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# Burnout in NSW School Counsellors: Relationships between mindfulness, career- sustaining practices and work setting

Kym-Myree Earle

*University of Wollongong*, [kmae511@uowmail.edu.au](mailto:kmae511@uowmail.edu.au)

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## **Abstract**

Burnout, a multifaceted psychological construct, is associated with a diverse range of undesirable physical and psychological consequences. School counsellor, employed in New South Wales (NSW) public schools, like other mental health professionals and teachers, are vulnerable to burnout that may negatively affect their work with students. While there is some international research into burnout within school counsellors, no studies have examined this within NSW school counsellors. This study, therefore, replicated Australian research by Di Benedetto and Swadling (2014), who investigated the relationships among burnout in psychologists, work-setting, mindfulness and career-sustaining behaviours (CSBs). One hundred and thirty-one NSW Department of Education (NSW DoE) school counsellors ( $M = 44.08$ ,  $SD = 11.99$ ) were surveyed to assess self-reported burnout, mindfulness and CSB preferences. Moderate levels of burnout were reported among these school counsellors. School counsellors working in rural areas reported significantly higher burnout compared to counsellors working in Sydney metropolitan or urban (Wollongong, Newcastle, Central Coast) areas. There was a strong negative relationship between mindfulness and burnout. Specific CSBs had small to medium associations with lower burnout. Some CSB preferences were linked to higher burnout. Increasing mindfulness practices may help in the prevention and management of burnout in NSW school counsellors.

## **Keywords**

school counsellors, burnout, geographical work-setting, mindfulness, career-sustaining behaviours



## **Burnout in NSW School Counsellors: Relationships between mindfulness, career-sustaining practices and work setting**

Kym-Myree Earle

*Bachelor of Arts (Psychology), University of Sydney*  
*Graduate Bachelor of Teaching, University of New England*  
*Graduate Diploma in Psychology, University of New England*

Burnout, a multifaceted psychological construct, is associated with a diverse range of undesirable physical and psychological consequences. School counsellors, employed in New South Wales (NSW) public schools, like other mental health professionals and teachers, are vulnerable to burnout that may negatively affect their work with students. While there is some international research into burnout within school counsellors, no studies have examined this within NSW school counsellors. This study, therefore, replicated Australian research by Di Benedetto and Swadling (2014), who investigated the relationships among burnout in psychologists, work-setting, mindfulness and career-sustaining behaviours (CSBs). One hundred and thirty-one NSW Department of Education (NSW DoE) school counsellors ( $M = 44.08$ ,  $SD=11.99$ ) were surveyed to assess self-reported burnout, mindfulness and CSB preferences. Moderate levels of burnout were reported among these school counsellors. School counsellors working in rural areas reported significantly higher burnout compared to counsellors working in Sydney metropolitan or urban (Wollongong, Newcastle, Central Coast) areas. There was a strong negative relationship between mindfulness and burnout. Specific CSBs had small to medium associations with lower burnout. Some CSB preferences were linked to higher burnout. Increasing mindfulness practices may help in the prevention and management of burnout in NSW school counsellors.

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### **Introduction**

The primary focus of NSW schools is to educate, nurture and prepare young people for the future. However, the job of helping students to achieve academic success and to develop their psychological health and social and emotional wellbeing is becoming increasingly challenging. Lawrence et al. (2015) observed that students of today confront: a rapidly changing world; violence within the school, community and at home; mental health disorders; learning difficulties; suicide; substance abuse; and sexual experimentation. School counsellors play an essential role within the school environment as they attempt to assist students to manage these issues along with the normal developmental tasks that all young people face.



### **School counselling in NSW**

NSW schools are uniquely dynamic work places for counsellors, who perform multiple specialised roles for hundreds of students. The Australian Psychological Society (APS, 2016) indicates this is a continually evolving role, as school counsellors assist with the learning, mental health and developmental needs of students aged 4–18 years. This responsibility also includes crisis interventions for school violence, self-harming and suicide. Beyond counselling, school counsellors also provide psychological assessment, behaviour interventions, case consultations and psycho-social advice for parents and other teachers (Campbell & Colmar, 2014).

School counselling in NSW is undertaken by school psychologists and school counsellors. While the role is the same, both names are used and denote similar but not identical training and academic qualifications (APS, 2016). School psychologists and counsellors have both completed postgraduate psychology training in school or child and adolescent psychology and after two years professional supervision making them eligible for registration as a psychologist with the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency (AHPRA). In addition, school counsellors hold the dual qualification of primary or high school teacher education. A female-dominated staff (NSW Department of Education and Training [NSW DET], 2011), given their extensive training most school counsellors in NSW are aged over 45 years. NSW DET (2011) indicates there were 790 school counsellor positions, representing a ratio of counsellor to student of 1:1050 (Campbell & Colmar, 2014). For the remainder of this investigation both school counsellors and school psychologists will be referred to as ‘school counsellors’, given their identical role within NSW schools.

Consistent with other helping professionals, school counsellors generally engage in this role because of a deep commitment to help others, particularly children (Webber, 2004). Research suggests that while most school counsellors are satisfied with their jobs (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; DeMato & Curcio, 2004), evidence also indicates that school counsellors increasingly perceive their roles as more stressful, with the number of daily tasks rising or incompatible, and feeling personally overwhelmed (Butler & Constantine, 2005; DeMato & Curcio, 2004; Kolodinsky et al., 2009; McCarthy et al., 2010; Stickel, 1991). Within the school context, school counsellors frequently face conflicting roles and responsibilities, including the expectations of teachers, parents and school executive, while trying to meet disparate student needs (APS, 2016). Together, these factors often lead to ongoing stress and leave school counsellors vulnerable to burnout (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006).

### **Literature review**

#### ***Burnout – a historical overview***

A literature review demonstrates that, despite some differences, the concepts of burnout and job stress are often used interchangeably (Parker & De Cotiis, 1983). McCarthy et al. (2010) propose that work-related stress manifests in various ways, including transient psychological and physical consequences, and long-term physical and psychological reactions, leading to problems with work productivity. Selye (1976) initially proposed stress to be a physiological response to pressure from the outside environment. Later, Parker and DeCotiis (1983) proposed stress to be a temporary, uncomfortable, emotional reaction to environmental stimuli. Maslach and



Leiter (2008) suggested three areas contribute to job pressure: employment-related factors (e.g., work overload, role confusion); personal tensions (e.g., anxiety, sleep difficulties, disconnection); and personal resources (e.g., support systems and coping behaviours). Extensive research indicates that work-related stress is a primary cause of emotional exhaustion and burnout. Maslach and Leiter argue that burnout is often the consequence of exhaustion from prolonged job stress.

Burnout is a concept that was first described by Freudenberger (1974) to indicate a clinical level of work-related emotional stress observed within workers involved in ‘helping professions’ and education. He had observed the process of enthusiastic, young mental health workers from a New York clinic gradually becoming physically and emotionally exhausted while trying to meet unrealistic work requirements and personal expectations. Freudenberger found the workers continued to help clients attending the clinic despite being completely fatigued and frustrated, and this led to depression and apathy. The workers became ‘burned out’. He also believed this pattern of symptoms, including an extreme state of tiredness was caused by the individual’s commitment to helping ideals but that the work failed to meet their personal expectations.

