

Mindfulness-Based Counseling as an Experiential Approach to Reducing Student Stress: A Qualitative Study in School Settings

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Abstract

Academic stress among students has intensified due to increasing academic demands, continuous evaluation, and social pressures within school environments. Mindfulness-based counseling has emerged as an alternative approach to stress management in schools; however, its effectiveness is predominantly assessed through quantitative outcome measures, offering limited insight into students' lived experiences. This study aims to explore how students experience and make meaning of mindfulness-based counseling in relation to academic stress, identify factors influencing its perceived effectiveness, and examine its implications for school counseling practice. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, this study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with junior and senior high school students who participated in mindfulness-based counseling programs. Data were analyzed using interpretative thematic analysis to capture patterns of meaning and experiential change. The findings indicate that mindfulness-based counseling facilitates a shift in students' awareness of thoughts and emotions, supports emotional acceptance, and transforms impulsive stress responses into more reflective and regulated reactions. The effectiveness of mindfulness-based counseling was found to be strongly influenced by relational quality with counselors, school climate, and structural conditions such as time allocation and academic workload. This study concludes that mindfulness-based counseling contributes to stress reduction primarily through experiential transformation rather than symptom elimination. Integrating students' subjective perspectives is essential for developing context-sensitive and sustainable mindfulness practices in school counseling.

Keywords: academic stress; mindfulness-based counseling; qualitative study; school counseling; student experience

Introduction

Academic stress among students has become an increasingly prominent concern within contemporary educational systems. Escalating academic demands, continuous evaluation, competitive performance standards, and social pressures within school environments have contributed to heightened levels of psychological distress among students across educational levels. Empirical evidence from various educational contexts indicates that stress is no longer an episodic condition experienced during examinations but a persistent aspect of students' daily



academic lives, affecting emotional well-being, learning engagement, and overall school adjustment (Carsley et al., 2017; Mettler et al., 2023). In response, schools have expanded counseling and mental health initiatives aimed at mitigating stress and supporting students' psychological resilience.

Despite these efforts, stress management in school settings often remains reactive and symptom-oriented. Counseling practices frequently emphasize problem-solving, advice-giving, or behavioral correction after stress-related difficulties manifest, rather than fostering students' internal capacities for self-regulation and awareness. Conventional counseling approaches, while valuable, may insufficiently address the embodied, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of stress that students experience in real time (Hosan et al., 2022). As a result, students may comply with recommended strategies without developing sustainable coping mechanisms that extend beyond counseling sessions.

Within this context, mindfulness has gained increasing attention as an alternative and complementary approach in educational counseling. Rooted in the cultivation of present-moment awareness and non-judgmental attention to experience, mindfulness offers a framework for helping individuals relate differently to stress, emotions, and internal experiences. In educational settings, mindfulness-based interventions have been associated with improvements in emotional regulation, attention, and psychological well-being among students (Fulambarkar et al., 2022; Phan et al., 2022). Rather than aiming to eliminate stressors, mindfulness emphasizes changing students' relationships with stress itself.

Recent years have witnessed growing implementation of mindfulness-based counseling programs in schools, either as standalone interventions or integrated into broader social-emotional learning frameworks. Meta-analyses and systematic reviews have reported statistically significant reductions in stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms following mindfulness-based school interventions (Carsley et al., 2017; Da Silva et al., 2023). However, these findings are predominantly derived from quantitative experimental designs that rely on pre-post measurements and standardized psychological scales. While such studies provide important evidence of efficacy, they offer limited insight into how students actually experience mindfulness-based counseling in practice.

This methodological dominance has produced a conceptual gap between measured outcomes and lived experience. Stress reduction is often operationalized as score decreases on stress or anxiety inventories, yet students' subjective processes, such as how they perceive stress, interpret mindfulness practices, and integrate awareness into daily school life, remain underexplored. Several scholars have cautioned that outcome-focused evaluations may obscure the experiential and contextual dimensions that determine whether mindfulness practices are meaningful and sustainable for students (Monsillion et al., 2023; Hosan et al., 2022).

Emerging qualitative studies suggest that mindfulness-based interventions may function less as technical stress-management tools and more as experiential spaces in which students learn to observe, tolerate, and reinterpret internal experiences. Dariotis et al. (2023), for example, found that minoritized adolescents described mindfulness programs as offering emotional safety and self-acceptance rather than immediate symptom relief. Similarly, Kempf et al. (2023) reported that elementary students experienced mindfulness sessions as opportunities to notice emotions without pressure to change them. These findings indicate that the value of mindfulness-



based counseling may lie in experiential transformation rather than outcome optimization.

