

Teachers' Reflections on Mindfulness and Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Phenomenological Inquiry

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i1/26984>

Published Date: 04 January 2026

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced educational systems worldwide, including Malaysia to adopt massive changes, indirectly placing heavy emotional and professional burdens on teachers. This study explored Malaysian teachers' reflective narratives regarding experiences of mindfulness and resilience in coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a qualitative phenomenological design, 12 teachers from the Malaysian schools who taught during the pandemic were interviewed. Data analysis using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis produced three important themes. Findings reveal that on the whole teachers described feelings of overwhelm, technological fatigue, and emotional exhaustion but also reported drawing on mindful awareness, acceptance, and intentional presence in regulating distress. Resilience was developed through reflective practice, peer support, and a sense of purpose in serving students despite disruptions. The study also underlines the centrality of psychological resources for sustaining teacher well-being. In addition, it stresses the importance of integrating mindfulness-based strategies and building resilience programs into teacher professional development. Study also pointed out new qualitative insights into teachers lived experiences during crisis, along with implications for supporting educator well-being in future emergencies.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Resilience, Teacher Well-Being, COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic saw massive changes in the educational eco-systems. The pandemic not only caused a disruption in the education systems around the world but also forced teachers to make rapid adjustments to remote teaching while navigating the uncertainties of

a global health crisis. With schools and educational institutions being shut down, forcing everyone to shift towards digital platforms, educators faced some of the greatest challenges. As put forward by König et al. (2021) teachers were trusted to adopt new instructional technologies and rethink their pedagogical approaches, while ensuring their learners stayed engaged. Many teachers were compelled into the 'New Normal' without adequate training or institutional support (Rapanta et al., 2020). Similar situations existed in Malaysia during the Movement Control Order (MCO) where sudden pressure was set upon educators to transition almost overnight into fully online modes of teaching. Lukas and Yunus (2021) and Talib et al. (2022) further pointed that this sudden intensification of workload, technical demands, and expectations to offer emotional support to students not only added frustrations but mounted significant pressure on the teachers' psychological well-being. Teachers' emotional health emerged as a key factor of both instructional quality and long-term professional sustainability as they navigated these professional and personal disruptions (Kaur et al., 2024; Menaga et al., 2024).

Both Baker et al. (2021) and Oza-miz-Etxebarria et al. (2021) agreed that the pandemic underscored how prolonged stress, uncertainty, and social isolation can be linked to exhaustion, anxiety, and reduced motivation among educators. These conditions have underlined the importance of psychological resources, in particular resilience and mindfulness, which are significant mechanisms that enable teachers to sustain their practice in the face of ongoing adversity. Resilience, or the capacity to adapt positively in the face of challenges, played an important role in helping teachers remain functional as they confronted shifting policies, technological setbacks, and emotional strain (Mansfield, 2021; Day & Gu, 2019). Complementing this, mindfulness has provided a means for teachers to become grounded, regulate their emotions, and maintain clarity during heightened states of stress (Matiz et al., 2020; Felver, 2015).

In the past, while an increasing number of studies have explored the impact of resilience and mindfulness on teacher stress, well-being, and burnout in the context of the pandemic, much of the research was quantitative and focused almost exclusively on correlations between psychological constructs (Vos et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2021). Although these studies uncover significant relationships, they yield limited understanding regarding the lived experiences of teachers as they navigated the uncertainties of the pandemic. Less is currently known about the ways in which teachers personally interpreted resilience, developed coping strategies, or integrated mindfulness practices into their daily routines during the crisis. Furthermore, few studies have examined such experiences from the perspective of Malaysian teachers, despite the unique cultural and institutional contexts that framed their professional realities throughout the pandemic (Varan, 2021).

The absence of narrative-based evidence creates an important gap in our understanding of the emotional processes which supported teachers' well-being during one of the most challenging times in modern education. Understanding such reflections is of prime importance, not only for documenting pandemic era experiences but also for informing teacher development frameworks over the longer term, in preparation for future crises. In response to this need, the present study investigates teachers' reflections concerning the role of mindfulness and resilience throughout the COVID-19 phenomenon, providing a nuance to the coping processes that proved meaningful to them.

With the above background in view, this study was hence specifically designed to:

1. Investigate how mindfulness practices influenced the emotional well-being of teachers and their coping mechanisms in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Investigate how resilience has been developed and exhibited in the process of adapting to the demands and disruptions of pandemic-era teaching by teachers.