Research by Maslach and colleagues during the late 1970s and 1980s expanded investigations into burnout as a psychological construct. Investigating childcare and human services employees, they found a consistent pattern of symptoms developing from situational mismatches and persistent job stress (Bardhoshi, Schweinle & Duncan, 2014). Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001) identified burnout as a response to a protracted experience of enduring interpersonal and emotional job-related stress. They suggested three core components specify burnout: emotional exhaustion, lowered personal achievement and depersonalisation.

### ***Burnout – a multifaceted construct***

Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001) argue emotional exhaustion is the sensation of being emotionally worn out, overstretched and strained by client needs. Demerouti, Mostert and Bakker (2010) indicate emotional exhaustion results from severe physical, cognitive and affective pressure, such as that coming from prolonged exposure to work stressors. It is considered the most recognisable dimension of burnout and a reaction to work demands that create feelings of overburden, lessening the worker’s capacity to engage with clients (Di Benedetto & Swadling, 2014). Lloyd and King (2004) found that emotional exhaustion often precedes physical fatigue and is displayed through low energy, sleeping problems and relationship difficulties.

Bardhoshi, Schweinle and Duncan (2014) suggest depersonalisation results from a sense of being unable to attend to ongoing client needs. As this feeling becomes overwhelming, helping professionals experience distancing from work, emotionally and cognitively. This separation from work in general includes clients and content, it encourages negative thoughts and detached or cynical treatment towards others (Khan, Yusoff & Khan, 2014). Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001) describe depersonalisation as cold, negative or excessive detached reactions to aspects of work.

A reduced sense of personal accomplishment is the third dimension of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Characterised by reduced feelings of work productivity and self-efficacy, it is prompted by an individual’s negative self-evaluations toward their



capacity to successfully manage the helping role (Bardhoshi, Schweinle & Duncan, 2014). These feelings of incompetence lead to a diminished sense of achievement and represent the self-evaluation aspect of burnout (Khan, Yusoff & Khan, 2014).

### ***Theories of Burnout***

The job demands–resources model, is one of the most cited models in burnout literature. According to this model, burnout occurs in two stages: intense job demands lead to sustained effort and ultimately exhaustion; a lack of resources to deal with those needs any further leads to withdrawal and eventual disengagement from work demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Bakker and Demerouti (2007) explain that exhaustion and disengagement from clients are observed in jobs in which high demands occur concurrently with inadequate job resources. Hakanen, Bakker and Schaufeli (2006) reviewed 2038 primary and high school teachers, finding that high job demands, such as work overload, time pressure and emotional claims, have a positive relationship with burnout. By contrast, job resources mostly have a favourable impact on work dedication, personal wellbeing and resilience.

More recently, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) defined burnout as “the exhaustion of employees’ capacity to maintain an intense involvement that has meaningful impact at work” (p. 295). This theory proposes that burnout may be understood generally as a state of exhaustion which is both general (personal burnout) and specific. Two specific forms of burnout are argued to be: work burnout and client (student) burnout (Borritz & Kristensen, 1999). This corresponds to the conceptual foundations of the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI; Kristensen et al., 2005), which assesses three sub-dimensions of burnout: personal, work related and client related. Kristensen et al. (2005) suggest that more than just exhaustion, burnout is defined by the attribution of this fatigue to a specific domain in the individual’s life. Work represents one domain and client-related work a specific example.

Schaufeli, Bakker and Van Rhenen (2009) indicate numerous investigations confirm that burnout is a multidimensional construct found in many community helping professionals, including psychologists, nurses, counsellors and teachers. Within health professionals, burnout frequently manifests as compassion fatigue (Drury et al., 2014), which may reduce that quality of patient care. Figley (2002) found that psychotherapists counselling clients with chronic illness suffered compassion fatigue, which lowered their empathetic concern with negative impacts on the client–therapist alliance. Killian (2008) reported high levels of compassion fatigue leading prior to burnout among a sample of psychologists working with adult trauma survivors.

### ***Burnout within education environments***

Levels of burnout and job stress have significantly risen within education environments through Australia and worldwide over the past twenty years (Khan, Yusoff & Khan, 2014). Goddard and Goddard (2006) reported burnout was strongly linked to early career turnover in 112 Queensland teachers. Burnout is also positively associated with teacher poor physical and mental health (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2006), with teachers developing anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion and disengagement from work (Goddard & Goddard, 2006). These findings were echoed in a more-recent study of university lecturers (Ahmad et al., 2011).



Although the research on burnout has investigated its consequence for teachers and mental health professionals, very few studies have examined its implications for school counsellors explicitly. One study, by Pierson-Hubeny and Archambault (1987), compared self-reported burnout and role stress levels among school counsellors, teachers and school social workers. They found that school counsellors reported significantly higher levels of burnout and role ambiguity and conflict compared to the other school-based professions.

### ***School counsellor burnout – an international perspective***

While burnout may be experienced by individuals in any industry, extensive international research indicates the school context provides several triggers for work-related stress. This environment exposes school counsellors to high interpersonal and social job demands requiring sustained emotional responding (Khan, Yusoff & Khan, 2014). Dattilio (2015) argues school counsellors are often the only mental health professional at school, where they are required to manage crises and through this are exposed to vicarious trauma. The school counselling role requires emotional empathy, and the qualitative and quantitative job demands are high. Stressors linked to burnout in other helping and health industries, such as high workload or limited supervision, demonstrate in other workplaces persistent effects even after exposure to the stressor has ended. This is associated with a negative impact on physical and emotional wellbeing (Khan, Yusoff & Khan, 2014). Bardhoshi, Schweinle and Duncan (2014) suggest that these stressors are also present in the school workplace and show similar effects on the daily wellbeing of school counsellors. As work-related factors account for the largest amount of variance in burnout studies (Schaufeli, Bakker & Van Rhenen, 2009), exploring those features that are unique to the profession of school counselling is important to understand the occurrence of burnout in school counsellors.

### ***Organisational factors related to school counsellor burnout***

Several international investigations focussing on school counselling have repeatedly highlighted organisational factors that are challenging for the occupation and that might provide some insight into burnout in this population. School counsellors face increasing job demands (Bardhoshi, Schweinle & Duncan, 2014; Kolodinsky et al., 2009; Webber, 2004) which are frequently hard to balance (DeMato & Curcio, 2004), leading them to feel overwhelmed in the school environment (Butler & Constantine, 2005; Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Kolodinsky et al., 2009), and reduces the time available to deliver counselling and/or other direct services to students (DeMato, 2001; McCarthy et al., 2010). In addition to work overload, school counsellors must manage differing professional work requirements, leading to role ambiguity and conflict (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006).

Research demonstrates that role conflict is associated with burnout in school counsellors. Wilkerson and Bellini (2006) examined the intrapersonal and organisational factors linked to burnout in 78 American school counsellors. They found role conflict to be related to higher levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout. Role conflict occurs when two or more job pressures occur simultaneously, fulfilling one role would make it difficult to comply with the other. NSW school counsellors frequently confront role conflict within their dual roles of teacher and psychologist



(APA, 2016). This is a source of stress most noticeable when the school executive push for the needs of the whole school while the counsellor is primarily concerned with the needs of individual students (Campbell & Colmar, 2014). Other conflicts arise from needing to break confidentiality, an ethical issue for psychologists because of mandated requirements, being asked to counsel students as a disciplinary requirement and issues around informed consent for assessment (Kimber & Campbell, 2013).