Nevertheless, qualitative inquiry into mindfulness-based counseling within school counseling contexts remains limited. Existing qualitative studies often focus on perceptions of programs broadly or include multiple stakeholders, such as teachers and parents, without centering students' lived experiences as primary analytical material (Milaré et al., 2025; Ceballos et al., 2021). Moreover, there is a lack of contextual analysis examining how school culture, counseling relationships, and institutional constraints shape students' engagement with mindfulness practices. This gap is particularly significant given that mindfulness is not a culturally or contextually neutral practice, but one that is interpreted and enacted differently across educational environments.

Thus, a critical research gap persists in understanding how students themselves experience and make meaning of mindfulness-based counseling as a response to academic stress. Specifically, there is insufficient qualitative exploration of (1) how students perceive and interpret mindfulness practices within counseling sessions, (2) how mindfulness influences students' ways of responding to stress in everyday academic situations, and (3) how school-level contextual factors facilitate or constrain the effectiveness of mindfulness-based counseling.

Addressing this gap is both theoretically and practically urgent. From a theoretical perspective, exploring students' lived experiences contributes to a more nuanced understanding of stress regulation as a subjective and relational process rather than a measurable outcome alone. From a practical standpoint, school counselors require insights into how mindfulness-based counseling is actually received by students in order to design interventions that are context-sensitive and experience-oriented. Therefore, this study aims to explore students' lived experiences of mindfulness-based counseling in school settings, examine how mindfulness shapes students' responses to academic stress, and analyze contextual factors that influence the perceived effectiveness of mindfulness-based counseling. By moving beyond outcome-based evaluations, this study seeks to contribute to a more experiential and student-centered understanding of stress reduction in educational counseling.

Research methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to explore students' lived experiences of mindfulness-based counseling in school settings. A phenomenological approach was chosen to capture how students subjectively experience, interpret, and make meaning of mindfulness practices in relation to academic stress, rather than to assess intervention effectiveness through predefined psychological measures (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The focus of the study was on experiential depth and meaning construction.

Participants were students at the junior and senior high school levels who had participated in a mindfulness-based counseling program provided through school counseling services. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their reported experiences of academic stress and active involvement in mindfulness counseling sessions. The research was conducted in formal school settings where guidance and counseling services were institutionally established.

Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with students, allowing participants to narrate their experiences of mindfulness practices, emotional responses, and



perceived changes in stress regulation. In addition, limited observations of mindfulness counseling sessions were conducted to capture interactional dynamics, and students' reflective notes were examined when available. Data analysis followed an interpretative thematic analysis process, including transcription, initial coding, theme development, and meaning interpretation. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was enhanced through triangulation and member checking, dependability through systematic documentation of analytical procedures, and confirmability through researcher reflexivity.

Results and Discussion

Students' Lived Experiences of Participating in Mindfulness-Based Counseling

The findings of this study reveal that students experience mindfulness-based counseling as a distinctive psychological space that differs markedly from conventional counseling encounters. Rather than perceiving counseling sessions as problem-solving forums aimed at eliminating stress, students described mindfulness-based counseling as an opportunity to observe and engage with their internal experiences in a more reflective and accepting manner. This experiential shift supports qualitative evidence suggesting that mindfulness interventions function as processes of awareness cultivation rather than direct stress-reduction techniques (Dariotis et al., 2023; Kempf et al., 2023).

A prominent theme across students' narratives was the emergence of heightened awareness of thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations that had previously gone unnoticed. Students reported becoming more conscious of academic stress as it arose, including physical tension, racing thoughts, and emotional discomfort. This awareness was not initially associated with relief; instead, several students described early experiences of discomfort and resistance when first engaging in mindfulness practices. Such resistance aligns with findings by Hosan et al. (2022), who note that students often struggle with non-reactive awareness due to habitual avoidance of unpleasant emotions.

Over time, however, students described a gradual transition from resistance to acceptance. Mindfulness-based counseling was perceived as providing a "safe space" in which stress could be acknowledged without immediate pressure to resolve or suppress it. This perception is consistent with qualitative findings by Dariotis et al. (2023), who observed that adolescents valued mindfulness programs for legitimizing emotional experiences rather than pathologizing them. For students in this study, acceptance did not imply resignation but rather a reduction in internal struggle, allowing stress to be experienced without overwhelming emotional escalation.

Students also highlighted the relational dimension of mindfulness-based counseling. The presence of a counselor who guided mindfulness practices in a calm, non-judgmental manner contributed significantly to students' sense of safety and trust. This relational quality facilitated deeper engagement with mindfulness exercises, supporting Milaré et al. (2025), who emphasize that the effectiveness of mindfulness in educational contexts is closely tied to the quality of facilitation and relational attunement. Students emphasized that when counselors modeled mindfulness through their demeanor, sessions felt more authentic and less instructional.

