

Embodiment as Pedagogy

Reclaiming Educator Well-Being Through the Koshas

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Abstract

This study explores the effects of yoga on educators' well-being and pedagogy, by addressing widespread teacher burnout and the historical neglect of the body in education. Using hermeneutic phenomenology and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the research integrates van Manen's lived existentials with the Vedantic kosha framework as conceptual, analytic, and methodological lenses. Data from interviews, kosha-guided journaling, and body mapping with international school educators reveal awareness as a mediating force across dimensions of well-being. Findings reframe teacher well-being as an embodied process of professional becoming that directly shapes relational pedagogy.

Keywords: *embodiment; educator well-being; teacher burnout; koshas; phenomenology; yoga; relational pedagogy; interoception; compassion*

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Within holistic education, teaching has long been understood as a relational and ethical practice grounded in the wholeness of the human being (Miller, 2019; Palmer, 2017). Yet, contemporary responses to teacher burnout often rely on external interventions—time management, resilience training, or institutional reform—while overlooking the inner, embodied dimensions through which educators actually experience their work. This study responds to that gap by returning to the body as a site of wisdom, perception, and pedagogical knowing.

Teacher well-being is often framed as a workplace outcome shaped by environmental supports, policy conditions, and professional demands

(Hascher & Waber, 2021; McCallum, 2021; Viac & Fraser, 2020). These dimensions are critical, and still, something essential can be missed: what happens inside teachers as they teach? The breath cycle that shortens; the somatic tightening before a difficult conversation; the subtle emotional pattern that becomes a default response; the moment of self-judgment that constricts presence. Teaching is lived through the body. Pedagogy unfolds in real time across psychological, somatic, and emotion registers, holding the potential for transformation toward more relational, embodied attunement (Gordon, 2019). This study asks how educators cultivate presence, regulation, and compassion from within, and how these inner capacities shape classroom life.

This research employs the kosha model from the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (Feuerstein, 2011) as a multidimensional scaffold for selfhood, encompassing:

- Annamaya: The physical body and food-sheath
- Prāṇamaya: The vital energy and breath
- Manomaya: The mental-emotional seat of thoughts and feelings
- Vijñānamaya: The layer of wisdom and inner discernment
- Ānandamaya: The innermost sheath of bliss and joy

The Kosha framework emerges from broader Vedantic and yogic philosophical traditions that conceptualize the human being as multidimensional and layered (Feuerstein, 2011). This Eastern model is integrated with Max van Manen's (1990) four lived existentials (body, space, time, and relation). This methodological synergy creates a dialectical space where the sacred and the scholarly meet, allowing internal subtle textures of experience to remain meaningfully situated within the professional realities of the educator (Alderfer, 2025; Heidegger, 1927/1962). In doing so, the study positions teacher well-being not as a fixed trait or a private matter, but as a dynamic, layered, embodied capacity and one that can be cultivated and that shapes pedagogy from within.

Methodology: Embodied Inquiry

The study adopts hermeneutic phenomenology, viewing the body as our general medium for having a world (Merleau-Ponty, 1974). Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected to

attend carefully to the meaning-making processes through which educators experience well-being in practice. Consistent with phenomenological and contemplative research traditions, the body was treated as a primary site of knowing through which experience is sensed, interpreted, and lived (Merleau-Ponty, 1974; van Manen, 1990).

Participants. Four K–12 educators with at least five years of experience in both teaching and yoga participated (Alderfer, 2025).

Methods. Data were generated through semi-structured IPA interviews, semester-long kosha-guided journaling, and body mapping—a visual representation of felt bodily experiences to bridge difficult-to-articulate tacit knowledge (Cochrane et al., 2022; de Jager et al., 2016).

Analysis. Data were analyzed through embodied inquiry and affective coding, interpreting the subtle nuances of energy and physical sensations expressed through storytelling (Chadwick, 2017; Alderfer, 2025). This analytic stance honored not only what was said, but also what was sensed, withheld, softened, tightened, or carried—recognizing that meaning often emerges first through the body.

