

Supporting Teachers, Supporting Students: Teachers' Stress, Self-compassion, and Mindsets
about Children's Behavior

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Abstract

Existing research has established that many teachers experience high stress and burnout, which negatively impacts their own well-being and their classroom practices and strategies for managing misbehavior. However, gaps exist in understanding how teachers' internal social-emotional characteristics, such as empathy, compassion for their students' struggles, and compassion for themselves, relate to their behavior management strategies. An additional gap exists for understanding whether experiences with stress and necessary supports varies across teachers at different levels of schooling (e.g., elementary versus middle). This dissertation aimed to address these gaps across three separate, but related studies.

Study 1 quantitatively examined elementary teachers' (N=178) self-reports of self-compassion, compassion for others, mindsets about misbehavior, approaches to behavior management, and level of job burnout. Findings indicated that greater self-compassion and compassion uniquely contributed to higher confidence in managing behaviors, use of positive strategies, and lower reports of burnout.

Study 2 analyzed demonstrations of empathy in interviews with elementary teachers (N=27) about students' social-emotional well-being and behavioral struggles, and utilized both interview and survey responses to examine connections between empathy and perceived effectiveness of behavior management strategies. Findings indicated three primary categories of

empathy: high, low, and inconsistent. Teachers' quantitative scores and qualitative descriptions of behavior management strategies largely aligned with their empathy profile.

Study 3 aimed to examine how teachers' (N=27) levels of stress and ideal solutions to stress might differ across elementary and middle school. Analyses revealed that elementary teachers' primary stressor related to perceived pressure to care for students' needs, whereas middle school teachers' reported excessive time demands and expectations. Teachers' ideal solutions to stress aligned with their stressors, where elementary teachers expressed needing more support, and middle school teachers wanted schools to prioritize the best use of their time.

Taken together, these findings highlight various characteristics of teachers' skills and experiences that promote their own well-being and reduced stress, as well as the approaches they utilize toward managing behaviors. The findings of these three studies indicate that research must continue examining teachers' unique skills and needs to provide the most relevant supports that positively benefit teachers and the students in their classrooms.