From Stress to Strength: A Narrative Review of Mindfulness Practices and Self-Esteem Development in Educational Settings

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In recent years, mindfulness has gained widespread attention as an effective strategy for promoting emotional well-being and academic success among students. Amid increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and self-esteem issues in educational settings, exacerbated by global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a pressing need to explore interventions that foster students' emotional resilience. While mindfulness has been extensively studied in adult populations, a research gap remains in understanding how mindfulness affects self-esteem and stress reduction among students, particularly through qualitative lenses. The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of mindfulness practices in fostering students' self-esteem and emotional resilience within educational contexts. Adopting a narrative review methodology, this study synthesised findings from recent qualitative and mixed-method research to identify recurring themes and outcomes. The review revealed four major themes: mindfulness reduces anxiety and emotional distress, enhances self-perception and self-esteem, fosters emotional resilience, and is effective even when delivered through brief or structured interventions, such as MBSR and MBCT. These practices not only helped students cope with academic pressure and uncertainty but also supported the development of healthier self-concepts and adaptive coping mechanisms. The findings underscore the value of integrating mindfulness into classroom routines and educational programs to create emotionally safe and supportive learning environments. This study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for holistic, student-centred approaches to mental health in schools. It highlights the need for more longitudinal and culturally diverse studies in the field.

***Keywords:** Mindfulness, Self-Esteem, Emotional Resilience, Stress Reduction, Narrative Review.*

1. Introduction

In today's classrooms, managing student behaviour and fostering emotional well-being have become central to effective teaching and learning. One promising approach gaining traction is mindfulness, which involves paying attention intentionally in the present moment without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Rooted in ancient Buddhist philosophy (Thera, 1973), mindfulness has evolved into a key component of psychological interventions, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which help individuals manage anxiety, depression, and stress (Creswell, 2017; Khoury et al., 2015). In education, mindfulness is being embraced not only as a tool for individual stress relief but also as a holistic classroom practice that supports emotional regulation, attention control, and positive teacher–student relationships (Nagpal & Radliff, 2024). Its integration into mobile platforms and digital health applications has further enhanced accessibility and student engagement (Linardon, 2020), while neuroscience research continues to demonstrate its benefits for brain development and cognitive flexibility (Rosenkranz et al., 2023).

A related and equally important factor in student success is self-esteem, which influences how students perceive their abilities and cope with challenges. High self-esteem enables adaptive coping, decision-making, and emotional stability, whereas low self-esteem is associated with various psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, and substance dependence (Greenberg et al., 1992; Silverstone, 1991). Current research recognises low self-esteem as a transdiagnostic vulnerability factor linked to the development of multiple mental health issues (Sowislo& Orth, 2013; Orth & Robins, 2022). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, students have faced increased academic stress, emotional disruptions, and social isolation, emphasising the need for school-based interventions that can foster resilience and rebuild confidence. Mindfulness, by helping students become more self-aware, less reactive, and more compassionate, holds strong potential to support their psychological well-being and promote healthier self-perceptions.

Despite its promise, much of the existing literature on mindfulness in education is quantitative in nature. It focuses on general outcomes, such as stress reduction and academic achievement, often overlooking students' voices and lived experiences. A gap remains in understanding how students personally interpret and describe the impact of mindfulness on their emotional lives, particularly in terms of their self-esteem, confidence, and ability to regulate emotions. This narrative review aims to address this gap by examining emerging themes from qualitative research that illuminate the role of mindfulness in promoting self-esteem and emotional resilience in educational settings. Synthesising these insights, this study aims to inform future practice, helping educators design more responsive, student-centred mindfulness interventions that support emotional growth and holistic learning.

