



Breathe, Teach, Thrive: Cultivating Mindfulness for Educators

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This article examines the role of mindfulness, particularly guided breathwork or *Pranayama* practice, as a pathway to enhancing emotional regulation and well-being among educators. Drawing on recent studies and theoretical models, the paper explores how mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) influence teachers' self-regulation, attentional stability, and classroom environment. Special attention is given to the accessibility of breath-focused practices which can be integrated into daily routines without requiring extensive training or resources. By situating mindfulness, not only as an individual coping mechanism, but also as a contributor to professional sustainability, the discussion highlights its significance for fostering teacher development and resilient school cultures.

本稿は、教育者における情動調整とウェルビーイングを高める方途として、マインドフルネス、特にガイド付き呼吸法すなわちPranayama実践の役割を検討する。近年の研究および理論的枠組みに基づき、本論文はマインドフルネス介入 (MBIs) が教師の自己調整、注意の安定性、ならびに教室環境にどのような影響を及ぼすかを考察する。呼吸に焦点を当てた実践は、特別な訓練や大きな資源を必要とせず、日常的な生活の中に取り入れやすいが、そのアクセスのしやすさに特に注目する。考察では、マインドフルネスを単なる個人的な対応機構として捉えるだけでなく、専門職としての持続可能性に寄与する要素として位置づけることにより、教師の能力開発や活力ある学校文化の構築におけるその意義を明らかにする。

Teacher well-being has become an increasingly important focus in educational research and practice as the demands and stresses of the profession continue to rise (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Brierton & Gkonou, 2022). Language educators, who

often navigate intercultural expectations, curriculum pressures, and affective classroom dynamics, are especially vulnerable to chronic stress (Menon et al., 2024). As awareness grows around the mental health needs of educators, there has been a corresponding interest in preventative and restorative approaches that promote long-term professional resilience (Acton & Glasgow, 2015).

One promising approach that has gained traction in recent years is the use of mindfulness techniques to help educators manage stress, regulate emotions, and enhance overall well-being. Rooted in contemplative traditions, but adapted for secular use, mindfulness has been implemented in various forms within school systems, from structured programs to informal breathing practices (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). While much of the research has focused on student outcomes, there is increasing recognition that teachers, too, benefit from mindfulness-based interventions (Emerson et al., 2017).

A central concept underpinning the use of mindfulness in teacher well-being is Gilbert's (2009) model of emotional regulation systems. This framework identifies three core systems (i.e., the threat, drive, and soothing systems) that influence how each individual responds to internal and external stressors. In educational environments, teachers often find themselves shifting between these systems in response to performance pressures, student behavior, and institutional demands. Mindfulness practices, particularly those that enhance self-awareness and compassion, can help educators better regulate these responses and maintain emotional balance. This article reviews current literature on the impact of mindfulness on teacher well-being and emotional regulation. In particular, guided breathwork, or *Pranayama*, has been proposed as an effective method for integrating mindfulness into teachers' lives. Through the combination of theoretical frameworks, such as Gilbert's model, with practical strategies, this article shows how educators can incorporate mindfulness into both professional and personal contexts.

Literature Review

Mindfulness and Emotional Regulation in Education

Mindfulness, rooted in Buddhist contemplative traditions, has been increasingly adopted in Western contexts as a secular practice for stress reduction and improved well-being (Tobin, 2018). Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “The awareness that arises from paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience” (2015, p.1481). Nyanaponika Thera, a Buddhist monk, defines mindfulness as attention. He explains the concept of bare attention which is a “clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us at successive moments of perception” (Thera, 1996/2005, p.25–32). Thera (1996) explains that this bare attention leads to associative thinking, which shapes one’s perceptions and eventually leads to experiencing ‘right mindfulness’. These definitions emphasize the importance of present-moment awareness and non-judgmental observation of experience. Thus, mindfulness could be understood as a practice that focuses on living in the present moment without worrying too much about the past or future.

In recent years, mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have gained significant attention in educational settings due to their potential benefits for both students and teachers. A systematic review of 77 studies involving over 12,000 students found that MBIs increased prosocial behavior, resilience, executive function, attention, and mindfulness while decreasing anxiety, attention problems, and conduct behaviors (Phan et al., 2022).