Key Qualitative Findings

The findings are organized across the koshas to reflect the layered nature of participants' experiences. While presented sequentially, these dimensions were experienced as interrelated and mutually informing, revealing well-being as an embodied, recursive process rather than a linear outcome.

Finding 1: Interoceptive Sensitivity and Presence (Annamaya Kosha)

Heightened interoceptive sensitivity—the capacity to sense internal bodily states (Garfinkel et al., 2015)—serves as the foundation for teacher

presence. Educators transition from a focus on superficial form to an interiorized awareness (Stone, 2018). This corporeal knowing (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012) allows teachers to stay “calm and centered, even on the most chaotic days” (Alderfer, 2025, p.117; participant quote). Across narratives, the body becomes a teacher: an early-warning system, a compass, and a medium through which presence is reclaimed.

Finding 2: The Pedagogical Pause and Classroom Climate (Prāṇamaya Kosha)

Breath awareness functions as a critical pause button or buffer against stress (Alderfer, 2025). This pedagogical pause allows teachers to move from reactivity to intentionality, fostering a playful mindset (Dierenfeld, 2024). By modeling this internal state, teachers create a harmonious classroom climate where students often mirror the teacher’s grounded energy (Sandilos et al., 2023). Breath becomes both a personal resource and a relational offering; shaping tone, pace, and the emotional ecology of the classroom.

Finding 3: Reperceiving and Emotional Resilience (Manomaya Kosha)

Yoga cultivates emotional resilience through reperceiving or decentering (Shapiro et al., 2006). This aligns with the yogic principle of *vairagya* (non-attachment), creating a space between stimulus and response (Tremblay et al., 2024; Stone, 2017). This witnessing awareness prevents a single negative interaction from elevating the ego or ruining the rest of the day (Alderfer, 2025). Participants described resilience not as toughening, but as widening; seeing more, holding less, staying connected without being overtaken.

Finding 4: Self-Compassion and Relational Pedagogy (Vijñānamaya Kosha)

Self-compassion acts as a crucial mediator of well-being (Hwang et al., 2019). Teachers trained in mindfulness show greater use of indirect talk-encouraging student behavior and accepting students’ ideas, and a corresponding decrease in direct, lecture-oriented talk (Hwang et al., 2019). This shift fosters a person-centered teaching practice where the teacher’s internal state of safeness and relaxation (Matos et al., 2021) promotes a sense of belonging for students (Alderfer, 2025). Compassion emerges as a regulatory and relational capacity—one that reshapes the micro-moments of teaching.

Together, these findings suggest that embodied awareness operates as a relational capacity that shapes how educators perceive, respond, and remain present within the complexities of classroom life.

Discussion

Pedagogy is always something being practiced (on the level of psychological, somatic and emotional registers) and thus holding potential for transformation into being more relational, ecological-minded, and reflecting more embodied attunement.

—Gordon, 2019

This discussion expands on the study’s findings by engaging current literature to deepen the dialogue between educators’ lived experiences and broader pedagogical implications related to teacher well-being. By weaving together the study’s findings with research on teacher well-being, a more nuanced understanding of yoga’s impact on well-being and pedagogy emerges. Each section is framed through a relevant kosha, grounding the discussion in a yogic framework that honors the layered nature of human experience and the subtle textures that shape teaching from within (Alderfer, 2025).

Teacher burnout and the mental health crisis in education have become defining conditions of contemporary schooling. Much of what teachers carry is not only cognitive workload, but ongoing emotional labor, relational strain, and the chronic demand to be responsive amid instability. As a result, teacher well-being cannot be treated as peripheral; it is pedagogical. It shapes presence, reactivity, classroom climate, and the relational field in which learning occurs. Current scholarship rightly emphasizes external conditions—administrative support, job resources, and systemic interventions (McCallum, 2021; O’Donnell, 2007; Reveley, 2016). Yet these approaches can unintentionally obscure a parallel truth: teachers’ inner lives matter. What is happening inside teachers as they teach—their breath cycles, somatic signals, emotional patterns, and capacity for non-reactive awareness—directly shapes how pedagogy is practiced in the moment (Gordon, 2019; Graham et al., 2019).

