



Protective Resources Against Teacher Burnout: A Structural Equation Model of Self-Compassion, Mindfulness, and Emotion Regulation Among EFL Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Teacher burnout threatens educator well-being and educational quality, particularly within the demanding English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. While personal resources like self-compassion and mindfulness are known protective factors, the psychological mechanisms through which they mitigate burnout remain underexplored. This study investigated the mediating role of emotion regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) in the relationship between these resources and the core dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment). Using a cross-sectional survey of 315 practicing Iranian EFL instructors, we tested a hypothesized structural equation model (SEM) with formal bootstrapping for mediation. The model demonstrated excellent fit, explaining substantial variance in emotional exhaustion (48%), depersonalization (41%), and personal accomplishment (44%). Results revealed that self-compassion was a potent protective factor against all burnout dimensions, while mindfulness also directly predicted lower exhaustion and higher accomplishment. Critically, mediation analysis confirmed that emotion regulation was a key mechanism; expressive suppression, in particular, emerged as a significant risk pathway linking lower self-compassion to higher burnout. The findings underscore the multifaceted role of self-compassion and have significant implications for teacher training and professional development. They suggest that fostering self-compassion and adaptive emotion regulation skills is a crucial strategy for mitigating burnout in the EFL profession.

KEYWORDS: EFL teachers; Emotion regulation; Mindfulness; Self-compassion; Structural equation modeling; Teacher burnout

1. Introduction

Teacher well-being is critical for effective education, yet the profession's demanding nature makes educators highly susceptible to burnout—a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy stemming from chronic work-related stress (Maslach, 1982; Brandão et al., 2025; Pyhältö et al., 2021). This syndrome not only harms teachers'

personal health but also leads to higher attrition and absenteeism, threatening the stability and quality of the educational system (Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

These professional pressures are often amplified for EFL teachers, who face additional challenges including linguistic and cultural mediation and high performance expectations (Acheson, 2016). This context contributes to disproportionately high attrition rates, a well-documented issue among Iranian EFL teachers, which underscores the need to identify protective factors in this specific population (Fathi, 2021; Ghanizadeh & Royaei, 2015; Khani & Mirzaee, 2015; Swanson, 2012).

To counteract burnout, research has increasingly focused on protective psychological resources such as self-compassion—treating oneself with kindness during hardship (Neff, 2003a)—and mindfulness, which involves non-judgmental, present-moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2019; Zhang & Fathi, 2024). While the benefits of these intrapersonal resources are established, the mechanisms through which they protect teachers from burnout remain less clear. This study posits that emotion regulation—the process of managing one's emotional experiences (Gross, 1998)—is a central mechanism. Given the emotionally demanding nature of teaching (Sutton & Harper, 2009), the specific strategies teachers use to regulate their feelings represent a critical link between their internal resources and their occupational well-being (Gross & John, 2003).

However, few studies have integrated these variables into a single, comprehensive model to test these mediational pathways, particularly among Iranian EFL teachers. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to test a structural model examining how two distinct emotion regulation strategies—cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression—mediate the relationships between self-compassion, mindfulness, and the dimensions of teacher burnout. To add depth to these quantitative findings, a secondary qualitative aim was to explore teachers' lived experiences with these psychological processes, seeking a more holistic understanding of the factors that underpin teacher resilience.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher burnout: A multidimensional syndrome in education

Teacher burnout is a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job (Maslach, 1982). Rather than a simple reaction to stress, it is a complex, multidimensional construct best understood through the widely accepted framework developed by Maslach and colleagues (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). This model conceptualizes burnout through three interrelated dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion, the core component, is characterized by the feeling of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one's psychological resources. Depersonalization (or cynicism) refers to a detached, negative, or overly cynical response to one's job and, in the case of teaching, to students and colleagues. Finally, a reduced sense of personal accomplishment involves feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement and productivity at work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

The teaching profession is particularly susceptible to burnout due to a confluence of persistent organizational and interpersonal stressors that can erode mental health (Vesely, 2013). These pressures—including excessive workload, large class sizes, student misbehavior, and bureaucratic demands—are well-documented contributors to chronic stress and, ultimately, burnout (McCormick & Barnett, 2011; Rajendran, 2020; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). These challenges are often magnified in the EFL context, where cultural and linguistic demands add another layer of complexity (Acheson, 2016). This has led to worryingly high rates of attrition among language teachers, often exceeding those in other subject areas, which underscores the urgent need for further research in this specific domain (Khani & Mirzaee, 2015; Swanson, 2012).

The consequences of unchecked teacher burnout are far-reaching, affecting educators, students, and the educational system at large. For teachers, burnout is linked to decreased job satisfaction and increased intentions to leave the profession, severely undermining their psychological well-being (Pyhältö et al., 2021). These individual struggles spill over into professional practice, manifesting as decreased job performance, absenteeism, and feelings of hopelessness that impact the entire learning environment (Fathi, 2021; Greenier, 2021; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Consequently, a significant body of research in L2 teacher education has shifted toward identifying the psychological factors that influence teacher effectiveness and well-being (e.g., Fathi & Derakhshan, 2019; Fathi & Savadi Rostami, 2018; Ghasemzadeh, 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). However, to truly understand how to protect teachers, we must look beyond the syndrome itself and examine the internal mechanisms teachers use to handle these pressures, specifically how they manage their emotions.

