

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



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Study 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 these new teachers, sapping motivation, undermining self-efficacy, and ultimately increasing their risk of experiencing stress, burnout, and leaving the profession (3-7).

We hypothesized that instilling self-compassionate beliefs during the transition to teaching could help to reduce common worries of beginning teachers and bolster their adaptive beliefs and growth orientation toward teaching, thereby reducing burnout and boosting their commitment to teaching.

We sought to instill these beliefs through a novel and brief training - combining approaches used in social-psychological and contemplative interventions.

Primary & Secondary Outcomes

Primary and secondary outcome measures assessed post-training & at 6-month follow-up

	Post-Training	6-Month Follow-Up
Primary Outcomes		
Self-Compassionate Beliefs	X	X
Motivational Beliefs ^a	X	X
Growth Orientation toward Teaching ^a	X	X
Efficacy Beliefs	X	X
General Teacher Self-Efficacy ^b		X
Growth in Teacher Self-Efficacy		X
Avoidance & Proving Goal Orientation	X	X
Secondary Outcomes		
Global Self-Compassion ^b		X
Growth in Self-Compassion		X
Teacher Self-Compassion		X
Mindfulness ^b		X
Growth in Mindfulness		X
Well-Being ^c		X
Perceived Stress ^b		X
Growth in Perceived Stress		X
Occupational Stress		X
Occupational Burnout		X
Job Satisfaction		X
Commitment to Teaching ^b		X

Notes: ^a Composite measure derived through both Exploratory Factor Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Measure assessed at baseline as well. ^b Composite measure derived through Confirmatory Factor Analysis only.

Research Design

We carried out a double-blind, placebo-controlled longitudinal field experiment. Teachers were recruited 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. We pre-registered our study analyses, describing our plans to analyze treatment main effects and to explore heterogeneity of treatment effects based on baseline characteristics and pre-existing dispositions.