This study does not deny systemic responsibility. Rather, it expands the well-being conversation beyond the external to include the internal. While external conditions will always fluctuate, internal practices can remain steady, offering teachers a way to cultivate the very qualities the literature consistently identifies as protective: emotional resilience, self-efficacy, boundary clarity, and compassion (Huang et al., 2019; Fox et al., 2023; Sohail et al., 2023). In the context of teacher burnout, these inner resources function as a form of pedagogical infrastructure—an embodied reservoir that supports sustained presence and relational teaching when conditions are difficult.

Beyond the External to Include the Internal: Sustained Qualities of Well-Being

In the landscape of teacher well-being, research consistently underscores emotional resilience and self-efficacy as predictors and outcomes of both teacher and student well-being (Huang et al.,

2019; Billet et al., 2022; Dreer et al., 2021). Emotional resilience functions as a buffer against burnout, emotional exhaustion, and deteriorating classroom dynamics (Graham et al., 2019; Fox et al., 2023). Similarly, teacher self-efficacy is strongly associated with well-being and improved pedagogy (Fox et al., 2023). There is broad consensus: these qualities matter (Sohail et al., 2023).

However, much of the literature remains oriented toward external factors—administrative support, school-based interventions, and job resource models (McCallum, 2021). These approaches are vital, particularly given the systemic pressures teachers face (O’Donnell, 2007; Reveley, 2016). Yet they can implicitly position well-being as primarily bestowed or withheld by context. As Graham and Truscott (2019) propose, we need to contextualize well-being as an experience and consider how contemplative education contributes to well-being in schools. This shift matters. It recognizes that teachers possess an innate capacity to cultivate emotional resilience and self-efficacy—and that internal cultivation supports a more sustainable form of well-being, precisely because it is not entirely contingent on external stability.

How do we support teachers in developing these qualities from within, through more embodied ways of being? The findings suggest yoga offers teachers internal resources that shape how they respond to stress and how that stress permeates pedagogy. Existing research supports the link between self-efficacy and coping: as cited in De Clercq et al. (2022), teachers’ self-efficacy enhances instructional quality (Holzberger et al., 2013) and enables teachers to perceive work demands as less excessive (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Research on the physiological mechanisms of yoga indicates regulation of the stress response and improvements in teacher resilience and empowerment/efficacy (Dyer et al., 2020).

Celeste et al. (2024) likewise emphasize that internal practices can create emotional equilibrium and buffer emotional exhaustion.

Yoga also enhances relaxation and awareness, reducing stress levels (Hagen et al., 2023) and “operates through underlying mechanisms that promote the dimensions of well-being both physiological and psychological which created the opportunity for behavioural changes” (Hepburn et al., 2021, p. 4). This aligns with the study’s findings: yoga does more than calm the body; it changes how teachers meet stress, and this shift shapes how they relate to students, colleagues, and classroom situations.

Prāṇamaya Kosha: Breath and the “Pedagogical Pause”

Breath awareness emerged as a central mechanism across participant narratives, operating through interconnected physiological and psychological pathways that support well-being. Within yogic traditions, pranayama has long been understood as a bridge between physiological, emotional, and mental states (Sivananda, 1993). Hepburn et al. (2021) highlight changes in body awareness, increased awareness of breathing, and stress response regulation as key benefits. Participants described breath as a way of creating space—physically and emotionally—during moments of stress. Breath functioned as a pause button, offering the opportunity to re-center before responding to difficult situations.