Psychologists consider emotion regulation a significant component of mental health, and difficulties in this area have been linked to various psychological disorders, including anxiety and depression (Berenbaum et al., 2003; Mennin and Farach, 2007). Emotion regulation involves using both conscious and unconscious strategies to change how a person feels by increasing, keeping, or reducing parts of an emotional reaction (Gross, 1998). For educators, the ability to manage emotions effectively is essential for both their personal well-being and their ability to maintain productive classroom environments. Recent research suggests that mindfulness practices can strengthen emotion regulation by encouraging non-reactivity, present-moment focus, and self-compassion. Research involving educators has shown that mindfulness practices can help reduce stress, improve emotional regulation, and enhance overall well-being (Jennings et al., 2017; Abenavoli et al., 2013). Mindful teachers may have an increased capacity to regulate their own emotional states, leading to more positive teacher-student interactions and a supportive classroom environment (Roeser et al., 2013).

Moreover, MBIs have been associated with improvements in teachers’ classroom management skills and their ability to create supportive learning environments (Flook et al., 2013). A study conducted by Emerson et.al (2017) asserted that MBIs for teachers resulted in lower stress, increased emotional regulation strategies, and increased professional self-efficacy. Teachers who practice mindfulness may be more attentive and responsive to the academic, social, and emotional needs of individual students, as well as better able to monitor student learning and adapt their instructional approaches (Abenavoli et al., 2013).

Teachers’ Emotional Regulation and Well-being

Emotional regulation plays an important role in teacher well-being and professional performance. In the classroom, educators are often required to manage competing demands, emotional disruptions, and interpersonal challenges. These experiences can trigger stress responses that, if unmanaged, contribute to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Hagenauer & Hascher, 2018).

Gilbert’s (2009) model of emotional regulation systems offers a useful framework for understanding how teachers respond to such challenges. This model identifies three primary systems that govern emotional responses: the threat system, the soothing system, and the drive system. The threat system is activated by feelings of anxiety, fear, or self-criticism, and often leads to a heightened state of stress. The drive system motivates individuals to achieve goals, seek rewards, and overcome challenges, but it can also result in overexertion or burnout if left unchecked. Finally, the soothing system helps regulate emotions by fostering feelings of safety, calm, and self-compassion, which provides a balance among the systems.

Teachers often shift between these systems throughout the school day. For example, performance pressure may trigger the drive system, while student misbehavior or administrative demands can activate the threat system. According to Brierton and Gkonou (2022), emotional health and psychological well-being depend on the ability to move flexibly between the three systems rather than becoming stuck in any one state for too long. When the soothing system is underdeveloped or inaccessible, teachers may become overwhelmed, reactive, or emotionally fatigued. Mindfulness and self-awareness practices can strengthen the soothing system. By learning to observe emotional patterns without judgment, educators improve their ability to regulate stress and maintain emotional stability. When teachers can access the soothing system, they are better able to stay composed and respond appropriately to student needs.

Neuroplasticity and Mindfulness

Recent neuroscientific research has shed light on the neural mechanisms underlying the benefits of mindfulness practice. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies demonstrate that regular mindfulness training can induce structural and functional changes in brain regions involved in attention, learning, and emotional regulation (Lazar et al., 2005). Such changes reflect neuroplasticity; that is, the brain's ability to reorganize itself in response to the internal and external stimuli which occurs at both biological and clinical levels (Bartsch & Wulff, 2015; Tolahunase, 2018).

One such area sensitive to mindfulness-related neuroplasticity is the hippocampus. This region of the brain is essential for memory formation, learning, and emotional regulation. It is particularly vulnerable to damage from prolonged stress, and individuals suffering from PTSD or depression often have smaller hippocampi. Research has shown that mindfulness training can lead to an increase in gray matter density in the hippocampus (Luders et al., 2009).

Similarly, the insula, situated deep within the cerebral cortex, plays a central role in interoceptive awareness and maintaining physiological homeostasis. Increased insular volume following mindfulness practice has been reported (Lazar et al., 2005), which may enhance self-awareness and the regulation of internal bodily states.

In a study conducted by Alvarez, et.al. (2023), 118 healthy participants were randomly assigned to a 31-day web-based mindfulness meditation training program. This study found that these participants had less stress and anxiety, and their ability to pay attention at a test increased. Brain scans showed that certain neuro areas, including the right hippocampus were more active when participants needed to be alert. These brain changes were linked to feeling less stressed and anxious, and to having more positive, focused experiences. Another brain scan showed that the connection between the right hippocampus and the front part of the brain got stronger, which suggests the brain's wiring improved.