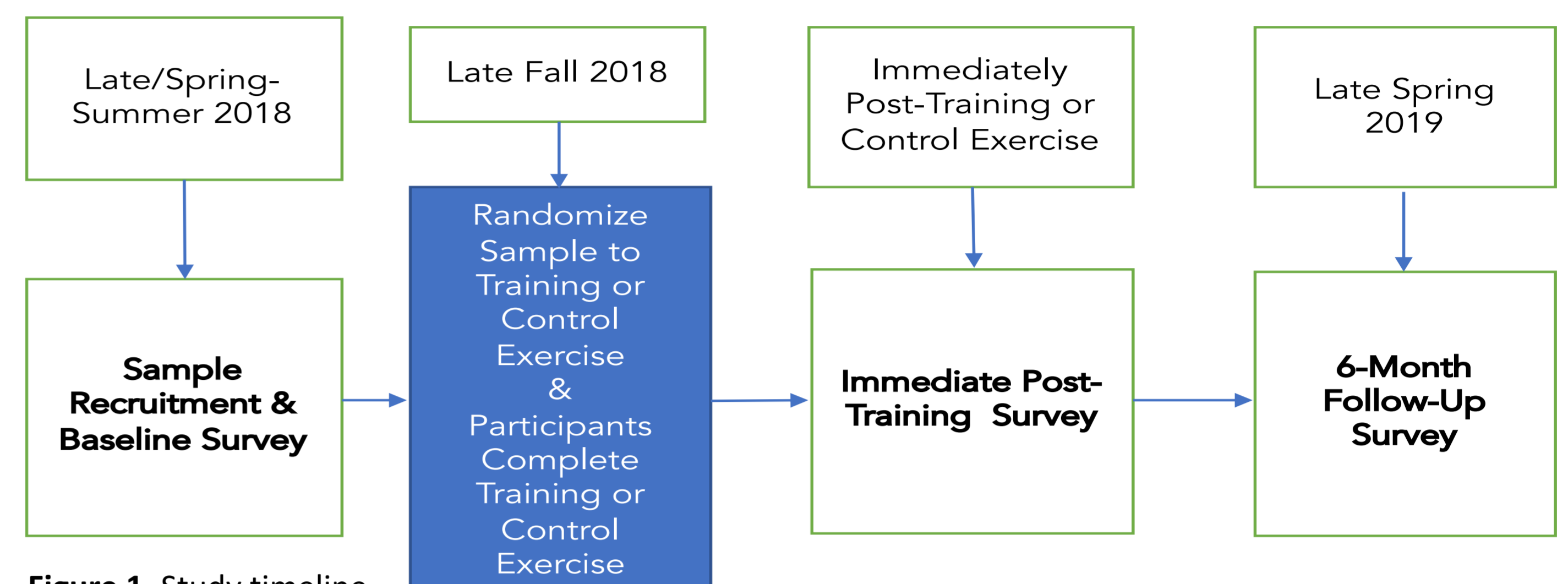


Figure 1. Study timeline

The Sample

- 119 teachers from three teacher education programs completed either the self-compassion training or the control activity, all completed the immediate post-training survey
- 118 teachers completed a 6-month follow-up survey

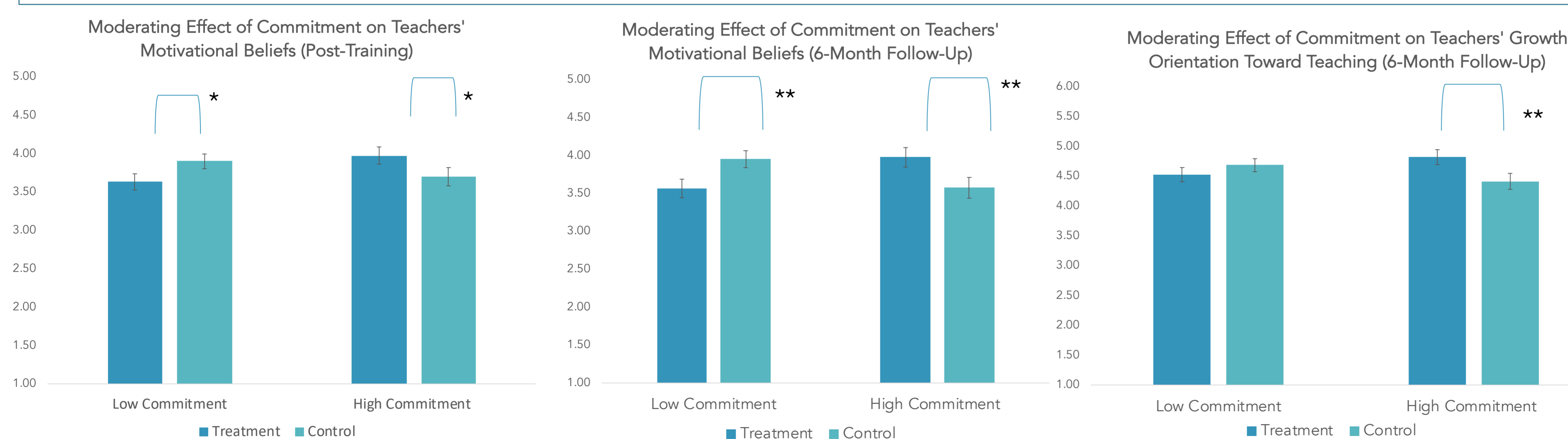
The Training

The training integrated techniques from social-psychological interventions and insights from contemplative science to tap into and alter participants' pre-existing beliefs about adversity in teaching. The training included three key components:

- It used "psychologically wise" framing, where participants were made to feel like the benefactors, rather than the beneficiaries.
- It involved participants listening to a series of teacher testimonials - developed from focus groups with teachers in each participating teacher education 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).
- Participants completed two written exercises: 1) identifying common themes in the testimonials; and 2) writing a letter of advice to a future first-year teacher in their program.

Findings

There was no main effect of training on the primary or secondary outcomes of interest, but teachers who reported a strong initial commitment to teaching (measured prior to the first year of teaching) experienced significant treatment benefits on a range of outcomes, as did teachers who were higher in stress prior to their first year and male teachers.



Conclusions

The training developed for this study represents a novel integration of contemplative science and social-psychological interventions. Findings suggest there is value to this integration. Trainings of this kind are also low-cost and easy to implement. In the future, it will be important to consider treatment heterogeneity when developing and testing these types of trainings (9). Given teachers' pre-existing individual differences and the wide range of school contexts in which they teach, we propose trainings be designed with participants' specific adversities in mind.

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