2. Research Questions

To better understand the role of mindfulness in supporting students' emotional well-being, this narrative review explores how mindfulness practices influence self-esteem development within educational settings. Grounded in existing qualitative research, the study aims to identify recurring patterns and insights that explain the connection between mindfulness, stress reduction, and students' emotional growth. Accordingly, the following research questions guide this review:

➢ RQ1: How do mindfulness practices contribute to the development of students' self-esteem and emotional resilience in educational settings?
➢ RQ2: What themes emerge from qualitative studies regarding the role of mindfulness in reducing stress and enhancing self-esteem among students?

3. Literature review
3.1. Mindfulness in Educational Settings

Mindfulness has become an increasingly valuable approach in education for supporting students' emotional well-being and improving their ability to manage stress. It enhances emotional regulation, a skill that enables students to manage academic demands, navigate peer relationships, and cope with family-related pressures effectively (Verhaeghen, 2023). In schools, mindfulness is not only delivered through formal lessons but also shapes the hidden curriculum, the unspoken values and behavioural

norms that influence students' development. Initiatives like the Flourishing Life Program demonstrate how embedding mindfulness into daily routines and school culture can nurture resilience, emotional strength, and character development in students **(Au & Kennedy, 2018)**.

Mindfulness practices in classrooms help establish a calm, safe, and focused learning environment. Students who regularly engage in mindfulness tend to show increased self-awareness, emotional control, and acceptance of their thoughts and feelings, which are closely linked to improved mental health and reduced stress levels **(Zhao et al., 2022)**. These benefits became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of heightened anxiety and disruption in education. Teachers experienced significant emotional exhaustion during the transition to remote teaching, further underscoring the importance of school-wide well-being strategies, such as mindfulness **(Kupcova et al., 2023; Westphal et al., 2022)**. Thus, mindfulness has emerged as a powerful tool for both students and educators to manage emotional challenges and maintain focus during uncertain times.

3.2. Self-Esteem and Emotional Well-Being

Self-esteem plays a vital role in students' psychological and academic development. Low self-esteem and poor emotional control, especially issues like unmanaged anger, can negatively impact students' social relationships, academic success, and overall mental health **(Phan et al., 2022)**. Given this, schools are increasingly adopting mindfulness-based programs as a preventive and supportive strategy. These programs promote emotional awareness and self-regulation, helping students reduce impulsive behaviour and express themselves more constructively. One of the key advantages of mindfulness is its ability to reduce overthinking, which is often linked to anxiety and emotional instability. Moreover, mindfulness fosters core emotional skills, such as self-compassion, empathy, and a positive outlook, qualities essential for creating an inclusive and emotionally safe classroom environment **(Schutte & Meynadier, 2024)**.

Although many studies have focused on the effectiveness of mindfulness among adults, there remains a need for further research on its long-term impact on children and adolescents **(Perrier et al., 2020)**. Despite this gap, existing evidence supports the integration of mindfulness in schools. Programs based on mindfulness principles have been associated with reduced emotional distress, improved anger management, and a greater sense of belonging among students **(Sharma et al., 2016)**. They also appear to play a protective role in preventing severe mental health risks such as suicidal thoughts **(Phan et al., 2022)**. As mindfulness continues to gain recognition in education, it offers a promising approach to help students develop strong self-esteem, emotional resilience, and healthier social interactions.

4. Methodology

This study employed a narrative literature review approach to explore the role of mindfulness in enhancing students' self-esteem within educational settings. A narrative review was chosen for its flexibility in synthesising existing literature, examining patterns, and capturing the evolution of research over time. Unlike systematic reviews or meta-analyses, which focus on quantitative comparisons and statistical rigour, the narrative approach allowed for a more interpretive and thematic understanding of the topic.

The review process followed a structured yet interpretive method. First, a relevant and well-defined topic was identified based on the researcher's interest in mindfulness, emotional well-being, and educational practice. A comprehensive search strategy was then developed using appropriate keywords related to "mindfulness," "self-esteem," "students," "education," and "emotional regulation." Scholarly databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, and PsycINFO, were accessed to collect peer-reviewed journal articles published within the last two decades. Citation tracking, both forward and backwards, was used to identify additional influential studies.

