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The Effects of Individual and School Mindfulness on Teachers Academic Optimism : Evidence from Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of the research is to identify the influence of mindfulness towards academic optimism among teachers in Malaysian public secondary schools. Data were obtained from 775 teachers randomly selected from 155 schools in Northern Peninsular Malaysia. Research findings revealed the Malaysian public secondary schools practice a moderate level of mindfulness and academic optimism. The findings also shows that only individual mindfulness has a significant influence towards the teachers academic optimism.

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Introduction

A principal is a symbol or an expression of the school because the principal is the determiner of a school's success in its programs and mission while such success becomes a reference to teachers, staff and the students under the principal's supervision (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). They are responsible in creating a conducive environment that enhances teacher's professionalism (Senin, 2012), be consistent in exploring and optimizing the hidden potential among school community and individuals which supports the students' learning experience thus ensuring the excellence of the institution (Weick & Sutcliffe (2015). Therefore, such ability in school leadership that realizes and recognizes an individual's potential through various creative, open and unique perspectives becomes an expertise in managing emotional competency and is an added value that helps to enhance teachers' academic optimism (Hoy & Miskel, (2013). In other words, mindfulness is a critical emotional competency in school leadership where leaders who generate and practice optimum mindfulness can increase teachers' academic optimism and ensure the desired student outcome in line with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

For decades, the construct of mindfulness has been made popular by Langer (Langer, 1989; Langer, 1993; Langer, 1997; Langer, 2009; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000), nevertheless Hoy and his fellow researchers (Hoy, Gage, & Tarter, 2006a; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2006b) examined the notion of academic optimism and discovered a positive momentum when it is being researched either individually or collectively as both constructs impacted the education field. Mindfulness is defined as the ability to understand a current situation in an organization from various perspectives with a creative, open and probabilistic mind (Langer, 1993). It is also concerning an individual or a group's way to function and act mindfully without the need to be asked while being able to improvise an opportunity to be collectively beneficial in a positive setting of an organization (Hoy, Gage & Tarter, 2004).

Meanwhile, teachers' academic optimism is the combination of self confidence and teachers' collective positivity with the emphasis towards academic matters and efficient learning that results in productive outcome in students' academic performance (Hoy & Miskel, 2013).

Meanwhile research studied by Hoy, (2003); Hoy and Miskel, (2013); Hoy et al, (2006a); Hoy et al., (2006b); and Kearney, Kelsey, and Herrington, (2013) in educational context has discovered that there is a positive relationship between individual and organizational mindfulness with teachers' academic optimism especially in the aspect of teaching practices in school and students' academic achievement. Thus, this study built upon Langer's work on individual mindfulness (Langer, 1989; Langer, 1993; Langer, 1997; Langer, 2009), organizational mindfulness (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), and with both of these constructs plus academic optimism (Hoy et al., 2006a; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Hoy et al., 2006b) in the educational setting. Such significant impact generates the need to investigate mindfulness and teachers' academic optimism especially in the Malaysian context. Therefore, the main intention of this quantitative study is to measure and identify the extent of influence of mindfulness towards teachers' academic optimism in public secondary schools. This research is anticipated to help solidify the importance of individual (principal) and organizational (school) mindfulness in increasing the academic optimism in a school.

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Teachers’ Academic Optimism

The concept of teachers’ academic optimism is first introduced by Hoy et al., (2006b) from positive psychology and humanistic psychology perspective as a result of quantitative research to identify the relationship between three characteristics in schools, namely collective teachers’ efficacy, teachers’ academic emphasis, and teachers’ trust towards parents and students. Since the relationship between these three characteristics is strong and reflected by students’ positive academic achievement, Wagner and Dipaola (2011), and Hoy (2012) assumed that trust and efficacy are most likely to exist in ensure student’s involvement and learning in class despite students being difficult or lacking of motivation (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 1998), and is often associated with student’s achievement (Wagner & Dipaola, 2011). optimistic situations while emphasis in academic trust further towards optimism. These collective underlying variables are used to measure a school’s culture (Hoy & Miskel, 2008) and also are often related to schools’ achievement as stated in research work by Hoy et al., (2006a). In fact, Beard et al., (2010), and Hoy et al., (2006b) found that teachers’ academic optimism is perceived as one of the aspect in school that influencing the entire teaching and learning environment and students’ achievement.