2.2. Teacher emotion regulation

Given that burnout is fundamentally a disorder of emotional exhaustion, it is critical to understand the mechanism of emotion regulation. As a key component of positive psychology, emotion regulation is the process by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions (Gross, 1998; Seligman, 2011). It is a multifaceted capacity that involves recognizing and understanding one's emotions, managing impulsive reactions, and flexibly applying strategies to modify emotional responses in adaptive ways (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). Central to this process is Gross's (1998) distinction between two types of strategies: antecedent-focused strategies, which are deployed before an emotional response is fully activated, and response-focused strategies, which occur after the emotion has developed. One of the most studied antecedent-focused strategies is cognitive reappraisal, which involves reframing a potentially emotion-eliciting situation to alter its emotional impact. By reinterpreting a professional challenge as a growth opportunity, for

instance, individuals can proactively diminish negative feelings and enhance their ability to cope (Gross & John, 2003; Koole, 2009).

Emotion regulation is not an abstract skill but a crucial component of teachers' daily professional lives. The teaching profession is inherently emotional, requiring constant management of interactions with students, colleagues, and parents amidst a variety of pedagogical and administrative challenges (Sutton, 2009; Yin, 2019). These emotional demands are often heightened in second language (L2) classrooms, where instructors must navigate unique frustrations and anxieties, making emotion regulation essential for building the resilience and adaptability needed to succeed (Morris & King, 2018; Wijaya, 2021). Teachers continuously engage in both the up-regulation of emotions, such as enthusiasm to foster student engagement, and the down-regulation of emotions, such as frustration to maintain a positive classroom climate (Gong, 2013; Sutton & Harper, 2009). The ability to skillfully manage these emotional dynamics is therefore directly linked to teacher effectiveness and motivation (Chang, 2009; Deng, 2022; Gardner & Stough, 2002; Gupta, 2021; Huang, 2020).

A substantial body of empirical evidence has established emotion regulation as a cornerstone of teacher well-being and a critical factor in the development of burnout. Broadly, research consistently links effective emotion regulation to favorable outcomes, including enhanced personal well-being, greater teaching effectiveness, and higher job satisfaction (Aldao, 2010; De Neve et al., 2023; Gkonou & Miller, 2023; Sutton & Harper, 2009; Yin, 2019). Conversely, difficulties with emotion regulation are a significant predictor of all three dimensions of burnout. Studies show that teachers who struggle to manage emotional stress are more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Brackett, 2010; Chang, 2013, 2020; Li, 2023). For example, research on Portuguese teachers found that emotion regulation difficulties were strongly related to personal, work-related, and student-relationship burnout (Brandão et al., 2025). This link is particularly relevant to the context of the present study, as research on Iranian EFL instructors has shown that both the capacity to regulate emotions and the strategies used for emotional labor are significant negative predictors of burnout (Ghanizadeh & Royaei, 2015).

Beyond simply mitigating negative states, effective emotion regulation also enables teachers to cultivate positive psychological experiences. Teachers who manage their emotions effectively report more positive feelings, which in turn leads to greater job satisfaction and work engagement (Atmaca, 2020; Freire, 2020; Greenier, 2021; Viseu, 2016; Zhang, 2019). In recent years, the role of emotion regulation in promoting work engagement has become a major focus of research, with studies consistently showing that it can boost engagement, sometimes by buffering the negative effects of psychological distress (Chen, 2022; Greenier, 2021; Keleynikov, 2022; Ma, 2023; Namaziandost, 2022). Taken together, this body of literature suggests that emotion regulation is a pivotal mechanism that not only protects teachers from burnout but also helps them thrive, justifying its central role as a mediator in models of teacher well-being.

2.3. Self-compassion as a protective resource for teachers

While effective emotion regulation is crucial for mitigating burnout, it is equally important to examine the intrapersonal resources that facilitate such adaptive processing. Among these resources, self-compassion has emerged as a powerful tool for navigating stress and adversity (Neff, 2003). It involves treating oneself with care and understanding when confronted with personal failings, inadequacies, or life difficulties. According to Neff's (2003a) influential model, self-compassion is a multifaceted construct comprising three interacting components: (a) self-kindness, which involves being gentle and supportive with oneself rather than harshly self-critical; (b) a sense of common humanity, which recognizes that suffering and personal imperfection are part of the shared human experience, rather than isolating; and (c) mindfulness, which entails holding one's painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them. By fostering a kind and connected mindset, self-compassion enables individuals to face challenging circumstances without being overwhelmed by negative emotions like shame or anxiety (Allen & Leary, 2010; Neff, 2003a), and is broadly associated with better mental health and emotional well-being (Neff & Germer, 2013).

In the demanding context of the teaching profession, self-compassion is a crucial asset that promotes both well-being and professional success (Moè & Katz, 2020). One of the most consistently documented benefits is its strong link to resilience. A large body of research demonstrates that self-compassionate individuals, including teachers, are better able to manage and rebound from work-related challenges and setbacks (Bluth, 2018; Kotera, 2021; Lefebvre, 2020; Neff, 2003a; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Nery-Hurwit et al., 2018). For example, a study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that self-compassion was a key factor in helping new teachers cope with extreme stress by facilitating a shift from self-criticism to self-kindness and from isolation to a sense of connectedness (Chen, 2022). Beyond resilience, self-compassion is also positively correlated with teachers' work engagement and overall job-related well-being (Dreisoerner, 2023; Eldor & Shoshani, 2016; Kotera & Van Gordon, 2021).

Given its role in mitigating stress, self-compassion is increasingly recognized as a potent buffer against teacher burnout (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2011; Zhang & Fathi, 2024). Research specific to the Iranian context has provided direct evidence for this protective effect. For instance, an intervention study found that self-compassion training significantly reduced burnout and increased job satisfaction among Iranian teachers (Hashemi, 2018). Similarly, a correlational study with Iranian EFL teachers demonstrated that self-compassion moderated the negative relationship between job stress and emotional well-being, highlighting its practical value in alleviating the pressures inherent in the profession (Rajabi & Ghezelsefloo, 2020).