Increasing work intensity and diversity are other factors implicated in school counsellor stress within NSW (Campbell & Colmar, 2014). In line with rising national mental health concerns displayed in school-aged children and the focus on youth suicide prevention (Lawrence et al., 2015), school counsellor workloads are increasing in amount and complexity. Fourteen per cent of children and adolescents are estimated to experience mental health problems each year (APA, 2016). Moore et al. (2015) indicate that 8–30% of children under the age of 15 years also experience abuse or trauma. Students from a trauma background or suffering mental health disorders and behavioural or emotional problems generally struggle academically (Moore et al., 2015), experience peer problems and social difficulties (Lawrence et al., 2015) and display more suicidal ideation (Sawyer et al., 2000). Schools counsellors provide an important source of support for children and adolescents facing mental health, life and learning challenges. Bardhoshi, Schweinle and Duncan (2014) reported that larger caseloads are associated with higher burnout in American school counsellors.

As a school-based program, the school counselling profession is affected by initiatives and educational reforms (Campbell & Colmar, 2014), involving both educational and mental health initiatives (APA, 2016). A current example includes the NSW Department of Communities (NSW DEC, 2015) *Wellbeing Framework for Schools*, which emphasises support for NSW students to connect, succeed and thrive throughout school in developing their wellbeing. The expectation of this program is that school counsellors through counselling and psychoeducation provide essential expertise to schools and young people to support development (NSW DEC, 2015). This will further widen the role of school counsellors within schools.

### ***Australian research into burnout***

While the focus of education in NSW schools remains the same for each throughout the state, there remains differences according to their environmental contexts. School counsellors work in schools that vary in size between large Sydney metropolitan high schools, involving several hundred students, to slightly smaller schools in regional centres close to Sydney (Newcastle, Wollongong, Central Coast) or small isolated rural schools with ten students. The geographical location of schools may represent a potentially important factor to explore for school counsellor burnout (Butler & Constantine, 2005).

Research shows that rural mental health counsellors face more stress while having fewer resources to manage it (Cohn & Hastings, 2013). Oser et al. (2013) found rural substance abuse counsellors faced higher levels of burnout than their urban counterparts. Implicated stressors included high caseloads, difficult to treat clients and co-occurring mental health disorders. Among Australian research, small rural towns pose the greatest stressors/challenges, linked to isolation, lower clinical





support and high demands on community mental health support (Cosgrave, Hussain & Maple, 2015).

In contrast, research by Burns and Machin (2013) found that teachers in rural locations reported less burnout. Their study also revealed that school counsellors working in urban school settings reported significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion and feelings of depersonalisation than did their counterparts in suburban, rural and other settings. School counsellors employed in metropolitan environments often are exposed to unique issues that may not present readily in other school settings. For example, the growing cultural diversity of school systems in large cities has mandated that school counsellors become increasingly proficient in addressing the complex needs of students who may be racially or ethnically different from themselves, and who may have varied expectations about how school counsellors can best meet their psychosocial issues (Constantine et al., 2001).

Education research demonstrates a difficulty to staff rural schools with experienced school counsellors (Campbell & Colmar, 2014) – government retraining programs place newly qualified in these positions (NSW DET, 2011). Furthermore, rural children and adolescents present with a similar level of mental health disorders, while living in communities with lower community and mental health professionals (Russell, McGrail & Humphreys, 2016). Rural school counsellors in NSW frequently service multiple schools. Thielking (2006) reported that the long distances between schools negatively impacts on the school counsellor's relationship with the school team and limits their capacity for clinical supervision. In contrast, Sydney-based and urban school counsellors face greater issues related to cultural diversity (Campbell & Colmar, 2014). To date, there has been no investigation into the level of burnout faced by NSW school counsellors in different geographic locations.

### ***Do mindfulness practices reduce the likelihood of burnout?***

Individual mindfulness practices can reduce the risk of burnout. Mindfulness is described as sustaining an accepting and non-judgemental, moment-by-moment awareness of one's thoughts, feelings, bodily experiences and surrounding environment (Dattilio, 2015). Baer, Smith and Allen (2004) reviewed 21 studies conducted between 1982 and 2001 investigating the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions. They reported these practises improve psychological wellbeing, reducing stress, anxiety and depression.

Irving, Dobkin and Park (2009) found strong support in literature for mindfulness interventions reducing work-related stress among health-care professionals. Dattilio (2015) suggests mindful individuals learn to develop a soft awareness of feelings and thoughts and diverting stress constructively, without trying to alter or avoid the sensations (McCullum & Gehart, 2010). This provides for healthier methods of managing daily struggles (Baer, Smith & Allen 2004) including for mental health professionals (Richards, Campenni & Muse-Burke, 2010).

### ***Career-sustaining behaviours***

Other protective strategies, such as personal self-care behaviours, can also lower the risk of burnout. Self-care behaviours are positive personal and professional activities and strategies that individuals may engage in to maintain their own physical, emotional and family needs while helping their clients (McCann et al., 2013). Benler



(2011) studied the relationship between self-care behaviours on the levels of traumatic stress in a group of 175 American psychologists. They reported that, irrespective to trauma exposure, psychologists who practiced self-care behaviours such as leisure activities displayed higher job satisfaction and lower levels of stress or burnout symptoms. Benler also observed gender and age differences. Female psychologists were more likely to engage in leisure activities, as were older participants.

Self-care activities may take numerous forms but generally involve areas of physical, psychological and personal support (Richards, Campenni & Muse-Burke, 2010). Research identifies personal or support strategies, such as: self-awareness/insight into one's own thoughts, feelings and behaviours by recognising potential biases and weaknesses (Richards, Campenni & Muse-Burke, 2010); clinical supervision from a supervisor or peers (Culbreth et al., 2005); and being kind and understanding towards themselves, self-acceptance (Norcross, 2000), supportive self-care. General biobehavioural self-care strategies that help to reduce the likelihood of burnout through constructively managing stress include: setting achievable client and workload goals; taking regular breaks during the day; regular exercise; getting enough sleep and relaxation; and continuing supportive connections with family and friends (McCarthy et al., 2010). Sustaining self-care may also encompass positive self-expression practises, such as art, cooking or gardening (Rupert & Kent, 2007).

Together, these strategies and activities have been characterised as career-sustaining behaviours (CSBs; Stevanovic & Rupert, 2004). These self-care actions support effective work functioning, help to reduce the effects of stress, increase wellbeing (Rupert & Kent, 2007) and moderate the risk of burnout and its impact on clients (Stevanovic & Rupert, 2004). Studying CSBs in a sample of 286 psychologists, Stevanovic and Rupert (2004) found that spending time with partner/family and maintaining a balance between professional and personal lives were the highest rated CSBs. Some gender differences were reported, with female participants indicating using a larger number of CSBs; these were often of a personal nature, such as spending time with friends. Ganey (2005) reviewed 190 American psychologists and reported that participants engaging in high levels of CSBs indicated lower rates of burnout than their low-CSBs peers.

### ***Examining burnout in a sample of Australian psychologists***

Di Benedetto and Swadling (2014) examined the effect of work setting, work experience, CSBs and mindfulness practices on burnout in a sample of 167 Australian psychologists. They found moderate levels of burnout in this sample. Significant negative associations were found between mindfulness practice and CSBs with rates of burnout. While these findings are consistent with previous international studies (Rupert & Kent, 2007; Stevanovic & Rupert, 2004) and are the first with an Australian mental health sample, they provide very limited generalisability to a school context.

