

Mental Health Crisis: Effect of Teachers' Mindfulness on Students' Burnout

Kshamta Sharma

Studies on leadership show that mindfulness is positively related to servant leadership, followers' job satisfaction and performance, and negatively related to abusive supervision and subordinates' emotional exhaustion. The present study examines the impact of teachers' mindfulness on relational aspects of student-teacher relationships and student's perceptions of psychological safety to understand its impact on students' burnout levels. The dyadic data is collected from students and teachers across three business schools located in different parts of India. The findings of sequential mediation analysis confirm the effects of teachers' mindfulness on students' burnout levels sequentially mediated through high-quality relationships and psychological safety. The study suggests that leaders of educational institutes and policymakers can utilize the effectiveness of mindfulness to deal with the emerging mental health crisis among young students.

Kshamta Sharma is an Assistant Professor at T. A. Pai Management Institute, Bengaluru. E-mail: kshamta.sharma@manipal.edu

Introduction

In the contemporary organizational landscape, there is an unprecedented prevalence of burnout, a phenomenon incurring substantial, yet insufficiently acknowledged, costs for organizations. These costs manifest in the form of covert employee disengagement, diminished innovation, and an escalation in healthcare expenditures.

While a common attribution links this issue to an upsurge in overall work-related demands, the recent meta-analytical investigation revealed that it is not the quantum of work demands per se that has caused a notable increase; rather, it is the heightened interpersonal intricacies inherent to the work that have surged (Kim et al., 2018). This research comprised a comprehensive meta-analysis encompassing 19 pertinent studies involving a substantial participant pool of 95,434 individuals. Its primary aim was to delve into the associations between diverse forms of social support and

the three distinct facets of student burnout. The overarching findings pointed to a consistent negative correlation between social support and the occurrence of student burnout. In particular, the study underscored that school or teacher support wields the most pronounced negative impact on student burnout.

The phenomenon of school burnout among students has been thoroughly examined concerning interpersonal elements like peer interactions and social adaptation (Farina et al., 2020), with empirical findings suggesting the role of interpersonal relationships and perceived social support having a major role to play (Kim et al., 2018). The purpose of the present research is to explore how can teachers play a role in addressing the mental health crisis of young students. Specifically, how can teachers use mindfulness, an established concept in management and leadership research with a significant impact on various dimensions of followers' well-being, to help reduce their students' burnout levels.

Literature Review & Hypotheses Development

Before we try to establish that mindfulness can be a useful tool to address student burnout crisis, it is important to acknowledge that not only students are experiencing burnout and other mental health issues, but teachers are also experiencing burnout and other mental health issues at schools and colleges (Chang, 2009; Pressley, 2021; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). And, mindfulness has been proven as a useful intervention

to address the issue of teachers' burnout (Luken & Sammons, 2016; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Mindfulness is a Buddhist psychology concept, rooted in the fundamental activities of consciousness-attention and awareness. Mindfulness is described as "receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience" (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Though different schools of thought emphasize certain characteristics of mindfulness more than others, the core characteristics of mindfulness are- (i) clarity of awareness, (ii) non-conceptual, non-discriminatory awareness and (iii) flexibility of attention and cognition (Brown et al., 2007).

Now, we explore whether teachers can use the skills of mindfulness to address the problem of student burnout. As already discussed, organizations are benefitting from leaders' mindfulness in the forms of followers' well-being, behavior and productivity (Tan et al., 2023). Our hypothesis is that teachers can use mindfulness to reduce the burnout levels of their students.

H1: Teachers' mindfulness is negatively related to students' burnout.

Mindfulness is negatively abusive supervision by increasing leaders' self-regulated behavior (Liang et al., 2015). When students misbehave or underperform, abusive behavior is an automatic or involuntary behavior, especially when teachers themselves are experiencing cognitive depletion. Mindfulness can help teachers to reassess a whole situation from a different perspective and respond in a more empathic manner than other-

wise. Prior research has established a strong positive relationship between, mindfulness and two dimensions of empathy, cognitive and emotional. (Winning & Boag, 2015).

Good quality relationship with co-workers reduces work-related burnout levels of employees

Based on the above discussion, mindful teachers may be more equipped to choose a respectful and empathic response in a difficult situation than less mindful teachers. Past research suggests that good quality relationship with co-workers reduces work-related burnout levels of employees (Fernet et al., 2010). Current research hypothesizes that when teachers are mindful of the classroom environment and their own possible responses to any emerging situation, they will engage in a more respectful and empathetic behavior, which will facilitate the high quality relationship between the teachers and their students over a period of time. And the high quality relationship between the teachers and students will help in building a classroom environment where students will have a sense of safety. There are empirical evidences which suggest that respectful engagement and a trust-based relationship between leaders and followers lead to a sense of psychological safety among the followers (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). Based on the discussion, it is hypothesized that:

H2: The negative relationship between teachers' mindfulness and students'

burnout is mediated by high quality relationship between teachers and students.