The protective benefits of self-compassion may be explained by its intrinsic link to adaptive emotional processing. Research suggests that self-compassion can function as an effective emotion regulation strategy (Diedrich, 2014). Individuals high in self-compassion are more likely to employ positive coping mechanisms, such as cognitive reframing and seeking social support, which in turn leads to fewer depressive symptoms following stressful events (Leary, 2007; Zeller, 2015). A recent study

on Chinese EFL teachers supported this by showing that self-compassion directly and positively influenced teacher resilience, with emotion regulation acting as a key mediating factor (Hu, 2023). By cultivating a more compassionate inner voice, individuals may also become more empathetic and responsive to others, leading to stronger interpersonal relationships and improved communication skills (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). This suggests that self-compassion does not operate in isolation but rather fosters a set of regulatory and relational skills that are essential for sustaining well-being in the teaching profession.

2.4. Mindfulness as a resource for teacher well-being

Closely related to self-compassion, yet serving as a distinct resource in its own right, is mindfulness. While mindfulness is a component of Neff's self-compassion model, it has also garnered significant empirical attention as a standalone construct for its benefits to well-being and stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, 2018, 2019). It is defined as a state of paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). This practice involves the self-regulation of attention to one's immediate thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations without being carried away by them, thereby fostering psychological clarity and serenity (Bishop et al., 2004). For educators, who operate in a high-stress environment that is a primary driver of burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), mindfulness represents a critical psychological resource for navigating the emotional and cognitive demands of their profession (Fathi, 2023).

A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that mindfulness is a powerful protective factor against teacher stress and burnout. Both dispositional (trait) mindfulness and participation in mindfulness-based interventions are consistently linked to lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, the core components of burnout (Maslach, 2001). Correlational studies and systematic reviews have affirmed a clear inverse relationship between mindfulness practices and burnout symptoms among educators (Luken & Sammons, 2016; Mettler, 2023). Furthermore, intervention studies have shown that mindfulness training effectively reduces teachers' perceived stress and burnout while simultaneously improving their teaching efficacy and emotional well-being (Flook, 2013; Song, 2020; Taylor, 2021). The mechanisms behind this effect are multifaceted; research suggests that the link between mindfulness and reduced burnout is mediated by factors such as increased self-acceptance (Sun et al., 2020). In the EFL context specifically, mindfulness has been shown to mediate the relationship between other positive resources, like psychological capital, and teacher burnout (Liu & Du, 2024), highlighting its central role in models of teacher well-being.

The benefits of mindfulness can be understood through several interrelated psychological mechanisms, primarily its capacity to enhance resilience, improve emotion regulation, and foster work engagement. First, mindfulness is strongly associated with greater psychological resilience, enabling teachers to better withstand and recover from professional adversity (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Lee, 2021; Neumann & Tillott, 2022). Empirical work has confirmed that trait mindfulness is positively linked to resilience and negatively associated with emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions (Lee, 2021). Second, mindfulness is fundamentally linked to improved emotion regulation. The non-judgmental awareness it cultivates allows individuals to confront challenges with greater calmness and respond to professional stressors with more emotional intelligence (McCaw, 2020; Mohammad Hosseini et al., 2023; Roeser, 2013). This enhanced regulatory capacity is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes, including reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression (Hofmann, 2010; Hue & Lau, 2015; Khoury, 2013; Xu, 2022) and improved job satisfaction (Hülshager et al., 2013).

Finally, beyond mitigating negative states, mindfulness also actively promotes positive experiences like work engagement. By fostering present-moment awareness, mindfulness helps cultivate positive job-related feelings, hope, and optimism (Malinowski & Lim, 2015). Organizations that support mindfulness meditation programs often see corresponding increases in workplace spirituality and employee engagement (Petchsawang & McLean, 2017). Taken together, the literature strongly suggests that mindfulness is a valuable resource for educators. However, while its direct benefits are well-documented, less is known about how mindfulness interacts with other intra-personal resources, such as self-compassion, and through which specific regulatory mechanisms it operates to prevent burnout. This gap highlights the need for more integrative models, such as the one proposed in the current study.

2.5. The purpose of the study

The literature review establishes that while self-compassion and mindfulness are potent resources against teacher burnout, the specific mechanisms through which they operate remain underexplored, particularly in the high-pressure context of EFL instruction in Iran. To address this gap, the primary purpose of this study was to test a structural model positing emotion regulation as a key mediator. We hypothesized that self-compassion and mindfulness would directly predict lower burnout (H1), consistent with extensive prior research (e.g., Flook et al., 2013; Neff, 2011). We further proposed that these personal resources would facilitate more adaptive emotion regulation by promoting cognitive reappraisal and reducing expressive suppression (H2), based on established theoretical links between awareness and emotional processing (Diedrich, 2014; Roeser, 2013). In turn, these strategies were expected to predict burnout, with reappraisal acting as a protective factor and suppression as a risk factor (H3) (Brackett, 2010; Chang, 2013). Synthesizing these paths, our central hypothesis (H4) was that emotion regulation strategies would mediate the relationship between teachers' personal resources and the dimensions of burnout.

To add necessary depth and context to these statistical relationships, this study also incorporates a qualitative component. This phase was designed to explore the lived experiences of Iranian EFL teachers, providing a narrative

understanding of *how* they deploy personal and regulatory resources to cope with the emotional demands of their profession and explain the patterns observed in the quantitative data.