Though studies of burnout in psychologists and mental health workers, who perform similar duties or work in similar settings to schools, provide some insight into the factors that affect helping professionals in these contexts, to this point limited research has examined burnout within a school counsellor sample (Bardhoshi, Schweinle & Duncan, 2014). None of this research has been conducted in NSW. To fill this gap in the literature, this investigation will replicate the Australian study of Di



Benedetto and Swadling (2014) and explore burnout, geographical location of school and protective factors, within a sample of NSW DoE school counsellors.

### ***This study's aims***

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between burnout in NSW DoE school counsellors, as measured on the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI), their geographical work setting, CSB and mindfulness. It is hypothesised, in line with Di Benedetto and Swadling's (2014) study, that school counsellors will report moderate levels of burnout. Additionally, consistent with previous research into teacher burnout, that NSW DoE school counsellors working in rural (country areas) will experience different rates of burnout compared to those working in metropolitan (Sydney area) and urban (Newcastle, Wollongong, Central Coast) areas. It is hypothesised that, given school counsellors ongoing professional development (Dattilio, 2015), there will be no difference between the levels of mindfulness practice and engagement in CSBs by school counsellors in different geographical work locations. It is also proposed that there will be a negative relationship between engaging in CSB or mindfulness practices and burnout rates. This study also aims to investigate the relationships between burnout and specific CSBs, and how geographical location influences this relationship, particularly, to identify which CSBs are associated with lower levels of burnout. Finally, a negative relationship between CSBs and burnout rates when controlling for geographical location is expected. A heightened knowledge of these associations could inform interventions to lower the risk of burnout developing in NSW DoE school counsellors.

### **Method**

This project will be a quantitative study investigating relationships between school counsellors, burnout levels, self-care behaviours and career and personal demographics. This investigation is designed to measure the current level of burnout in NSW DoE school counsellors. Primarily descriptive in nature, this study uses an anonymous survey to gather information such as the level of burnout or number of CSBs school counsellors engage in. Borg and Gall (1983) suggest that descriptive research designs have provided understanding to events in schools and are instrumental in determining the current state of operations. A between-subjects ANOVA will compare mean differences of the study's variables between the geographical locations of school counsellors. Pearson product correlations will investigate the size and direction of relationships between burnout and the other variables.

In replicating the study conducted by Di Benedetto and Swadling (2014), these findings will provide a common platform for comparison of Australian psychologists working in different contexts. Di Benedetto and Swadling only compared participants from private practice with government psychologists. This study will involve solely NSW DoE school counsellors, a group not previously investigated.

### ***Participants***

One hundred and thirty-one school counsellors employed by the NSW DoE, aged between 25–77 years ( $M = 44.08$ ,  $SD = 11.99$ ) participated in this study. The group included 99 females, aged 25–68 years ( $M = 43.44$ ,  $SD = 11.60$ ), and 32 males, aged



25–77 years ( $M = 46.06$ ,  $SD = 13.13$ ). The participants indicated between 6 months and 52 years of experience working as a school counsellor ( $M = 9.96$ ,  $SD = 9.07$ ). Fifty-two school counsellors worked in the Sydney metropolitan area, 46 in a rural setting and 33 in either Newcastle, Wollongong or the Central Coast.

### **Materials**

Self-reported levels of burnout were measured on the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) (Kristensen et al., 2005). Comprised of 19 items, the CBI measures burnout on three sub-dimensions (Kristensen et. al., 2005): 1) personal burnout, the level of psychological and physical exhaustion felt by the person (six items, e.g., ‘How often are you physically exhausted?’); 2) work-related burnout, explained as the level of physical and psychological fatigue experienced by the participant attributed to work causes (seven items, e.g., ‘Is your work emotionally exhausting?’); and 3) student-related burnout, defined as the level of psychological and physical exhaustion felt by the person to be related to their work with students (six items, e.g., ‘Does it drain your energy to work with students/families?’).

The CBI is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*to a very low degree/never/almost never*) to 5 (*to a very high degree/always*). The scale labels will be re-coded to the original Inventory’s format labels of 100 (always), 75, 50, 25 and 0 (never/almost never). All burnout items will be shown together, but items from each sub-dimension will be intermixed, with higher scores indicating more burnout.

The CBI has been shown to have high reliability for use in multiple different populations. Di Benedetto and Swadling (2014) validated the CBI in their study of Australian psychologists ( $N = 167$ ). They found the scale to have high internal reliability  $\alpha = .92$ . Milfont et al. (2008), researching burnout in New Zealand teachers ( $N = 129$ ), demonstrated high reliability of overall burnout, with a Cronbach alpha of .94. Winwood and Winefield (2004) found similar reliability in their study of Australian dentists. The Cronbach’s alpha scores for the subscales and the CBI include: personal burnout subscale (six items,  $\alpha = .87$ ); work burnout subscale (seven items,  $\alpha = .87$ ); and client burnout subscale (six items,  $\alpha = .85$ ) (Kristensen et. al, 2005; Milfont et al., 2008). The CBI has also demonstrated very good concurrent and predictive validity (Kristensen et al., 2005).

The Career Sustaining Behaviours Questionnaire (CSBQ), was validated by Stevanovic and Rupert (2004) for use as a measure of behaviours believed to be helpful in functioning effectively and maintaining a positive attitude toward to work. The 34 items (e.g., ‘Spend time with partner/family’; ‘Taking regular vacations’) are scored on a five-point Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). Scores will range from 34 to 170, with higher scores indicating the importance of a greater number of CSBs. Stevanovic and Rupert (2004) demonstrated a high overall internal reliability of  $\alpha = .87$  for the CBSQ. This was supported by Di Benedetto and Swadling (2014), who concluded the CSBQ exhibited good discriminant validity and adequate construct validity when compared to other validated measures of self-awareness.

The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) was validated by Baer et al. (2006) as a measure of a tendency to be mindful in daily life. The 39-item inventory consists of four eight-item sub-dimensions (observing, describing, acting with awareness, non- judging of inner experience) and one seven-item (reactivity to



inner experience) is based on Baer, Smith and Allen's (2004) original mindfulness scale. The items (e.g., 'When I'm walking, I deliberately notice the sensations of my body moving') are scored on a five-point Likert-style scale ranging, from 0 (*never/very rarely true*) to 4 (*very often/always true*). Scores can range from 0 to 156, with larger scores indicating higher levels of mindfulness.

Baer et al. (2006) demonstrated adequate to high internal reliabilities of each sub-scale of the FFMQ dimensions: non-reactivity ( $\alpha = .75$ ), observing ( $\alpha = .83$ ), acting with awareness ( $\alpha = .87$ ), non-judging ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and describing ( $\alpha = .91$ ). In addition, Di Benedetto and Swadling (2014) concluded the FFMQ exhibited high internal consistency  $\alpha = .92$ , and good convergent and predictive reliability compared to other validated mindfulness measures. de Bruin et al. (2012) confirmed this with a large sample of Dutch non-meditating students ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and meditating participants ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

Participants were also asked to provide demographic information, including gender and age. In addition, information was gathered on years of experience as a school counsellor and to nominate which geographical area they worked in: Sydney Metropolitan, Newcastle, Wollongong, Central Coast, rural or remote.