Psychological safety is a concept that pertains to the workplace and social environments, particularly within the context of team dynamics and organizational culture. It refers to an individual's perception of the work environment as a safe space for expressing ideas, taking risks, and being oneself without fear of negative consequences, such as ridicule, punishment, or rejection. In a psychologically safe environment, individuals feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, admitting mistakes, asking questions, and contributing to discussions openly. (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017).

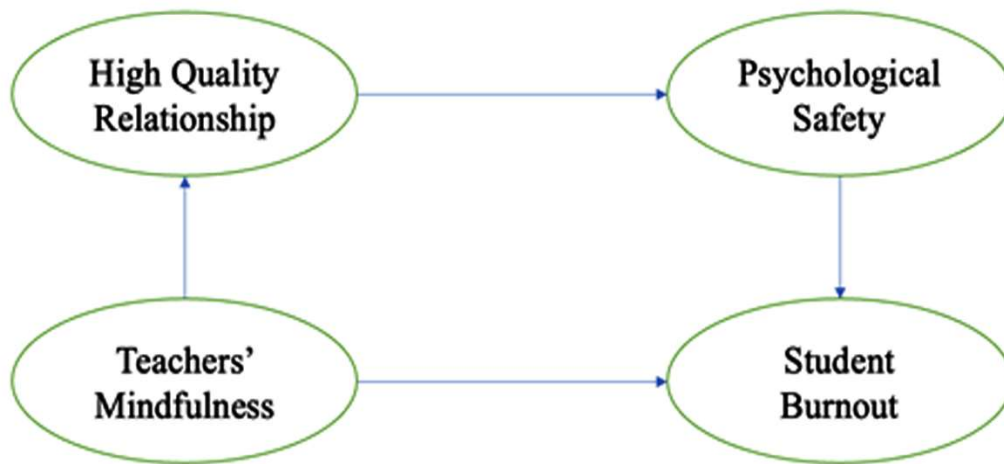
When mindful teachers encourage a psychological safe classroom environment, the students feel safe and motivated to express their ideas, raise their doubts, admit their mistakes, and contribute to the class discussion without the threat of being judged or without the fear of being punished. This kind of classroom experience will make students more engaged in the classroom without feeling drained or tired in the process of learning. In other words, students will be less burned out when teachers are mindful and provide a sense of psychological safety than the teachers who are not mindful. Thus, the last hypothesis is that:

H3: The negative relationship between teachers' mindfulness and students' burnout is mediated by the perception of psychological safety among students.

H4: The negative relationship between teachers' mindfulness and students' burnout is sequentially mediated by (i) high quality relationship between teachers and students and (ii) a perception of psychological safety among students.

All four hypothesized relationships between teachers' mindfulness, high quality relationship between teachers and students, students' perception of psychological safety and students' burnout level is depicted in the fig. 1.

Fig. 1 Students' perception of psychological safety and students' burnout level



Sample & Procedure

Sampling was done using a convenience sampling approach. Professors in three different colleges were requested to take part in the study and provide the details of their students to take part in the study. The data were collected at the dyadic level, one online survey was sent 45 teachers, seeking responses to the questions about their levels of mindfulness and demographic information. Another online survey was sent to 600 students, seeking questions about their relationships with their teachers, perception of psychological safety and burnout levels.

The survey was sent using Qualtrics survey software. The survey links were kept open for professors' responses for two weeks (June 2021). During this period, multiple reminders were sent to participants requesting their responses. The student survey was sent in two phases. First phase- first survey included questions about their perception of psychological safety and the quality of their relationship with their teachers (Sep 2021), second survey included questions about their burnout levels and demographic information (Nov 2021). For both the phases, the surveys were kept open for one month and weekly reminders were sent to participate in the study.

Out of 45 teachers and 600 students, 38 and 480 responded to the surveys. The responses from teachers and students were discarded if any one of them missed responding to any of the scale items of their respective surveys. After deleting all incomplete responses from teachers and students, the final sample size was 33 teachers and 368 students. There was no incentive to participate in the survey and students were given the option to leave the study in-between if they needed.

