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Title: A Brief Self-Compassion Training Boosts Motivational Beliefs and Growth Orientation Toward Teaching Six Months Later: A Longitudinal Field Experiment with First-Year Teachers

First and Second Choice of Conference Section:
1. Teachers and School Leaders
2. Social and Emotional Learning in Educational Settings

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Background: First-year teachers face significant challenges and uncertainty during the transition to teaching, which leads many to question their self-worth and worry whether they have what it takes to be successful in their classrooms (1-2). High expectations, challenging demands, and uncertainty can take an emotional and psychological toll on new teachers, sapping motivation, undermining self-efficacy, and ultimately increasing their risk of experiencing stress, burnout, and leaving the profession (3-7).

Purpose: We developed and tested a novel intervention designed to instill adaptive beliefs and interpretations of adversity in beginning teachers. We hypothesized that instilling self-compassionate beliefs, in particular, could help to reduce common, but potentially destabilizing, worries and bolster teachers' motivational beliefs and growth orientation toward teaching, as well as reduce their levels of burnout and boost their commitment to teaching. We sought to instill these beliefs through a brief training - using principles of wise psychological design - in an easy to implement and scalable format.

Setting: The study took place in three teacher education programs - all within the same university in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Participants: A total of 121 teachers were randomized and completed either the self-compassion training or a placebo control activity. Sixty-six percent of participants in the analytic sample were female, 51% were White, 12% were Asian, 12% were African American, 12% were Hispanic, and 13% identified as multi-racial.

Intervention: The training format and overall approach integrated techniques from social-psychological interventions and insights from contemplative science to tap into and alter participants' pre-existing beliefs about adversity in teaching. To our knowledge, no contemplative training has been delivered using insights from social-psychological intervention research.

The training included three components. First, the training used "psychologically wise" framing, where participants were made to feel like the benefactors of the training, rather than the beneficiaries. Secondly, the training involved having participants listen to a series of teacher testimonials - developed from focus groups with teachers in each program - where teachers described their experience transitioning into teaching. Testimonials were deliberately infused with self-compassionate language - underscoring the fact that worries and disappointments are both temporary (mindfulness) and common to the transition to teaching (common humanity), and opportunities for self-kindness rather than self-criticism (8). Thirdly, participants completed two written exercised: (1) participants were asked to identify common themes in the testimonials, and (2) they were asked to write a note of advice to a future first-year teacher in their program.

We administered the intervention via Qualtircs early on in the first year of teaching. Participants randomized to the placebo control activity were also asked to read testimonials from former teachers in their programs, however, these testimonials were devoid of the self-compassionate message. They also completed two short writing exercises.

Research Design: We carried out a double-blind, placebo-controlled longitudinal field experiment. We recruited teachers in the months leading up to their first year of teaching - defined as the first year being the "teacher of record" or primary classroom teacher. Fifty-nine teachers were randomized to the self-compassion training and 62 were randomized to the placebo control activity.

Between the baseline survey and training, we pre-registered our study analyses with Aspredicted.org (http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=ww92z8), describing our plan to analyze main effects of the training at immediate post-test and 6-month follow-up, as well as to assess interactive effects of various baseline measures and the training on our outcomes of interest.

Data Collection & Analysis: Data collection involved three phases. First, teachers who consented to participate (N=132, 99% of teachers enrolled in the programs) completed a hard-copy baseline survey in late-spring/ late-summer prior to their first year. Then, in late fall, participants still enrolled in their program and/or teaching (N=124) received a Qualtrics link via email. After reading the introductory language, participants were randomly assigned (by Qualtrics) to the training or control activity. Immediately after completing the training or activity, participants completed a follow-up survey. Six months later, participating teachers (N=121) received a link to complete a follow-up survey.

Random assignment was successful. We observed no significant differences between our self-compassion or control group on tests of baseline equivalence. In light of this and in keeping with our pre-registration plan, we did not include covariates in our models. We ran a series of independent samples t-tests to assess the main effects of the training on immediate post-test and 6-month follow-up measures, as well as a series of moderation models using PROCESS macro (Model 1) in SPSS to assess interactive effects (9).

Findings: Contrary to pre-registered hypotheses, we found little evidence for a main effect of the training on our primary outcomes of interest (e.g., motivational beliefs and growth orientation toward teaching) or on our secondary outcomes of interest (e.g., self-compassion, stress, burnout, well-being, commitment to teaching).

Interactive analyses revealed that for teachers highly committed to teaching at baseline, the training led to greater self-efficacy and motivational beliefs, greater ability to handle stressors in teaching, a heightened growth orientation toward teaching, and reduced levels of burnout at 6-month follow-up. In addition, teachers high in stress at baseline who completed the training experienced greater growth in self-compassion over the course of the school year. The training had differential effects depending on teacher education program and gender. For instance, the training led to a host of positive outcomes for male teachers but had no significant effects on female teachers.

Conclusion: The training developed for this study represents a novel integration of contemplative science and social-psychological interventions. Findings suggest that there is value to this integration and that these types of trainings are easy to implement. In the future, it will be important to consider treatment heterogeneity when developing and testing these types of trainings (10). Given teachers' wide range of psychological experiences in the classroom and pre-existing individual differences, we propose that trainings be designed with participants' specific adversities in mind.

In sum, we see this training as a promising low-cost, low-burden approach for instilling adaptive beliefs and interpretations of adversity in beginning teachers - beliefs that can ultimately lead to reductions in burnout and increased commitment to the profession.

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