the school community and support initiative sustainability.

- School staff well-being is impacted by individual, interpersonal, organizational, and contextual factors and should therefore be viewed as a collective, rather than individualized, responsibility.

- Team-based well-being initiatives that address multi-faceted drivers of well-being, such as the Stress-Less Initiative, show potential to foster positive outcomes for individual school staff well-being, team cohesion, and school culture.

disinvestment (Blitz et al. 2016; Camacho et al. 2021; Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006; Schmidt and Jones-Fosu 2019; Shernoff et al. 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the impact of these pervasive social injustices (Baker et al. 2021; Harris et al. 2020). In one large survey of school personnel, more than three-quarters of participants reported that the student population they worked with was moderately or severely traumatized (Borntrager et al. 2012). Despite these high demands, teachers working in disinvested schools often face resource constraints, including inadequate supplies, limited funding, and less access to leadership support and quality professional development (Borntrager et al. 2012; Ingersoll et al. 2019; Thompson 2017).

The high demands and limited resources common to the experience of school staff are known to lead to burnout, characterized by high levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low perception of personal accomplishment (Hakanen et al. 2006; Maslach and Jackson 1981; Maslach et al. 2001). School staff experience high levels of emotional exhaustion in comparison to other groups of professional helpers, and staff working in high-poverty schools are particularly at risk (Camacho et al. 2021; García-Carmona et al. 2019; Maslach et al. 2001; Schmidt and Jones-Fosu 2019; Shernoff et al. 2011). These conditions further contribute to symptoms of secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue, defined as the resultant emotions and behaviors from exposure to secondary trauma which can mimic those of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Figley 1995). Though secondary traumatic stress has been researched less extensively in school-based settings than within healthcare and mental health settings, available data suggests that mild and moderate STS in particular are common among school staff (Borntrager et al. 2012; Castro Schepers and Young 2022; Christian-Brandt et al. 2020; Sprang and Garcia 2022).

Symptoms of STS among school staff have been associated with lower job satisfaction, poor engagement, and greater attrition (Christian-Brandt et al. 2020; Hakanen et al. 2006; Li and Yao 2022). However, prior research suggests potentially modifiable factors that could be addressed to buffer these negative outcomes and enhance feelings of personal well-being. Research has consistently supported that social-emotional support and workplace collegiality with both coworkers and administrators, an internal locus of control, coping self-efficacy, shared vision, perception of organizational fairness, and compassion satisfaction are protective against emotional exhaustion, burnout, STS, and/or turnover (Camacho et al. 2021; Christian-Brandt et al. 2020; Ouellette et al. 2018; Schaack et al. 2020). Originally developed in the mental health setting to support community-based social workers, the Stress-Less Initiative© (SLI) is a team-based, internally facilitated intervention to proactively foster these known protective factors among school staff (Vega 2019; Vega et al. 2019). It is intended to promote culture change, which is uniquely aligned with general school staff preferences for sustainable well-being initiatives that promote connectedness and autonomy as opposed to one-off activities (Brady and Wilson 2021; Gearhart et al. 2022). Further, SLI's model of internal facilitation importantly empowers staff members with awareness of their school communities' distinct social and contextual environments. This allows facilitators to tailor and deliver sessions with cultural relevance to local circumstances and needs, thus enhancing the perceived credibility of, engagement in, and outcomes of health promotion and psychosocial interventions (Barrera et al. 2013; Kreuter et al. 2003; Reese and Vera 2007).

We recognize that communities themselves are the experts on their needs and that programs built with their partnership are better poised for success and sustainability (Minkler 2005). Accordingly, as part of ongoing program development and evaluation activities, we gathered school staff perspectives who participated in and/or facilitated a school-based pilot of SLI. In doing so, we had three primary aims: (1) evaluate the relevance, feasibility, and acceptability of implementing SLI in the school setting; (2) explore staff-perceived outcomes as a result of participation in the program; and (3) identify opportunities to optimize and sustain SLI and other supportive well-being initiatives for school staff.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Setting and Participants

This project was part of a larger hospital-academic-community partnership aiming to address the social determinants of health in neighborhoods surrounding a large urban pediatric hospital. For this pilot, we partnered with two K-8 public schools located in a high-poverty, large Mid-Atlantic school district to implement SLI among school staff supporting after-school programming to address ongoing needs for sustainable support. Over the course of two academic years (2020-2021 and 2021-2022), staff voluntarily participated in SLI sessions, which were conducted virtually as this school district retained virtual learning through the 2020-2021 school year due to COVID-19 guidelines. Veteran school staff members known for being well trusted and supportive within their school communities served as SLI facilitators. The Netter Center for Community Partnerships, a university-affiliated community partnership-focused center serving as the longstanding manager of the after-school programs at both school sites, oversaw session scheduling and logistics of SLI pilot implementation. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia provided a 1-h training to SLI facilitators; training

TABLE 1 | Stress-Less Initiative (SLI) Session Components.