By bringing the voices of teachers to the fore, this study adds to the literature on the psychological and reflective mechanisms that sustained educators' well-being, offering insight that could inform policy makers, school leaders, and teacher educators beyond crisis contexts in their efforts to support teacher mental health.

Literature Review

Teachers' Psychological Well-Being in Crisis Contexts

Teachers' psychological well-being has long been considered a basic element of effective educational practice in general, as it affects the quality of instruction, the emotional climate, and the outcomes of students (Hascher et al., 2021). During periods of uncertainty, like the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher well-being became even more critical as educators were called on to navigate rapid pedagogical shifts amidst their own emotional responses. Studies conducted across different countries reported that teachers went through high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion due to increased workload, technology-related demands, and blurring work-home boundaries (Baker et al., 2021; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021).

Similar patterns were reported in Malaysia as the pandemic reshaped work expectations almost overnight. Teachers were required to adopt digital platforms with limited preparation while simultaneously addressing students' learning gaps and emotional needs (Lukas and Yunus, 2021). The resulting strain often manifested as burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished sense of professional efficacy (Talib et al., 2022).

Teacher Resilience as a Coping Mechanism

Resilience has been conceptualised as a dynamic process whereby individuals are able to adapt positively in the face of adversity, trauma, or significant stress (Mansfield, 2021). In teaching, resilience refers to emotional endurance, the maintenance of identity, and sustaining commitment in the face of professional and personal challenge (Day & Gu, 2019). A growing body of work in the pandemic identified that resilience was not solely a personal attribute but a socially constructed process mediated by institutional support, collegiate networks, and reflexive self-awareness (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Malaysian studies similarly stressed that resilient teachers were more able to maintain instructional quality and emotional stability while facing critical digital pedagogical challenges and shifting policy directions (Razak & Kutty, 2021). The concept of reflective resilience as in teachers' reflective practice involving reflective thinking, assessing of stressors, and making adaptive decisions, became particularly salient during COVID-19 as educators constantly adjusted their emotional responses and their pedagogies of engagement (Unger, 2021). Given the duration and uncertainty of the pandemic, resilience became one of the key psychological resources for teachers to buffer against emotional exhaustion, thus sustaining professional functioning.

Mindfulness and its Role in Teacher Well-Being

Mindfulness, or rather typically defined as paying attention to the present moment with openness and non-judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2015), has become increasingly recognized as a psychosocial strategy for educators. Matiz et al. (2020) and Felver (2015) both agree that mindfulness enhances emotion regulation, reduces stress, and promotes full professional presence. Mindfulness practices such as deep breathing exercises, grounding techniques, or reflective journaling has enabled educators to respond rather than react to the stressors of the day, thereby bolstering their resilience and overall psychological balance (Zhu et al., 2021).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, mindfulness became a salient resource for teachers as they faced technological requirements, social isolation, and uncertainty about their students' well-being. Educators who consistently used mindfulness practices demonstrated less emotional reactivity, clarity in decision-making, and an increased ability to deal with rapid changes (Vos et al., 2021; Emerson et al., 2017).

In Malaysia, being a multicultural nation, mindfulness is not something new as it has always been practiced by many religions. Teachers, during the pandemic, began to see mindfulness strategies on an informal basis as part of daily routines to help them continue with emotional stability while transitioning to online teaching methods. These observations bring into focus the importance of an investigation into how such mindfulness was personally interpreted and put into practice by teachers during the pandemic.

Although there has been extensive research on mindfulness, teacher stress and well-being, a number of scholars have pointed out the lack of qualitative research that captures teachers' lived experiences and personal narratives (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020). Much of the existing literature focused on statistical associations rather than understanding how teachers interpreted, enacted, and relied on resilience and mindfulness during prolonged crises, marking this as a gap that led to this study.

Methodology

Research Design

This study which was designed to investigate teachers' lived experiences of resilience and mindfulness during the COVID-19 pandemic employed a qualitative phenomenological approach. The phenomenology approach was particularly suitable for this study as it allowed researchers to explore the meanings that individuals conveyed on their significant life events, enabling an in-depth understanding of personal coping processes and reflective practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Van Manen, 2016). Unlike quantitative designs, which focus on measuring relationships among variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018) phenomenology allows the researcher to capture the richness of subjective experiences, emphasizing teachers' narratives and interpretations of their emotional well-being under crisis conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

This study utilised purposive sampling as it allowed researchers to select educators who could provide rich, relevant insights into the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). The population consisted of Malaysian teachers from public primary and secondary schools.

