

## SPECIAL ARTICLE

# Is there a role for mindfulness and self-compassion in reducing stress in the teaching profession?

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides an outline of contemporary literature related to mindfulness and self-compassion and their impact on countering the adverse effects of occupational stress. Moreover, an attempt is made to postulate a model of mindfulness which in turn generates self-compassion serving to buffer the potentially deleterious influence of ongoing stress, providing an avenue for promoting adjustment to the specific stressors associated with the teaching profession. The contribution concludes with suggestions for incorporating training programs for stress management among prospective teachers.

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The myriad influences on teachers — as professionally-trained instructors, let alone as employees within bureaucracies but also as managers of students plus responsibilities to the community through their role *in loco parentis* — makes for an unusual cocktail of stressors. Whilst some teachers are able to manage this career pathway others respond with apathy, suffer burnout let alone severe stress, or drop out from a situation in which they might otherwise have coped. In this paper a model where mindfulness is employed to generate self-compassion as an antidote to the daily stressors of the modern school system is described. A key ingredient in this mindfulness is the capacity to apply self-compassion and a scoping review of the relevant literature is introduced. The first section of this paper outlines the components of stress within

teaching and this is followed by the potential for mindfulness to impact positively on the personal adjustment to the demands of teaching. The final section of the paper advocates training in self-compassion for teachers as a central component of stress management.

The teaching context is complex, varied and at all times idiosyncratic for each individual teacher. There are commonalities, however, and some insight is depicted in the following transcript from an experienced teacher who distilled reasons for describing a teaching career as potentially stressful:

Many students need help organizing their assignments — “How do I start?,” “Where do I find what?,” “Work organization is difficult for students. They quickly become frustrated, prematurely finish a task before coming to a conclu-

sion. The challenge is to offer work in graduated steps to include students' selection of topics. Disinterest does not imply insufficient motivation. I also see my role as a motivator to arouse a "willingness to learn". This is exhausting and goes far beyond a simple worksheet in A4 size, time-wise and psychologically. Equally important is promoting "behavior towards fellow human beings." Close the door "gently," throw garbage in the trash, appear punctually for lessons, and try to deal with conflicts adequately. After all, as a teacher, I have 25-30 students in a class. One's own knowledge about educational measures, which students reach as well, is helpful, e.g. work with praise, affirm strengths and underline resources, and avoid applying "deficit pedagogy."

The bureaucracy/office work has multiplied in recent years. Actually, we would need secretarial assistance to facilitate our work in: creating lists, declarations of consent, organization plans, guidance of new colleagues, accompanying trainees, testimonial conferences, final conferences, interim conferences, hearings for students in problematic situations, etc. — just a few tasks that need to be completed and accomplished in a timely manner. In addition, I personally desire to make my teaching diverse and interesting, as the students should be spared by the school organization. So after the bureaucracy has been dealt with, I continue to prepare for my lessons, I think of group work with cooperative learning methods, in which students can practice their teamwork, not just a frontal teaching that fails to absorb students' interests. Personal action and initiative are required to maintain ongoing interests among students. At peak times, the holidays are of no use to me for relaxation, because the burden is the concentrated work, which cannot be clearly demarcated in the teacher's job.

Just as in other occupational domains, the teaching profession is currently working longer, more unsocial hours than ever before. Furthermore, the workloads are increasingly more regulated, vulnerable to fluctuations in government policy. Moreover, the contribution of teaching is not acknowledged by public opinion and this is coupled with a reduction in the prestige.<sup>1</sup> The general situation may be summarized by the model illustrated in Figure 1.

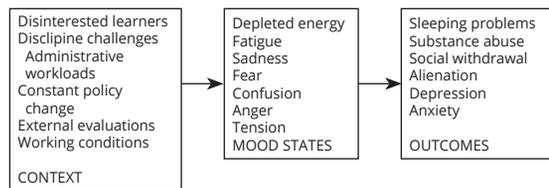


Figure 1.—A context-mood state-outcomes model of stressfulness in teaching.