### ***Procedure***

The University of Wollongong's human ethics committee provided ethics approval for this study. Approval to conduct research in a NSW government school was provided by the State Education Research Applications Process (SERAP). Participation was self-selected upon invitation via the secure, password-protected NSW DoE departmental email which included a link to the survey, powered by SurveyMonkey. Connecting to the link on the invitation, participants read the School Counsellor Stress and Self-Care Information Sheet, provided consent and then anonymously confirmed that they were employed by the NSW DoE as a school counsellor. If a participant indicated that they were not employed by the NSW DoE, they were exited from the survey at this point. Participants completed the CBI, followed by the CSBQ and the FFMQ. They provided socio-demographic information, such as their age, gender and work location area, and indicated the number of years experience working as a school counsellor. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. All scores were statistically analysed using SPSS 24.

### **Results**

This study examined the levels of burnout in school counsellors working in NSW DoE schools. Additionally, it investigated the relationship of burnout to the geographical areas of schools, mindfulness practices and CSBs, within this sample. Of the total of 136 school counsellors who responded to the survey, five skipped the question related to workplace area and were excluded from the data analysis. This represents a participant loss of 3.68%.

Data was screened for missing values, normality of distributions and outlying scores for demographic characteristics including gender, participant age and years of work experience for each geographic location. Female school counsellors outnumbered male counsellors in the metropolitan (80.8%; 19.2%) and rural areas



(84.8%; 15.2%). However, the school counsellor female to male ratio (51.5%; 48.5%) in the urban (Newcastle, Wollongong, Central Coast) region was more equal.

Two-tailed, one-way between subjects ANOVAs compared geographic groups on age and amount of work experience. A check concluded that the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were not violated. The groups differed in age and amount of work experience. School counsellors in the metropolitan region ( $M = 38.9$  years,  $SD = 11.08$ ) were significantly younger than those working in urban areas ( $M = 48.1$  years,  $SD = 13.11$ ), and rural regions ( $M = 46.9$  years,  $SD = 10.19$ ),  $F(2, 128) = 8.85$ ,  $p < .000$ , Cohen's  $d = .76$ ,  $.75$  respectively. Participants working in urban area ( $M = 13.8$  years,  $SD = 12.88$ ) reported significantly more school counselling experience than those working in metropolitan areas ( $M = 7.8$  years,  $SD = 6.94$ ),  $F(2, 128) = 4.72$ ,  $p = .011$ , Cohen's  $d = .58$ .

The level of school counsellor burnout was calculated and is displayed in Table 1. This shows that school counsellors report a moderate level of burnout for all dimensions. Additionally, lower levels of student-related burnout, but higher rates of personal and work-related burnout were reported by participants. Forty-seven (36.72%) school counsellors met the standard for total burnout (CBI score  $\geq 50$ ), 59 (46.10%) for personal burnout, 47 (36.72%) for work-related burnout and 41 (32.03%) for student-related burnout.

**Table 1:** Means and standard deviations of school counsellor burnout, overall by geographical work location (N = 131)

	Geographical area			
	Overall sample	Metropolitan	Urban	Rural
Total (B)	42.3 (17.6)	39.4 (14.7)	34.6 (14.9)	50.9 (19.1)
Personal (B)	45.4 (18.8)	43.7 (15.9)	35.9 (17.0)	54.5 (19.3)
Work-related (B)	43.0 (18.4)	40.6 (15.7)	34.0 (15.4)	52.1 (19.6)
Student-related (B)	38.3 (19.8)	34.2 (18.3)	34.1 (15.6)	46.0 (22.1)

Note: Figures in parentheses are standard deviations. (B) = burnout.

To determine the effect that work settings have on burnout, participants were divided into three groups according to their geographical work location. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for burnout as reported in geographic work locations. Separate one-way between-group analyses of variance compared different geographical work location on reported levels of total burnout and personal, work-related and student-related burnout, as measured by the CBI. Inspection of skewness, kurtosis and Shapiro–Wilk statistics indicated the assumption of normality was not violated in any of the conditions. Levene's statistic was also non-significant for each condition, ensuring homogeneity of variance.

The ANOVA was statistically significant, indicating that school counsellors' overall level of burnout and their personal, work-related and student-related burnout is impacted by their geographic work location. The F statistic for each condition is displayed in Table 2.



**Table 2:** Analysis of variance (ANOVA) between geographical location and burnout (N = 131)

	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>	
				R-M	R-U
Total (B)	2	10.80	< .001	.67	.95
Personal (B)	2	11.60	< .000	.61	1.02
Work-related (B)	2	11.62	< .000	.65	1.03
Student-related (B)	2	5.74	.004	.58	.62

Note: (B) = burnout

Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that rural school counsellors report significantly higher total burnout compared to urban and metropolitan counsellors. Rural counsellors also showed significant differences from the other two groups in personal, work-related and student-related burnout. The effect sizes were between medium and large. Metropolitan school counsellors did not differ significantly from urban counsellors on any burnout subscale.

To evaluate the significance of geographic work location on the number of CSBs and mindfulness practices school counsellors engage in, a set of one-way between groups ANOVAs were calculated. ANOVA homogeneity of variance and assumptions of normality were not violated in any condition. There was no difference in the number of CSBs engaged in by school counsellors regardless of working area,  $F(2,128) = 4.11, p = .321$ . Table 3 displays that geographic work location generally made no difference in the mean levels of CSBs or mindfulness practices engaged in. An exception, however, urban school counsellors practice 'non-judging inner experience' significantly more than rural counsellors,  $F(2,125) = 4.1, p = .019$ , Cohen's  $d = .55$ . All other comparisons demonstrated non-significant differences, as displayed in Table 4.

**Table 3:** Means and standard deviations of school counsellor CSBs and mindfulness subscales by geographical locations (CSB N = 131; FFMQ N = 128)

	Geographical area			
	Overall sample	Metropolitan	Urban	Rural
CSBs	82.9 (12.8)	84.9 (11.3)	81.3 (12.4)	81.7 (14.5)
FFMQ				
Observing	17.1 (5.4)	16.0 (4.9)	18.0 (5.3)	17.1 (6.1)
Describing	22.3 (4.5)	22.7 (3.9)	22.9 (4.3)	21.4 (5.1)
Awareness	17.6 (4.8)	17.2 (4.3)	18.0 (5.1)	16.3 (5.2)
Non-reacting	14.7 (4.3)	14.9 (3.9)	15.2 (4.7)	14.1 (4.3)
Non-judging	22.4 (6.4)	22.8 (6.0)	24.5 (6.3)	20.5 (6.4)

Note: Figures in parentheses are standard deviations. For the non-reacting facet, possible range of scores is 7–35. For all other facets, possible range is 8–40.



**Table 4:** Analysis of variance (ANOVA) between geographical location and mindfulness subscales (N = 128)

	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Observing	2	0.63	.541
Describing	2	1.22	.300
Awareness	2	0.70	.300
Non-reacting	2	5.74	.497
Non-judging	2	4.11	.019

Note: Awareness = Acting with awareness. Non-reacting = Non-reacting to inner experiences. Non-judging = non-judging inner experiences.

