



Direct and indirect effects of Key2Teach on teachers' sense of self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion, a randomized controlled trial

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Self-efficacy for instructional strategies increased as a result of Key2Teach.
- Emotional exhaustion decreased five months after finishing Key2Teach.
- Effect of Key2Teach on emotional exhaustion was not mediated through self-efficacy.
- Indirect effects were seen for two domains of self-efficacy through closeness.
- Effect of Key2Teach on emotional exhaustion was not mediated through closeness.

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ABSTRACT

The effects of Key2Teach on teachers' sense of self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion related to students with externalizing problem behaviour were investigated using an RCT-design. 103 teachers were randomly assigned to an intervention or control condition and followed during a school-year. Data were collected at three time-points. Self-efficacy for instructional strategies improved at post-test and emotional exhaustion decreased at follow-up as a result of Key2Teach. Self-efficacy did not mediate the effect on emotional exhaustion. The effect of Key2Teach on self-efficacy concerning student engagement and classroom management was mediated by an increase in closeness. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Experienced and effective teachers are important for optimal academic and social development of students. Promoting teachers' skills and competencies and retaining experienced teachers within the profession is therefore considered of importance in many western countries, to such an extent that the European Union has

prioritized teacher training and teacher education in its educational policy (ET 2020; Council of the European Union, 2009). However, teaching can be challenging and many teachers experience overload in their daily work (Day & Hong, 2016; Evers, Tomic, & Brouwers, 2004). One of the main reasons for such overload and the related turnover in the educational profession, is that teachers find it difficult to interact with students with externalizing problem behaviours (Aloe, Shisler, Norris, Nickerson, & Rinker, 2014; Mashburn, Hamre, Downer, & Pianta, 2006; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011; Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010; Yoon, 2002). The conflictual relationships that develop in

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interaction with students with externalizing problem behaviour may cause reduced feelings of competence and provoke emotional exhaustion in teachers (Evers, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2002; Spilt et al., 2011; Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014). This study investigates to what extent the teacher-focused coaching intervention Key2Teach, which has previously been shown to improve teacher's relationship with students who show externalizing behaviours, positively impacts teachers' sense of self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion. This may highlight a possible avenue towards reducing the work-related stressors that teachers encounter on a daily basis.

1.1. Theoretical background: effects of externalizing problem behaviour

Research from the Health Behaviour and School Aged Children study in the Netherlands shows that nearly one in four of the Dutch primary school students exhibit externalizing problem behaviour, which include conduct problems, aggressive behaviour and hyperactivity problems (Goodman, 2001; Looze et al., 2014). Such behaviour can consist of distractibility, hyperactivity, disobedience and hostile aggression (Tsouloupas et al., 2010). Dealing with externalizing problem behaviour is difficult for teachers (Harrison, Vannest, Davis, & Reynolds, 2012; Kaakinen, 2017). Not only has such externalizing problem behaviour been related to academic underachievement and peer victimization (Lier et al., 2012), research also suggests that such problems pose a significant threat to teachers' occupational wellbeing.

A meta-analysis of Aloe et al. (2014) indicates a significant relationship between student externalizing problem behaviour and teachers' symptoms of burnout. Based on the Job Demand-Resources Model, symptoms of burnout can be the result of an imbalance between job demands and job resources (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). The experience of having insufficient emotional resources in social interactions, which obstructs professionals to be fully present, is the main characteristic of burnout, a work-related phenomenon (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Taris, Van Horn, & Schaufeli, 2004). Such emotional exhaustion is the driving force in predicting job dissatisfaction (Martin, Sass, & Schmitt, 2012). Research has shown that teachers are more prone to burnout compared to other professions (Hooftman et al., 2016). The externalizing problem behaviour of students can be considered a serious job demand when teachers do not experience enough support. Their daily interactions with students with externalizing problem behaviour put teachers at risk for developing such burnout problems (Aloe et al., 2014).

In addition, externalizing problem behaviour in students can challenge teacher's sense of self-efficacy (Doumen et al., 2008; Gastaldi, Pasta, Longobardi, Prino, & Quaglia, 2014; Spilt et al., 2011). Based on the social-cognitive theory, teachers' sense of self-efficacy is the perception of teachers of their own capacity to stimulate learning and engagement of students, even among difficult or unmotivated students (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Teachers' perceptions of their own competency have long been considered an important cognitive resource for teachers to handle the challenges of daily interactions, and contribute to their performances as well as their well-being (Bandura, 1997). Feelings of self-efficacy help teachers to motivate students, to involve them in the classroom and to manage students' disruptive behaviour (Dunn & