



## Living the Motto “Giving, Compassion, Self-Control”: Mindfulness Leadership in Practice

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### Abstract

This study explores how mindfulness leadership is practiced within school “X” guided by the institutional motto “Giving, Compassion, Self-Control.” Using a qualitative narrative analysis design, the research investigates how mindfulness values are embedded in leadership and organizational culture. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with the Head of School, supported by document analysis and field observations. The analysis reveals that mindfulness leadership extends beyond individual awareness to a collective ethos shaping relationships, communication, and decision-making. The leader models mindfulness through presence, emotional regulation, and compassionate discipline, cultivating a culture anchored in empathy, service, and reflective awareness. Barriers such as workload, time pressure, and maintaining consistency also emerge as challenges in sustaining mindful practices. Overall, the study illustrates how mindfulness leadership, when lived through shared institutional values, fosters a value-driven educational environment that nurtures both personal growth and organizational wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Mindfulness leadership; Educational leadership; Narrative analysis; School culture; Compassionate education; Ethical decision-making; Indonesia

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mindfulness has gained prominence as a transformative approach in education and leadership. Rooted in awareness, compassion, and non-judgmental presence, mindfulness is increasingly recognized as both a pedagogical and leadership framework that supports ethical sensitivity, emotional regulation, and reflective decision-making (Ergas, 2019; Ergas & Hadar, 2019; Weare, 2023). Within schools, mindfulness practices have been associated with improved teacher wellbeing, relational trust, and sustainable professional engagement (Correia, 2020; Klapp et al., 2021; Nurshadrina et al., 2025).

Parallel to this pedagogical trend, mindfulness leadership has emerged as a meaningful response to the emotional complexity of educational work. Mindful leaders cultivate self-awareness, regulate emotions, and lead with compassion and ethical clarity (Burmansah et al., 2019, 2020; Rooney et al., 2021). Leadership grounded in mindfulness is inherently relational, it emphasizes presence, listening, and empathy, strengthening communication and organizational trust (Arendt et al., 2019; Garba Konte, 2023; Urrila & Mäkelä, 2024).

In Indonesia, where educational leadership is often shaped by communal and moral values, mindfulness resonates strongly with local cultural orientations emphasizing harmony and compassion (Alimah, 2020; Jovini et al., 2024; Sumintono et al., 2019). Yet, empirical research exploring how mindfulness leadership is practiced in real institutional contexts remains limited.

Most studies focus on outcomes of mindfulness training for teachers or students (Gómez-Olmedo et al., 2020; Lubis et al., 2024; Serrão et al., 2022) leaving unexplored how leaders personally experience and enact mindfulness in daily school life.

Following Ergas (2019) and Brady (2021), understanding mindfulness in education requires examining how it shapes identity, agency, and ethical relations. This study, therefore, explores the lived experience of mindfulness leadership as practiced by the Head of School at school “X”, a mindfulness-based institution in Jakarta. The research provides an interpretive account of how mindfulness becomes a sustained, contextually grounded mode of leading that shapes both individual and collective wellbeing.

## **METHODS**

A qualitative single-case study design was employed to explore the lived experience of mindfulness leadership within school “X” The case study methodology enables an in-depth examination of complex social phenomena within their authentic contexts, emphasizing meaning, context, and subjectivity as integral to understanding lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). This approach was particularly suited to capturing the multidimensional character of mindfulness leadership as both a personal and organizational practice situated within a distinctive educational environment.

School “X”, one of Indonesia’s pioneering mindfulness-based institutions, served as the contextual site for this study. Guided by the motto “*Giving, Compassion, Self-Control*,” the school integrates mindfulness not as a discrete program but as an institutional ethos embedded across leadership, pedagogy, and community engagement. The institution operates two campuses encompassing Kindergarten, Primary, and Secondary levels under an international curriculum framework emphasizing global citizenship, character formation, and emotional well-being. Within this ecosystem, mindfulness leadership functions as both an ethical compass and a strategic practice for fostering a compassionate learning culture.