Component	Description
Assessment	Participants reflect on their current stress levels and responses
Learning	Facilitator leads a themed learning module related to strategies for approaching trauma-focused work that enhance protective capacity (e.g., mindfulness, work-life balance)
Processing	Participants reflect on the challenges and benefits of their work and/or the session's learning module
Skill	Participants practice a new mind or body self-care strategy with perceived relevance to the team, selected by the facilitator or other group member

topics included an overview of facilitators' roles and responsibilities, guidance for preparing to facilitate sessions, orientation to initiative materials (manual, PowerPoint slides) and implementation fidelity, and strategies to overcome common facilitation or engagement-related barriers or challenges. Facilitators also received ongoing consultative support from Children's Hospital of Philadelphia after each monthly session to troubleshoot challenges and monitor intervention fidelity. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined this project was exempt from human subjects research review (IRB-22-019844).

2.2 | Intervention

SLI is a trauma-informed group intervention that consists of 12 team-based monthly manualized sessions, each of which contains four components described in Table 1 (Vega 2019; Vega et al. 2019). Sessions are internally facilitated by a team member with shared professional and lived experience, which enhances the relevance and feasibility of the intervention for participants. Examples of such relevant implementation could include infusing contextually relevant examples of session concepts, engaging in processing of content and sharing experiences alongside participants, and selecting specific skills that could be feasibly practiced in their setting and are of interest to participants. As an integrative model, SLI addresses multiple levels of risk and protective factors for STS at individual, team, and organizational levels. SLI supports professionals' mental and physical well-being and longevity in helping roles by proactively fostering resilience, building team cohesion and social support, and building compassion satisfaction. SLI also aims to create opportunities for more timely mitigation of organizational stressors by providing dedicated time for staff to identify perceived challenges to their well-being in the presence of team leaders who can advocate for necessary organizational changes. The present study was designed to assess how SLI can be implemented and adapted to the school setting, as we believe it appropriately targets factors identified in prior studies to promote school staff well-being.

2.3 | Data Collection and Analysis

In support of ongoing program development and refinement, we conducted qualitative interviews with participants and facilitators to understand SLI's relevance, acceptability, and feasibility in the school setting. Project partners from both the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the Netter Center

TABLE 2 | Interviewee Identified Characteristics and SLI Engagement.

Characteristic		n	%
Race	Black or African American	5	100%
Ethnicity	Non-Hispanic/Latinx	5	100%
Gender	Female	4	80%
	Male	1	20%
Site	School 1	2	40%
	School 2	3	60%
School-based role	Full-time school-based role (e.g., teacher)	4	80%
	After-school role only	1	20%
Years in current role	4-10 years	5	100%
Extent of SLI participation	1-3 sessions	2	40%
	4-6 sessions	1	20%
	10-13 sessions	2	20%

collaborated to develop and refine an interview guide to elicit information regarding questions of interest related to implementation. Revisions also ensured that terminology would be understood by interview participants. We selected a purposive sample of school-based staff to capture varying experiences with SLI in terms of participation role (participants only vs. facilitators), level of participation (high engagement vs. low engagement), and site (School 1 vs. School 2). A project member who oversaw after-school programming invited staff to participate in qualitative interviews via email; all five invited staff, two of whom had experience facilitating SLI sessions, opted to participate. Their demographic and professional characteristics and engagement with SLI are summarized in Table 2.

