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## Practicing Mindfulness in an Elementary School Workplace

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### ABSTRACT

Teachers, administrators, and staff members deal with a variety of challenges and demands daily in elementary schools. Multiple factors may contribute to the increase in stress levels, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. Some examples of these include the heavy workload, student engagement and management, and the need to uphold academic standards. In the hopes of addressing the global learning crisis, institutions must invest and provide different types of support for their educators. Schools need to assess the mental well-being of their teachers amidst the transitions made during the pandemic. Hence, the importance of this study is to understand the teacher's motivation to improve students' learning outcomes. Many ways in which mindfulness affected teachers' well-being were significant. Participants had a better understanding of their motivations, which helped them feel more connected to their teaching goals. Practices of mindfulness helped people adopt the attitude of embracing intrinsic rewards, which improved their motivation overall. The mindfulness integration within the school environment also contributed to a positive shift in the teacher community, fostering a culture of empathy, support, and collaboration. The study's implications extend to educational policy and practice, demonstrating the potential advantages of incorporating mindfulness to build a strong and empowered teaching community, eventually generating a richer learning environment for students.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The novel Coronavirus-19 global pandemic caused a major disruption in the status quo of education. Educational institutions in the Philippines were propelled to shift their teaching modality and create new structures as a way of adjusting to the pandemic's upheaval. This interruption encouraged the promotion and use of various learning resources that would enable teachers and students to continue lessons in the comfort of their homes. However, despite the effort to carry out different distance learning modalities, several Filipino children were still learning less as compared to the traditional in-person classes (Bordeos *et al.*, 2022).

On another note, uncertainty loomed in the minds of teachers and students alike as a result of several school closures and social isolation resulting from the government-mandated lockdowns (Rabacal *et al.*, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic not only brought about concerns for one's physical health but also took a toll on the psychological effects that pose serious risks to one's mental health and well-being due to the ongoing ambiguity of the situation. For educators, transitioning to a new educational landscape was no easy feat, as not all teachers were adept with the technological skills and resources needed to successfully carry out the new modality of teaching (Rabacal *et al.*, 2020).

Before the start of the school year 2022-2023, many institutions in the Philippines clamored for government assistance due to the lack of resources and teachers needed. As schools were called to conduct face-to-face classes during a pandemic, this entailed implementing new fixtures and policies that would ensure the safety of students and staff members in school. However, with the volume of students coming into school and social distancing policies in place, many public schools were required to conduct double or triple shifts and a blended learning scheme to address the overcrowding in schools (Kumar *et al.*, 2021).

This in itself is an example of why teachers may feel overworked and stressed. In September 2022, the Department of Education (DepEd) spokesperson, Atty. Michael Poa also reiterated the need to fill the teacher shortage and hire 10,000 new teachers (Parida and Parida, 2022). In addition to this, a report by the Economic Policy Institute also identified that the reason for the shortage of teachers is due to stressful working conditions and low income. It is important to note that the greatest influence on enhancing student learning outcomes is the caliber of teachers.

## 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### 2.1. A Plea for Educators' Mental Needs to be Met

Teachers, administrators, and staff members deal with a variety of challenges and demands daily in elementary schools. Multiple factors may contribute to the increase in stress levels, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. Some examples of these include the heavy workload, student engagement and management, and the need to uphold academic standards. In the hopes of addressing the global learning crisis, institutions must invest and provide different types of support for their educators. Schools need to assess the mental well-being of their teachers amidst the transitions made (i.e., distance learning) during the pandemic. Hence, the importance of this study is to understand the teacher's motivation to improve students' learning outcomes. The key element in this study is mindfulness.

The concept of mindfulness, as defined by Giraldi and Giraldi (2019), involves the practice of paying attention to the present moment and observing it without judgment. This meditative practice has gained considerable attention recently due to its benefits for individuals' mental health, well-being, and performance. However, despite mindfulness

interventions being studied in clinical and adult workspaces, there is limited research on the impact of practicing mindfulness in elementary school workplaces.