The Head of School was purposively selected as the key participant due to her central role in cultivating and sustaining mindfulness-based practices across both campuses. Her long-term engagement offered nuanced insight into how mindfulness is enacted as a discipline of self-awareness, decision-making, and community stewardship (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection drew upon semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and non-participant field observations to generate a rich, triangulated understanding of leadership experience. Interview transcripts, school policy documents, and field notes were analysed narratively, tracing the evolution of mindfulness within leadership practices and institutional development. The narrative analysis examined how meaning was constructed through personal and organizational stories, emphasizing coherence, temporal progression, and emotional resonance (Nasheeda et al., 2019; Parks, 2023).

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to Lincoln & Guba (1985) qualitative credibility framework, operationalized through triangulation, member checking, reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing. These strategies, supported by the methodological guidance of Korstjens & Moser (2018) and the trustworthiness principles articulated by Ahmed (2024), strengthened transparency, dependability, and confirmability across the analytic process. Collectively, this interpretive framework produced a coherent narrative that illuminated how mindfulness leadership is lived, embodied, and sustained within a culturally grounded school environment, linking individual awareness with collective organizational ethos and ethical educational practice.

## **FINDINGS**

The Head of School’s narrative portrays mindfulness leadership as an evolving synthesis of self-awareness, relational ethics, and institutional responsibility. Her account demonstrates how mindfulness functions both as a reflective stance and an organizing principle that shapes communication, discipline, and decision-making across the school. At school “X”, leadership is

understood not as managerial control but as value stewardship. The Head of School describes her role as nurturing a community grounded in compassion and self-control, ensuring that operational decisions align with moral purpose. *“Our graduates must become global students with character, aware, caring, and emotionally balanced,”* she explained, underscoring mindfulness as the guiding compass that bridges educational mission and daily practice.

In practice, mindfulness leadership manifests through awareness, intentional presence, and emotional regulation. The Head of School emphasizes pausing before reacting, listening deeply, and maintaining calm under pressure, attributes consistent with mindful leadership principles (Burmansah et al., 2020; Riley, 2022). Everyday routines, such as opening meetings with brief reflection or deep breathing, embed mindfulness into institutional rhythms, transforming it from an individual discipline into a collective ritual. Significantly, mindfulness is presented as universal and inclusive rather than bound to any religious identity, enabling diverse staff and families to engage with it as a shared ethical framework. This approach resonates with global perspectives framing mindfulness as a pedagogy of attention and gratitude applicable across cultural contexts (Ergas & Hadar, 2019; Hemming, 2024).

Despite its integration, the practice of mindfulness leadership is not without barriers. The Head of School acknowledges that time constraints and administrative demands often pressure reactive decisions: *“Sometimes we have to decide fast; it may not always be the most mindful choice.”* Such conditions reveal the tension between ethical intention and institutional accountability (Frost et al., 2025; Ylimaki & Brunderman, 2022). Early on, scepticism among teachers and parents also presented a challenge, as mindfulness was perceived as abstract or difficult to measure. Over time, observable behavioural and emotional improvements among students, such as enhanced self-regulation and empathy, contributed to broader acceptance and legitimacy within the school community.

The most profound change is reflected in the transformation of the school’s culture toward calmness, empathy, and reflective communication. Teachers increasingly *“remind each other to stay calm and not reactive,”* signalling mindfulness as a normalized social habit. This cultural evolution aligns with research indicating that mindfulness leadership fosters relational safety and organizational trust (Garba Konte, 2023; Urrila & Mäkelä, 2024). In disciplinary matters, punitive approaches have been replaced with restorative practices that encourage reflection and accountability. Students are invited to examine their actions and propose constructive resolutions, echoing Alimah (2020) concept of contemplative learning for moral development and reinforcing mindfulness as an ethical pedagogy.