### Teaching-related challenges and demands

To perform their task, teachers need to be skilled in content knowledge, educational knowledge to know when and how to teach particular content, and in developmental knowledge to know how to teach content appropriately for students' various ages. Additionally, a fourth domain of teaching skills has been posited namely professional dispositions.<sup>2</sup> Roeser, Skinner, Beers, and Jennings referred to professional dispositions when describing teaching as a human service occupation requiring a suitable mindset to deal successfully with emotions, uncertainties and attention to others that come along with teachers' work lives.<sup>3</sup> It occurs because teachers' working lives are characterized as loaded by social interactions with various partners such as students, parents, colleagues or administrators. It has been argued that mental flexibility, emotion regulation and relationship management skills are required.<sup>4</sup> Given that conflict is inevitable, teachers need to be able to manage difficulties creatively. In classroom situations, teachers often must shift their attention from individual student needs, to an overview of the entire student body, and return to particular students. That might require mental flexibility that in turn might help teachers respond proactively to students. Given that teachers have to express some positive and supportive motivations when in the classroom while simultaneously suppressing negative and distressing emotions, emotion regulation is most needed to deal with stressors and the resulting self-affect.<sup>3</sup>

Typically, teacher education programs do not include sessions to help them handle socio-emotional demands.<sup>5</sup> Work-related demands were perceived by around 30% of the teachers as stressful, exhausting, and resigning – a combination of emotions and cognitions interpreted as being comparable to the burnout dimensions. In

Germany for instance, people working in other human service occupations reported lower levels of burnout symptoms than teachers (e.g., caregivers, police, workers in the penal system).<sup>6</sup> Drop-out rates in the first years of teaching are high internationally, with over one third of trainee teachers leaving in the first five years.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the available evidence points to teaching as being among a stressful profession and teachers' perceived stress can undermine well-being, health, instructional practices.<sup>8</sup> It can result in teachers not reaching their full potential to secure supportive relationships with students and a positive socio-emotional classroom climate.<sup>5</sup> However, some teachers deal with the socioemotional demands of their profession without suffering from exhaustion and health problems. The question arises: what helps teachers to sustain their positive conditions considering the work-related socio-emotional challenges?

Findings from the closely related fields of mindfulness and self-compassion show that certain teachers' mindsets are described as being consciously aware of the present moment, nonjudgmental, kind to themselves as well as being connected to humanity. This mindset can be interpreted as the professional disposition necessary to buffer against suffering from burnout symptoms and relevant to support effective classroom management.<sup>9, 10</sup> Mindfulness and self-compassion are possibly complementary strategies in successfully dealing with demands and various stressors.<sup>11</sup>

Roeser *et al.*'s model and theory of change provided a theoretical frame that considered teachers' mindfulness and self-compassion as a set of resources that should help teachers to be resilient and cope adaptively with the socio-emotional and cognitive challenges inherent in teaching.<sup>3, 12</sup> Such an approach is hypothesized to result in teachers experiencing (1) less mental and physiological stress and being (2) less frequently absent from work. Further, the effective coping should (3) provide teachers with enhanced mental capacity and energy which can be invested in classroom outcomes such as generating an emotionally supportive climate, and to develop and sustain positive dyadic student-teacher relationships. By establishing these

positive classroom features, the model proposes positive student effects such as students' feeling of affiliation in the classroom, motivation and engagement to learn, and prosocial behaviors.