Relevant studies were selected based on their qualitative or mixed-method insights into the impact of mindfulness on students' emotional development. The selected literature was carefully read, and key themes and findings were noted. During the synthesis phase, the literature was critically analysed and categorised into recurring themes such as emotional regulation, self-awareness, resilience, and classroom climate. The

review emphasised coherence, clarity, and critical evaluation rather than simple listing of findings. Peer feedback was sought before finalising the manuscript to ensure clarity, consistency, and relevance of interpretations.

5. Results

This narrative review identified four major themes that illustrate how mindfulness practices contribute to the development of students' self-esteem and emotional resilience, as well as how they help reduce stress and promote psychological well-being in educational settings. The themes were derived from qualitative and mixed-methods studies that examined students' experiences and the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions across various academic contexts.

RQ1: How do mindfulness practices contribute to the development of students' self-esteem and emotional resilience in educational settings?

5.1. Theme 1: Reduction of Anxiety and Emotional Distress

One of the most prominent findings across the reviewed literature is the role of mindfulness in reducing anxiety and emotional distress among students. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, brought increased levels of stress, uncertainty, and emotional disruption into the educational environment. During this period, mindfulness practices gained widespread adoption as an effective response to the growing mental health concerns (Harrison et al., 2024). These practices, characterised by focused attention and non-judgmental awareness, helped students manage stress by promoting emotional clarity and calmness. As a result, students reported feeling more in control of their emotions and less overwhelmed by academic and social pressures (Gong et al., 2023).

Reduced anxiety was closely linked to improved self-esteem. When students experienced a calmer mental state, they were better able to focus on their strengths and accomplishments, which contributed to a more positive self-concept (Plakhotnik et al., 2021). Additionally, mindfulness was shown to reduce the cognitive overload that anxiety often causes, particularly its adverse effects on memory, attention, and executive functioning (Almarzouki, 2024). This anxiety reduction created the mental space necessary for students to reflect constructively on their goals and challenges, thereby supporting both emotional stability and academic performance.

5.2. Theme 2: Enhancement of Self-Esteem and Positive Self-Perception

Mindfulness practices were also found to directly support the development of self-esteem, primarily through self-awareness and acceptance. As students learned to observe their thoughts and emotions without judgment, they became more accepting of themselves and their imperfections. This process, often facilitated by mindfulness-based journaling or reflection, helped students cultivate a healthier self-image and reduced tendencies toward negative self-talk or perfectionism (Nawa & Yamagishi, 2021). Mindfulness enabled students to develop an internal sense of worth that was not solely dependent on external validation or academic achievement.

Qualitative accounts indicated that students who regularly practised mindfulness became more confident in expressing themselves, making decisions, and coping with failure. The emphasis on present-moment awareness encouraged them to let go of ruminations about past mistakes or fears about the future, familiar sources of low self-esteem among adolescents and young adults (Yosep et al., 2023). As such, mindfulness served as a foundation for positive self-perception, allowing students to view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than threats to their identity.

RQ2: What themes emerge from qualitative studies regarding the role of mindfulness in reducing stress and enhancing self-esteem among students?

5.3. Theme 3: Development of Emotional Resilience

Another key theme identified in the review was the development of emotional resilience through mindfulness. Emotional resilience refers to the ability to adapt to stressful or changing circumstances without becoming overwhelmed. During periods of crisis, such as the shift to online learning during the pandemic, students who practised mindfulness reported feeling more emotionally prepared to deal with disruption and uncertainty (Fagioli et al., 2023; Mahama et al.,

2023). These students were able to maintain focus, manage disappointment, and recover from academic or personal setbacks more effectively than their peers.

Studies emphasised that students taught mindfulness-based coping strategies, such as conscious breathing, acceptance of discomfort, and emotional labelling, were better equipped to navigate academic pressures and emotional upheaval (Mahama et al., 2023). Practicing mindfulness consistently, they built a psychological buffer against stressors, which contributed to improved perseverance, motivation, and mental clarity. This resilience not only helped them cope with immediate challenges but also fostered a long-term ability to thrive in demanding academic environments.