The integration of mindfulness has also supported professional and institutional growth. Although academic achievements are not directly attributed to mindfulness, teachers report better classroom management, empathy, and emotional resilience. The Head of School observes that mindful teachers *“handle students better, develop empathy, and teach with more patience,”* reflecting enhanced wellbeing and professional competence (Correia, 2020; Klap et al., 2021). Institutional efforts toward sustainability include the introduction of reflective logbooks for students, self-assessment journals for teachers, and the development of a mindfulness guidebook. These practices illustrate the school’s movement toward systemic embedding of mindfulness as a foundation for continuous professional learning, consistent with (De Toni & De Marchi, 2022) notion of self-organized and reflective leadership in education.

Taken together, the Head of School’s narrative reveals mindfulness leadership as a process of continual ethical reflection that integrates awareness, compassion, and responsibility. This finding aligns with global perspectives that view mindfulness as a relational and transformative mode of leadership (Burmansah et al., 2019; Riley, 2022; Weare, 2023). Its effectiveness, however, depends on authentic practice and contextual adaptation. Rather than eliminating stress, mindfulness transforms how leaders inhabit it, cultivating awareness, restraint, and compassion in the face of complexity. This dual focus on self-regulation and collective harmony positions mindfulness as a bridge between individual consciousness and organizational ethics, deeply resonant with Indonesian cultural values of balance, mutual respect, and moral integrity. Through

this lens, mindful leadership becomes not merely a personal discipline but a sustainable institutional strategy for cultivating wellbeing, empathy, and ethical coherence within education.

## DISCUSSION

The narratives from the Head of School reveal mindfulness leadership as a multidimensional construct that unites self-awareness, ethical decision-making, and institutional practice. Rather than a technical or managerial skill, mindfulness emerges as an embodied way of leading that integrates reflection, compassion, and relational awareness within the dynamics of school life (Burmansah et al., 2019; Garba Konte, 2023; Urrila & Mäkelä, 2024). The findings demonstrate how mindfulness provides a foundation for reflective action and moral clarity, aligning leadership with values of empathy, inclusivity, and calm responsiveness even amid systemic and bureaucratic constraints (De Toni & De Marchi, 2022; Riley, 2022).

Mindfulness leadership, as practiced in school “X”, mirrors the view that mindful awareness in leadership involves a conscious alignment between attention, intention, and ethical attitude (Burmansah et al., 2020; Ergas, 2019). The Head of School’s narrative of pausing before decisions, listening attentively, and modelling balance reflects the integration of contemplative awareness into leadership routines, transforming mindfulness from a private exercise into a public ethic of care. This resonates with the principle that mindfulness enhances leaders’ capacity to communicate authentically and foster social awareness within organizational relationships (Arendt et al., 2019; Urrila & Mäkelä, 2024)

In a multicultural school context, mindfulness also functions as an inclusive and adaptive leadership framework. By interpreting mindfulness as a universal practice of awareness rather than a religious or spiritual doctrine, the leader demonstrates its compatibility with educational values of respect, gratitude, and global citizenship (Hemming, 2024; Mercer, 2024). This inclusive interpretation strengthens school cohesion and resonates with the idea of mindfulness in education as both practice and ethos, as suggested by Ergas & Hadar (2019). The leader’s approach reflects the capacity to nurture a shared moral culture, grounded in compassion and self-regulation, that transcends cultural boundaries and promotes harmony among teachers, students, and parents (Burmansah et al., 2022; Riley, 2022).

However, the narrative also uncovers key barriers to sustaining mindful leadership in real-world educational environments. Time pressure, administrative accountability, and the constant demand for results create conditions that test a leader’s capacity for sustained mindfulness. These challenges mirror findings from contemporary leadership studies emphasizing that educational leaders must balance bureaucratic obligations with moral and emotional presence (Frost et al., 2025; van Jaarsveld, 2022; Ylimäki & Brunderman, 2022). Yet, rather than negating mindfulness, these pressures appear to reinforce its practical relevance, cultivating composure, ethical restraint, and measured decision-making even within constraint (Burmansah et al., 2022; Riley, 2022).