A Pearson’s correlation was calculated to assess the size and relationship between CSBs, mindfulness facets and overall burnout and the three burnout subscales. The assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity were assessed and supported for all distributions. CSBs and overall burnout were significantly negatively correlated,  $r(129) = -.26, p=.002$ , indicating a small effect, where engaging in CSBs explains 6.86% of the variance in overall burnout. Significant low negative relationships were found between CSBs and personal burnout,  $r(129) = -.25, p=.004$ ; CSBs and work-related burnout,  $r(129) = -.26, p = .002$ ; CSBs and student-related burnout,  $r(129) = -.21, p = .013$ .

Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to examine size and the direction of the relationship between burnout subscales, overall burnout and mindfulness facets. Significant low to large negative relationships were found between each burnout subscale and each facet of mindfulness, the correlation coefficients are contained in Table 5. Indicating a large effect, acting with awareness explains 36% of the variance in total burnout.

**Table 5:** Intercorrelations between mindfulness subscales and burnout subscales (N = 128)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Total (B)	-								
2. Personal (B)	.92	-							
3. Work-related (B)	.96	.89	-						
4. Stud-related (B)	.89	.67	.80	-					
5. Observing	-.29	-.27	-.28	-.26	-				
6. Describing	-.33	-.27	-.31	-.34	-.16	-			
7. Awareness	-.60	-.57	-.59	-.52	-.33	-.37	-		
8. Non-reacting	-.40	-.40	-.36	-.36	-.28	-.30	-.38	-	
9. Non-judging	-.40	-.36	-.40	-.35	-.04†	-.39	-.44	-.43	-

Note: all  $p < .001$  except †  $> .05$  (B) = burnout. Stud-related = student-related. Awareness = Acting with awareness. Non-reacting = Non-reacting to inner experiences. Non-judging = non-judging inner experiences.





**Table 6:** Means and standard deviations of school counsellor individual CSBs by geographical locations

	Overall sample	Geographical area		
		Metropolitan	Urban	Rural
Spend time with partner/family	3.2 (0.9)	3.2 (0.9)	3.1 (1.0)	3.2 (0.9)
Balance professional and personal life	3.3 (0.8)	3.5 (0.7)	3.3 (0.8)	3.2 (0.9)
Lose sense of humour	2.2 (1.5)	2.6 (1.3)	2.1 (1.6)	1.9 (1.5)
Self-awareness	3.1 (0.9)	3.1 (0.8)	3.0 (1.1)	3.1 (0.9)
Professional identity	3.0 (0.1)	2.9 (0.9)	3.0 (0.7)	3.0 (0.9)
Quiet leisure activities	2.9 (0.9)	2.8 (0.8)	2.8 (1.0)	3.0 (1.0)
Sense of control over work	2.9 (0.8)	3.0 (0.8)	2.9 (0.8)	3.0 (0.9)
Physical activities	2.8 (1.1)	2.8 (1.2)	3.0 (0.9)	2.7 (1.2)
Regular holidays	2.7 (1.0)	2.8 (1.1)	2.8 (0.9)	2.6 (1.0)
Time with friends	2.6 (0.9)	2.8 (1.0)	2.5 (1.0)	2.5 (0.8)
Perceive students' problems as interesting?	1.8 (0.9)	1.7 (0.9)	1.8 (1.0)	1.9 (1.0)
Objectivity about students	2.7 (0.9)	2.9 (0.8)	2.8 (1.0)	2.6 (0.9)
Vary work responsibilities	2.4 (0.8)	2.4 (0.9)	2.5 (0.8)	2.4 (0.9)
Reflect on positive experiences	2.7 (0.9)	2.8 (0.9)	2.4 (1.1)	2.7 (0.9)
Feel sense of responsibility for students' problems	2.9 (0.9)	2.9 (0.9)	3.1 (1.0)	2.8 (0.9)
Read literature	2.5 (1.0)	2.4 (0.9)	2.6 (0.9)	2.5 (1.1)
Professional learning	3.0 (0.9)	3.1 (0.9)	2.9 (0.9)	3.1 (0.9)
Time alone in self-reflection	2.4 (1.0)	2.4 (1.0)	2.4 (1.1)	2.4 (1.1)
Discuss work frustrations with colleagues	2.6 (1.0)	2.8 (1.0)	2.3 (1.0)	2.6 (1.0)
Professional distance from students	2.7 (1.0)	2.7 (1.0)	2.7 (0.9)	2.7 (1.0)
Thoughts of the students stay outside of work	2.9 (1.0)	3.0 (0.9)	3.0 (1.1)	2.8 (1.1)
Seek case consultation	2.8 (1.0)	3.2 (0.9)	2.4 (1.1)	2.6 (0.9)
Discuss work frustrations with partner/family	1.6 (1.1)	1.6 (1.2)	1.6 (1.0)	1.6 (1.0)
Breaks between sessions	2.2 (1.1)	2.4 (1.0)	2.1 (1.1)	2.1 (1.1)
Contact with referral networks	2.2 (0.9)	2.2 (0.9)	2.2 (0.7)	2.4 (0.9)
Spiritual beliefs	1.2 (1.4)	1.2 (1.4)	1.1 (1.2)	1.3 (1.4)
Allow students' sessions to run over time	2.8 (1.0)	2.7 (0.9)	3.1 (0.7)	2.7 (1.1)
Positive self-talk	2.3 (1.1)	2.2 (1.2)	2.2 (1.0)	2.4 (1.2)
Formal relaxation activities	2.1 (1.1)	2.1 (1.1)	2.3 (0.9)	2.0 (1.1)
Personal therapy	1.2 (1.0)	1.3 (1.0)	1.2 (1.0)	1.1 (1.0)
Discuss work frustrations with friends	1.3 (1.1)	1.4 (1.0)	1.2 (0.9)	1.3 (1.1)
Peer support groups	2.0 (1.2)	2.5 (1.0)	1.5 (1.2)	1.9 (1.1)
Regular supervision	3.2 (0.9)	3.5 (0.7)	2.5 (1.2)	3.2 (0.7)
Use substances to relax	0.7 (0.9)	0.4 (0.6)	1.1 (1.3)	0.6 (0.9)

N = 131 Note: Figures in parentheses are standard deviations.



To assess the impact that geographical work location has on the negative relationships between mindfulness practices and burnout levels a follow-up partial correlation was calculated. There continued significant low to large negative relationships between CSBs and burnout rates when controlling for geographical location. To evaluate the significance of geographic work location on the type of CSBs school counsellors engage in, one-way between group ANOVA were calculated. The ANOVA homogeneity of variance and assumptions of normality were not violated in any condition. Table 6 shows metropolitan school counsellors seek case consultation significantly more often than rural and urban school counsellors,  $F(2,128) = 7.60, p = .001$ , Cohen's  $d = .62, .75$  respectively.

Metropolitan school counsellors also significantly 'participate in peer support groups' more often than rural and urban school counsellors,  $F(2,128) = 8.28, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = .45, .89$ . 'Receiving regular supervision' also reported a significant difference  $F(2, 128) = 14.47, p < .000$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.02$ . Indicating a large effect, supervision was reported as more important to metropolitan school counsellors than urban school counsellors. Rural counsellors also significantly viewed supervision as more important than urban school counsellors, Cohen's  $d = .73$ . Urban school counsellors felt 'using substances to relax' as more important than metropolitan counsellors,  $F(2,128) = 5.44, p = .005$ , Cohen's  $d = .64$ . There were no other significant mean differences within other types of CSBs.

