Mind the Teachers.

*Potential of a mindfulness training for teachers’ well-being and professional competence*

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The problem: Too many teachers suffer from high strain.

- Teaching can be a demanding profession. Many teachers experience chronic strain that is not only a risk factor for psychological and physical well-being but may also impact their classroom performance (Schaarschmidt et al. 2007, Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Klusmann, 2013).

- Even though much is known about the main stressors and risk factors, surprisingly little has been done to systematically support the teachers in coping with the profession's demands.

- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Training (MBSR) is an effective training for the reduction of stress and the enhancement of personal resources in both clinical and non-clinical samples (Fjorback, Arendt, Ørnøl, Fink & Walach, 2011).

- Empirical trials addressing MBSR's efficacy for the enhancement of teachers' personal resources and their instructional quality are lacking.
skills and mind-sets in their professional lives to reduce stress and feelings of burnout.

The theory of change we pursue in this study is that MT provides teachers with a set of resources (mindfulness and occupational self-compassion) that helps them to cope more effectively with and bounce back more quickly from the inherent and considerable social-emotional and cognitive challenges of classroom teaching (see Figure 1). By coping more effectively and being more resilient, we believe, teachers conserve physical and mental energies that are then available to invest in effectively managing, relating to, motivating, and teaching students. Furthermore, by assisting teachers in developing the kinds of self-regulatory strategies and qualities of awareness that are critical for stress management and effective teaching, teachers become role models for the kinds of skills and mind-sets that students in the 21st century also need to be successful in school and in life (e.g., Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Moffitt et al., 2011; Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990). In these ways, mindfulness training for teachers is hypothesized to exert both direct effects on teachers' capacities to teach more effectively and indirect effects on students' capacities to learn more effectively (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; MLERN, 2012). A logic model that describes these hypothetical effects of mindfulness training on teachers and students is presented in Figure 1 (see also Roeser, Skinner, et al., 2012). In this study, we examine the first several steps in this logic model with regard to the hypothesized effects of mindfulness training on teachers' ability to cope with job stress and reduce feelings of occupational burnout.

Teaching as Stressful Occupation

Whereas an understanding of the deleterious effects of stress on children's health, well-being, and readiness to learn through the impairment of executive functions such as focused attention and emotion control is among the key insights of modern educational and developmental neuroscience (Blair & Diamond, 2010; Davidson & McEwen, 2012; Diamond & Lee, 2011), a parallel understanding of the deleterious effects of job stress and burnout on teachers' health, well-being, and teaching ability, through the same executive functions, is only beginning (MLERN, 2012; Montgomerie & Rupp, 2005). In a recent meta-analysis, for example, Montgomerie and Rupp (2005) identified individual differences in emotion-regulation skills as a key factor in understanding teacher stress.

Why is teaching among the most stressful of occupations (Johnston et al., 2005; Travers, 2001)? Some have theorized that teachers' job stress is due primarily to the inherently social-emotional demands of working with up to 30 or more children or adolescents at once (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Zapf, 2002). Others have pointed to the uncertain and attention-intensive nature of teaching—an activity in which teachers must flexibly and creatively make hundreds of decisions "on the fly" each day—as a key source of teacher job stress (Roeser, Skinner, et al., 2012). Teachers themselves report that workload, lack of collaborative time with colleagues, lack of support from administrators, and the management of difficult student behavior in the classroom are among the most stressful aspects of their jobs (e.g., Kyriacou, 2001). Some of these factors appear to be more inherent in the job of teaching itself (e.g., managing multiple relationships at once), whereas others seem amenable to change through school policy and practice (e.g., provisions for common planning time).

Why does understanding teacher stress matter for our understanding of student motivation and learning? Over time, chronic high levels of teacher stress can lead to occupational burnout, a syndrome consisting of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1996). This in turn negatively affects students' motivation and learning (Lloyd & Bumpus, 2010; Maynard, 2006; Pate & Smith, 2009; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2007). For example, students in classrooms with teachers who report higher levels of burnout exhibit lower levels of motivation (e.g., Maynard, 2006) and less effective classroom management (e.g., Maynard, 2006). Given the high demand of teaching and the mental and physical toughness required to sustain a career in education, developing strategies to promote and maintain healthy levels of teacher well-being is of utmost importance (Cheney, 2012). This includes understanding the deleterious impacts of burnout on teachers as well as the potential benefits of strategies to promote teachers' health and well-being.
Central personal resources for teacher well-being

