

# Cultivating compassion in schools: The impact of a compassion focused intervention on teachers' mental health and wellbeing

Marcela Matos<sup>1</sup>, Isabel Albuquerque<sup>1</sup>, Marina Cunha<sup>1,2</sup>, Margarida Pedroso Lima<sup>1</sup>, Ana Galhardo<sup>1,2</sup>, Lara Palmeira<sup>1</sup>,

Kirsten McEwan<sup>3</sup>, Frances Maratos<sup>4</sup>, & Paul Gilbert<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>CINEICC – Center for Research in Neuropsychology and Cognitive and Behavioural Interventions, University of Coimbra; <sup>2</sup>Instituto Superior Miguel Torga, Coimbra; <sup>3</sup>Centre for Compassion /Mental Health Research Unit, Derbyshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust; <sup>4</sup>University of Derby, College of Health and Natural Sciences, Derby, United Kingdom

## Introduction

Schools are becoming increasingly stressful environments for both teachers and pupils. Recent studies suggest that teachers present a high risk of professional stress, which negatively impacts well-being and professional performance. Furthermore, mental health problems are highly prevalent in the school context, affecting both teachers and students (McCallum et al., 2017). Therefore it is crucial to promote adaptive cognitive and emotional regulation that support teachers in coping with the challenges of the school context and promote their mental wellbeing. Growing empirical support has highlighted the beneficial impact of compassionate-based interventions on improving emotional regulation skills central to stress regulation (Kirby, 2016). These interventions have revealed numerous benefits in diverse populations and contexts, such as in mental health indicators (e.g., lower depression, stress, anxiety), physical health (e.g., regulation of neurochemical processes associated with the stress response) and at an interpersonal level (e.g., greater empathy and compassion, improved interpersonal and social relations) (Kirby et al, 2017; Leaviss & Uttley, 2015; Matos et al., 2017). In educational settings, Maratos, Matos et al. (2020) investigated the international utility of a pilot version of a 6-module Compassionate Mind Training (CMT; Gilbert, 2014) program with school staff to improve well-being. Results revealed that the initiative was well received, with teachers reporting positively on their experiences of the curriculum and practices.

This study aims at investigating the impact of the Compassionate Schools Program (CSP), a revised version of the six-module CMT group intervention for teachers, on mental wellbeing indicators.

## Results

### Group Comparisons

Repeated measures ANOVA comparing pre (T1) and post-CSP (T2) (matched T1-T2 IG n=58 CG n=42) showed within-subjects main ( $F=4.99$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.628$ ) and interaction ( $F=2.70$ ,  $p=.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.477$ ) effects, and marginally significant between-subjects effects ( $F=1.62$ ,  $p=.057$ ,  $\eta^2=.354$ ).

Significant within-group main effects were found for burnout, depression, anxiety and stress, and positive affect (safe, relaxed and activated). Significant timexgroup interaction effects were found for positive affect (safe, relaxed and activated).

After the CSP, teachers in the CSP group showed significant:

- **increases in positive affect;**
- **reductions in burnout, depressive, anxiety and stress symptoms.**

### Stepped wedge analysis

A subset of teachers who were part of the control group between T1 and T2, underwent the CSP between T2 and T3; n=37 (matched T1-T2-T3 = 32).

Repeated measures ANOVAs comparing baseline (T1), pre-CSP (T2), and post-CSP (T3) showed significant within-subjects effects ( $F=4.297$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.739$ ), revealing significant T2-T3:

- **increases in positive affect** (safe, relaxed and activated);
- **reductions in teachers' experiential avoidance, burnout, and symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress.**