A follow-up partial Pearson product correlation examined the strength of the relationship between burnout and individual CSBs after controlling for geographic location, shown in Table 7. Several significant low to moderate negative and positive correlations were found. 'Maintaining balance between professional and personal life', 'Maintaining professional identity' and 'Taking regular holidays' were inversely correlated with personal burnout, work-related burnout and overall burnout. 'Maintaining self-awareness', 'Engaging in quiet leisure', 'Engaging in physical activity' and 'Spending time alone in self-reflection' negatively correlated with personal, work-related, student-related and overall burnout.

'Perceiving students problems as interesting' negatively correlated with student-related and overall burnout, as did 'Reflecting on positive experiences'. The latter also negatively correlated with personal burnout. 'Objectivity about students' inversely correlated with work-related and overall burnout. 'Discussing work frustrations with family, friends or colleagues' positively correlated with student-related, work-related and overall burnout, as did 'thoughts of the students staying on mind outside of work', which also correlated with personal burnout. 'Losing sense of humour' positively correlated with personal, student-related and overall burnout. Other relationships were no longer significant.



**Table 7:** Correlation coefficients between individual CSBs and burnout subscales controlling for geographical locations

CSB item	Burnout			
	Total	Personal	Work related	Student related
Spend time with partner/family	-.10	-.09	-.09	-.10
Balance professional and personal life	-.29***	-.27***	-.31***	-.22
Lose sense of humour	.21*	.20*	.17	.20*
Self-awareness	-.35***	-.30***	-.34***	-.34***
Professional identity	-.20*	-.20*	-.19*	-.17
Quiet leisure activities	-.35***	-.28***	-.33***	-.35***
Sense of control over work	-.15	-.15	-.17	-.10
Physical activities	-.33**	-.33**	-.36**	-.25**
Regular holidays	-.24**	-.26**	-.25**	-.14
Time with friends	-.02	.01	-.05	-.01
Perceive student problems as interesting	-.18*	-.13	-.16	-.19*
Objectivity about students	-.18*	-.14	-.19*	-.16
Vary work responsibilities	-.10	-.12	-.08	-.08
Reflect on positive experiences	-.19*	-.18*	-.14	-.20*
Feel sense of responsibility for students' problems	-.06	-.03	-.08	-.05
Read literature	-.06	-.06	-.09	-.02
Professional learning	-.14	-.17	-.16	-.07
Time alone in self-reflection	-.37***	-.33***	-.34***	-.36***
Discuss work frustrations with colleagues	-.11	-.05	-.08	-.17
Professional distance from students	-.11	-.10	-.14	-.06
Thoughts of the students stay outside of work	.32***	.23**	.29***	.37***
Seek case consultation	-.05	.00	-.05	-.08
Discuss work frustrations with partner/family	.20*	.15	.18*	.24*
Breaks between sessions	.01	-.06	-.01	.11
Contact with referral networks	-.04	-.03	-.05	-.02
Spiritual beliefs	-.02	.00	.02	-.07
Allow students' sessions to run over time.	-.11	-.10	-.09	-.11
Positive self-talk	-.11	-.14	-.12	-.05
Formal relaxation activities	-.06	-.11	-.07	-.02
Personal therapy	.01	-.04	.01	.04
Discuss work frustrations with friends	.16	.15	.16	.14
Peer support groups	.09	.10	.09	.05
Regular supervision	.04	-.10	.03	-.02
Use substances to relax	.12	.04	.12	.17

N = 131 Note: \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$



## **Discussion**

This study sought to examine the relationships between burnout, as measured by the CBI (Kristensen et al., 2005), and geographical work location, demographic variables and participation in mindfulness practices and CSBs among NSW DoE school counsellors. It aimed to replicate Di Benedetto and Swadling's (2014) study of variables implicated in Australian psychologists' burnout but in a NSW school environment.

### ***School counsellor characteristics***

As a group, the school counsellors in this study were predominately female, aged in midlife, citing an average work experience of ten years in the role. The results indicated similar numbers employed in the metropolitan and rural regions with slightly less responding from urban (Newcastle, Wollongong, Central Coast) schools. This profile shows little change to the demographic characteristics of NSW school counsellors found by NSW DET (2011), 89% female counsellors, mean age 46 years. This sample demonstrated slightly less responses from urban school counsellors than would be expected from previous research (NSW DET, 2011). These demographic findings need to be considered in the following discussion of this study's results.

### ***Burnout levels in NSW DoE School counsellors***

Confirming all hypotheses, the results of this study suggest that work-related variables, such as the school's geographic location and engaging in mindfulness practices or other CSBs, explain variance in burnout levels for DoE school counsellors. NSW school counsellors indicated moderate levels of burnout in total and across burnout dimensions (personal, work-related, student-related). This is higher than what was observed in Australian psychologists (Di Benedetto & Swadling, 2014). Compared to findings in Kristensen et al.'s, (2005) normative study of the CBI, NSW school counsellors report levels in line with the highest rates of personal and work-related burnout. The rates of student-related burnout were lower in this study than compared to the other dimensions, with personal burnout reported highest. This pattern is in line with that observed in the other education and mental health worker populations (Kristensen et al., 2005) and may reflect personal reasons for entering this role. Empirical observations may help to explain the difference between higher scores on the personal subscale and the relatively lower scores on the student-related subscales. Kristensen et al. (2005) posit that some psychosocial factors such as role conflicts predict all three CBI subscales, with other variables influencing only one or two.

### ***Differences between geographical locations***

As predicted, rural school counsellors differed in the level of burnout – total, personal, work related, student related – compared to their metropolitan and urban colleagues. Research has implicated organisational variables, such as work setting differentially influencing burnout, (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006) may explain this difference. While Di Benedetto and Swadling (2014) reported no difference in burnout rates between psychologists working in different settings, this study found school counsellors working in rural areas indicated significantly higher levels of all burnout dimensions compared to either metropolitan or urban counsellors. The largest difference being for



personal and work-related burnout between rural counsellors and associates working in the urban locations of Newcastle, Wollongong or the Central Coast. This is consistent with Garrick et al.'s (2014) findings that rural teachers report higher levels of overall burnout and job stress.

The higher level of reported rural burnout may reflect diversities within these environmental settings that impact on the school counsellor role (Bardhoshi, Schweinle & Duncan, 2014). Rural positions are often challenging to fill (NSW DET, 2011), with newly qualified school counsellors being appointed there (Campbell & Colmar, 2014); lower work experience is associated with higher burnout in psychologists (Grepmaier et al., 2007). Rural school counsellors generally provide service to several schools (NSW DET, 2011), which can involve extensive travel time. With limited specialist learning and mental health services in country areas, the school counsellor must manage complex student concerns that are often acute with limited resources (Cosgrave, Hussain & Maple, 2015). Cosgrave, Hussain and Maple (2015) found high counsellor workloads linked with complex cases, the intensity of the student problems addressed or the effect of vicarious trauma predict higher levels of burnout in school counsellors (Benler, 2011).

Greater employment options in metropolitan and urban locations (Cosgrave, Hussain & Maple, 2015) may enable school counsellors in these areas who are sensitive to burnout to change professions, with those remaining showing resistance to burnout. Alternatively, Di Benedetto and Swadling (2014) posit that counsellors/psychologists who remain develop coping strategies or build resilience toward burnout over time. Further research is required to explore the nature and direction of the relationship between burnout and geographical work location and identify those variables that are associated with lower burnout.

