



Caring relationships in school staff: Exploring the link between compassion and teacher work engagement



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H I G H L I G H T S

- The role of compassion at work received from teaching colleagues and principals.
- The effect of compassion on teacher engagement and well-being at their workplace.
- Compassion positively relates to teachers' vigor, commitment, and satisfaction.
- Compassion negatively relates to teacher burnout.
- Compassion as a mechanism for coping with the stressful teaching conditions.

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A B S T R A C T

Compassion in the school setting traditionally defines students as the recipients. Teachers, on the other hand, have yet to be studied as such. This study examines the effects of compassion expressed by teaching colleagues and school principals on teacher school engagement and subjective well-being at work. A sample of 226 teachers in Israel filled out a questionnaire in which they rated the amount of compassion received from their school colleagues and principals, as well as their job satisfaction, organizational commitment, emotional vigor, and burnout. Multi-level modeling analysis techniques showed that expressions of compassion from teaching colleagues and principals related positively to teachers' sense of emotional vigor, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, but negatively to teacher burnout; this relationship was mediated by teacher positive affect (PA). Furthermore, there was evidence for the role of compassion in coping with the stressful teaching conditions inherent to the profession. The mediation relationship through teacher PA as moderated by student-misbehavior stress was strongest when student-misbehavior stress was high, and provided teachers with the ability to cope with the stressful condition and maintain work outcome levels (emotional vigor, burnout, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction). These findings emphasize the crucial role of compassion in the workplace, and suggest it should be targeted by principals and other educational decision makers.

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1. Introduction

Workplaces are potentially compassionate arenas in nature, whether due to events in employees' personal lives or to organizationally induced ones (Fisher, 2002; Rynes, Bartunek, Dutton, & Margolis, 2012). Compassion in the workplace is defined as expressions of affection, caring, generosity, and tenderness to fellow

workers (e.g., colleagues, subordinates) without expecting specific organizational benefits (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Compassion is particularly crucial in a school setting. The educational workplace, which consists primarily of teachers expressing care, affection, kindness, and tenderness toward their students, is the ideal site for fostering compassion among employees. However, educational psychology has thus far only exclusively examined the effect of compassion on students, and has neglected its potential impact on school employees – namely teachers. Beyond being a place for students, schools are the workplaces of teachers who are also the recipients and expressers of affection and emotions, not only in relation to their students but also with respect to one another.

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Examining teachers as compassion receivers is important given recent affective research in organizational psychology which has shown that emotions exist among employees at work, and even impact organizational outcomes (Barsade, Brief, & Spataro, 2003; Brief & Weiss, 2002; Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008; Robinson, Watkins, & Harmon-Jones, 2013). The present study draws on organizational psychology research and theory and examines a model that aims to demonstrate the effect of compassion towards teachers expressed by teaching colleagues and school principals on significant teacher work outcomes such as emotional vigor, burnout, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. The model also proposes positive affect (PA) as a mediator of these relationships, and explores the role of compassion as a coping mechanism when teachers face student-misbehavior stress (see Fig. 1). The underlying assumption is that workplace compassion can respond to the inevitable demands of teaching and act as a mechanism to face the contemporary challenges of the education system.

2. Conceptualizing compassion at the workplace

Compassion has been defined as “an attitude toward other(s), either close others or strangers or all of humanity, containing feelings, cognitions, and behaviors that are focused on caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding the other(s), particularly when the other(s) is (are) perceived to be suffering or in need” (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005, p. 630). It is based on warmth, connection (Fehr, 1988; Sternberg, 1988), and the affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply intertwined (Berscheid & Walster, 1978). According to Underwood (2009), being compassionate involves valuing the other, a profound understanding of the needs and feelings of others, emotionally engagement and an attitude of openness and receptivity. Conceptually, compassion differs from the similar, well-established concept such as perceived social support. Perceived social support refers to an individual’s feeling that others care and that if something were to happen, others are available to help provide support (e.g., sense of belonging, tangible support, and informational support; Russell, Altmaier, & Van Velzen, 1987). Thus, while social support is a reactive attitude on the part of the individual (Knobloch & Whittington, 2002), compassion is proactive (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005).