A trained academic staff member unknown to interviewees conducted semi-structured interviews, which were approximately 40 min in duration. Before all interviews, the interviewer reminded interviewees that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be deidentified. During interviews, interviewees were asked about (1) their experiences with SLI, including their personal and team engagement with SLI, alignment of SLI with their expectations, and perceived cultural relevance of SLI; (2) their perceived personal, team, and

organizational outcomes of SLI; (3) their suggestions for optimizing SLI for the school setting in terms of session content and format, implementation logistics, and facilitation. Additionally, interviewees who served as SLI facilitators were asked to discuss successes and challenges in facilitating SLI with their teams, including those related to participant engagement and implementation materials (e.g., SLI manual, session slide decks, and handouts). Interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. All interviewees received a $50 gift card to a local merchant as remuneration for their time.

Before analysis, interview transcripts were deidentified to remove any identifying characteristics of interviewees (e.g., name, school-based role, or location of work). Using a general inductive approach, two research team members independently completed repeated line-by-line readings of all transcripts to identify salient patterns and themes across interviews within each major topic area of inquiry: experiences with SLI, SLI impacts and outcomes, and suggestions for optimizing and sustaining well-being initiatives within the school setting (Thomas 2006). Staff maintained analytic memos to organize their findings and reflections and then met to discuss and consolidate identified themes. To access the validity of our findings and refine our interpretation of their practical implications, the primary author led discussions with the larger community-academic team, including team members with prior experience implementing the SLI intervention, community-based members with primary oversight of after-school programming and staff, and evaluation experts, as a form of member checking.

3 | Results

Overall, interviewees reported positive experiences with SLI, describing it as timely and relevant both for them personally and their peers and sharing concrete examples of positive impacts on their personal well-being, teams, and students. To foster engagement and enhance sustainability, interviewees also shared several recommendations and considerations for translating and optimizing SLI and other team-based well-being interventions in the school setting. We distilled these findings into three overarching themes—(1) content suitability and relevance, (2) impacts of team-based well-being initiatives for school staff, and (3) considerations for implementation feasibility and sustainability in the school setting—with associated subthemes described below.

3.1 | Content Suitability and Relevance

3.1.1 | Timeliness and Resonance

Interviewees perceived SLI as particularly culturally relevant and timely in the context of challenges their school communities were facing, namely the COVID-19 pandemic, pandemic-associated virtual learning and return to school, and civil unrest. Interviewees described SLI as providing them a much-needed refuge and support system within extraordinarily difficult work and personal contexts:

"Culturally, in this particular community, we lost a lot of, students lost family. A lot. I know I lost my brother through COVID, and so there was a lot of loss in this particular zone. We're in one of the top three zones for COVID during the high end of the numbers. So it was very helpful because we were all set initially because we were all alone dealing with it at our homes. We were really quarantined and this was an actual outlet...We were all teaching. We never really kind of stopped teaching. But we were at our homes teaching by ourselves dealing with whatever we was dealing. Students were losing family. Coworkers was losing family, and this was a way to come together, kind of discuss it and deal with it. We became a support team for each other during this time to really talk about that because there was a lot of things talking about everything else. But we didn't really have anywhere else to kind of talk about the stress that we was dealing with. So it gave us an outlet for that....We actually had students that were in the hospital for long periods of time during that time....So we had a couple students that was in the hospital that I had taught for a couple years. So we created a connection with kids when you teach them for several years like that...I mean it was just like a support system, that we had each other to kind of go through what was going on and what we were facing."

[Participant 3]

Interviewees shared that SLI provided tools for coping with stress, a space for community building, an opportunity for self-care, and/or a time for colleagues to collaborate on student-related challenges. They described SLI exceeding their expectations, generally describing high levels of engagement during SLI sessions:

"But just the fact that, you know and I wasn't there because I was going to get paid. I wasn't there because it was mandatory because I love to be in a meeting, a positive, motivated meeting...after I started going, attending more, more and more, I found them to be very, very relevant to helping me with my life."

[Participant 5]

Sessions elicited robust discussions, openness, and vulnerability among participants, particularly later in the series as participants became more comfortable and willing to share. Some who initially thought that the material would be less personally helpful, as they perceived themselves to be coping well with stress, expressed surprise at how resonant and meaningful the content was for them personally, particularly in becoming more cognizant of their stress levels.

"It just made me more aware of what was going on in my body, and then what I needed to do to get my mind in line and actually physically feel like I was okay, and the different strategies that were talked about in that session.

That one, I can't really think of any off the top of my head, but that one stood out to me as well because it just made me be a little bit more, how can I say, present, and be in whatever it was that I was feeling and dealing with to get my mind where I needed to be to be well."