Twelve teachers who actively taught during the Movement Control Order (MCO) were purposively selected to participate. As for the selection, the eligibility criteria required teachers to:

- (i) have taught in traditional classroom and transitioned to online teaching during the pandemic,
- (ii) be currently teaching in either private or public schools, and
- (iii) be able to articulate reflective accounts of their emotional and professional experiences in English language.

This sample size of twelve teachers aligns with phenomenological recommendations for capturing thematic depth while maintaining analytical feasibility (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews. This allowed participants to communicate their experiences and allowing the researchers to probe further (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Since participants selected were from different states in Malaysia, interviews were conducted via Zoom and Google Meet, providing both cost-reduction and accessibility (Archibald et al., 2019). Each interview lasted 35 to 40 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant's consent.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (Figure 1) which includes familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). To ensure researcher immersion in the data manual coding was performed. In addition reflexive memo-writing was done by researchers to track analytical decisions. Peer debriefing with two qualitative experts was conducted to further enhance interpretive consistency and credibility (Nowell et al., 2017).



Figure 1 Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework

Trustworthiness

To ensure methodological rigor, researchers adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria that entails credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Member checking ensured credibility where participants reviewed summarized transcripts. Maintaining an audit trail of coding and thematic development ensured this study had dependability (Shenton,

2004). Reflexive journaling promoted confirmability, and thick, contextual descriptions were provided to facilitate transferability to other teaching contexts (Elo et al., 2014).

Ethical Considerations

In ensuring that this study was strictly based on ethical procedures, participants were informed about the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, and their voluntary participation (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Pseudonyms such as TE1 for Teacher 1, TE2 for Teacher 2 and so on were used to maintain anonymity, and digital files were stored securely on encrypted devices for the use of the researchers only (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings

Analysis of the interview data produced three major themes. The themes emerged based on data analysis from the teachers' reflections on mindfulness and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 1: Emotional Turbulence and Psychological Strain

Teachers constantly expressed the pandemic as a period of "constant emotional overwhelm," marked by fear, uncertainty, and increased mental fatigue. All (100%) teachers expressed thoughts on balancing between home and school responsibilities, particularly when teaching from home while supporting their own children's online learning (Table 1)

Table 1

Teachers Struggles During Pandemic

Struggles	Frequency (TE % of responses)
Balance between work and family	100%
Digital overload	65%
Isolation	55%
Time management	75%
Loss of structure	60%
Loss of student participation/engagement	55%

Many teachers (65%) described a sense of digital overload, noting that constant screen exposure, communication demands, and technological troubleshooting contributed to burnout.

I was extremely exhausted (TE7)

I felt uncertain, lost, like my mind was going everywhere...from being with family and balancing it with work (TE10)

Almost 55% of teachers further reflected on feelings of isolation. One participant shared that the lack of physical interaction with colleagues made her "feel alone in every decision."

The online session does not allow me to meet my colleagues face to face to discuss issues. It was a lonely journey. I feel alone....in every journey (TE1)

Another noted that unawareness of time management due to online teaching, emotional exhaustion intensified. The exhaustion was further added when teachers perceived declining student engagement or witnessed students struggling with internet access and home constraints.

Across the interviews, teachers expressed that the sudden loss of structure, the emotional load of proving support to distressed students, and the pressure to maintain academic continuity were central sources of psychological strain. These reflections provided context for understanding why mindfulness and resilience became essential coping resources.

Theme 2: Mindfulness as a Grounding and Stabilising Force

Mindfulness proved to be an invaluable resource for teachers to manage challenging emotions, stay in the moment and reduce stress. Teachers expressed that pausing, breathing, and moment-to-moment awareness as strategies they intentionally used during overwhelming situations.

When the stress increased, I would stop. I would first breathe, and then I would remind myself to focus on what I can control right now (TE12)

Teachers described mindfulness not as a formal practice alone, but as everyday intentionality that included slowing down, accepting challenges without self-blame, and being compassionate toward themselves and others. Some integrated brief mindfulness exercises based on their religious practices into their routine before online classes, sharing that it helped them “begin the day in a peaceful and spiritual state.”

