Symposium Justification

Symposium title: Cultivating mindfulness among educators to support their health, wellbeing, and efficacy

Educators are faced with the difficult task of meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of diverse learners in their classrooms. Given the psychological resources this requires, teaching is a particularly demanding profession. Many teachers report experiencing high levels of stress on a regular basis, and this can negatively impact their health, wellbeing, and effectiveness in the classroom. Although educators’ stress can have strong negative consequences for students’ learning, stress management is rarely covered in educators’ formal training or professional development. An important objective for research and practice, then, is to identify promising interventions for educators that enable them to cope with stress, burnout, and the daily demands of teaching.

The Prosocial Classroom model suggests that educators’ social-emotional competence may protect them from experiencing a “burnout cascade” of deteriorating classroom climate, student misbehavior, emotional exhaustion, and callousness (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In particular, mindfulness—or intentional, nonjudgmental attention to and awareness of the present moment—may be particularly useful in classroom settings because it prevents burnout, enables non-reactive classroom management strategies, and facilitates healthy teacher-student relationships, among other benefits. Based on this premise, mindfulness-based training programs for educators have been developed as an innovative and promising approach to professional development.

Recent trials indicate that mindfulness-based interventions show great promise in supporting educators. For example, a modified version of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) recently was found to have positive impacts on mindfulness, self-compassion, and burnout (Flook et al., 2013). Another intervention model, the Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques (SMART)-in-Education program, has been shown to improve mindfulness, self-compassion, and attention, as well as reduce stress and burnout (Roese et al., 2013). The Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) program also has previously been linked with improved mindfulness, emotion regulation, and efficacy, as well as reduced burnout and perceived time pressure (Jennings et al., 2013). Results across studies in this emerging field provide evidence that cultivating mindfulness among educators can promote their health and wellbeing and may even positively impact classroom processes that impact students.

The papers in this symposium contribute to this field by replicating prior research on the positive effects of mindfulness. The first paper documents that several aspects of educators’ mindfulness, particularly mindful attention, predict change across the school year in educators’ efficacy in student engagement, classroom management, and instructional practices. The second paper replicates previous research on the CARE professional development program in a randomized controlled trial with a sample of teachers in a high-poverty urban setting. The third paper demonstrates the efficacy of a new intervention model, the Comprehensive Approach to Learning Mindfulness (CALM) program, and adds to accumulating evidence on the benefits of mindfulness training for educators.

With teacher stress and attrition at alarming rates, promoting educators’ health and social-emotional wellbeing is critical. Cultivating mindfulness shows promise in fostering healthy educators, classrooms, and students, and a growing body of work underscores the added value of incorporating mindfulness into professional development for educators.