

UNDERSTANDING MINDFUL TEACHING THROUGH TEACHER BURNOUT AND RELATIONAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract

Teachers require a variety of skills and competencies to deliver effective teaching (Kaendler et al., 2015). Mindfulness-based approaches are recognized in continuous professional development programs for enhancing outcomes for both teachers and students (Roeser et al., 2012). Although mindfulness is typically viewed as an individual meditative practice (Creswell, 2017), it can also be effectively applied in social settings, particularly valuable for teachers in maintaining a presence in themselves and the classroom (i.e. on students when teaching). Teachers can practice mindfulness in teaching through intrapersonal mindfulness (focusing on one self's awareness, attentiveness and the present moment) and interpersonal mindfulness (having an open, accepting, and receptive approach to student-teacher interactions), with both types recognized as integral for effective teaching (Frank et al., 2016). In the present paper, we focus on teacher characteristics, namely teacher burnout and their relational competence, as potential contributors to mindful teaching. Although mindfulness is often used as an individual preventive strategy for burnout (Luken & Sammons, 2016), our focus is on how teacher burnout is connected to mindfulness during teaching. Moreover, relational competence considers the social aspect of the classrooms, as it encompasses how well the teachers use student-supportive leadership to activate and motivate their students (Laursen & Nielsen, 2016). The sample includes 207 teachers from Slovenia (94,2 % female) who participated in the Erasmus KA3 project HAND ET: Empowering Teachers Across Europe to Deal with Social, Emotional and Diversity Related Career Challenges. Two multiple regression analyses were performed with interpersonal and intrapersonal mindfulness set as dependent variables. Burnout, relational competence and control variables (age, experience with mindfulness/inner exercises, experience with yoga/body exercises) were entered into the analyses in a step-wise procedure. The results show the predictors explain 36 % of the variance in interpersonal mindfulness and 21 % in intrapersonal mindfulness. Relational competence was a positive predictor of interpersonal mindfulness, while burnout was a negative predictor of intrapersonal mindfulness. Furthermore, age was inversely associated with intrapersonal mindfulness, suggesting that younger teachers may benefit from additional support. Findings are discussed through the lens of socio-emotional competencies also considering the practical implications.

Keywords: *Mindful teaching, relational competence, burnout, socio-emotional competencies.*

1. Introduction

As the world is transforming at an unfound pace, teachers are increasingly required to develop new skills and effective teaching methods (Kaendler et al., 2015). Not only do teachers require skills related to digitalization, they also have to be empowered to successfully cope with the demands of their job. Stress is an evident part of the teaching professions (Iriarte Redín & Erro-Garcés, 2020) and teachers require the skills and empowerment in order to mitigate the effects of stress and to be fully present (i.e. emotionally, mentally) in the classroom while teaching. This can be done through programs for ongoing professional development. Recently, mindfulness-based approaches have garnered attention for potentially being able to provide positive outcomes for both educators and students (Roeser et al., 2012). While mindfulness is typically viewed as an individual meditative practice (Creswell, 2017), mindfulness can also be used in social contexts, especially in the context of classroom education (e.g. assisting teachers in cultivating presence in the present moment while teaching).

The integration of mindfulness practices into teaching can be thought through two dimensions: intrapersonal mindfulness and interpersonal mindfulness (Frank et al., 2016). Intrapersonal mindfulness emphasizes self-awareness, attentiveness, and embracing the present moment. Contrary, interpersonal mindfulness focuses on fostering an open, accepting and receptive approach to student-teacher

interactions. Frank et al. (2016) underscores the importance of both dimensions in facilitating effective teaching practices. In the present paper, we focus on teacher characteristics, namely teacher burnout and their relational competence as potential contributors to mindful teaching.

While mindfulness is often viewed as a preventive measure for burnout (Luken & Sammons, 2016), the present study gives attention to understanding the association between teacher burnout and mindfulness during teaching. Moreover, as teachers in the classroom are always interacting with students, it is important to consider relational competence in fostering mindfulness in teaching. According to Laursen & Nielsen (2016) relational competence includes the social dynamics within the classroom, encompassing how adeptly teachers use student-supportive leadership to help foster activity of students.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the predictors of mindfulness in teaching (operationalized as intrapersonal and interpersonal mindfulness).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 207 Slovenian teachers ($M = 41.67$ years, $SD = 7.69$; 94.2 % female) from schools who participated in the European Erasmus KA3+ project HAND ET: Empowering Teachers Across Europe to Deal with Social, Emotional and Diversity Related Career Challenges, which aimed to increase the social-emotional competencies and diversity awareness amongst teachers and school staff.