There are several significant implications for the study of practicing mindfulness in an elementary school workplace. This includes (i) teacher well-being and motivation, (ii) stress reduction and burnout prevention, (iii) and the promotion of mindfulness-based interventions. Firstly, the research intends to help improve teacher motivation and engagement by promoting self-awareness, emotional regulation, and understanding of one's perspectives and needs. By exploring the impact of mindfulness practices in a school workplace, one may uncover the potential benefits for teachers and staff members. Secondly, studies have shown that mindfulness practices may contribute to stress reduction and prevent burnout among professionals.

Implementing mindfulness interventions in the school workplace may provide teachers and staff members with the necessary tools to cope with stressors and preserve their mental health. Therefore, this research could provide evidence-based support for the integration of mindfulness interventions in elementary schools as a means of reducing stress and preventing burnout. Lastly, this study can contribute to a better understanding of mindfulness-based interventions in a school setting.

Examining the feasibility and efficacy of the program can provide valuable insight and evidence to educators, administrators, and researchers who are interested in promoting the well-being of individuals in a school workplace. On the whole, this research has the potential to shed light on the benefits of practicing mindfulness in the elementary school workplace, as it provides a fresh approach to support teacher well-being, reduce stress levels, and prevent burnouts that could foster a conducive working environment in institutions.

## 2.2. On Mental Health

In this day and age, there has been more discussion about the importance of mental health. In 2020, the Philippine World Health Organization conducted a special initiative for mental health to address an impending issue that has been affecting millions of Filipinos. Furthermore, it was identified that the pandemic contributed to the increase in individuals who experience mental health problems. According to the WHO, the ratio of individuals with mental disorders worldwide is one in eight. Additionally, in the case of many countries, less than 2% of the health budget is allocated to tackling mental health (Freeman, 2022).

As nations continue to rise above the challenges brought about by this pandemic, institutions have also been more ardent in speaking about the mental health of individuals. Mental health is a fundamental human right and an essential component of our overall health and well-being (Freeman, 2022). A healthy mental state necessitates that we can function, communicate, and thrive better. In the 2022 World Mental Health Report, conducted by the WHO, a variety of strategies for treating mental health disorders were identified.

One in particular involved psychosocial intervention, wherein interpersonal techniques were used to improve an individual's well-being. This included stress management exercises such as relaxation training and mindfulness exercises (Freeman, 2022). The report also cited the significance of providing mediation for workers that focus on stress-management interventions, which include mindfulness-based approaches.

## 2.3. Stress Levels and Burnout

According to the National Institutes of Health, stress can be defined as a person's physical and emotional reaction to challenges they encounter (Kelley *et al.*, 2022). As we enter the 3rd year of this pandemic, stressors experienced by people have become more enduring with the

heightened increase of possible burnout. Burnout can affect anybody who is subjected to persistently stressful situations, and it is common among those in the service industry, such as those in the medical field and educational sector (Abramson, 2022). WHO also distinguishes burnout as a result of unsuccessful management of workplace stress. Furthermore, burnout can be characterized in three dimensions:

- (i) Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- (ii) Increased mental distance from one's job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- (iii) Reduced professional efficacy" (Alsalhe *et al.*, 2021).

Similar to most professions, educators experience stress and possibly burnout. With the multiple roles and functions teachers play, they must be given sufficient time and space to alleviate their stress (Melguizo-Ibáñez *et al.*, 2022). It is detrimental to acknowledge the impact of stress on the well-being and academic achievement of individuals and address this to avoid possible long-term problems in their professional and personal lives (Gustems-Carnicer *et al.*, 2019).

#### 2.4. Educators Workload in the Philippines

In the Philippines, educators are categorized as individuals who work in the field of education, such as teachers, professors, and instructors. Specifically, grades 1 through 8 are covered by elementary school teachers, grades 9 and 10 are covered by junior high school teachers, and grades 11 and 12 are covered by senior high school teachers. According to Tarraya (2023), the typical workload for teachers includes six hours of actual classroom teaching per day, or thirty hours per week for a full-time teacher, which still leaves out other duties associated with being a lecturer. Aside from their hours dedicated to molding the minds of young learners in the classroom, other tasks include creating lesson plans and instructional materials, implementing classroom rooms, supervising curricular and co-curricular projects, maintaining updated school records, conducting enrichment or remediation programs, and upholding a cordial relationship with parents and other stakeholders through PTA meetings (Dimbie *et al.*, 2021).