[Participant 1]

SLI was also perceived as unique in the school setting for its focus on building staff capacity, in contrast to more traditional student-focused professional development, with one interviewee explaining:

"I know the type of work we do, we spend a lot of time transferring coping skills to the younger people that we work with, but sometimes neglect to transfer those same skills to our coworkers. And I think the Stress Less was a good way in which to help us to do that...I like the fact that it was transitive in that it gave you skills that you could not only utilize in the workplace, but you could also utilize in your home setting and your community setting as well."

[Participant 2]

3.1.2 | Flexibility and Customizability

Several interviewees suggested that the relevance, feasibility, and perceived success of SLI in their school communities was enabled by its flexibility and customizability, with one interviewee who had served as a facilitator explaining that it was "culturally neutral" and "g[ave] [facilitators] enough space" [Participant 2]. Both interviewees who facilitated sessions described exercising autonomy to adapt content to be culturally relevant, namely by integrating examples relevant to their personal experiences, school communities, or current events:

"It was really culturally relevant because the facilitators... did provide examples, especially from my perspective, as far as with the civil unrest we think that our children face in this, to the community just to see, and just understanding the population that you serve, or the school that you're in, understanding that population. That's so important, and [Facilitator] gave that, and examples we're given,...because there's so many people that come into our schools, the teacher[s], they have no clue. They really have no clue. And even when they say, 'I can't believe they said that they said their lights are out,' or, 'I can't believe...' They have no clue. So it's really it's just very important."

[Participant 4]

Facilitators also described how the preprepared intervention materials, which included a facilitator manual with background on the session topic and participant-facing slide decks and handouts, were critical to SLI's success by minimizing their own preparatory burden and helping them to feel like "experts" on the topic:

"If you weren't informed on that particular topic, you could read through the notes and really catch yourself up and be able to facilitate it without even having a whole lot of experience with it...So you could take what it was saying and kind of paraphrase in your own way. And really be sounding like you were very experienced on the topic, even if you may not have it."

[Participant 3]

3.2 | Impacts of Team-Based Wellbeing Initiatives

Interviewees described benefits of SLI for them personally, as well as for their team and organization. Interviewees believed the knowledge and skills they gained changed how they related to, understood, and interacted with both colleagues and students.

3.2.1 | Personal Growth and Change

Interviewees consistently described ways that SLI had fostered personal growth and changes. Many commented on how SLI increased their personal knowledge and awareness of STS and stress more generally. Speaking to this enhanced understanding of STS, one interviewed explained:

"It was relating to how we can relate, remove ourselves from the emotional trauma of what the students are going through. Because I definitely remember that because sometimes we could put ourselves in the situation of a child or if a child is going through something that might trigger what we've been through. So what I thought was important...is how can we still be empathetic but remove ourselves from being overwhelmed with the trauma of the situation of what that person is going through."

[Participant 5]

As participants became more aware of their stress and reactions, interviewees described SLI sessions creating a psychologically safe space for participants to share their stresses and acknowledge and validate the challenges that come with their work. In doing so, interviewees described experiencing "release," reduction in their feelings of aloneness and isolation, and greater comfort asking for help. One interviewee described how more reserved team members began to share more openly and find community:

"Well, I know how it has impacted us...I know a lot of people have gone through a lot. So a lot of people who would never participate in things like that we have gotten so many more people to participate since then. People who are normally quiet started coming to the sessions and speaking up, which is so helpful, that you're not alone in that kind of situation."

[Participant 3]

Additionally, interviewees described how SLI helped them better manage their reactions to stress. They acquired concrete coping skills such as breathing exercises, mindfulness, body scans, taking pauses, and setting boundaries. They also shared that greater mindfulness of their triggers and temperament allowed them to better manage their emotional reactions, including during tense interactions with students:

> "...sometimes you might be so angry, you feel yourself getting escalated, but you don't really know why. Or you're so in your emotions, you're not even stopping to think why or whatever and not really being mindful of, okay, wait a minute, this just triggered me. This triggered me because of that....So if I understand that, then let's reverse engineer that, get back to center so we can deal with it appropriately."
>
> [Participant 2]