### Mindfulness and reduction in teacher stress

This section of the paper explores the role of mindfulness on stress reduction and educational practice in teaching. By way of introduction, mindfulness has been defined as "*paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.*"<sup>13</sup> In general, a person who is taught mindfulness: 1) focuses attention on the present moment (rather than ruminating about the past or the future); 2) perceives situations with a conscious awareness (rather than being driven by emotions, automatism, and nonconsciousness); and 3) experiences each moment without biasing emotions and expectations (rather than being dominated by fears or wishes). Meta-analytic results linked mindfulness to lower levels of clinical measures such as depression, anxiety, and distress, while mindfulness was related to a reduction in stress and higher levels in the quality of life.<sup>11</sup>

Various versions of mindfulness-based training differing in content, length, and setting have been conducted among teachers with promising effects to manage the demands of teaching.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the effects of 5-week mindfulness training in various teachers (elementary, middle, and high school) were studied using an intervention and control group.<sup>14</sup> At post-tests, teachers reported reduced levels of state and trait anxiety, burnout (emotional exhaustion), and experience of stress. Qualitative designs support the adaptive effects of the mindfulness trainings. Analyzing feedback of three Italian teachers who underwent 8-week mindfulness training, Napoli indicated that teachers reported improved abilities coping with conflict and anxiety, increased productivity in the classroom, and improvement in their personal lives.<sup>15</sup>

Gold *et al.* performed an intervention study on 10 British primary school teachers who participated in an 8-week course in mindfulness-based stress reduction.<sup>16</sup> Before and after taking the

training, teachers reported their mindfulness status, emotional status, and stress level. As a consequence of participation in the training, teachers experienced improvements in a mindfulness scale (accept without judgment), in their levels of depression, and stress. The authors additionally provided some qualitative data from the participating teachers while teachers predominantly treasured the accepting and non-judgmental attitude taught by the mindfulness training.

Flook *et al.* studied the effects of an 8-week standard mindfulness-based stress reduction training adapted to teachers' work-related experiences in 18 elementary school teachers in the USA.<sup>9</sup> Compared to teachers in the wait-list control group, teachers in the intervention group significantly improved in measures of subscales of mindfulness (describe) and self-compassion (common humanity), psychological distress, burnout dimensions (emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment). Further, intervention group teachers improved in objective measures such as observed classroom organization, and in behavior tasks showing fewer affective attentional biases due to lower levels of negative commissions. Besides, improvements in mindfulness were related to improvements in the other outcomes outlining that changes in mindfulness are a central mechanism for positive changes related to mindfulness trainings.

Roeser *et al.* investigated effects of 8-week mindfulness training in 113 elementary and secondary school teachers from Northern America (USA and Canada) who were randomized to the training or to a waitlist-control group.<sup>12</sup> Teachers in the intervention group reported higher levels of mindfulness and occupational self-compassion at post-program and 3-month follow-up than did the control group. Further, on a behavioral level, teachers trained in mindfulness showed increased focused attention and working memory capacities at post-program. Teachers in the mindfulness training group also reported experiencing less occupational stress and burnout, and lower anxiety and depression rates post-program and 3-month follow-up compared to wait-list teachers. Moreover, at a post-program session, intervention group teachers were less absent from work. However, physiologically, teachers from both groups

did not differ in various cortisol levels, blood pressure, and resting heart rates. Additionally, effects of the mindfulness training on occupational stress and burnout were transmitted via teachers' mindfulness and self-compassionate mind-sets. Inferencing on this, teachers with a mindset characterized by self-acceptance, self-kindness, less personalization of stressful events, and by an awareness of sensation, feelings, thoughts, and one's actions and its reasons, and by less judgment and reactivity, might be better at meeting the various interpersonal and instructional demands and complexities related to teaching. Apart from the measured effects of the mindfulness program, attending teachers also reported a high acceptance of the training and that they highly recommend it for their peers and the school administrators given the benefit they gained. Roeser *et al.* stated that these empirical results fit the first part of their theoretical model (logic model and theory of change) — mindfulness and self-compassion are central for teachers enabling them to cope more effectively with work-related stress.<sup>3, 12</sup>