Importantly, students' experiences indicated that mindfulness-based counseling fostered a reorientation toward stress rather than its immediate reduction. Stress was no longer framed solely as an obstacle to academic performance but as an internal experience that could be



observed, understood, and managed. This experiential reframing resonates with the arguments of Monsillion et al. (2023), who suggest that the primary contribution of school-based mindfulness interventions lies in cultivating adaptive relationships with stress rather than eliminating stressors themselves.

Nevertheless, students' experiences were not uniformly positive. Some students reported difficulty sustaining attention during mindfulness practices, particularly in the early stages, while others expressed skepticism regarding the relevance of mindfulness to academic demands. These ambivalent experiences underscore the importance of acknowledging variability in students' readiness and openness to mindfulness practices, as also noted by Fulambarkar et al. (2022). From a qualitative perspective, such ambivalence should not be interpreted as intervention failure but as part of the experiential learning process inherent in mindfulness-based counseling.

Overall, this subdiscussion demonstrates that students' lived experiences of mindfulness-based counseling are characterized by an evolving process of awareness, acceptance, and relational safety. Rather than producing immediate stress relief, mindfulness-based counseling supports students in developing experiential capacities that alter how stress is perceived and tolerated. These findings address the first research objective by illuminating how students subjectively experience mindfulness-based counseling within school contexts.

The Role of Mindfulness in Transforming Students' Responses to Academic Stress

Beyond immediate experiential awareness, mindfulness-based counseling was found to contribute to significant transformations in how students respond to academic stress over time. Students described a shift from impulsive and emotionally reactive responses toward more deliberate and reflective engagement with stressful situations. This transformation reflects the core theoretical premise of mindfulness as a practice of decentering from automatic cognitive and emotional patterns (Phan et al., 2022; Nur'aini & Patry, 2024).

Students frequently reported that mindfulness practices helped them identify stress triggers with greater clarity. Academic stressors such as examinations, deadlines, and performance evaluations were no longer experienced as undifferentiated sources of anxiety but as specific situations that elicited identifiable emotional and cognitive responses. This enhanced discrimination allowed students to intervene earlier in stress cycles, supporting findings by Hadi et al. (2025) that mindfulness strengthens self-regulatory awareness in academic contexts.

A notable transformation involved the modulation of emotional reactivity. Students described reduced tendencies toward panic, avoidance, or emotional outbursts when facing academic pressure. Instead, they reported pausing, noticing internal reactions, and choosing more adaptive responses, such as seeking support or breaking tasks into manageable steps. These accounts align with meta-analytic evidence indicating that mindfulness-based interventions improve emotional regulation among adolescents (Carsley et al., 2017; Mettler et al., 2023). Qualitatively, however, students framed this change as an experiential shift rather than a learned technique.

Mindfulness-based counseling also appeared to influence students' self-evaluative processes. Students described becoming less self-critical in response to academic difficulties, interpreting setbacks as temporary experiences rather than reflections of personal inadequacy. This finding resonates with qualitative insights from Kempf et al. (2023), who reported that



mindfulness practices reduced harsh self-judgment among elementary students. For participants in this study, reduced self-criticism contributed to a more sustainable engagement with learning despite ongoing stress.

To synthesize these transformations, Table 1 presents key changes in students' stress responses associated with mindfulness-based counseling.

Table 1. Transformations in Students' Responses to Academic Stress through Mindfulness-Based Counseling

Aspect of Stress Response	Pre-Mindfulness Experience	Post-Mindfulness Experience
Stress Awareness	Diffuse, overwhelming	Clear, differentiated
Emotional Reactivity	Impulsive, avoidant	Reflective, regulated
Cognitive Appraisal	Self-blaming, catastrophic	Balanced, contextual
Behavioral Response	Avoidance, disengagement	Adaptive coping, persistence
Emotional Regulation	Limited tolerance	Increased acceptance

Analysis of Table 1 indicates that mindfulness-based counseling contributes to a qualitative transformation in students' stress responses by enhancing awareness, emotional tolerance, and adaptive coping. These changes do not eliminate academic stress but alter students' relationships with stress, enabling more sustainable engagement with academic demands. This interpretation supports Phan et al. (2022), who caution against equating mindfulness effectiveness solely with symptom reduction and instead emphasize experiential transformation.

However, the extent of these transformations was influenced by individual differences and contextual conditions. Students who engaged consistently with mindfulness practices reported more pronounced changes, while those with limited engagement experienced partial or delayed benefits. This variability underscores the importance of sustained practice and contextual support, as highlighted in systematic reviews by Monsillion et al. (2023). Qualitatively, these findings suggest that mindfulness-based counseling should be understood as a developmental process rather than a uniform intervention.