These are just some of the duties and responsibilities expected of a teacher. On top of this, teachers have mountains of paperwork to accomplish daily for transparency, and checks and balances measures. In 2018, concerned individuals urged the government to take action in response to the recent wave of suicides involving teachers and children. This was following the death of two teachers in a span of two months, which was allegedly a result of their workload (Dela and Mocon, 2018). At this time, with the current changes being implemented in institutions due to the recent pandemic, several educators continue to struggle with the balance of their workload. This is in line with the shift to distance learning, where teachers had to rapidly adjust their lessons to remote instruction (Westphal *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, several educators were technologically challenged as they lacked not only the resources but also the skillset needed to work efficiently. Moreover, teachers faced competing responsibilities while preparing for their lessons as they also managed responsibilities in their homes, such as caring for their children, dealing with emotional stress brought about by the lockdown, or worse dealing with the death of a loved one (Westphal *et al.*, 2022). Lastly, many school teachers have opted to work abroad as the opportunity provides a more competitive salary. Thus, leaving behind additional workload and challenges for teachers in the country (Chaaban *et al.*, 2023). Administrators and government leaders are urged to find means to address the mental well-being of teachers that could boost their motivation and reduce stress and burnouts.

## 2.5. Mindfulness

There has been much interest and discussion over the last 20 years in mindfulness from both the clinical and practical psychology communities (Bishop *et al.*, 2004). Modern psychology has adopted mindfulness as a technique for increasing awareness of mental processes that result in emotional distress and negative behavior. (Bishop *et al.*, 2004). Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction, defines mindfulness as "awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat, 2021). It is human nature to have preconceived judgments or reactions made quickly on matters we are currently observing.

Based on the definition provided, one could practice mindfulness when done correctly. Today, there are multiple ways one can practice it. The Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality and Healing at the University of Minnesota mentions three key characteristics of developing mindfulness. This includes Intention, Attention, and Attitude. First, let's talk about intention. This implies practicing awareness. By being aware, one must simply know what is happening around them (Kabat, 2021). This includes becoming aware of one's surroundings. Next is attention, referencing the practice of paying attention on purpose.

Mindfulness is an engaging practice. To pay attention is to acknowledge and engage with the impressions we have made. It necessitates concentration and consciously listening carefully to the matter at hand. Lastly, an attitude wherein one is kind, curious, and non-judgmental. In a way, practicing mindfulness is a technique for gathering information. Whether it be facts about yourself, how you live your life, or truths about how hard you are on yourself (Kabat, 2021). By practicing mindfulness, we want to maintain an unbiased gaze on the here and now. By practicing mindfulness, we allow ourselves to take control of our reactions by taking a step back and pausing. We allow ourselves to look at the picture clearly and as a whole before making our judgments.

## 2.6. Mindfulness-Based Interventions

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the research and practice of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) (Zenner *et al.*, 2014). The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn was designed to benefit patients with persistent pain and illnesses (Hyland *et al.*, 2015). This program was initiated at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. For over 35 years, MBSR has effectively aided patients to notice notable decreases in pain, stress, anxiety, and other symptoms (Hyland *et al.*, 2015). Briefly, MBSR is an eight-week program wherein participants meet once a week for 2.5 hours. In addition to this, there is a full-day session held between the 6th and 7th sessions, and participants are expected to practice mindfulness on their own for roughly 45 minutes each day (Hyland *et al.*, 2015). Today, several organizations specialize in offering workplace mindfulness training. To make workplace mindfulness training more practical, the MBSR model's structure and content have been modified (Hyland *et al.*, 2015). This is to accommodate the workload of individuals going through the program so as not to take much of their time. For instance, the individual classes have been trimmed down to 60–90 minutes as compared to the original 2.5 hours. Moreover, mindfulness programs are also made accessible online, both in real-time and asynchronously (Hyland *et al.*, 2015). In this manner, executives and employees gain access to the program anytime and anywhere. With some successful cases and a positive record of MBIs for adults, researchers are striving to create adaptations for children and youth members (Zenner *et al.*, 2014).

The most appropriate setting for such a program would be the school, as children spend most of their days there. Mindfulness initiatives practiced in institutions may promote and

enhance qualities such as empathy, compassion, sensitivity, and self-regulation for both teachers and students (Zenner *et al.*, 2014).