Compassion at the workplace refers to behavior clearly motivated by concern for others at work (i.e., peers, subordinates, colleagues, clients), and acts of kindness that are directly intended for the benefit of others, without expecting organizational benefits. It can be triggered at a particular working moment, for instance when colleagues express their feelings about problems at work (Fredrickson, 2013), or on a more regular and ongoing basis, when demonstrations of tenderness, caring, and affection are embedded

as a routine in interpersonal relationships at the workplace (Rynes et al., 2012). Accordingly, this study applied the three underlying key assumptions described above: compassion may take a wide range of forms and feelings (e.g., gestures of emotional support, expressing care, generosity and tenderness); compassion can be considered and measured as a routinely ongoing phenomenon that is expressed and received on a daily basis; it can be expressed through diverse workplace sources such as directly from teaching colleagues or school principals (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006).

Nevertheless, compassion at the workplace as a research topic is still in its infancy. Only recently has organizational psychology research begun to study the positive effects of compassion at work and the organizational conditions in which it arises (Dutton et al., 2006; Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011; Lilius et al., 2008). However, although research on compassion at work is rare and generally dominated by theoretical studies, there is emerging evidence of its value for organizations – not only for their employees’ well-being but for organizational effectiveness as well (Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000; Frost et al., 2006; Kanov et al., 2004; Lilius et al., 2008; O’Donohoe & Turley, 2006; Tsui, 2013). Current research in the field is promising, revealing evidence of a positive relationship between demonstrations of compassion towards and among employees, strengthening of work bonds, and enhancing employee productivity (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002; Frost et al., 2000). Recent studies have also indicated that receiving compassion from another colleague at work allows employees to view their peers as more humane and their organization as more caring (Lilius et al., 2008). Moreover, compassion from another was found to be particularly salient and productive in workplaces where an employee has a caregiving job or routinely deals with emotionally exhausted colleagues (Kahn, 1993; O’Donohoe & Turley, 2006).

3. The consequences of compassion on teacher work attitudes

While the study of compassion and its effects on organizational factors (e.g., employee commitment, satisfaction, and motivation) is rapidly growing in organizational psychology, it has hardly been researched in the field of educational psychology. The existing handful of studies have mainly focused on the influence of compassionate and caring teachers on their students’ well-being, performance, and achievements (Barber, 2002; Larson, 2006; McCormick, O’Connor, Cappella, & McClowry, 2013; O’Connor, 2008; Schussler & Collins, 2006; Vogt, 2002). These findings, however, are congruent with the results of studies conducted in other occupational sectors, and reinforce the potentially positive effect of compassion on teachers’ sense of well-being. For example,

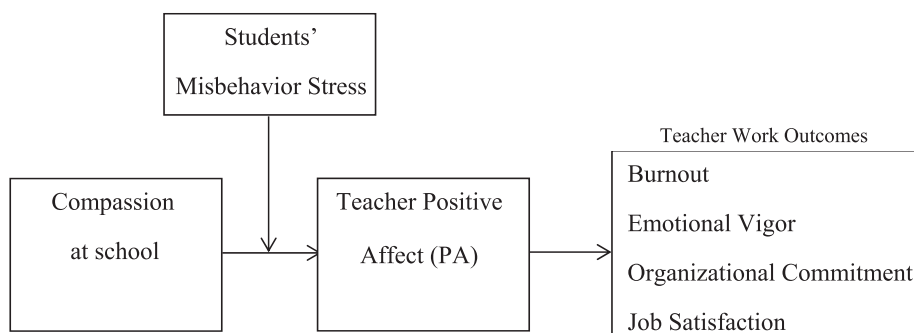


Fig. 1. The research model for the study of compassion toward teachers at school.

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