This subdiscussion addresses the second research objective by demonstrating how mindfulness-based counseling reshapes students' ways of responding to academic stress. By fostering reflective awareness, emotional regulation, and adaptive appraisal, mindfulness contributes to experiential changes that extend beyond measurable stress reduction.

School Contextual Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Counseling

The findings of this study indicate that the effectiveness of mindfulness-based counseling cannot be understood solely through individual student experiences but must be situated within the broader school context in which such practices are implemented. Students' narratives reveal that contextual and institutional factors significantly shape how mindfulness-based counseling is received, sustained, and translated into everyday stress responses. These findings align with



qualitative and mixed-methods research emphasizing that school-based mental health interventions are deeply embedded within organizational cultures, relational climates, and structural constraints (Ceballos et al., 2021; Monsillion et al., 2023).

One of the most influential contextual factors identified in this study was the quality of the counselor student relationship within mindfulness-based sessions. Students consistently emphasized that mindfulness practices were more meaningful when facilitated by counselors who embodied calmness, patience, and non-judgmental presence. This relational attunement was perceived as integral to the credibility of mindfulness practices, as students tended to mirror the counselor's demeanor during sessions. Similar findings were reported by Milaré et al. (2025), who noted that students' engagement with mindfulness was closely tied to how authentically facilitators modeled mindful awareness. In this sense, the counselor functioned not merely as an instructor but as a relational anchor for experiential learning.

School culture also emerged as a critical determinant of effectiveness. In school environments where emotional well-being was openly valued and counseling services were normalized, students described greater willingness to engage in mindfulness practices without fear of stigma. Conversely, in contexts where counseling was perceived as remedial or associated with behavioral problems, students reported initial hesitation and self-consciousness. This finding is consistent with Ceballos et al. (2021), who found that culturally responsive and emotionally supportive school climates enhance students' receptivity to mindfulness-based counseling. The symbolic positioning of counseling within the school thus influenced whether mindfulness was experienced as supportive or marginal.

Structural constraints further shaped students' experiences. Limited time allocation, heavy academic workloads, and rigid scheduling were frequently cited as barriers to sustained mindfulness practice. Students expressed difficulty integrating mindfulness into daily routines when sessions were infrequent or rushed. These constraints echo concerns raised in systematic reviews cautioning that mindfulness interventions may lose depth when implemented under institutional pressure to demonstrate quick outcomes (Fulambarkar et al., 2022; Phan et al., 2022). From a qualitative perspective, these findings suggest that mindfulness requires temporal and psychological space to be experienced meaningfully.

Students also highlighted the importance of contextual adaptation to developmental and cultural characteristics. Mindfulness practices perceived as overly abstract or disconnected from students' everyday academic realities were less effective in fostering engagement. In contrast, practices that were framed using familiar language and linked explicitly to common school stressors, such as examinations or peer relationships, were experienced as more relevant. This supports Hosan et al. (2022), who emphasize the need for developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive mindfulness implementation in schools.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that mindfulness-based counseling effectiveness is co-constructed through interactions between students, counselors, and school contexts. Mindfulness does not operate as a universally applicable technique but as a context-dependent practice whose meaning and impact are shaped by relational quality, institutional culture, and structural conditions. This subdiscussion addresses the third research objective by highlighting the contextual factors that enable or constrain the experiential benefits of mindfulness-based counseling in educational settings.



Conclusion

This study demonstrates that mindfulness-based counseling contributes to meaningful changes in how students experience and respond to academic stress, not by eliminating stressors but by transforming students' relationships with stress. Through heightened awareness, emotional acceptance, and reflective engagement, students developed greater capacity for self-regulation and adaptive coping. These findings challenge outcome-oriented models that equate effectiveness with symptom reduction alone and instead emphasize experiential transformation as a core mechanism of change.

The findings further reveal that the effectiveness of mindfulness-based counseling is deeply relational and contextual. The quality of counselor facilitation, the emotional climate of the school, and structural conditions such as time and accessibility significantly shape students' engagement with mindfulness practices. Mindfulness-based counseling is therefore best understood as a situated practice that requires alignment between individual experiences and institutional support.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on school counseling and mindfulness by advancing a qualitative, phenomenological understanding of stress regulation grounded in students' lived experiences. Practically, the findings suggest that school counselors should integrate mindfulness adaptively, attend to relational dynamics, and advocate for supportive school environments that allow mindfulness practices to unfold meaningfully. Future research may build on these insights through longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to further explore how experiential changes associated with mindfulness are sustained over time within educational contexts.

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