Out of 33 teachers, 14 were females and 19 were males. All the teachers were minimum Ph.D. in different disciplines of management, 03 were post-doc. The average post PhD work experience of teachers was 4.5 years.

Out of 368 students, 153 students were males and 211 were females. Four students did not disclose their gender. All the students completed their undergraduate level studies in different disciplines, the majority were in engineering. The average work experience of the students prior to joining the business schools was 02 years.

Measures

Mindfulness: Mindfulness Attention and Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003) was used to measure leaders' mindfulness. MAAS represents mindfulness as a state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present (Brown & Ryan, 2003: 822). The self-reported scale has 15 items and uses a 6-point Likert scale (1 = almost

always; 6 = almost never) to measure mindfulness. Items in the scale include "I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present," "It seems I am 'running on automatic' without much awareness of what I'm doing," and "I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past." Items with inverse wording were re-coded for all analyses so that higher scores mean higher levels of mindfulness. This scale demonstrated the alpha level of .89.

High Quality Relationship: High quality relationship between teachers and students were measured by high quality connection (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). Sample items are 'I bounce back when I confront setbacks in my class, I am getting better at my study because I learn from my mistakes.' The scale used was a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Cronbach's alpha was .75 for this scale.

Psychological Safety: Edmondson's psychological safety scale was used to collect the data (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Sample items are: 'it is difficult to ask other members of this organization for help' (reverse coded), and 'members of this organization are able to bring up problems and tough issues'. The self-reported scale has 7 items and uses a 7-point Likert scale to measure psychological safety. The Cronbach's α for this measure was 0.65.

Burnout: The Undergraduate Learning Burnout Scale was used to collect the student burnout data (Lanhua, 2005). ULB scale consisted of 20 items on a

five-point Likert scale. "1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree," The Cronbach's alpha for this measure was 0.88. Sample items cannot be disclosed as per the scale's authors' instruction

Data Analysis

Correlations and descriptive statistics of all variables of interest were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics 23. Linear regression functions in SPSS Statistics 23 were used to test the hypotheses. Hayes' PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Hayes,

2013) was used to test direct and indirect effects in mediation analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Mean values, standard deviation (S.D.), and the number of respondents (N) for each variable are reported in Table 1. Inter-correlations and reliabilities are reported in Table 2. Correlation analysis shows that most hypothesized correlations are significant and in the proposed direction.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	S.D.	N
Teachers' Mindfulness	4.70	0.75	33
High Quality Relationship	5.69	0.54	368
Psychological Safety	6.86	0.47	368
Student Burnout	4.69	0.41	368

Table 2 Inter-correlations & Reliabilities

Variable	1	2	3	4
Teachers' Mindfulness	(.89)			
High Quality Relationship	.52**	(.75)		
Psychological Safety	.09	.34**	(.65)	
Student Burnout	-.82**	-.59**	-.12*	(.88)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).Cronbach Alpha in parenthesis.

Hypotheses Testing

For hypotheses testing, the data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23. Process macro was used to estimate the direct and indirect effects of mediation hypotheses (Hayes, 2013). The results were consistent with the hypothesized sequential mediation process. The global fit indices of the model show good fit (CFI=0.88; TLI=0.89; RMSEA=0.07;

Chi Square=1846.05; Df = 1163). The model hypothesized the indirect sequential effects of teachers' mindfulness on students' burnout levels through the high quality relationship between teachers and students and students' perception of psychological safety.

Consistent with the hypotheses, the relevant path coefficients were signifi-

cant. Direct effects of teachers' mindfulness on students' burnout ($\beta = -0.10$, $p < 0.05$, BCLB=0.23; BCUB=0.57), of high quality relationship on psychological safety ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.05$; BCLB=0.41; BCUB=0.64), of psychological safety on student burnout ($\beta = -0.32$, $p < 0.05$; BCLB=0.18; BCUB=0.45), were all significant.

The analysis of the sequential mediation hypothesis and bootstrap analyses found that the indirect effects of teachers' mindfulness on student burnout ($\beta = -0.05$, $p < 0.001$, BCLB=0.02; BCUB=0.08) were negatively significant. Further, the total effects of teachers' mindfulness on student burnout ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.001$, BCLB= 0.18; BCUB= 0.43) were also significant, as were the direct effects of teachers' mindfulness on student burnout ($\beta = -0.27$, $p < 0.01$, BCLB=0.12; BCUB=0.38). This confirms that the relationship was mediated through sequential mediators.