The effects of teachers' mindfulness on teachers' classroom behavior were outlined by Jennings.<sup>17</sup> Thirty-five preschool teachers from the USA were observed when in class by trained raters. Classroom behavior was rated according to three broad categories, namely, emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support, and each category comprised several dimensions. Three factors of mindfulness were found to be significantly related to higher levels of emotional support, whereas no associations were revealed with classroom organization or instructional support. Emotional support is composed of a positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives. Furthermore, teachers reported benefits from being trained in mindfulness, while research showed that the positive effects are related to the amount of meditation practice.<sup>18</sup>

### Self-compassion

When being confronted with personal inadequacies, failures, or uncontrollable life events, self-compassion entails people to treat themselves with warmth and comprehension. Self-compassion

sion helps to be open and aware of one's suffering and to hold a rather nonjudgmental attitude towards it, and it supports to frame the negative events considering common experience shared by humans.<sup>19</sup> It has been defined as "*a useful emotional regulation strategy, in which painful or distressing feelings are not avoided but are instead held in awareness with kindness, understanding, and a sense of shared humanity.*" Self-compassion should consist of three bipolar dimensions that constitute its six subscales: 1) self-kindness: an understanding and kindness towards oneself rather than being self-critical and judgmental (self-judgment); 2) common humanity: recognizing that experiencing failure and inadequacies are experiences shared by all human beings rather than judging them as a personal misery and purely personal that might lead to feelings of isolation and separation (isolation); and 3) mindfulness: the ability to keep suffering and the related emotions in balanced awareness instead of ignoring and suppressing them, or being swept away by them (over-identification).<sup>19-21</sup> These three bipolar dimensions were shown to be highly correlated making the use of a single overarching factor applicable.<sup>19, 20</sup>

Self-compassion can be viewed as an emotion regulation strategy that transforms negative self-affect (*i.e.*, feeling bad about personal inadequacies) into positive self-affect (*i.e.*, feeling kindness towards oneself), and therefore self-compassion should be associated to numerous psychological advantages and strengths. An abundance of research has supported self-compassion's positive associations with various individual outcomes and interpersonal concerns. In general, self-compassion is positively related to indicators of mental health such as optimism, happiness, and satisfaction with life,<sup>22, 23</sup> and negatively related to depression and anxiety.<sup>24</sup> Within interpersonal relationships, high self-compassionate people reported feeling less emotional turmoil in interpersonal conflict situations and rather trying to solve conflicts cooperatively. Further, high self-compassionate people reported elevated feelings of relational well-being and when in romantic relationships, partners of high self-compassionate spouses reported increased relational well-being.<sup>25</sup>

Self-compassion has an adaptive role in a school context in fostering students' motivation, well-being and coping strategies in dealing with failure. Among undergraduates, self-compassion was positively associated with mastery goals, perceived competence, and intrinsic motivation, and inversely related to performance goals, levels of fear of failure, and anxiety. When confronted with perceived academic failure, undergraduates' self-compassion was additionally related to higher levels of emotion-focused coping strategies (positive reinterpretation and growth) and to lower levels of avoidance-oriented strategies (denial, mental disengagement).<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, students high in self-compassion reported delaying intended academic tasks less often (procrastination) and reported experiencing lower levels of general stress.<sup>27</sup> When facing chronic academic stress, undergraduates' self-compassion was positively associated with positive affect but negatively associated with negative affect and learning stress.<sup>28</sup> However, no association of self-compassion with academic success was obtained.<sup>26</sup>

The protective role of self-compassion in experiencing less burnout symptoms has been demonstrated among professionals working in the social and health care sectors,<sup>29, 30</sup> and in clergy.<sup>31</sup> Among teacher training students, self-compassion was related to lower levels in the burnout components.<sup>32</sup> Possible mediating mechanisms were that high self-compassionate students perceived university requirements as less demanding and used social support from fellow students and lecturers more frequently than low self-compassionate students.