Further, interviewees reported making more conscious, proactive efforts to engage in healthy habits to support healing and longevity in their roles despite the secondary trauma encountered working with students. These behaviors included being more intentional with self-care, celebrating small successes, and taking time for intentional restorative activities outside of work, such as walking or gardening. Speaking of the restorative impact of these activities, one interviewee said:

> "Wow, this really, even though I'm tired, it just relaxes me. And it helped me, and even when it was time to go back and do another day, I was in a better space, or go back, and out of my office, and handle another situation, it allowed me to be in a better space and handle things successfully."
>
> [Participant 4]

3.2.2 | Team Cohesion and Support

Interviewees believed that SLI strengthened their relationships with team members who participated in the sessions, describing how they built a new support system and space of cohesion and genuine friendship with their colleagues. Interviewees described this new camaraderie transcending beyond the 90-min SLI sessions. Outside of sessions, some interviewees discussed how SLI increased their cognizance of their colleagues' stress levels and needs for social support:

> "I'll ask people in a minute, 'It seems like you got a lot going on. What's going on?' and it just makes me be a little bit more mindful of what I see in others and even ask them, and like I said, I do the same with my students."
>
> [Participant 1]

Interviewees also described how developing a shared team vocabulary around concepts such as stress, emotional expression, and protective mechanisms, strengthened coworker relationships and enhanced how they provided social support to colleagues:

> "If like my coworker needs to vent, they'll just say, 'Hey, I just need to vent.' 'Go right on ahead. Just go right on ahead. I'm not going to interrupt you. I'm just going to let you say whatever you need to say.' So yes, it definitely has helped in our relationships."
>
> [Participant 2]

3.2.3 | Strengthen Student Relationships

Most interviewees shared that SLI helped improve their relationships and interactions with students by increasing empathy, awareness of their backgrounds and stressors, and understanding of how stress may manifest in students' behaviors:

> "I look at it differently now because stress actually deals, it impacts everyone differently, and it made me more alert on how it might be affecting the students that I teach. It might not look how it's affecting me, and sometimes changes in behavior, changes in appetite, is it all comes from stress sometimes."
>
> [Participant 3]

As a result, interviewees described adapting their communication with students to be kinder and more patient:

> "The students can be difficult too, just in responding, and just understanding the stress that they may encounter, and even the trauma that they may encounter. And if they're screaming and yelling, I'm not going to meet them with that same anger. I'm going to come with a calm tone, and that was discussed in the sessions as well. If they're at a heightened state, we have to come at a calming state with the students, and just helping to just understand, and putting myself in their shoes, and having the empathy. So [SLI] did help me in that regard as well."
>
> [Participant 4]

To better support students, interviewees explained greater intention to look past students' behaviors and focused on amending the factors driving those behaviors. An interviewee explained their effort to be responsive to the needs of their students, saying:

> "As far as the children are concerned, again, I do what I do as far as with the kids, just looking at how they respond to things and what they're doing, and then it just makes me just talk to them more and just try to help them deal with whatever if they're going through something. That's what it did for me...Like I have students that just come up to me and just say, 'I need a hug,' and I'm like, 'Okay.'"
>
> [Participant 1]

3.3 | Considerations for Maximizing Feasibility, Sustainability, and Impact in the School Setting

Based on positive experiences, interviewees expressed a strong desire to continue SLI in their after-school settings and to bring SLI to their wider school communities. To optimize feasibility and sustainability in the school setting, interviewees provided several suggestions related to implementation.

3.3.1 | Importance of Framing, Messaging, and Local Facilitation

Interviewees viewed leadership buy-in of SLI as critical to motivating staff participation. When framing and messaging the intervention, interviewees suggested that leadership acknowledge staff's high levels of stress and needs for support. Interviewees stressed the importance that leaders communicate the unique and tangible ways SLI will benefit staff and make clear that SLI is not punitive:

> "And I guess that comes from the leadership just communicating to them like, 'Yo, this is not a punishment. This is something that I think will really help you guys in terms of your own personal and professional, personal lives, work with your significant other, children or your parents or whatever in your life or help you better working in a school setting with not only your peers in terms of your colleagues, but also with the young people that you instruct.'"
>
> [Participant 2]

In addition to being thoughtful about how leadership messages the intervention, interviewees also stressed the importance of leadership being active participants in the intervention, acknowledging that this participation sends messages about the importance and value of the intervention and recognizing that leaders and administrators also face their own stressors and could themselves benefit from participation. Interviewees further suggested that advertisement of the program be integrated into regular channels for staff communication, such as on the school webpage or in automated reminder calls to staff, which they perceived would increase participation.