According to Akhavan (2011), literature on variables are still lacking although there is an abundance of research regarding teachers’ academic optimism conducted in primary schools by Allen (2011), Beard, Hoy and Hoy (2010), and Beard (2008), while researches in secondary schools are conducted by Fahy, Wu dan Hoy (2010). Fahy et al., (2010) confirmed that teachers’ academic optimism is an individual concept albeit having the same structure as the collective concept. Such optimism is perceived as an individual quality among teachers and is also one of the organizational traits that directly influence students’ achievement (Hoy et al., 2006a; Beard et al., 2009). According to Beard et al., (2009), there are three main components of teachers academic optimism; namely trust towards parents and students, teachers’ efficacy, and teachers’ academic emphasis.

Teachers’ trust towards parents and students

Trust is an important component that is required to develop a positive relationship with parents and students. Trust is also the key element in building a strong rapport with students. When teachers create a safe and impartial environment, students are prone to take risks and learn from their mistakes and this action helps parents to trust the teachers’ positive intention for the benefit of their children (Adams, 2014). Among these trustworthy qualities are such as sense of social responsibility, trustworthiness, efficiency, honesty, and open-mindedness (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Generally, effective teachers are inclined to believe that their students possess high receptivity to learning

and the potential to succeed. As how such is related to teachers’ high efficacy, teachers believe in parents and students are more prone to have higher expectations in students’ achievement (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). This is not only a desirable trait but also ensures that success is attainable.

Teachers’ efficacy

A teacher’s efficacy is the ability to When a teacher is able to motivate a student’s learning, high expectation can therefore be placed which drives effort and hardwork, thus producing perserverance and grit in challenging situations (Weick & Sutlife, 2015).

Teachers’ academic emphasis

Academic emphasis is a teacher’s capability to prioritize academic matters over social and affective obligations (Wagner & Dipaola, 2011). The academic learning period for students is crucial because time is spent on active and effective academic tasks, which are relevant and important to students’ achievement (Hoy et al., 2006a). Nevertheless, students usually spent only one third from the time of academic learning (Hoy & Miskel, 2013).

Mindfulness

Organizational mindfulness is related to the ability to interpret fundamental relationship bonds, identify important aspects in social relationships and understand forms of stress and action towards subordinates, clients and competitors while accurately assess the reality within and without the organization (Hoy, 2003). According to Vogus and Sutcliffe (2012), mindfulness in an organization refers to a group’s capability to realize and understand that it is a part of social and political system. In one of the researches regarding personal management in collaborative work, it was discovered that an effective team has a better grasp in the organization’s culture including how and why the management make decisions. Such understanding is very helpful in helping the team to serve the organization better.

The term “individual mindfulness” is first explored and built based on research by Langer (1989 & 1992). The analysis of this concept is further enlarged to organizational mindfulness by Weick dan Sutcliffe (2015). Then, it is further expanded to schools in which a school’s organizational mindfulness is studied with M-Scale atau School Mindfulness Scale by Hoy (2003) and Hoy, Gage and Tarter (2004). Meanwhile, Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) developed the concept of organizational mindfulness, which explains organizational performance in situations requiring dependability and reliability with the understanding that as mindful comprehension increases, organizational errors decrease (Weick & Roberts, 1993).

Research Objectives

The main objective of the research is to identify the influence of mindfulness towards teachers’ academic optimism especially teachers in public secondary schools. Therefore, this study specifically aims to:-

- a) Identify the level of mindfulness and teachers’ academic optimism.
- b) Examine the influence of mindfulness towards teachers’ academic optimism

Research Methodology

The data for the research was obtained from 775 trained teachers randomly selected from 155 public secondary schools in Northern Peninsular Malaysia namely Kedah, Perlis and Penang. All the respondents have at least 3 year’s of teaching experience in the current schools. Regarding

gender, the number of male respondents [72.6% were female and only 27.6% were male teachers]. Pertaining to age group of respondents, 43.6% were in the group of less than 40 years old, 37.9% were aged between 41 to 50 years old, and the remaining 18.5% were aged more than 51 years old. A set of questionnaire is used to obtain data from respondents. The translated version of School Mindfulness Scale (M-Scale) by Hoy and Gage (2003) were used to measure mindfulness. The construct measures two dimensions namely individual and organizational mindfulness that comprise of 14 items. The measure is highly reliable with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .88 to .92 for this study. Teachers' academic optimism were measured using the translated questionnaire from Teacher Sense of Academic Optimism for Secondary Teachers (TAOS-S) developed by Fahy, Wu and Hoy (2010). The constructs are measured using 9 items and has 3 dimensions, namely, collective self efficacy, collective trust towards parents and students, and academic emphasis. The reported Cronbach's alphas range from .84 to .90 for the this study. The responses for these research instruments were captured using a 5-point Likert scales which ranging from 1 for strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree. The data were analysed using descriptive, and multiple regression analyses

Research Findings

Level of Mindfulness and Teachers' Academic Optimism.