In an effort to gain more insight into self-compassion's role among teaching professionals, we report results recently collected in our group research. Being self-compassionate could serve as a crucial element in predicting lower levels in the burnout components emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment among German teachers on probation.<sup>10</sup> In Germany, trainee teachers must undergo between 1-2 years of a teacher trainee phase, where they are required to teach at schools under supervision and simultaneously attend courses at teacher training institutes. These adaptive relations re-

mained even after controlling for work-related stressors such as the amount of time needed for home-based preparations, time spent at school, and time of teaching. These work-related stressors were strongly predictive of the experience of burnout. The underlying mechanism explaining self-compassion's adaptive associations with burnout components were emotion-based coping strategies such as "positive reframing" and "emotional support."<sup>10</sup>

The negative associations of self-compassion with burnout dimensions in teacher candidates might indicate that self-compassion possibly serves a stress-buffering effect and therefore could be helpful for teachers to alleviate the potential deleterious effects of highly demanding work-related stressors including disrupting student behavior in class, big class sizes, and a high number of classes to teach.<sup>6</sup> Self-compassion has been found to be adaptively related to interpersonal conflict resolutions.<sup>25</sup> Across various interpersonal contexts, self-compassion was associated with compromising rather than with self-subordinating or self-prioritizing. This might be supportive in dealing successfully with the various social demands that teachers have to face with their students, colleagues, and school administration.

Another work-related challenge can be inherent in the teaching itself — it might induce psychosocial stress. Experimental studies have demonstrated that high self-compassionate people showed lower stress-induced reactivity in a marker of the sympathetic nervous system activation (salivary alpha-amylase) across various stressors such as given an unexpected speech and solving tasks in front of an audience.<sup>33</sup> Given the similarity of the experimental conditions and the classroom management and instructional practice of teachers, one can infer that self-compassionate teachers experience less physiological stress when doing their main work task.

Furthermore, high levels of self-compassion might enable aspiring teachers to implement coping strategies in such a way that they can make the various work-related demands and stressors match to the individual teacher's individual needs and resources. High self-compassionate teachers experience a social supportive environment; they

are more likely to apply positive cognitive strategies, and perceive requirements as less demanding than low self-compassionate teachers.<sup>10, 32</sup> Coherently, a self-compassion subscale analyses revealed that high self-compassionate teachers spend less time preparing lessons at home.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the negative self-compassion subscales self-judgment and isolation seemed to be of relevance here. The results can be interpreted that such self-compassionate teachers are less critical of themselves and this might prevent them from criticizing their work which in turn leads them to invest extra time in work-related preparations. In line with this interpretation are the established associations of self-compassion with lower levels of fear of academic failure and neurotic perfectionism, and higher levels of feelings of competency found in university students.<sup>19, 26, 28</sup>

Few studies exist that examine the effects of teachers' self-compassion on student outcomes, however, an observational study on preschool teachers' interactions with students might provide some possible directions.<sup>17</sup> Teachers' self-compassion was positively associated with ratings of their displayed classroom qualities whereas self-compassion was particularly related to the emotional support dimensions positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives. And positive climate in the classroom is known to be an important factor in predicting students' academic performance, social outcomes, and motivational variables.<sup>34</sup> Further, other teacher-related variables that might be associated with students' educational outcome are the valences of teacher cognitions and expectations regarding their students. In teacher candidates, among the three dimensions of burnout, self-compassion showed the highest (negative) association with depersonalization.<sup>10</sup> Depersonalization involves a rather detached and unfeeling response and handling of people one has to take care of, in this case the students and might therefore rather constrain positive cognitions in teachers about their students. In other words, teachers' level of self-compassion might be related to positive cognitions about students. Within the context of teacher expectations, positive cognitions about students might support

positive educational development in students because positive teacher cognitions might produce self-fulfilling prophecies.<sup>35</sup>