### ***Career-sustaining behaviours and burnout levels***

In line with expectations, this study found significant negative relationships between CSBs and burnout. Consistent with findings in Di Benedetto and Swadling's (2014) study, these results indicate that CSBs negatively correlate with all dimensions of burnout, whether total, personal, work related or student related. However, CSBs only explained a small amount of this variance.

As predicted, school counsellors from different geographic work areas engaged in similar numbers of CSBs. The CSB preferences most commonly identified in being important to manage at work were relational in nature (spending time with spouse/partner or family; receiving regular supervision) or professional (maintaining a balance between professional; maintaining a sense of control over work responsibilities). This is consistent with the study of Stevanovic and Rupert (2004) who found that the CSBs 'sense of humour', 'spending time with a partner/family', 'maintaining work/life balance', 'maintaining self-awareness' and 'maintaining a sense of self-control over work responsibilities' were nominated by psychologists who also rated themselves highly for life satisfaction. Rupert and Kent (2007) suggest participant gender influences the type of CSBs nominated, with women preferring relational self-care strategies, as in this study's findings.

The results of ANOVA calculations suggest that the geographical locations school counsellors work in influences some of the specific CSBs engaged in. Metropolitan school counsellors report valuing case consultation and peer support



groups significantly more than rural and urban counsellors. This is consistent with research that shows positive professional relationships are associated with lower burnout (McCarthy et al., 2010; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). Regular supervision was reported significantly high for metropolitan and rural school counsellors, but less for urban school counsellors.

After controlling for the geographical location of respondents, several significant low to moderate negative and positive correlations were found indicating specific CSBs that appear associated with lower burnout. The professionally related CSBs (e.g., 'Maintaining balance between professional and personal life' and 'Maintaining professional identity') were linked with lower personal burnout, work-related burnout and total burnout. Also implicated with reduced burnout in these areas were the psychocognitive behaviours of 'Maintaining self-awareness' and 'Spending time alone in self-reflection'. These four behaviours indicated the strongest negative relationship with every scale of burnout and would appear to be a possible focus for programs to either protect against burnout or guard against its development. Several CSBs – 'taking regular holidays', 'engaging in quiet leisure' and 'engaging in physical activity' – were linked with lower personal, work-related, student-related and total burnout. These behaviours appear defensive in nature and again seem to offer protection against burnout.

In contrast to previous research (Culbreth et al., 2005; Stevanovic & Rupert, 2004) which indicated that professional support guards against role stress and burnout, no relationships were found between the CSBs 'receiving regular supervision', 'engage in peer support groups' or 'seek case consultation' in this study. However, low to moderate significant positive correlations were detected between 'discussing work frustrations with partner/family' and 'putting aside thoughts of the students outside of work', indicating that an inclination for these CSBs was linked with higher levels of total, personal, work-related and student-related burnout. Additionally, 'losing sense of humour' appears related to increased student-related, personal and total burnout. This is in line with previous findings that psychologists and counsellors indicate humour to be a common CSB preference (Lawson & Myers, 2011; Stevanovic & Rupert, 2004). Di Benedetto and Swadling (2014) argue that this relationship indicates these are either detrimental behaviours, or that they may provide valuable predictors or indicators of burnout.

The small to medium relationships between specific CSBs and burnout, and the lack of an evident association with those CSBs previously identified as preferred by less burnt-out school counsellors (such as 'receiving regular supervision') found in this examination suggests that participating in specific CSBs with the intention of lowering burnout may be most beneficial when considered within a geographical context. This investigation found that work location exerts influence on the type of CSBs favoured and that this predicts the nature of the burnout experienced. Future research clarifying whether a causal relationship exists between burnout and specific CSBs and the direction of such associations will determine which variables directly moderate burnout. Identification of these factors may provide strategies for burnout prevention and treatment specific to a geographical context.



### ***Mindfulness practice and burnout***

As predicted, mindfulness practice was associated with lower burnout for participants in all geographical locations. All five mindfulness components (observing, describing, non-reactivity to inner experience, acting with awareness and non-judging of inner experience) were significantly negatively correlated with burnout. With a large effect, acting with awareness explained 36% of the variance in personal and work-related burnout and slightly less for student-related burnout. Generally, school counsellors indicate an average level of mindfulness practice across all the facets, this is lower than reported by Australian psychologists (Di Benedetto & Swadling, 2014). This may be explained by the lower control school counsellors experience over their workload, with competing psychological and school priorities, compared to the case-by-case load managed by community psychologists (Bardhoshi, Schweinle & Duncan, 2014).

Research demonstrates mindfulness is positively associated with wellbeing in mental health professionals (Richards et al., 2010). Linked to reducing work-related stress (Irving, Dobkin & Park, 2009) mindfulness practices appear to support healthier methods for managing daily hassles, which can over time develop into burnout (Baer, Smith & Allen, 2004). Further research is required into the relationship between the five mindfulness facets and burnout to explore if specific mindfulness skills can directly lower burnout (Baer, Smith & Allen, 2004). This could indicate more-targeted prevention and intervention opportunities. Determining if a causal relationship exists between burnout and mindfulness and its direction will ascertain whether mindfulness directly moderates burnout.

### **Study strengths, limitations and future research**

Several strengths and limitations must be considered in reviewing these results. As an exploratory study these results provide the first snapshot of the level of burnout experienced by NSW DoE school counsellors. Beneficially, it also offers indicators of CSBs and mindfulness practices associated with differential burnout rates. A primary strength is this study affords a platform for further research, particularly examining specific mindfulness skills or CSBs that may protect against or lower the burnout experienced. However, as participation was limited to NSW DoE school counsellors, the use of this volunteer sample will reduce generalisability and may have introduced unknown selection biases. All participants are employed in the public school system; variables that protect or contribute to burnout may be different for counsellors in other education contexts. School counsellors with high levels of burnout may have been less likely to participate in this study, so the current sample could be skewed toward less burnt-out professionals. Improving sample variability should be an aim of future studies. Further, assessing incidence rates of burnout in future studies may offer valuable information in understanding the prevalence of this phenomenon in the school counsellor population. Also, given the study's correlational nature, causation cannot be implied. Future research clarifying whether a causal relationship exists between burnout and specific CSBs or mindfulness practices and the direction of such relationships will establish which variables directly moderate burnout. Lastly, it is also important to note that this study only used self-report measures, meaning that social desirability as well as a lack of clinical observation may have influenced the findings.



## **Conclusion**

NSW DoE school counsellors work in a variety of educational settings, sharing a focus of helping children and adolescents through diverse learning, mental health, career and psychosocial concerns. However, despite performing the critical role of supporting students' needs, they may not always recognise the need to maintain a healthy balance in their own professional and personal lives to manage or avoid excessive job stress and burnout (Butler & Constantine, 2005). This study indicates that NSW school counsellors are experiencing a moderate level of total burnout and across the personal, work-related and student-related spheres. These results demonstrate that specific organisational variables (e.g., geographical location of the school) differentially impact on the level and type of burnout experienced by these professionals. However, it was found that engaging in CSBs and mindfulness practices may lower burnout experienced. The results of this study offer several potential directions for future research, including identifying organisational variables implicit in the development of burnout in school counsellors and specific CSBs or mindfulness skills that may provide strategies for burnout treatment or its prevention. Given the lack of literature on school counsellor burnout in NSW (Campbell & Colmar, 2014), this study provides a basis for future research to fully understand the development and course of this phenomenon in this population.

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