Interviewees consistently iterated that facilitators should be one of them: from the school community, such as teachers, school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, team leads, or grade-level leaders. They believed facilitation by a member of their internal school community, as opposed to an outside consultant from a university or other community-based agency, would further signify the school's investment and reduce potential power differentials between the facilitator and participants. Additionally, interviewees believed these individuals had unique understanding of the school setting, likely having navigated similar challenges to participants, and were able to "set the tone," and "encourage school-wide participation":

> "I think [the facilitator should be] a teacher or an administrator, but I just think it's very important, first of all, for the person that is facilitating it wants to do it and have some understanding of the school population, even staff and students, because a lot of times we have people coming in from the outside facilitating, and they can answer questions very on educational standpoint, but a personal standpoint, they really don't have a real idea as far as, 'Okay, I can give you this is what did I experienced, or this is what I did.' So I would feel even a teacher...I think a teacher brings so much, or someone that's already within the school, that's already in the school community I think would be better and very receptive from...Especially if that person is respected within the school community. People are really just going to really hone in and listen, because they have earned that respect in their field. They have earned that respect in their field, And so what can I learn from you for real?"
>
> [Participant 4]

In addition to the value of internal facilitators for enhancing buy-in, they were also stressed as being crucial to intervention sustainability; interviewees described these school-based facilitators as SLI champions who could keep the intervention going through future changes or turnover in school leadership and staff. Interviewees also discussed the importance that the facilitator have the necessary training and experience to lead SLI sessions, communicate effectively, hold attention of participants, and have a passion for the material. Interviewees were open to shared or rotating facilitation to give more staff members the opportunity to facilitate but expressed that the consistency of facilitators is important to support cohesiveness and flow and allow participants to build relationships and comfortability with facilitators.

3.3.2 | Logistics to Optimize Participation and Impact

Interviewees expressed that consistency of monthly SLI sessions was critical to maintaining momentum and engagement, with one suggestion that sessions could be held more frequently (i.e., bimonthly). A strong preference for in-person sessions to support "real engagement" and discourage multitasking emerged. Interviewees described some challenges with engagement during virtual sessions, particularly when held in the evening hours. One interviewee explained:

> "I think people are always much more reticent to engage on Zoom than they are in person...Because then you got people who, they're on but they're not really tapped in."
>
> [Participant 2]

While having after-school staff, most of whom also had full-time school-based roles, participate in SLI is valuable, interviewees stressed the importance of providing SLI to school-day staff for whom they perceived the material would be highly relevant and most impactful on the larger school community, students, and overall culture:

"I think it would have a greater impact...The need is certainly there. The need is certainly there in the schools, and I'm not saying it's not there with the after-school staff, but the after-school staff, they had the kids from maybe 3:00-6:00, and it's not a large population....With the teachers you're reaching a wide population, therefore impacting a larger number of not only adults, and helping them deal with a larger number of students, and recognizing, and dealing with their stress."

[Participant 4]

To make school-wide expansion feasible and maximize engagement, interviewees recommended that sessions be scheduled and tailored to fit within the traditional school staff workday as opposed to in the evenings or during school closures/holidays, offering that interventions could be integrated into planning periods, existing meetings, and/or pre-scheduled monthly professional development days. Specifically, multiple interviewees discussed how incorporation of SLI into routine professional development would be valuable to school-day staff, providing them a "time to share, collaborate..., and be encouraged" [Participant 4]. Speaking to the novelty of incorporating staff well-being content into professional development settings, one interviewee shared:

"Because we're hardly ever, during professional development time...talking about anything that might relate to us internally and how to deal with the stresses that we may encounter in coming to work every day. So actually, I would think that people would see it as an, 'Oh, they do care if we're coming in stressed and want to make sure we have some type of skills to calm down or,' you know. That's why I would think it would work, because it's something different than what we usually do."