## References

- Gilbert, P. (2014). The origins and nature of compassion focused therapy. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 53, 6–41. doi:10.1111/bjc.12043.
- Kirby, J.N. (2016). Compassion interventions: The programs, the evidence, and implications for research and practice. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1111/papt.12104
- Kirby, J. N., Tellegen, C. L., & Steindl, S. R. (2017). A systematic review and meta-analysis of compassion-based interventions: Current state of knowledge and future directions. *Behavior Therapy*. doi: 10.1016/j.beth.2017.06.003
- Leaviss, J., & Uttley, L. (2015). Psychotherapeutic benefits of compassion focused therapy: An early systematic review. *Psychological Medicine*, 45, 927–945. DOI:10.1017/S0033291714002141.
- Maratos, F., Matos, M., Albuquerque, I., Wood, W., Palmeira, L., Cunha, M., Lima, M. & Gilbert, P. (2020). Exploring the international utility of progressing Compassionate Mind Training in School Settings: A comparison of Implementation Effectiveness of the same curricula in the UK and Portugal. *Psychology of Education Review*. In press
- Matos, M., Duarte, C., Duarte, J., Pinto-Gouveia, J., Petrocchi, N., Basran, J. & Gilbert, P. (2017). Psychological and physiological effects of compassionate mind training: A pilot randomized controlled study. *Mindfulness*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1007/s12671-017-0745-7
- McCallum, F., Price, D., Graham, A., & Morrison, A. (2017). *Teacher Wellbeing: A review of the literature*. Sydney: The Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales Limited.

## Methods

### Procedure & Participants

A randomized controlled study was conducted in a sample of 153 public school Portuguese teachers (CSP N=80; WLC n=73), recruited within 4 separate schools from 3 different towns. The sample was composed of 11 (7%) men, 142 (93%) women, age range 25 - 63,  $M = 51.44$  ( $SD = 7.18$ ).

Participants completed self-report measures of experiential avoidance, burnout, depression, anxiety and stress, and positive affect, at pre (T1) and post intervention (T2). A subsample of teachers from the WLC group (N=37) underwent the CSP after T2 and completed the same questionnaires after the intervention (T3).

Participants attended the 6-module curriculum delivered across eight 2.5 hour sessions. the 6-week CSP and were instructed to practice the CMT exercises everyday or in moments of stress. They completed a series of self-report measures pre and post-intervention.

### Measures

*Teachers' Action and Acceptance Questionnaire* (Hinds, E., et al., 2015)

*Types of Positive Affect Scale* (Gilbert et al., 2009)

*Shirom-Melamed Burnout Questionnaire* (Melamed et al., 2006)

*Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale* (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995)

### Compassionate Schools Program

6-module CMT intervention adapted for educational settings.

8 weekly sessions (2.5 hours each): Psychoeducation + experiential exercises

- Session 1: Compassion and nature of mind
- Session 2: How emotions work & Mindfulness
- Session 3: Cultivate a compassionate mind
- Session 4: Multiple selves and working with our emotions
- Session 5: Working with self criticism
- Session 6 : Compassion in every day life

**Table 1. Means and SDs of the Outcome Measures at Pre (T0) and Post-CSP (T1), and Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (CSP n = 58; WLC n = 42).**

Outcome measures	Groups	Pre-CSP	Post-CSP	F	p
		M (SD)	M (SD)		
Burnout	CSP	48.64 (15.81)	46.38 (13.80)	7.21	.009
	Control	54.12 (15.37)	50.12 (16.04)		
Depression	CSP	2.93 (3.06)	1.67 (1.60)	15.49	<.001
	Control	4.52 (4.48)	3.04 (3.28)		
Anxiety	CSP	2.72 (2.81)	1.83 (1.99)	11.79	.001
	Control	4.12 (3.52)	2.93 (3.36)		
Stress	CSP	6.52 (3.70)	5.50 (2.72)	5.52	.020
	Control	8.02 (4.45)	7.14 (3.65)		
Safeness_Positive affect	CSP	2.36 (0.70)	2.81 (0.71)	15.86	<.001
	Control	2.31 (0.67)	2.37 (0.70)		
Relaxed_Positive affect	CSP	2.16 (0.77)	2.58 (0.82)	11.06	.001
	Control	2.12 (0.84)	2.16 (0.80)		
Activated_Positive affect	CSP	2.64 (0.72)	2.96 (0.56)	11.94	.001
	Control	2.54 (0.81)	2.59 (0.74)		

## Conclusion

These findings suggest that the Compassionate Schools Program may be an effective psychological group intervention to promote psychological flexibility, well-being and mental health in educators. The CSP had a positive impact on teachers' satisfaction with life and feelings levels of safeness, connectedness to others, calmness, and vitality, and on reducing burnout, depression anxiety and stress symptoms.

The cost-effectiveness and usefulness of this program seems promising, and future work should continue to assess its efficacy and promote its dissemination in other settings/countries.