Accordingly, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do emotion regulation strategies mediate the relationships between self-compassion, mindfulness, and the dimensions of teacher burnout among Iranian EFL teachers?
2. How do Iranian EFL teachers describe using self-compassion, mindfulness, and emotion regulation to cope with professional stress and burnout?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The sample recruited for this study consisted of 315 practicing EFL instructors from Iran. Following the procedures outlined in the data analysis section, three cases were identified as multivariate outliers and were removed to ensure the integrity of the statistical models. A brief analysis confirmed that these removed cases (two females, one male; all English majors) did not differ systematically from the remaining sample on key demographic variables. Thus, the final analytical sample used for all reported statistics was composed of 312 participants.

To capture a diverse range of teaching contexts within the country, participants were recruited from five provinces selected for their demographic and educational variety: Tehran, Alborz, Kurdistan, East Azerbaijan, and Khuzestan. These regions encompass the metropolitan capital, adjacent urban centers, western ethnic minority areas, a northwestern academic hub, and a major southwestern province, thus capturing a wide spectrum of socio-cultural and professional environments. Participants were drawn from both private language institutes (ranging from large, franchised chains to smaller, independent centers) and public secondary schools.

A multi-stage sampling strategy was implemented to optimize sample representativeness. In the first stage, a cluster sampling approach was used to randomly select 40 educational institutions (25 private institutes, 15 public schools) from the official registries in the target provinces. This method ensured that the sample was not biased toward easily accessible institutions. In the second stage, stratified random sampling was applied within these clusters. Potential participants were stratified based on years of teaching experience (1–5, 6–10, 11–15, >15 years) to ensure that instructors at different career stages were adequately represented. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently employed as EFL instructors with at least one year of full-time teaching experience.

The demographic characteristics of the final analytical sample are presented in Table 1. The participants were predominantly female (61.5%, $n = 192$), which reflects the gender distribution common in the EFL teaching profession in Iran. The largest proportion of instructors (41.3%, $n = 129$) had 6–10 years of teaching experience. A significant majority (85.9%, $n = 268$) held degrees in English-related disciplines such as TEFL, Translation Studies, or English Literature, with the Master of Arts (MA) being the most common highest qualification ($n = 183$). All participants reported a high command of English, which was deemed essential for the valid completion of the English-language instruments.

Table 1.

Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 312)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	120	38.5
	Female	192	61.5
Teaching Experience	1–5 years	87	27.9
	6–10 years	129	41.3
	11–15 years	61	19.6
	> 15 years	35	11.2
Academic Major	English-related	268	85.9
	Non-English	44	14.1
Highest Degree (English Majors, $n = 268$)	BA	54	20.1
	MA	183	68.3
	PhD	31	11.6

3.2. Instruments

Four internationally recognized and validated instruments were utilized to measure the study's key constructs. For each scale, internal consistency was assessed in the current sample using Cronbach's alpha (α).

3.2.1. Self-compassion

The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a) was selected to provide a comprehensive assessment of how individuals relate to themselves in moments of perceived failure or distress. This 26-item scale measures three positive facets (Self-Kindness, Common Humanity, Mindfulness) and three negative facets (Self-Judgment, Isolation, Over-Identification) of self-compassion. Participants rated items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = almost never to 5 = almost always). Following Neff's (2003a) guidelines, a total self-compassion score was computed by averaging all items after reverse-scoring the negative subscales. The SCS is extensively validated, with original studies reporting excellent reliability ($\alpha > .90$). The overall scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the present study ($\alpha = .91$).

3.2.2. Mindfulness

The Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003) was used to measure dispositional mindfulness, defined as a receptive awareness and attention to present-moment experience. This 15-item scale assesses the frequency of mindful states in daily life on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = almost always to 6 = almost never). A sample item is, "I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time." Scores were reverse-coded and averaged, with higher scores reflecting greater mindfulness. The original validation of the MAAS reported strong psychometric properties, which were replicated in the current sample with a good internal consistency of $\alpha = .88$.

3.2.3. Emotion regulation

The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003) was chosen for its established validity in assessing two distinct emotion regulation strategies. The 10-item measure is divided into two subscales: Cognitive Reappraisal (6 items), which refers to changing how one thinks about a situation to alter its emotional impact, and Expressive Suppression (4 items), which involves inhibiting emotion-expressive behavior. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The reliability coefficients in the current sample were robust for both Cognitive Reappraisal ($\alpha = .85$) and Expressive Suppression ($\alpha = .78$). Given the short length of the suppression subscale, the mean inter-item correlation was also calculated and found to be satisfactory (.47), further confirming internal consistency.

3.2.4. Burnout

The Maslach Burnout Inventory–Educators Survey (MBI-ES; Maslach, 1996) was utilized as the gold standard for measuring occupational burnout among educators. The 22-item instrument assesses three core dimensions: Emotional Exhaustion (9 items), defined as feelings of being emotionally depleted by one's work; Depersonalization (5 items), reflecting cynical and detached responses to one's job and students; and a reduced sense of Personal Accomplishment (8 items), characterized by feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement. Participants rated the frequency of these feelings on a 7-point scale (0 = never to 6 = every day). The internal consistency for each subscale in the current study was high: Emotional Exhaustion ($\alpha = .92$), Depersonalization ($\alpha = .86$), and Personal Accomplishment ($\alpha = .89$).

3.3. Procedure

The research protocol received full ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Kurdistan, and the study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Data were collected between October 2024 and January 2025.