The ripple effect of mindfulness extends beyond the individual leader to the broader school culture. Teacher and student engagement narratives indicate that mindfulness fosters resilience, emotional safety, and prosocial behavior, reflecting the integrative relationship between mindful teaching, reflective communication, and wellbeing (Correia, 2020; Klap et al., 2021; Nurshadrina et al., 2025). The Head of School’s emphasis on restorative discipline practices further demonstrates how mindfulness redefines accountability as a process of reflection and growth rather than punishment, aligning with Alimah (2020) idea of contemplative and transformative learning for character development.

From an organizational standpoint, mindfulness leadership serves as a cultural and structural force. The Head of School’s effort to institutionalize reflection through guidebooks and teacher journals represents what De Toni & De Marchi (2022) describe as self-organized educational leadership, where mindfulness becomes embedded in collective routines and shared pedagogical values. This process aligns with perspectives on mindful educational organizations

that emphasize trust, relational safety, and collaborative meaning-making as conditions for sustainable transformation (Riley, 2022; Weare, 2023).

From the narrative accounts, mindfulness leadership emerges as a lived expression of transformational and values-driven educational practice, where the leader's experiences reveal how awareness, empathy, and ethical reflection become integral to everyday decision-making. It fosters transformation not through control or directive power but through presence, compassion, and authentic communication (Burmansah et al., 2019; Garba Konte, 2023; Rooney et al., 2021). Unlike performance-based managerialism, mindfulness leadership emphasizes non-striving, acceptance, and awareness, nurturing both leader wellbeing and institutional harmony. This aligns with the moral and reflective dimension of leadership described in contemporary educational research, which highlights mindfulness as a path toward human-centred, ethical, and inclusive schooling (Frost et al., 2025; Riley, 2022; Weare, 2023).

Ultimately, the Head of School's experience situates mindfulness leadership within the lived realities of educational management, where ideals meet structural limitations, and awareness becomes a strategy for navigating imperfection. Her narrative demonstrates that mindfulness does not eliminate challenges; it transforms how leaders inhabit them. In this sense, mindfulness becomes both a philosophy of being and a praxis of leading, a relational, ethical, and sustainable model for educational leadership in complex school environments (Burmansah et al., 2020; De Toni & De Marchi, 2022; Riley, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that mindfulness leadership is best understood as a lived and relational practice that weaves together self-awareness, ethical reflection, and institutional care. The Head of School's narrative illustrates how mindfulness serves as a guiding principle in decision-making, communication, and cultural transformation, fostering a cohesive school environment grounded in empathy, compassion, and self-control. Within this framework, leadership becomes less about authority and more about presence, about cultivating awareness and moral clarity in both personal and collective actions.

Mindfulness leadership operates dynamically across three interconnected levels. On a personal level, it supports leaders in maintaining composure, emotional regulation, and self-reflection amid challenges. Relationally, it nurtures trust, empathetic dialogue, and compassionate communication among staff and students, reinforcing a culture of respect and shared responsibility. At the institutional level, mindfulness shapes organizational routines and values, embedding reflection and care within the school's ethical and operational systems. Together, these dimensions illustrate mindfulness as a holistic leadership model that aligns inner awareness with collective wellbeing.

Although challenges such as time constraints and policy pressures persist, mindfulness remains a stabilizing force that transforms these limitations into opportunities for learning and moral growth. Rather than prescribing fixed techniques or procedures, mindfulness leadership embodies an ethical orientation, a way of being that balances strategic action with inner calm and ethical intent. It invites leaders to act with clarity, patience, and compassion, even within the demands of contemporary educational management.

For practitioners, this study highlights the value of integrating mindfulness into leadership preparation and school-wide initiatives to enhance wellbeing, ethical conduct, and reflective practice. For researchers, it opens pathways for deeper narrative and comparative studies across cultural and institutional contexts to examine how mindfulness leadership evolves, adapts, and sustains inclusive, resilient, and value-centred educational communities.

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