2.2. Instruments

Mindfulness in teaching was assessed with the Mindfulness in teaching scale (Frank et al., 2016) with 14 items (example: “When I am teaching it seems I am running on automatic without much awareness of what I am doing.”) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – Never true to 5 – Always true). Reliability was 0.83 for the total scale. *Burnout* was measured with the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Questionnaire (SMBQ) (Melamed et al., 1992) with teachers responding to 14 items (example: “I feel fed up.”) on a 7-point Likert scale (1 – Never/almost never to 7 – Always/almost always). Reliability of the scale was 0.93. *Relational competence* was measured with the Teacher’s Relational Competence Scale (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016) with teachers responding to 7 items (example: “When I can’t build a good relationship with a student, I ask him/her for help”) on 5-point Likert scale (1 – Never true to 5 – Always true). Reliability was 0.85. *Experience with meditation or similar inner exercises* was measured with teachers responding to the following question “Have you ever done meditation or similar inner exercises?” on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – I have never done to 5 – I meditate or practice similar inner exercises on a regular basis). *Experience with yoga or similar body exercises* was assessed with the following item “Have you ever done yoga or similar body exercises?” with teachers responding on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – I have never done to 5 – I do yoga or practice similar body exercises on a regular basis). *Age* was used as a control variable in the regression models.

2.3. Procedure

Before the beginning of the HAND ET program, teachers completed a digital version of the HAND ET questionnaire battery. Data presented is only for selected measures at the first time-point of measurement (T1). IBM SPSS 28 was used for statistical analyses.

3. Results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Age	41.67	7.69	1							
2 Meditation experience	2.95	1.07	-.09	1						
3 Yoga experience	2.99	1.16	-.06	.48**	1					
4 Burnout	3.43	1.12	-.03	.00	.07	1				
5 Intrapersonal mindfulness	3.93	.53	.21**	-.04	-.02	-.37**	1			
6 Interpersonal mindfulness	4.03	.52	.01	.08	.19**	-.08	.31**	1		
7 Responsibility	3.90	.54	.16*	.04	.10	-.06	.27**	.56**	1	
8 Individuality	4.12	.57	-.05	.04	.08	-.06	.26**	.54**	.72**	1

Notes: ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$.

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables are presented in Table 1. Based on correlational coefficients, differences in correlates of intrapersonal mindfulness and interpersonal mindfulness are already observed. Burnout is negatively correlated with intrapersonal mindfulness, but not interpersonal. Dimensions of relational competence (individuality, responsibility) are positively correlated to interpersonal mindfulness, but not intrapersonal. Age is positively correlated with intrapersonal mindfulness, but not interpersonal mindfulness.

Results from two hierarchical multiple regressions are presented assessing the predictors of interpersonal mindfulness and intrapersonal mindfulness. In both models, predictors were entered in the same order in a step-wise manner. Step 1 included age as the control variable. In step 2, previous experiences with meditation/inner exercises and yoga/body exercises were entered. Burnout was added in step 3, while aspects of relational competence (individuality, responsibility) were entered in the last step. The predictors together explained 36 % of variance in interpersonal mindfulness and 21 % of variance of intrapersonal variance. Concerning interpersonal mindfulness, experience with yoga and/or body exercises ($\beta = 0.15, p < 0.05$), responsibility ($\beta = 0.36, p < 0.01$), and individuality ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.01$) were positive predictors. Responsibility was the strongest predictor. Concerning intrapersonal mindfulness, age and burnout were shown to be significant predictors, with age being a positive predictor ($\beta = 0.19, p < 0.01$) and burnout being a negative predictor ($\beta = -0.34, p < 0.01$).

4. Conclusions

The present study focused on burnout and relational competence as predictors of intrapersonal and interpersonal mindfulness (dimensions of mindfulness in teaching). Our study shows burnout and relational competence as important aspects to consider when fostering mindfulness in teaching. Burnout was negatively associated with intrapersonal mindfulness, meaning that teachers who report higher burnout reported lower intrapersonal mindfulness. This shows that experiencing burnout affects teachers' ability to be mindful while teaching. Typically, mindfulness is used as a preventive intervention to decrease burnout (Luken & Sammons, 2016). Relational competence, both individuality and responsibility, were shown to be positively associated with interpersonal mindfulness, meaning that teachers who report higher relational competence reported higher interpersonal mindfulness. As relational competence (also referred to as interpersonal competence) relates to relationships with others (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016) it is expected that it is related to the aspect of mindfulness of teaching that focuses on student-teacher interactions (Frank et al., 2016). Developing relational competencies and mechanisms to prevent burnout in teachers can help teachers be mindful while teaching. This can be done through a whole-school approach that is supported by a continuous educational program (such as HAND ET).

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