Following IRB approval, official letters of invitation were emailed to the administrative heads of the 40 selected educational institutions. Upon receiving institutional consent, a recruitment email was forwarded by the administration to all eligible EFL instructors. This email contained a link to the online survey, which was created and administered using the Google Forms platform. The initial page of the survey was a detailed Participant Information Sheet and an electronic informed consent form. This form clearly outlined the research aims, the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, the estimated completion time (20–25 minutes), and the right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Consent was indicated by clicking an "Agree to Participate" button.

To mitigate potential order effects, four versions of the survey were created with the primary questionnaires presented in a counterbalanced order. The links to these different versions were distributed randomly among the participating institutions. Demographic questions were presented last to avoid priming any identity-related responses. Upon completion, a total of 328 responses were received. The dataset was subsequently screened for anomalies. Thirteen cases were excluded due to significant missing data (>10%) or evidence of inattentive responding (e.g., straight-lining, completion times under 10 minutes), yielding a final valid sample of 315 participants.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages using IBM SPSS 28.0 for preliminary analysis and IBM SPSS AMOS 28.0 for the main analysis. The preliminary stage in SPSS involved screening the dataset for missing values, outliers (using Mahalanobis

distance), and the assumptions of multivariate normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Descriptive statistics and a Pearson correlation matrix were generated to provide an initial overview of the variable relationships and to check for multicollinearity.

The primary analysis employed structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS, following the recommended two-step approach (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to establish the psychometric integrity of the measurement model. After confirming this model's validity, the full structural model was tested by specifying the hypothesized directional paths from the predictor variables (self-compassion, mindfulness, emotion regulation strategies) to the outcome variables (the three dimensions of burnout). The fit for both models was evaluated using a combination of established goodness-of-fit indices: the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), with acceptable fit determined by established thresholds (Hoyle, 2012; Kline, 2015). Using maximum likelihood (ML) estimation, hypotheses were tested by examining the statistical significance ($p < .05$) and magnitude of the standardized path coefficients (β) within the final structural model.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary analyses

Prior to the main analysis, the dataset ($N = 315$) was screened for accuracy, missing values, and the assumptions of structural equation modeling. The rate of missing data was minimal ($<1\%$) and was addressed using the full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation procedure within AMOS, which is superior to deletion methods. An assessment for multivariate outliers using Mahalanobis distance ($p < .001$) identified three cases, which were removed to prevent undue influence on the model parameters, resulting in a final sample of $N = 312$ for the SEM analysis. The assumptions of multivariate normality and linearity were assessed; while minor deviations from normality were observed, the maximum likelihood (ML) estimator is known to be robust to such violations in samples of this size (Kline, 2015).

Descriptive statistics and Pearson product-moment correlations for all key variables are presented in Table 2. As expected, self-compassion and mindfulness were strongly and positively correlated ($r = .68, p < .001$). Both constructs were positively associated with cognitive reappraisal and personal accomplishment, and negatively associated with expressive suppression, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization. The burnout dimensions were intercorrelated in the anticipated directions: emotional exhaustion and depersonalization showed a strong positive correlation ($r = .62, p < .001$), and both were significantly and negatively correlated with personal accomplishment. The magnitude of the correlations did not indicate issues with multicollinearity, as no coefficient exceeded the common threshold of .85.

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Self-Compassion	3.15	0.75	—						
2. Mindfulness	3.98	0.69	.68**	—					
3. Cog. Reappraisal	5.41	1.02	.45**	.39**	—				
4. Exp. Suppression	3.82	1.35	-.21**	-.18**	-.09	—			
5. Emo. Exhaustion	3.88	1.41	-.55**	-.48**	-.41**	.33**	—		
6. Depersonalization	2.95	1.52	-.49**	-.42**	-.35**	.38**	.62**	—	
7. Per. Accomplishment	4.05	1.15	.51**	.46**	.38**	-.25**	-.47**	-.44**	—

Note. $N = 312$. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation. Cog. = Cognitive; Exp. = Expressive; Emo. = Emotional; Per. = Personal. ** $p < .01$.

4.2. Main analysis: Structural equation modeling

The hypothesized theoretical model was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) in IBM SPSS AMOS (Version 28.0). Following the robust two-step approach advocated by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the analysis began with the validation of the measurement model through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which establishes the psychometric integrity of the latent constructs. Subsequently, the structural model was specified and tested to examine the hypothesized directional relationships among the variables.

4.2.1. The measurement model: confirmatory factor analysis

The proposed measurement model comprised seven correlated latent constructs: self-compassion, mindfulness, cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. To create a more parsimonious model and improve the ratio of sample size to estimated parameters, a random-assignment item parceling strategy was employed for constructs with more than five items. Three indicator parcels were created for each of these six constructs. The four items of the expressive suppression subscale were retained as individual indicators, as this construct has a narrower

conceptual breadth.

The initial seven-factor CFA yielded a reasonable but suboptimal fit: $\chi^2(231, N = 312) = 512.84, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 2.22$; CFI = .93; TLI = .91; RMSEA = .068 [90% CI = .061, .075]; SRMR = .059. A review of modification indices suggested a theoretically defensible respecification: allowing the error terms of two indicator parcels for the depersonalization construct to covary. This covariance is justifiable as both parcels contained items specifically reflecting cynical and detached attitudes toward students, suggesting a shared source of variance beyond the general latent construct. The respecified measurement model demonstrated an excellent fit to the data: $\chi^2(230, N = 312) = 409.50, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 1.78$; CFI = .97; TLI = .96; RMSEA = .051 [90% CI = .043, .059]; SRMR = .045.