Collectively, these findings provide converging evidence that mindfulness practice fosters both structural and functional brain changes, supporting its role in enhancing cognitive capacity, emotional resilience, and overall well-being.

Mindfulness and Teacher Motivation

Teacher motivation is a critical factor in the educational process, influencing not only well-being, but also student engagement and achievement. Emerging research suggests that MBIs can significantly impact teacher motivation and overall job satisfaction. For

instance, a study of elementary school teachers found that regular mindfulness practice enabled participants to better understand their underlying motivations, strengthening their connection to their teaching goals and fostering a greater appreciation for intrinsic rewards (Violago & Martin, 2023). Importantly, these benefits were not confined to individual gains; the integration of mindfulness practices within the school context also promoted a collective culture of empathy, support, and collaboration among staff.

Building on this link between personal development and professional climate, Klingbeil and Renshaw's (2018) meta-analysis demonstrated that MBIs significantly reduced teachers' stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout, while enhancing social-emotional competencies, adaptive emotional regulation, and professional self-efficacy. These psychological and interpersonal gains are directly tied to motivation as they provide teachers with the emotional resources and confidence to engage fully in their work and persist through challenges.

Further evidence comes from a randomized controlled pilot trial of a teacher-adapted mindfulness-based stress reduction program which revealed not only significant reductions in psychological symptoms and burnout, but also improved classroom organization and attentional focus (Flook et al., 2013). Such findings suggest that the motivational benefits of mindfulness interventions manifest both internally, by reinforcing teachers' senses of purpose and resilience, and externally, through enhanced instructional practices, classroom climate, and student engagement (Rupprecht et al., 2018).

These studies indicate that mindfulness training strengthens the motivational foundations of teaching by aligning personal well-being with professional effectiveness.

Risks of Overlooking Mindfulness in the Teaching Profession

Educators who lack mindfulness skills are more susceptible to emotional and behavioral patterns that undermine both professional motivation and personal well-being. Chronic overcommitment without awareness of personal limits can lead to burnout, marked by emotional exhaustion, reduced self-efficacy, and depersonalization (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In the absence of effective emotion regulation strategies, teachers may respond to stress with heightened irritability, withdrawal from responsibilities, or diminished classroom organization. These patterns may be linked to lower engagement and weaker instructional outcomes (Emerson et al., 2017). As emotional balance deteriorates, some educators may adopt defensive coping mechanisms, such as externalizing blame or disengaging from collaborative efforts, which, over time, erode collegial relationships and job satisfaction.

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Additionally, a lack of mindfulness can blur boundaries between work and personal life, intensifying chronic stress, fatigue, and sleep disturbances. These factors may further impair attention, decision-making, and stress tolerance, diminishing the capacity for resilience in the classroom (Flook et al., 2013).

To sum up, these conditions form a cycle in which mounting stress and emotional dysregulation contribute to motivational decline, reducing teachers' ability to maintain both instructional effectiveness and a sense of professional fulfillment. However, regular mindfulness practice may prove to break these stress patterns.

Mindfulness Practice

Mindfulness training facilitates enhanced attentional regulation by fostering deliberate awareness of the chosen object of focus, whether it be the breath, bodily sensations, external stimuli, cognitive processes, or emotional states. Such training has been associated with increased capacity to engage and sustain activity within self-regulatory neural circuits, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, thereby contributing to improvements in sustained attention and emotion regulation (Lutz et al., 2008).

Guided breathwork is a simple and accessible method that can be practiced even in a classroom setting. As Armstrong (2019) explains, mindful breathing helps individuals deepen their awareness by focusing on the breath and gently acknowledging distractions without judgment. This practice encourages individuals to stay present, rather than dwelling on past experiences. Over time, this sustained attention strengthens the brain's "attention muscles" and enhances the mind's ability to observe its own thought patterns.