In order to identify the level of mindfulness and teachers' academic optimism, the benchmark is determined according to recommendation by Creswell (2012) and Leithwood and Jantzi, (1999), where mean score from "1.00 to 1.80" is categorized as very low, "1.81 to 2.60" is categorized as low, while "2.61 to 3.40" is categorized as medium, "3.41 to 4.20" is categorized as high, and "4.21 to 5.00" is categorized as very high. The findings from the descriptive analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Research Variables.

Research variables	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Level
Organizational Mindfulness	4.03	.25	High
Organization Level	4.05	.30	High
Individual Level	4.01	.25	High
Teachers' Academic Optimism	3.88	0.21	High
Teachers' Collective Efficacy	3.80	0.28	High
Teacher's Trust towards Parents and Students	3.71	0.28	High
Teachers' academic emphasis	4.12	0.25	High

The results from the responses showed that the overall mean score value obtained from the variable of organizational mindfulness is 4.03 with standard deviation of .25. This indirectly shows that it is placed at a high level. This is the same as the dimension of individual mindfulness (Mean=4.01) and organizational mindfulness (Mean=4.05). Meanwhile, research findings also showed an overall mean score value for the variable of teachers' academic optimism with the value of 3.88 and a standard deviation of .21. This finding reflects a high level of teachers' academic optimism, in which such level is also portrayed in other dimensions.

Influence of Organizational Mindfulness towards Teachers' Academic Optimism

The results of Table 2 shows the dimensions of mindfulness significantly contributed 19 percent of the variance changes to the dimension of teachers' collective efficacy, 16 percent of the variance change to the dimension of teachers' trust to parents and students and 28 percent of the variance changes to the dimension of teachers' academic

emphasis. The results also revealed that the beta coefficient (β) shows that only individual mindfulness has a positive and significant effect on teacher academic optimism such as teachers' collective ($\beta=.38, p<.01$), teachers' trust towards parents and students ($\beta=.35, p<.01$), and teachers' academic emphasis ($\beta=.45, p<.01$).

Table 2. Coefficient value β for the Influence.

Variable	Dependent Variables: Teachers Academic Optimism		
	Teachers' Collective Efficacy (β)	Teachers' Collective Efficacy (β)	Teachers' Collective Efficacy (β)
Mindfulness			
Organizational	.079	.072	.104
Individual	.384**	.354*	.450**
R ²	.194	.164	.275
Adjusted R ²	.181	.151	.263
F Value	15.480**	12.649**	24.414**

*Sig. at $p<.05$; **Sig. at $p<.01$

Discussion and Implication

The research findings have shown that mindfulness at an individual level has a significant and positive influence towards the dimension of teachers' collective efficacy which shows that all actions taken individually by teachers will bring positive effects to the students (Goddard et al., 2004). This indicates that as teachers develop higher level of mindfulness towards their actions by not only focusing on themselves, they are able to build confidence where an individual can bring change that increases the collective effectiveness in the school community. According to Hoy et al., (2006b), the pre-requisite for this situation to exist is when there is a high level of concern and care between organization and teachers' mindfulness in schools.

Theoretically speaking, when there is a relationship between mindfulness and organizational concern and care, enthusiasm and passion will increase among teachers, motivating them to be more trustworthy, competent, honest, and openness (Hoy et al., 1999). For example, when schools encourage communication between teachers, parents and students, it minimizes misunderstandings and cultivates mindfulness among teachers. Hoy et al., (2006b) stated that when teachers and administrators enhance the ability to face unexpected challenges via examining failure, avoiding shortcuts and remaining sensitive in operations, it is then mindfulness can be cultivated.

In terms of practical implication, both constructs, mindfulness and teachers' academic optimism have enabled various approaches which can be incorporated consistently and be used to support students' learning strategies in schools. Based on previous research literature reviews, the understanding on both constructs will be an added value to the existing routine, hence directly increases the schools' academic achievement.

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