To further substantiate the proposed seven-factor structure, it was compared against two plausible alternative models: (a) a five-factor model where the three burnout dimensions were collapsed into a single latent factor, and (b) a single-factor model where all indicators loaded onto one general factor to check for common method bias. The proposed seven-factor model fit the data significantly better than both the five-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2(11) = 482.19, p < .001$) and the single-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2(21) = 2105.44, p < .001$), supporting the distinctiveness of the seven constructs.

As shown in Table 3, the final measurement model exhibited strong psychometric properties. Convergent validity was established as the composite reliability (CR) for all constructs exceeded the .70 threshold, and the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs surpassed the .50 benchmark (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Furthermore, all standardized factor loadings (λ) were substantial and highly significant ($p < .001$).

Table 3.

Psychometric Properties of the Final Measurement Model

Latent Construct	Indicator	Std. Loading (λ)	AVE	CR
Self-Compassion	Parcel 1	.81	.68	.86
	Parcel 2	.85		
	Parcel 3	.80		
Mindfulness	Parcel 1	.78	.63	.84
	Parcel 2	.82		
	Parcel 3	.77		
Cognitive Reappraisal	Parcel 1	.83	.71	.88
	Parcel 2	.88		
	Parcel 3	.81		
Expressive Suppression	Item 1	.71	.56	.83
	Item 2	.73		
	Item 3	.79		
	Item 4	.76		
Emotional Exhaustion	Parcel 1	.88	.78	.91
	Parcel 2	.91		
	Parcel 3	.85		
Depersonalization	Parcel 1	.79	.66	.85
	Parcel 2	.83		
	Parcel 3	.80		
Personal Accomplishment	Parcel 1	.85	.73	.89
	Parcel 2	.88		
	Parcel 3	.82		

Note. All factor loadings are significant at $p < .001$. AVE = Average Variance Extracted; CR = Composite Reliability.

Discriminant validity was rigorously assessed using the Fornell-Larcker (1981) criterion, as presented in Table 4. The square root of the AVE for each construct (shown on the diagonal) was greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations (the off-diagonal values), providing strong evidence that each latent variable is distinct from the others in the model.

Table 4.

Discriminant Validity Analysis (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Self-Compassion	.82						
2. Mindfulness	.70	.79					
3. Cog. Reappraisal	.48	.41	.84				
4. Exp. Suppression	-.24	-.20	-.11	.75			
5. Emo. Exhaustion	-.58	-.51	-.44	.36	.88		
6. Depersonalization	-.52	-.45	-.37	.40	.65	.81	

7. Per. Accomplishment	.55	.49	.40	-.27	-.50	-.47	.85
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Note. Values on the diagonal (in bold) are the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Off-diagonal values are the latent variable correlations.

4.2.2. The structural model and hypothesis testing

Having established a well-fitting and psychometrically sound measurement model, the structural model was tested by specifying the hypothesized directional paths among the latent variables. The model's fit indices were identical to the final measurement model ($\chi^2(230, N = 312) = 409.50, p < .001$; CFI = .97; TLI = .96; RMSEA = .051), indicating that the theoretical structure is an excellent representation of the observed covariance matrix. The model accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in the outcome variables: 48% for emotional exhaustion, 41% for depersonalization, and 44% for personal accomplishment.

The full results of the path analysis, including unstandardized and standardized coefficients, are detailed in Table 5. The standardized path coefficients are also illustrated in the path diagram (Figure 1).

Table 5.