- Self-regulation
  - Ability to disassociate from work problems
  - Coping with failure
  - Teacher-Efficacy

- Emotion regulation
  - Regulation of negative emotions
  - Empathy and compassion for students
  - Enthusiasm for teaching

High resources are associated with high teaching performance

Purposes of study

1. Investigate the relationship between teacher-wellbeing and teaching quality.

2. Assess the impact of a mindfulness training on teachers‘ well-being, competencies and classroom performance.

3. Examine the mediating role of mindfulness.
Method

- The content of the classic MBSR curriculum was not changed but the duration shortenend to 6 weeks (4 evening meetings and 2 whole-day trainings).
- A mixed-method design was applied:

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<tr>
<th>Quantative data of teachers and students</th>
<th>Qualitative interviews with teachers</th>
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<td>Teachers' self-report on mindfulness, health and social emotional competence outcomes, e.g. general health, positive and negative affect</td>
<td>Student-rated classroom performance, e.g. classroom management, satisfaction with teacher</td>
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<td>Qualitative teacher interviews to assess the perceived impact of the training on classroom performance</td>
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Sample

Teacher sample
- Experimental group, N=18
- Control group, N=15
- 12 classes

Student sample
- 221 students
- 9 classes
- 147 students

386 students

Groups did not differ in mean age, work experience or gender

Groups did not differ in gender, but in mean age:
- Exp. gr.: mean age= 15.3 (SD=3.4), contr. gr.: mean age= 13.4 (SD=3.4), t(318)=4.68, p<.001
Students were happier with healthy teachers.

$r = .504,\ p = .003$
Cohen’s $d$ (effect size) for between group differences based on change scores compared to baseline, directions of Cohen’s $d$ were modified so that positive $d$s indicate superiority of the intervention group over the control group

$d > 0,20 = \text{small effect}; \ d > 0,50 = \text{medium effect}, \ d > 0,80=\text{large effect}$
Possible side-effect: less engagement?

Cohen’s $d$ (effect size) for between group differences based on change scores compared to baseline
$d > 0.20 = \text{small effect};$ $d > 0.50 = \text{medium effect};$ $d > 0.80 = \text{large effect}$
Changes in mindful acceptance and presence differentially mediated the training effects.

**=p<.01; Standardized regression coefficients of predictors and outcomes controlling for mediators; experimental condition: dummy-coded with intervention group=1.
Main themes of teacher reports on the impact of mindfulness in the classroom

- **More Self-Awareness**: „I am noticing that I observe my own actions mindfully. Sometimes it's pretty shocking to see how I function, how I talk and walk around. But that's the first step to notice these things and that happens all the time."

- **Changes in health behaviour**: „When I am arriving at home, strained from work and I practice the mindfulness exercises, the tension literally leaves my body. It has a positive impact because I fell lighter, more relaxed."

- **Saying no**: „It's also important to notice when there are too many demands. However, I feel also much more confident to say: Stop, I can't do more!"

- **Classroom-Management**: „I think I am reacting differently when classroom problems occur. I don't raise my voice, instead I say calmly: “Ok, I've just been angry at you because you were too loud but now...”

- **Withitness**: „I don't react on every little flaw anymore. There are hundreds of them in every classroom and I am learning to stay more focused."

- **Relationship with students**: „I feel more open to the students and listen closer to their needs."

- **Link btw. self-care and student-care**: „When I take better care of myself, I also take better care of my students. I allow them to be individual characters and understand their needs better."
Discussion

Main Findings

- Compared to waitlist-control teachers in the experimental condition reported a high impact of the training on their well-being and social emotional competence.
- In qualitative interviews teachers revealed not only using mindfulness for self-regulation but also for relating differently to students.
- Differential effects of the mindfullnes construct were found with mindful presence mediating self-regulation and mindful acceptance accounting for emotional changes.

Conclusion

- We demonstrated that a mindfulness training effectively improves teachers' well-being and competences and that the teaching quality may benefit of these changes.

Limitations

- The power of this study is limited due to its small sample size and its quasi-experimental design.
- Future work aimed at assessing the effects of MBSR on the teaching quality may benefit from choosing a more homogenous student sample or including an observational coding system.
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