### Strategies for implementing mindfulness and self-compassion

There are viable strategies for implementing mindfulness and self-compassion in reducing teacher stress. In their concluding comments in a contribution of mindfulness among *health care* professionals, Shapiro and Burnham claimed “*Mindfulness has a variety of useful applications for health care providers including personal care, professional effectiveness, and specific therapeutic interventions ... help(ing) health professionals develop core skills such as attention, presence, empathy and self-compassion... potential of mindfulness as a means of teaching self-care...*”<sup>36</sup> There are other avenues of research which suggest filtering out specific stress coping tools which may well be coupled with self-compassion and mindfulness. For example, five methods have been identified by Cooper cited in a TES article on de-stressing teachers for the summer break.<sup>1</sup> He focused on five key methods for dealing with stress in the teaching profession. They include: 1) modifying (Type A) behavior, associated with a sense of urgency, impatience and an aggressive lifestyle (adopting tools of anger reduction, composure such as mindfulness training, and being less performance/competitively driven; 2) regular bouts of exercises, perhaps 3 times weekly between 20-30 minutes aerobic exercise; 3) expand and implement social networks (other individuals offer social nurturance and critical feedback); 4) develop a positive attitude and elevate sense of optimism (maximize good events and minimize the adverse events, learn to alter the perspective and evaluation of a situation); and 5) find out-

lets for emotional expression *e.g.* diary monitoring, writing narrative texts, selecting affirmative statements. Again it may be worth considering the association with these aspects and mindfulness and compassion. At a practical level, the American Psychological Association provides a module as film of techniques valuable for teachers, underlining the value of: 1) recognizing one’s personal accomplishments; 2) pacing yourself; 3) viewing situations and others from a more humorous perspective; 4) desensitization; and 5) identifying negative behavior.<sup>37-39</sup>

### Concluding comments

The impact of mindfulness and self-compassion on stress reduction in teaching were canvassed in this paper. It has been argued that there are unusual stressors in educational settings that are amenable to the reduction of stress. Aside from the management of situations in the workplace, it has been proposed that a regimen of mindfulness and self-compassion training will enhance the cognitive and emotional capacity of some teachers to cope with inordinate stress demands. The available literature is limited but indicates some propensity for there to be benefits from a diverse clinical training in mindfulness and self-compassion.

The role of self-compassion is hypothesized to have greater potential as it provides an existential focus for the individual. It mediates the cognitive schemata that accompany stressful reactions and intervenes or blocks the development of learned stress thoughts. Returning to the model that was sketched originally, it is possible to visualize a new hypothesized role for mindfulness and self-compassion in teacher stress-reduction along the lines of Figure 2. No claim is made that this represents discrete steps or that it is a linear process. Indeed, allowance may need to be made for iteration in this model. Furthermore, future re-

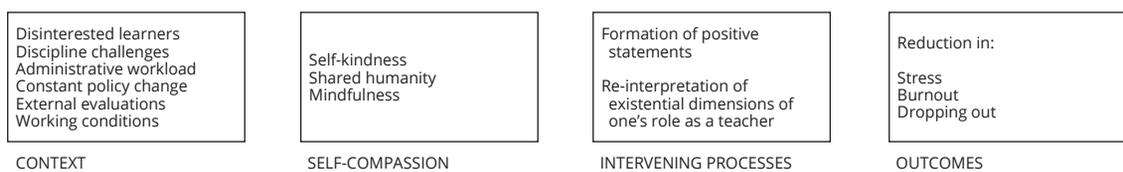


Figure 2.—An intervening role for self-compassion and mindfulness.

search may wish to tease out the efficacy of the elements of the model in Figure 2.

This model is supported in large part by the literature that has been reviewed and locates mindfulness within the framework of self-compassion as an integral component in stress reduction. Without a fundamental re-perception or reformulation of the context, teachers are doomed to experience unnecessary effects of stress. It is proposed that strategies related to self-compassion have value for teachers because they incorporate elements of mindfulness but also implement elements of mindful response to oneself that is lacking in teaching, let alone the modern world.

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