Mindfulness also supported emotional acceptance. Teachers expressed that adopting a non-judgmental stance enabled them to acknowledge their limitations during an unprecedented crisis. As one teacher said,

Mindfulness helped me accept that I cannot do everything perfectly (TE5)

Overall, mindfulness served as a psychological anchor—grounding teachers in the present, reducing emotional reactivity, and sustaining emotional well-being during prolonged uncertainty.

Theme 3: Resilience as Adaptive Perseverance and Professional Commitment

Almost all teachers (95%) agreed that resilience as the changing process shaped by reflection, social support, and a strong sense of purpose. Resilience was evident in their adaptability, willingness to learn new technologies, and determination to continue supporting students despite adversity.

Several teachers highlighted how collaborating with colleagues, sharing resources, and participating in informal peer learning communities strengthened their coping capacity. One teacher described this as “learning to rise together,” emphasizing that collective resilience buffered individual stress.

Resilience also came about due to their devotion to the profession. Many teachers expressed that commitment to their students motivated them to persist. They saw themselves as emotional anchors for learners, which reinforced their own strength. Reflective practice played an important role, with teachers intentionally assessing their emotional responses, adjusting teaching strategies, and identifying what helped them endure challenges.

Teachers characterised resilience as a combination of emotional endurance, adaptive problem solving, and an intrinsic motivation to “keep going for the students’ sake,” despite personal difficulties.

Discussion

This study explored how Malaysian teachers reflected on their experiences of mindfulness and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings provide important insights into the emotional and psychological demands faced by teachers during educational disruptions, while offering a deeper understanding of how mindfulness and resilience supported their well-being.

Psychological Strain and Emotional Overload

Educators' accounts of emotional exhaustion, isolation, and screen fatigue resonate with global reports regarding more stress, burnout and anxiety among educators in COVID-19 (Pressley 2021; Keleynikov et al. (2022). The emotional distress that participating teachers reported mirrors the worldwide situation where an abrupt shift to remote teaching increased the cognitive and emotional demands in teachers' work (Kim & Asbury, 2020). These results further highlight the importance of systemic supports for teacher well-being, especially in crisis settings.

Mindfulness as a Protective Emotional Resource

The results of the study show how mindfulness supported emotional control, acceptance, and present-moment awareness while acting as a stabilising influence. This is consistent with recent studies showing that mindfulness improves coping skills, improves emotional balance, and lowers teacher burnout (Matiz et al., 2020; Emerson et al., 2017). Mindfulness interventions have shown to reduce stress and boost psychological resilience in educators during COVID-19 (Keleynikov et al., 2022). The teachers in this study did not view mindfulness merely as a formal practice, but as an attitude of awareness and intentional calmness woven into daily life. Such findings support contemporary conceptualisations of mindfulness as both a practice and a way of being that fosters cognitive clarity and emotional stability during uncertainty.

Resilience as Dynamic Adaptation

Resilience is a changing process influenced by reflective thinking, social connections, and a sense of purpose in one's job. Recent studies show that teachers build resilience through teamwork, support from peers, and reflective practices (Beltman et al., 2022; Mansfield, 2021). Teachers' ability to learn new technologies, emotionally support students, and stay committed to their work aligns with resilience models that highlight flexibility, perseverance, and finding meaning. The findings also highlight previous study on the connection between mindfulness and resilience (Mansfield et al, 2016). Mindful awareness helps with emotional control, which strengthens resilience by allowing teachers to respond thoughtfully to stress instead of reacting impulsively. This backs up new evidence that mindfulness is both a foundation for and a boost to resilience (Zhang, 2023).

Implications for Practice

The findings highlight the importance of implementing structured mindfulness-based programmes and resilience training within teacher professional development. Schools could integrate brief mindfulness moments into staff routines, provide emotional-support spaces, and foster collaborative learning communities that enhance resilience. Policymakers should prioritise teacher well-being frameworks to ensure sustainable educational functioning during future disruptions.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing literature on teacher well-being by offering qualitative insights into how mindfulness and resilience supported Malaysian teachers during the COVID-19 crisis. Findings affirm that these psychological resources are not optional; they are essential components of teacher sustainability, especially during large-scale disruptions. Supporting educators through mindfulness and resilience-building initiatives is pivotal for strengthening both individual well-being and the overall stability of educational systems.

Acknowledgments

The researchers would like to thank UNITAR University College Kuala Lumpur (UUCKL) for funding the research publication cost.

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