Pranayama, a fundamental component of Yoga practice, is derived from the Sanskrit words "*prana*" (breath of life or vital energy) and "*ayama*" (expansion, regulation, or control) (Saoji et al., 2019). It encompasses various breathing techniques designed to regulate and optimize the flow of prana throughout the body (Nivethitha et al., 2016). These practices involve deliberate modifications of the breathing process, such as rapid diaphragmatic breathing, slow/deep breathing, alternate nostril breathing, and breath holding or retention (Saoji et al., 2019). *Pranayama* has been associated with numerous physiological and psychological benefits, including stress reduction, increased focus, improved memory, improved lung function, and enhanced mindfulness (Sharma et al., 2013; Novaes et al., 2020).

These benefits can directly translate to more effective teaching, as educators may find themselves better equipped to maintain focus during lessons and retain important information. Additionally, the stress-reducing effects of *Pranayama* can help manage

the demands of the teaching profession, potentially leading to improved classroom management and a more positive teaching environment (Sharma et al., 2013).

The *Pranayama* practice involves three common techniques, namely, *Anulom vilom*, *Bhramari*, and *Kapalabhati*. *Anulom vilom*, also known as alternate nostril breathing, involves inhaling through one nostril, holding the breath, and exhaling through the other nostril in a specific pattern (Bamne, 2017). This practice is believed to balance the body's energy channels and reduce anxiety (Telles et al., 2016). *Bhramari Pranayama*, or the "Humming Bee Breath," involves making a humming sound while exhaling, which has been shown to calm the nervous system and potentially lower blood pressure (Karthik et al., 2014). *Kapalabhati Pranayama*, often referred to as "Skull Shining Breath," consists of short, forceful exhalations followed by passive inhalations (Chetry et al., 2023). This technique is thought to cleanse the respiratory system and stimulate brain function (Chetry et al., 2023).

These *Pranayama* techniques can serve not only as a powerful well-being approach, but may help cultivate focus, calm, and resilience. When adopted to educational settings, such techniques hold significant potential for enhancing both teaching and learning.

Mindfulness Practice in Classroom

Integrating a mindfulness routine within the classroom can be a straightforward and effective practice. Educators have the flexibility to determine how best to incorporate breathwork into their daily teaching schedules. One approach involves dedicating the first few minutes of class to guiding students through *Pranayama* breathing exercises, an opportunity that simultaneously allows teachers to engage in the practice themselves. Beginning with mindful breathing can help students transition from previous lessons, release accumulated stress, and prepare their attention for the content to be covered.

Alternatively, *Pranayama* can be introduced during the final minutes of the lesson, allowing students and teachers to center their breathing, reduce any kind of stress or tension, and ready themselves for subsequent classes or activities. This end-of class practice can also serve as a reflective time for students and teachers to process the class contents and assess their individual contribution. However, this practice should be adopted when students and teachers have familiarized themselves with the *Pranayama* practice over a consistent period of time.

Over time, teachers may also adopt a blended approach that incorporates breathwork at the beginning and end of lesson, thus maximizing the benefits of focus, emotional regulation, and knowledge retention.

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Key Insights and Practical Tips for Teachers

Mindfulness is a holistic approach which can have a positive impact on teachers' professional and personal lives. Educators aiming to cultivate mindfulness in their professional lives can benefit from the following evidence-informed and experience-based strategies:

Use Breath Awareness as an Accessible Anchor Throughout the Day

Simple techniques such as breath awareness, including practices derived from *Pranayama*, can serve as powerful tools for grounding attention. Some common breathing exercises which educators must consider incorporating into their morning routine are the *Anulom vilom* (alternate nostril breathing) and the *Brahmari Pranayama* (Humming bee breathing). Just by taking out 3-5 minutes to practice these two *Pranayama* practices, they will gradually bring calm and eventually mindfulness in every aspect of life. Additionally, this breathwork can also be used as a reliable anchor throughout the day, especially during stressful moments, such as seemingly stressful team meetings, before beginning lesson preparations, or before handling conflicts at work. A consistent routine will help return to the present moment and reset the mental state.

Commit to Consistent Practice

Like any skill, mindfulness develops through regular and intentional practice in order to strengthen mental focus and emotional regulation. As the saying goes, "what you practice grows stronger." Establishing a consistent routine, even if brief or just once a day, can yield significant long-term benefits.

Prioritize the Process Over Outcomes

Mindfulness is inherently process oriented. Fixating on quick outcomes may defeat the overall purpose of engaging with mindfulness. The attitude of this practice is essentially, non-striving and can be experienced with consistency. A consistent practice is essential for preventing frustration or self-judgment when progress feels slow or inconsistent.