Celeste (2024) similarly found that teachers engaging in mindful breathing regain equilibrium, approaching work with renewed clarity and purpose. Breath practices served as a buffer against emotional exhaustion (Sandmeier et al., 2022), preventing escalation and creating room for reflection and self-regulation. Dierenfeld’s (2024) work on space-making through breath also resonates with participant accounts: creating space

supports a playful mindset and greater readiness to take risks. In this study, breath becomes not only a coping strategy but an embodied pedagogy—a way of teaching from a steadier internal register that reshapes classroom climate (Sandilos et al., 2023).

Manomaya Kosha: Reperceiving, Non-Attachment, and Emotional Resilience

Emotional resilience is repeatedly identified as protective against burnout and the emotional demands of teaching (Sandilos et al., 2023). Yet much of the literature emphasizes external supports (Fox et al., 2023). What this study brings forward is the internal development of resilience through embodied yoga practice. Participants described yoga as cultivating a capacity to pause, reflect, and sense internal states before reacting—an intentionality that carried directly into classroom interactions.

A key mechanism in mindfulness literature is “reperceiving,” or decentering (Shapiro et al., 2006). This process also aligns with mindfulness-based approaches emphasizing nonjudgemental awareness of bodily and emotional experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Yoga’s alignment with non-attachment (*vairagya*) offers a parallel frame: creating space between stimulus and response (Tremblay et al., 2024; Stone, 2017). In lived terms, this study suggests that yoga helps teachers remain connected without being overtaken—an essential nuance for teaching as a relational practice. Resilience here is not emotional detachment; it is the capacity to witness, to hold perspective, and to respond intentionally.

Self-Efficacy, Boundaries, and the Inner Conditions of Agency

Self-efficacy remains a key component of teacher well-being (Pap et al., 2023). Yet it is often

positioned as shaped by external conditions (Fox et al., 2023). This study extends the conversation by suggesting yoga as an internal pathway into agency—particularly through embodied boundary-setting.

Participants described boundaries as lived necessities in systems that rarely build in time to pause or reflect. Yoga supported boundary clarity through structure and through micro-adaptations that created pockets of processing amid overload. This mechanism appears connected to interoceptive awareness and the development of a personal “language with the body,” a discernment that helps teachers recognize depletion, misalignment, and the need for protection (Alderfer, 2025, p.145). Price and Hooven (2018) identify interoception as foundational for emotional self-regulation and psychosocial well-being, and the study’s findings suggest this internal awareness supports teachers’ capacity to set boundaries and sustain efficacy within school environments.

Vijñānamaya Kosha: Compassion as a Mediating Force in Relational Pedagogy

Scholarship on compassion in education emphasizes compassion-focused approaches as foundational for prosocial behavior and relational climates (Matos et al., 2024). Teachers’ capacity to respond effectively to emotions matters for mitigating burnout, particularly in caregiving roles (Stevens et al., 2021). Teaching is precisely such a role. Miller (2019) underscores the ethical imperative of compassion in education. This study’s findings align with research positioning self-compassion as a mediator of well-being and pedagogy. Jennings (2015) found that mindfulness and self-compassion strengthen the social and emotional capacities teachers draw on to sustain emotionally supportive classrooms.

Participants described yoga as fostering a more compassionate relationship with self, which then reshaped interactions with students and colleagues. Compassion in this study functions less as ideal and more as capacity: a steadiness that supports person-centered teaching. Hwang et al. (2019) connect compassion with changes in teacher well-being and person-centered teaching practices (p. 212). Matos et al. (2021) further identify compassion-related mediators tied to burnout, anxiety, and stress (p. 1356). The findings suggest yoga cultivates compassion through embodied practice—breath, attention, non-reactivity, and inner attunement—reshaping pedagogy as a lived, relational act.