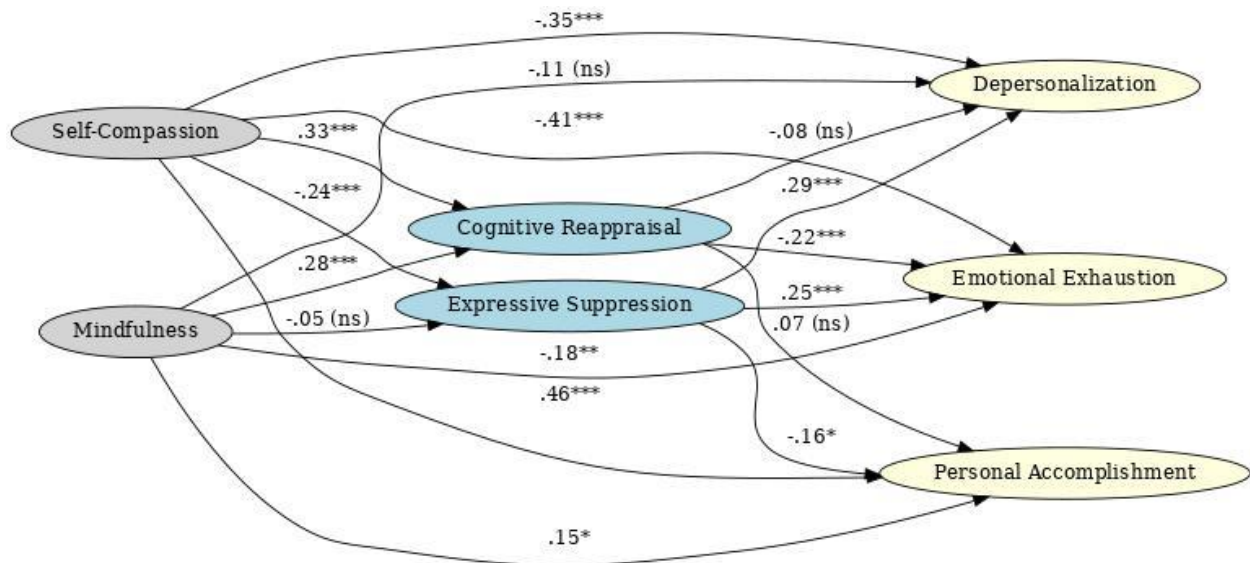
Results of the Structural Path Analysis

Path	B	SE	β	p-value
Paths from Personal Resources to Mediators				
Self-Compassion → Cog. Reappraisal	.45	.09	.33	< .001
Self-Compassion → Exp. Suppression	-.43	.11	-.24	< .001
Mindfulness → Cog. Reappraisal	.41	.09	.28	< .001
Mindfulness → Exp. Suppression	-.08	.12	-.05	.481
Paths from Personal Resources to Outcomes (Direct Effects)				
Self-Compassion → Emo. Exhaustion	-.77	.12	-.41	< .001
Self-Compassion → Depersonalization	-.71	.12	-.35	< .001
Self-Compassion → Per. Accomplishment	.70	.10	.46	< .001
Mindfulness → Emo. Exhaustion	-.36	.13	-.18	.007
Mindfulness → Depersonalization	-.23	.14	-.11	.095
Mindfulness → Per. Accomplishment	.25	.11	.15	.028
Paths from Mediators to Outcomes				
Cog. Reappraisal → Emo. Exhaustion	-.31	.08	-.22	< .001
Cog. Reappraisal → Depersonalization	-.12	.08	-.08	.144
Cog. Reappraisal → Per. Accomplishment	.08	.07	.07	.210
Exp. Suppression → Emo. Exhaustion	.26	.06	.25	< .001
Exp. Suppression → Depersonalization	.30	.06	.29	< .001
Exp. Suppression → Per. Accomplishment	-.13	.05	-.16	.015

Note. B = Unstandardized coefficient; SE = Standard Error; β = Standardized coefficient.

Figure 1

Structural equation model with standardized path coefficients among study variables.



Key findings from the path analysis include the strong, direct protective effects of self-compassion against emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.41$) and depersonalization ($\beta = -.35$), and its robust positive effect on personal accomplishment ($\beta = .46$). Mindfulness also showed significant direct effects, albeit smaller, on reducing emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.18$) and enhancing personal accomplishment ($\beta = .15$). Both personal resources positively predicted the use of cognitive reappraisal, while only self-compassion was a significant negative predictor of expressive suppression. In turn, expressive suppression was a potent risk factor, significantly predicting higher emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .25$) and depersonalization ($\beta = .29$), and lower personal accomplishment ($\beta = -.16$).

4.2.3. Analysis of indirect effects (Mediation)

To formally test the mediating role of emotion regulation strategies, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was performed in AMOS to generate bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for all indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). An indirect effect is considered statistically significant if its 95% CI does not contain zero. The results, detailed in Table 6, reveal several significant mediation pathways.

Table 6.

Standardized Indirect Effects and 95% Bias-Corrected Confidence Intervals

Indirect Path	Mediator	Effect (β)	95% CI
Self-Compassion $\rightarrow$ Emo. Exhaustion	Cog. Reappraisal	-.07	[-.12, -.04]
	Exp. Suppression	-.06	[-.11, -.02]
Mindfulness $\rightarrow$ Emo. Exhaustion	Cog. Reappraisal	-.06	[-.11, -.03]
Self-Compassion $\rightarrow$ Depersonalization	Exp. Suppression	-.07	[-.12, -.03]
Mindfulness $\rightarrow$ Depersonalization	Exp. Suppression	ns	[-.06, .02]

Note. CI = Confidence Interval. Only significant and key non-significant paths are shown for brevity. ns = non-significant.

The analysis confirmed that cognitive reappraisal significantly mediated the relationship between both self-compassion and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.07$) and mindfulness and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.06$). Furthermore, expressive suppression was a significant mediator in the paths from self-compassion to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.06$) and from self-compassion to depersonalization ($\beta = -.07$). This indicates that self-compassion exerts its protective effects not only directly, but also indirectly by fostering more adaptive (and less maladaptive) emotion regulation strategies. The total effect of self-compassion on emotional exhaustion (direct + indirect) was substantial ($\beta = -.54$).

5. Discussion

This study tested a structural model of teacher well-being in the demanding context of EFL instruction in Iran. The findings provided robust support for the hypothesized framework, explaining substantial variance in all three burnout dimensions and revealing a complex interplay between teachers' personal resources and their emotional processes.

The most prominent finding was the potent, broad-spectrum protective effect of self-compassion against all facets of burnout. It strongly and directly predicted lower emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, alongside a greater sense of personal accomplishment. This result aligns with and extends a growing body of literature highlighting self-compassion as a cornerstone of mental health and resilience (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2011). These distinct effects are plausible, as the core components of self-compassion offer specific psychological antidotes to each burnout dimension (Moè & Katz, 2020; Neff, 2003b). For example, the self-kindness component likely buffers against emotional depletion by interrupting the draining cycle of harsh self-criticism that can follow a difficult class or professional setback. The sense of common humanity counters the cynicism of depersonalization by reframing personal struggles as part of a shared professional experience, which reduces the feelings of isolation that can lead to viewing students and colleagues with cynical detachment. Finally, the mindful acceptance of setbacks helps maintain professional competence by allowing teachers to observe their imperfections without over-identifying with them, thus preserving a stable sense of value in their work. These results are also consistent with research in the Iranian EFL context, which has similarly found self-compassion to be a vital resource for mitigating job stress (Hashemi, 2018; Rajabi & Ghezelsefloo, 2020; Zhang & Fathi, 2024).