[Participant 1]

4 | Discussion

Our evaluation explored the perspectives of school-based staff who participated in SLI, a team-based well-being initiative, in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a time of outsized personal, professional, and community stress. Notably, many of the challenges described by school staff in our study are not unique to urban schools and are experienced more broadly by schools impacted by disinvestment regardless of geography. During interviews, school personnel emphasized the relevance and timeliness of this supportive intervention and reaffirmed the perceived value and novelty of culturally relevant programming to increase their own personal awareness of stress and mitigate burnout and secondary trauma. Notably, while we conducted interviews in the context of learning about recent experience with SLI, emergent themes reflected broader professional development needs and preferences of school staff. These results have practical implications for design, implementation, and sustainability of future interventions supporting school staff well-being.

Uniquely, as a team-based, internally facilitated intervention, SLI addresses individual, interpersonal, and organizational contributors to school staff well-being. Substantial literature has established that school staff stress, burnout, and turnover is multifaceted—comprised of individual, classroom, interpersonal, occupational, and organizational factors—suggesting that staff wellbeing should be a collective, rather than individualized responsibility. Prior research highlights the importance of organizational-level factors, such as leadership support, staff autonomy, and school climate, on staff well-being, even during times of societal crisis (Ford et al. 2019; Grayson and Alvarez 2008; Trinidad 2021). Therefore, solutions to improve well-being ideally must be multilevel and span from the individual to the organization (Gearhart et al. 2022; Li and Yao 2022; Ouellette et al. 2018); yet, the vast majority of existing school-based supportive interventions continue to narrowly focus on individual skill development and behavior change (Beames et al. 2023; Iancu et al. 2018). In this regard, our work highlights a potential intervention, which is novel in its intention to address wellbeing beyond the individual level to enhance resources at both the interpersonal and organizational levels. At the interpersonal level, SLI enhances social support and team cohesion through dedicated time for relationship building, processing of session content, and sharing of current stressors and successes. At the organizational level, SLI provides opportunity for school leaders and administrators to signify their prioritization of staff wellbeing by providing dedicated space to build skills, vocabulary, and connections. Interviewees perceived these organizational impacts could be realized more fully in their larger school communities if SLI were offered more widely beyond staff serving after-school programming and clearly supported by school leaders (i.e., principals). Further study is needed to determine how leadership might best signify their support; for example, "supportive" actions might range from a principal providing dedicated time during the workday for sessions to attending groups as an active participant. Each of these supportive strategies may contribute differently to group dynamics and participants' perceptions of psychological safety, which are likely further influenced by pre-existing school climate.

Our findings reaffirm the value of community-led interventions and provide a feasible model for doing so to support staff wellbeing in the school setting. A strength of our implementation of SLI was its grounding in community expertise through the inclusion of school staff to facilitate and identify future opportunities to refine programming. Interviewees perceived interventions being led by an internal expert—a school staff member—as a prerequisite of community buy-in and a driver of the success of implementation of SLI on their teams. An important aspect of acknowledging this internal expertise was the empowerment of internal facilitators to carry out interventions with "flexible" fidelity—giving them the encouragement and freedom to make content culturally relevant and optimized for their settings and contexts while minimizing preparatory burden by providing thorough and preprepared intervention materials (e.g., intervention manuals, participant-facing visually appealing slide decks). In the wider literature, use of an internal facilitator for staff wellbeing interventions in the school setting is rare. A 2023 meta-analysis found fewer than 5% of published intervention studies intended to improve

teacher wellbeing used an internal facilitator, such as a teacher or school nurse, with the majority being delivered by external experts, such as certified trainers, clinical psychologists, or researchers (Beames et al. 2023). In addition to potentially hampering participant buy-in and engagement in the short-term, programs led or overly driven by community "outsiders" also create challenges for longer-term sustainability after funding cycles or research studies have concluded (Herlitz et al. 2020). More sustainable programs may also have greater potential for impact given that longer intervention duration has been associated with larger effect sizes in a meta-analysis of interventions addressing teacher burnout (Iancu et al. 2018). While the current study limitedly explored school staff preferences for facilitators internal or external to the school community, further research is also needed to understand how other aspects of facilitators' identities, such as gender, racial identity, or professional role, might influence experiences of facilitators and participants alike.