### 3. METHOD

A qualitative research design was used to investigate how mindfulness is practiced in an elementary school workplace. This allows for an in-depth exploration of the participant's perspectives, experiences, and practices of mindfulness. Methods for acquiring data include interviews, observations, and focus groups. In the data-gathering process, the participants were interviewed to learn more about how teachers and staff members practice mindfulness in their daily work.

The target respondents of this research were private elementary school teachers and staff members in the Philippines who have experienced teaching and working during the COVID-19 Pandemic (S.Y. 2021-2022) as well as the succeeding school year (S.Y. 2022 – 2023). This particular choice was made to identify the contextual and motivational elements that might have hampered or helped them achieve their goals at work.

Before the start of the elementary school's in-service training, teachers and staff members were invited to participate in the research study on "Practicing Mindfulness in an Elementary School Workplace." Volunteers underwent a brief orientation that introduced the concept of mindfulness and were presented with techniques and guidelines that would allow them to practice these on their own. During the orientation, the aim of the study was identified as a well-being program for teachers and staff members.

The study was conducted for 8 weeks. During the initial week, a 1- hour session was conducted with the group to engage them in mindfulness techniques. Participants would also engage in mindfulness exercises at the start of their work day and after their lunch breaks either in groups or individually. The participants were encouraged to journal their experiences and practice mindful exercises on their own time.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative findings reveal diverse ways in which practicing mindfulness is integrated into the routines and experiences of teachers within an elementary school workplace. These practices not only aid in stress reduction but also contribute to enhanced motivation and overall well-being. The five emerging themes include (i) Coping strategies for stress relief, (ii) Mindful transitions and preparatory practices, (iii) Routine setting and time management, (iv) Mindful eating and leisure, and (v) Rest and social interaction. Through the interviews and focus group discussions, the participants expressed the different methods they applied in practicing mindfulness and how it translated to their work. This is evident in their responses as shown in **Table 1**.

#### 4.1. Theme 1: Coping Strategies for Stress Relief

The first theme discusses coping strategies to relieve stress. Participants underlined the significance of using hobbies and leisure time to manage stress. One educator talked about using personal interests as a way to decompress. Engaging in particular activities allows her to shift her attention away from the difficulties of her job. This coping strategy emphasizes how important it is to keep work and play separate to sustain psychological well-being. By allowing oneself to live in the moment, individuals can tune into their thoughts and feelings, which can contribute to reducing anxiety (Xu and Choi, 2023).



**Table 1.** Emerging themes and subthemes in “Practicing Mindfulness in an Elementary School Workplace.”

Themes	Sub-Themes
Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Turning to hobbies</li> <li>- Acknowledging rest and recovery</li> </ul> <p>“Dati inuuwi ko pa yung trabaho ko sa bahay para tapusin. Pero ngayon nagfocus na muna ako sa sarili ko at ang mga gusto kong gawin paguwi sa bahay. Kagaya ng manood ng mga paborito kong shows or magluto.” (Before I would bring home my work just so that I can finish it. Now, I try to focus on myself and give time to the things I enjoy doing such as watching my favorite shows and cooking.)</p>
Mindfulness Transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cited by Teacher A</li> <li>- Mindful start and end of classes</li> <li>- Workplace stretching exercises</li> <li>- Transitioning mindset after work</li> </ul> <p>“Usually I make it a point to practice some breathing exercises before I start each class. Napansin ko mas madalas ko tong ginagawa ngayon dahil narerelax ako at parang nare-ready ko sarili ko. Ginagawa ko na rin siya pag-gumagawa ako ng mga LPs.” (I noticed that I find myself doing this exercise more because it allows me to calm myself and prepare my mindset and body for the next class. I also do this when I create my lesson plans.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cited by Teacher B</li> </ul> <p>“When I feel overwhelmed, I make it a point to stand up and do some stretches. This helps reset my mind and body. Then before going home, I make sure to leave everything work-related in school.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cited by Teacher C</li> </ul>
Time Management and Routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Setting and adapting routines</li> <li>- Effective time management</li> </ul> <p>“At the start of every school year, it’s really important to set classroom rules and routines to manage and discipline students. But aside from this, it allows me as their teacher to best structure and prepare the class for what to expect. Less stress on my plate in the succeeding days kasi alam na nila gagawin nila (because they already know what to do).”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cited by Teacher D</li> </ul>
Mindful Eating and Leisure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mindful eating and enjoying meals</li> <li>- Allocating time for leisure</li> </ul> <p>“Nung last school year, madalas kumakain lang ako mag-isa at parang nagmamadali pa ako dahil andami ko pang trabaho na gustong tapusin at may klase pa ako. Ngayon, tina-try kong lasahin talaga yung food at siyempre kausapin rin yung ibang teachers. Mas-masaya siyang gawin.” (Last school year, I would usually eat my food alone and it’s usually rushed cause I have a lot of work to finish and classes to attend to. Now I try to practice savoring my food and talking to my colleagues. I find this to be more enjoyable and exciting.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cited by Teacher E</li> </ul>
Rest and Social Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Importance of work breaks</li> <li>- Positive social interactions in school</li> </ul> <p>“Focused lang talaga ako sa work before. Ngayon nag-rereach out ako sa iba at mas-naeenganyo akong magtrabo at less stressed siyempre.” (Before I would just focus on my work. Now I try to reach out more to others and it motivates me to work better and feel less stressed.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cited by Teacher E</li> </ul>