In contrast, mindfulness demonstrated a more focused protective role, directly predicting lower emotional exhaustion and higher personal accomplishment, but not depersonalization. This nuanced finding suggests that the present-moment, non-judgmental attention central to mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) is particularly effective for managing internal states. Its link to lower emotional exhaustion supports research showing that mindfulness reduces the rumination and perceived stress that drain emotional energy (Flook, 2013; Song, 2020), acting as a "circuit breaker" for the repetitive negative thoughts that often follow stressful classroom events. Its connection to personal accomplishment aligns with findings that it enhances work engagement and focus (Malinowski & Lim, 2015). The lack of a direct effect on depersonalization is an intriguing result. This is psychologically coherent, as depersonalization is an interpersonal construct rooted in cynicism toward others. Mindfulness, as an intrapersonal attentional skill, helps individuals manage their own internal experience but does not inherently contain the other-oriented, relational perspective of "common humanity" that directly challenges the tendency to become cynical about

students or colleagues.

Perhaps the study's most critical contribution was illuminating emotion regulation as the primary mechanism through which these personal resources operate. Both self-compassion and mindfulness promoted the use of cognitive reappraisal, which in turn predicted lower emotional exhaustion. This suggests these personal resources foster the cognitive flexibility and psychological space necessary for teachers to step back from an initial emotional reaction and reframe a stressful event in a less depleting way. Even more striking was the role of expressive suppression as a key risk pathway. A lack of self-compassion predicted greater use of suppression, which in turn strongly predicted higher emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and lower personal accomplishment. The act of consistently "bottling up" emotions is draining and fosters a sense of inauthenticity, leading to exhaustion and depersonalization—a highly plausible pathway in an emotional profession like teaching. That self-compassionate teachers were less likely to use this maladaptive strategy is a key insight. It suggests that self-compassion allows teachers to treat their negative emotions as valid signals rather than as threats to be eliminated. By accepting their frustration or disappointment with kindness, they reduce the internal pressure to suppress the "unacceptable" feeling, thereby avoiding the significant cognitive and emotional costs of inhibition. This positions self-compassion as a vital antecedent to healthy emotional processing and aligns with prior work linking emotion regulation difficulties to burnout (Brackett, 2010; Chang, 2013; Diedrich, 2014; Ghanizadeh & Royaei, 2015; Hu, 2023).

6. Conclusions, implications, and future directions

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive structural model supporting the protective role of personal resources against teacher burnout among Iranian EFL instructors. Our findings confirm that self-compassion and mindfulness are key antecedents that mitigate burnout primarily by shaping emotional processes. Specifically, the strong indirect path through expressive suppression highlights a crucial, previously underexplored mechanism linking a lack of self-kindness to emotional exhaustion and cynicism.

The primary contribution of the study lies in offering a nuanced structural model of teacher well-being that specifies the distinct protective pathways of self-compassion and mindfulness. Our findings help to differentiate these resources, showing self-compassion as a broad-spectrum buffer against all burnout facets, whereas mindfulness had more targeted effects on emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment. This distinction has direct practical implications for teacher training, suggesting that professional development should cultivate both skills to offer comprehensive support (Hashemi, 2018; Song, 2020; Taylor, 2021). Critically, the model also illuminates emotion regulation as a core mechanism, reinforcing Gross's (1998) process model by demonstrating that expressive suppression is a particularly potent risk pathway linking a lack of self-compassion to burnout. Therefore, training should move beyond general stress management to equip teachers with practical cognitive reappraisal skills and a clear understanding of the psychological costs of emotional suppression, framing these as core professional competencies rather than remedial measures.

Furthermore, the finding that expressive suppression is a powerful predictor of burnout extends the implications beyond individual training to the institutional level. It provides an empirical basis for recommending that school leaders and administrators foster psychologically safe climates where expressing concerns is not penalized. Such environments directly reduce the perceived need for teachers to engage in this harmful regulatory strategy and can reinforce the "common humanity" aspect of self-compassion at an organizational level. Ultimately, this research confirms that teacher burnout is not an inevitable outcome of a demanding profession but is significantly influenced by the interplay between teachers' internal resources and their work environment. By investing in training that builds self-compassion and healthy emotional habits, alongside creating supportive school cultures, we can better equip educators to sustain their well-being and thrive in their vital professional roles.

While this study provides valuable insights, its limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future inquiry. First, its cross-sectional design precludes any claims of causality. For example, a longitudinal study could track new teachers to determine whether pre-existing levels of self-compassion predict changes in burnout across their first year, or if, conversely, the experience of burnout depletes these personal resources over time, suggesting a potential transactional relationship. Second, the reliance on self-report measures raises the possibility of common method bias. Future research could complement self-report data with observational methods to assess how teachers' emotion regulation strategies manifest in actual classroom interactions, or utilize daily diary studies to capture fluctuations in emotional states and coping behaviors in near real-time.

Third, the findings are specific to the cultural context of Iranian EFL teachers. Furthermore, although the sample was drawn from five distinct provinces to capture diversity, it may not fully reflect the demographic nuances of the entire country. Future cross-cultural research could examine whether the strong negative impact of expressive suppression found in the collectivistic-leaning context of Iran holds in more individualistic cultures, where emotional expression norms may differ. Finally, while the model explained a substantial portion of the variance in burnout, other variables clearly play a role. Rather than simply adding more predictors, future studies could employ multilevel modeling to examine how individual resources like self-compassion (Level 1) interact with organizational factors like leadership support and school climate (Level 2) in predicting teacher burnout. This approach would provide a more integrated understanding of how individual and systemic factors jointly shape teacher well-being.

7. References

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