Cultivate Balanced Emotional Regulation

A regular and effective mindfulness practice involves recognizing and managing the brain's three regulation systems: the threat, drive, and soothing systems. Consistent practice of *Pranayama* may help educators attuned to when they may be over-relying on

one system, such as constantly striving for achievement (drive) or operating from a place of anxiety (threat), and develop the flexibility to shift among these systems. This balance fosters emotional resilience and enhances well-being.

Develop Self-awareness as a Professional

Self-awareness is a core component of mindfulness and serves as the foundation for sustainable professional growth. Focusing on one's breathing helps cultivate awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, and behavioral tendencies. Through consistent practice, educators can identify stressors and triggers, and thus, help build professional bonds which focus on mutual respect. This self-awareness can help mitigate common challenges such as overcommitment, emotional reactivity, or reliance on defense mechanisms.

Mindfulness also involves a willingness to reflect critically on entrenched patterns. As their practice grows, educators are encouraged to carefully reflect and challenge the assumption that "we have always done it this way" and remain open to adopting more compassionate, responsive, and mindful approaches in their teaching and institutional culture.

Create and Sustain Safe Spaces for Practice

While mindfulness breathing can be practiced at any time of day and in virtually any location, it is generally recommended that such practices take place in a comfortable environment with minimal distractions. Historically, Buddhist monasteries established dedicated spaces for mindfulness and meditative practices. However, similar provisions have yet to be widely integrated into secular settings. Within contemporary educational contexts, the creation of designated safe spaces for mindful breathwork practices may facilitate regular engagement among teachers.

Porter et al., (2017) identifies three broad categories of practice spaces. The first is a dedicated retreat space for teachers, situated away from the immediate distractions of daily responsibilities, allowing for immersive mindfulness engagement. The second comprises adaptable rooms within the institutional setting, such as meeting rooms or vacant classrooms that can be transformed into spaces for individual or group practice. The third category involves mindfulness spaces within the workplace, custom designed to provide privacy while maintaining a connection to natural surroundings. These kinds of spaces provide teachers a chance to reflect, practice together, and support each other, helping build a culture of well-being, teamwork, and ongoing resilience.

Discussion and Conclusion

The literature underscores that mindfulness practices can influence both emotional regulation and attention stability, but the implication extends beyond individual psychological benefits. For teachers, the practice of mindfulness holds meaning at both professional and institutional levels. Numerous studies suggest that teaching requires ongoing emotional labour, and when stress is left unaddressed, well-being, motivation, and classroom management may suffer. By incorporating mindfulness into professional routines, educators can approach their work with greater balance, cultivating self-awareness that not only mitigates burnout, but can also support rational aspects of teaching, fostering genuine bonds between students and colleagues.

Additionally, mindfulness may challenge the existing systems where teachers are evaluated through metrics of efficiency and student outcomes. Through its process-oriented nature, daily Pranayama practice can help teachers avoid becoming stuck in any one emotional state, as described in Gilbert's model of emotional regulation, and instead cultivate greater flexibility. For early-career teachers, this may provide a framework to navigate demanding expectation, while seasoned educators may find it a resource for renewing their sense of purpose and reconnection with their intrinsic motivation. At a broader level, mindfulness has the potential to reframe professional development. By normalizing practices of reflection, presence, and self-compassion, schools can position mindfulness as part of a broader culture of teacher well-being rather than an isolated intervention.

Ultimately, mindfulness is more than a coping strategy; it is a long-term investment in professional sustainability for teachers. It is not only a pathway to immediate stress relief, but also a foundation for enduring well-being and thriving throughout one's teaching career. In this way, it supports not just healthier teachers, but richer and more humane educational environments. Further research could examine the long-term impacts of establishing a culture of mindfulness in the workplace, through workshops and regular practices, on teacher well-being and classroom practice.

Bio Data

Prateek Sharma is a senior lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies. His research interests include mindfulness in education, teacher well-being, artificial intelligence in language teaching, reflective practices, and intercultural competence in language education. Prateek has an M.A. degree in TESOL, and has taught a diverse range of learners in India and Japan. He works closely with teachers and students to help regulate and manage stress through mindfulness practices.

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