5.4. Theme 4: Effectiveness of Structured and Brief Mindfulness Interventions

The final theme that emerged from the review was the effectiveness of both structured and brief mindfulness interventions. Programs such asMBSR andMBCT have been found to have a highly impactful effect on improving students' focus, emotional regulation, and academic performance (Nardi et al., 2022; Ostermann et al., 2022). MBSR offered a general framework for managing stress and building awareness, while MBCT combined mindfulness with cognitive-behaviouralstrategies to help students reframe negative thoughts and avoid emotional relapse (Perez-Pena et al., 2022).

Importantly, even short-duration interventions, such as five-minute breathing exercises, body scans, or gratitude journaling, were shown to produce measurable benefits when practised regularly (Yosep et al., 2023). These brief practices were particularly valuable in school settings where time and resources are limited. Students who engaged in daily mindfulness activities developed stronger emotional control and higher engagement with academic tasks. These small habits encouraged a mindset of reflection and self-care, which in turn supported mental health and academic resilience (Nawa & Yamagishi, 2021).

6. Limitations and Future Directions

While this narrative review offers valuable insights into the role of mindfulness in enhancing students' self-esteem and emotional resilience,

several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied solely on existing literature, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across diverse educational contexts. Most of the reviewed studies were conducted in higher education settings or in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have limited the scope of applicability to primary and secondary school environments. Additionally, much of the literature reviewed focused on short-term outcomes; long-term effects of mindfulness practices on self-esteem development remain underexplored.

Another limitation is the lack of uniformity in mindfulness program design across the studies. Variations in duration, content, delivery methods (in-person vs. digital), and measurement tools make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about which specific components are most effective. Moreover, while qualitative themes emerged strongly from the literature, fewer studies employed longitudinal or mixed-method designs, which are essential for understanding how mindfulness practices influence students' emotional development over time. Cultural and regional differences were also insufficiently addressed in many of the studies, raising questions about how mindfulness interventions may need to be adapted to fit diverse student populations.

Future research should prioritise longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to examine the sustained impact of mindfulness on students' self-esteem and resilience across different educational levels. More empirical studies focusing on children and adolescents in school settings are especially needed to address the developmental applicability of mindfulness practices. Additionally, comparative studies examining the effectiveness of various mindfulness-based interventions, such as MBSR and MBCT, as well as brief daily exercises, can help educators identify the most suitable formats for different age groups and contexts. Finally, integrating student voices more prominently in future qualitative studies will deepen our understanding of how mindfulness is personally experienced and internalised, allowing for the design of more student-centred, inclusive mental health programs in schools.

7. Conclusion

This narrative review highlights the significant role of mindfulness practices in

supporting students' self-esteem, emotional resilience, and stress management within educational settings. The findings demonstrate that both structured programs, such as MBSR and MBCT, as well as brief daily exercises like breathing techniques and gratitude journaling, are effective in improving students' emotional well-being and academic engagement.

The review identified four key themes: the reduction of anxiety and emotional distress, enhancement of self-esteem and positive self-perception, development of emotional resilience, and the effectiveness of varied mindfulness interventions. These themes collectively underscore the multifaceted impact of mindfulness. Helping students regulate emotions, reflect without judgment, and remain present in the moment, mindfulness fosters a more confident and balanced approach to learning. In particular, the capacity to build resilience and cope with uncertainty was shown to be especially beneficial during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mindfulness emerges not only as a technique for stress reduction but also as a transformative educational tool that supports holistic student development. Integrating mindfulness into school routines and educational programs can create emotionally safe and supportive learning environments that empower students to thrive both academically and personally. As such, this review advocates for the continued and expanded use of mindfulness practices in education, while also calling for more longitudinal, culturally responsive, and student-centred research to strengthen and tailor its application in diverse learning contexts.

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