## **4.2. Theme 2: Mindful Transitions and Preparatory Practices**

The second theme identifies mindful transitions incorporated into the teaching routine of an educator. In the study, many teachers expressed how they would practice deep breathing exercises and stretches at the start and end of classes. This mindful exercise allowed the teachers to prepare their minds and bodies for their teaching responsibilities.

Additionally, some teachers incorporated deep breathing exercises with their students at the start of classes. They would dedicate a moment of silence as they prepare themselves for the next class. Thus, allowing them to clear their minds. Lastly, the teachers would consciously leave work-related stressors behind once clocking out, shifting their focus towards personal leisure and relaxation. This demonstrates how mindfulness techniques can be integrated into both work and personal life, aiding in stress reduction and overall well-being.

## **4.3. Theme 3: Routine Setting and Time Management**

The third theme highlights routine setting and time management. Teachers emphasized the importance of being mindful of one's classroom routine and time management. This includes starting and ending their sessions with a prayer, checking on the wellness of students by conducting a feelings check, and incorporating movement exercises at the start of classes. One teacher highlighted the importance of setting routines to follow both at work and in the classroom. This approach enables her to manage her time efficiently and adapt to unforeseen challenges, ultimately reducing stress levels. This finding underscores the importance of organization and structure in the workplace as tools for enhancing teacher well-being.

## **4.4. Theme 4: Mindful Eating and Leisure**

The fourth theme centers on the practice of mindful eating and enjoying the present moment. Mindful eating emerged as a practice for fostering present-moment awareness. One teacher described savoring meals, highlighting a shift from rushed consumption to enjoying each bite. This practice aligns with the principles of mindfulness, encouraging engagement in the present moment and promoting a healthier relationship with food as one is mindful of their eating habit (Glena *et al.*, 2022).

## **4.5. Theme 5: Rest and Social Interaction**

The fifth theme identified talks about the value of social interactions and building connections. A teacher expressed how she tried to focus on giving herself more time to rest during work and how it allowed her to be more productive. As the teachers became more mindful of their disposition while walking in the hallway or working in the faculty area, they expressed how casual conversations allowed them to create a sense of connection and community within the school. Additionally, the simple practice of leisurely walking at a slower pace allowed them to observe and pay closer attention to their surroundings by greeting students and chatting with them. These interactions contribute to reduced workplace stress and an increase in motivation.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, these qualitative findings shed light on how mindfulness practices are integrated into the daily experiences of elementary school teachers. The strategies employed encompass various dimensions of well-being, including stress reduction, motivation enhancement, and the cultivation of a healthier work-life balance. These practices hold implications for educators' overall satisfaction and effectiveness in the classroom, and their



potential integration into teacher training and professional development programs warrants consideration. By fostering mindfulness practices in the elementary school workplace, educators can create a more supportive and thriving educational environment for both themselves and their students.

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## 7. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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