Teacher Inner Life as Pedagogical Resource

Across the koshas, the findings suggest that teacher well-being is not a fixed state but a dynamic, embodied capacity shaped by awareness and responsive engagement. In the current landscape, teacher inner life emerges as a crucial partner to systemic change. Supporting teachers’ inner resources—breath awareness, emotional resilience through re-perceiving and non-attachment, embodied self-efficacy through boundary clarity, and compassion as a mediating force—offers a holistic approach to sustained well-being. This does not replace institutional responsibility; it deepens the well-being conversation by insisting that pedagogy is always being practiced on psychological, somatic, and emotional registers (Gordon, 2019). Yoga, as an embodied practice, appears to support the vitality of pedagogy itself (Alderfer, 2025).

Holistic education has long emphasized that teaching is not merely a technical or cognitive endeavor, but a deeply relational and ethical practice rooted in the wholeness of the human being (Miller, 2019; Palmer, 2017). Palmer (2017) reminds us that “we teach who we are,” underscoring the inseparability of teachers’ inner

lives from their pedagogical presence. Within this tradition, teacher well-being has been understood as a matter of meaning, identity, and moral purpose rather than simply stress reduction or performance optimization. Yet even within holistic education, contemporary responses to teacher burnout often remain primarily reflective or cognitive in orientation, leaving the body largely implicit or undertheorized.

This study extends holistic education by foregrounding embodiment as a critical and necessary dimension of teacher well-being. Participants' experiences of burnout were not described solely in emotional or psychological terms, but as felt disruptions in breath, energy, and bodily presence. Teachers spoke of constriction, depletion, and reactivity as somatic states that shaped how they entered the classroom and engaged with students. These accounts suggest that burnout is not only something teachers think or feel, but something they live through their bodies. When embodiment is absent from well-being frameworks, educators are left without language or practice for addressing the very site where stress first manifests.

Yoga emerged in this study as an embodied extension of holistic education's core commitments rather than a supplementary wellness strategy. Through breath awareness, interoceptive attention, and non-reactive observation, teachers developed the capacity to sense themselves more clearly and respond with greater intentionality. This individualized and experiential orientation toward practice reflects classical understandings of yoga as a process of inner integration and self-study (Desikachar, 1995). Participants described this as a return to alignment or center—an embodied steadiness that supported relational presence even amid institutional pressure. In this way, yoga functioned as a means of sustaining the inner conditions required for relational teaching. Importantly, this

reframing does not individualize responsibility for burnout. Holistic education has consistently called for educational systems that honor dignity, relationality, and humane working conditions. However, this study suggests that systemic change alone is insufficient if teachers lack embodied resources for navigating stress as it is lived moment by moment. Embodied practices do not resolve structural inequities, but they do offer teachers a way to tap into an inner reservoir that can challenge how current educational systems operate.

The findings elaborate this embodied reframing through the lens of the koshas, which provide a layered framework for understanding how teacher well-being is lived across physical, energetic, emotional, mental, and intuitive dimensions. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate or hierarchical, the koshas illuminate the interpenetrating nature of teachers' experiences, revealing how shifts in breath awareness, emotional regulation, and intuitive attunement shaped participants' pedagogical presence. The kosha framework thus offers a conceptual bridge between holistic education's emphasis on wholeness and the embodied practices through which teachers in this study navigated burnout, resilience, and professional renewal.

Conclusion and Implications for Teacher Education

The study calls for a paradigm shift in teacher education and professional learning:

1. Teacher Formation: Moving beyond instructional delivery to support “professional becoming” through a kosha-based developmental scaffold (McCaw, 2024; Alderfer, 2025).
2. Practicum Applications: Integrating somatic reflections and “gut-check”

journaling into teacher candidate training (Alderfer, 2025).

3. Policy Change: Systems must trust teachers' inner wisdom and recognize that teacher well-being is deeply intertwined with the "vitality of pedagogy itself" (Alderfer, 2025).

In a time of widespread burnout and deep strain in education, this study invites an expanded understanding of teacher well-being: one that includes both external supports and the internal resources teachers cultivate through sustained embodied practice. By framing well-being through the koshas, the study offers a language—and a methodology—for naming the inner dimensions of teaching that often remain invisible, yet profoundly shape classroom life.

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