Our evaluation identified a wide range of outcomes resulting from SLI participation, spanning from personal to team to student-related impacts. While our evaluation was not designed to measure staff changes in burnout or STS due to SLI participation, the individual- and team-level impacts identified by our study have been established as mitigating factors for burnout and STS in prior research—namely development of positive coping skills, professional and socio-emotional support, and connection with colleagues—suggesting that SLI may reduce burnout and STS and enhance wellbeing (Borntrager et al. 2012; Caringi et al. 2015; Follette et al. 1994; Kerr et al. 2011; Schauben and Frazier 1995). Assessment of these outcomes deserves more rigorous, longitudinal exploration. In particular, while SLI was principally designed to support community-based service providers (in our implementation, school staff), interviewees described ways in which SLI positively altered their assessments of and interactions with students. Prior research supports that students perceive teacher stress and burnout, and such perceptions may relate to subsequent academic achievement, behavior, and classroom motivation (Herman et al. 2018; Madigan and Kim 2021; Oberle et al. 2020). Thus, future study is needed to examine the potential impact of this staff-focused intervention on student outcomes and whether students directly perceive or experience any personal outcomes.

As community experts, interviewees also shared logistical practices to minimize burden to school staff and enhance engagement and comfort in team-based interventions, in particular regarding session modality. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, SLI sessions were necessarily virtual; however, interviewees reflected that engagement in and comfort with a team-based intervention like SLI was optimized when sessions were held in-person. Though some prior studies have found in-person and online professional development modalities to have equal impact on teacher and student outcomes, SLI's unique objectives and peer-led interactive instructional style differs from traditional "expert-led" lecture-based professional development (Fishman et al. 2013; Powell et al. 2010). Fostering the prerequisite levels of psychological safety and participant engagement to implement SLI may be more feasible in a face-to-face setting, though this nuance deserves further study. Staff members' preference for face-to-face sessions also could reflect the timing of the intervention and interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic when virtual meeting fatigue was common.

4.1 | Limitations

Our findings are limited by the exploratory nature of our evaluation design. Most notably, our sample size of five school-based staff working in two public schools may limit the generalizability of our findings; however, we believe our sample was adequate to answer our questions of interest. These 5 individuals represented 10% of SLI participants who attended 2 or more sessions and a facilitator from each school site, providing sufficient data to assess preliminary acceptability and feasibility of the intervention in the school setting, explore staff-perceived outcomes, and gather staff perspectives on future optimization for the school setting. Staff-identified outcomes should be more explicitly and rigorously measured in future quantitative studies with a sample size sufficiently powered to detect statistically meaningful changes. Additionally, while we did interview staff purposively to include those with low, moderate, and high SLI participation, future study is still needed to understand how needs, views, and barriers to participation might differ for staff who had never participated in SLI. Finally, our pilot of SLI and subsequent interviews took place in the context of the first 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of outsized stress, loss, and grief for school staff and their communities. While the core content of SLI was not specific to the experience of the pandemic and associated trauma, we acknowledge that perceptions of SLI during this time may not be generalizable to other time periods and require additional study.

5 | Conclusion

School staff face high workplace demands and are in need of supportive interventions that foster their personal wellbeing and positive team and school cultures. Our pilot of SLI preliminarily established its feasibility and acceptability for school staff working in after-school programming and highlighted the strengths of a team-based, internally led model for enhancing staff buy-in and program sustainability. We identified the diffusive nature of this initiative's positive impacts—transcending staff's personal and professional wellbeing to additionally enhance team cohesion and student-facing interactions. Our work uncovered several best practices for optimizing implementation of school-based staff wellbeing initiatives and in doing so highlighted staff preferences and needs for professional development more generally. We also identified opportunities to expand interventions to the full range of school staff to maximize intervention impacts, particularly on school culture. Importantly, given the near-term impact of SLI identified by participants in this study, efforts to embed and sustain SLI may have an important role in supporting staff in disinvested school communities as they continue to face systemic injustices and community traumas. Such implementation requires further study of the impact of this intervention on longer-term wellbeing in the face of continued adversity.

Conflicts of Interest

In accordance with Wiley policy and her ethical obligation as a researcher, Dr. Laura Vega would like to disclose that she has financial interests related to the Stress-Less Initiative©. The Stress-Less Initiative is intellectual property of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and was developed by Dr. Vega. Accordingly, one or both parties may receive income from this invention in the future. To support the validity and rigor of this study, as inventor of SLI, Dr. Vega was not involved in participant identification, recruitment, data collection, or primary analysis of data. Individuals with no significant financial interest in SLI, the outcome of the research, or reporting obligations to Dr. Vega performed these tasks to limit potential biases in our study methods or findings.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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