Discussion

The present study highlights intriguing insights into the benefits of mindfulness at school and colleges by utilizing the relational approach of leadership in the context of student-teacher relationship. The study found the significant positive effects of teachers' mindfulness on the high quality interpersonal relationships between students and teachers. It also found that the high quality relationship was a significant mediator in explaining the process that promote the perception of psychological safety between teachers and students. Moreover, the study not

only examines the psychological safety as an outcome that is facilitated through mindfulness' mindfulness and high quality relationships but it also extends the role of psychological safety in producing the mental health benefits of teachers' mindfulness in the form of low burnout among the students.'

By focusing on the interpersonal consequences of mindfulness in the educational institute-specific context, the current study has provided noteworthy implications for schools and colleges. Current findings may help educational institutes to be more open to mindfulness training programs, because the interpersonal effects of mindfulness will facilitate educational institutes and its people to function more smoothly, specifically in classrooms that require frequent student-teacher interactions.

References

- Brown, K. W. & Ryan, R. M. (2003), "The Benefits of Being Present: Mindfulness and Its Role in Psychological Well-Being", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(4): 822-48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.822>
- Brown, K. W., Ryan, R. M. & David Creswell, J. (2007), "Addressing Fundamental Questions About Mindfulness", *Psychological Inquiry*, 18(4): 272-81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10478400701703344>
- Carmeli, A., & Gittell, J. H. (2009), "High-quality Relationships, Psychological Safety, and Learning from Failures in Work Organizations": *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 30(6): 709-29. <https://doi.org/10.1002/JOB.565>
- Chang, M. L. (2009), "An Appraisal Perspective of Teacher Burnout: Examining the Emo-

- tional Work of Teachers”, *Educational Psychology Review*, 21(3): 193–218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10648-009-9106-Y/TABLES/1>
- Edmondson, A. C. & Lei, Z. (2014), “Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct”, <https://doi.org/10.1146/Annurev-Orgpsych-031413-091305>, 1, 23–43. <https://doi.org/10.1146/ANNUREV-ORGPYCH-031413-091305>
- Farina, E., Ornaghi, V., Pepe, A., Fiorilli, C. & Grazzani, I. (2020), “High School Student Burnout: Is Empathy a Protective or Risk Factor?” *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11: 536606. <https://doi.org/10.3389/FPSYG.2020.00897/BIBTEX>
- Fernet, C., Gagné, M. & Austin, S. (2010), “When Does Quality of Relationships with Co-workers Predict Burnout Over time? The Moderating Role of Work Motivation,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31(8): 1163–80. <https://doi.org/10.1002/JOB.673>
- Kim, B., Jee, S., Lee, J., An, S. & Lee, S. M. (2018), “Relationships Between Social Support and Student Burnout: A Meta-analytic Approach”. *Stress and Health*, 34(1): <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2771>
- Lanhua, L. R. Y. L. W. (2005), “Relationship Between Professional Commitment and Learning Burnout of Undergraduates and Scales Developing”. *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, 37(05): 632. <https://journal.psych.ac.cn/acps/EN/>
- Liang, L. H., Lian, H., Brown, D. J., Lance Ferris, D., Hanig, S. & Keeping, L. M. (2015), Why Are Abusive Supervisors Abusive? A Dual-system Self-control Model. <https://doi.org/10.5465/Amj.2014.0651>, 59(4): 1385–1406. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2014.0651>
- Luken, M. & Sammons, A. (2016), “Systematic Review of Mindfulness Practice for Reducing Job Burnout”, *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70(2): 7002250020 p1-7002250020p10. <https://doi.org/10.5014/AJOT.2016.016956>
- Newman, A., Donohue, R. & Eva, N. (2017), “Psychological Safety: A Systematic Review of the Literature”, *Human Resource Management Review*, 27(3): 521–35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.HRMR.2017.01.001>
- Pressley, T. (2021), “Factors Contributing to Teacher Burnout During COVID-19”. *50(5)*: 325–27. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211004138>
- Saloviita, T. & Pakarinen, E. (2021), “Teacher Burnout Explained: Teacher-, Student-, and Organization-level Variables”, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 97: 103221. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.TATE.2020.103221>
- Tan, N., Peters, E. K. & Reb, J. (2023), “Effects of a Mindfulness-Based Leadership Training on Leadership Behaviors and Effectiveness”, *Mindfulness*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-023-02209-1>
- Winning, A. P. & Boag, S. (2015), “Does Brief Mindfulness Training Increase Empathy? The Role of Personality”, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 86: 492–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.PAID.2015.07.011>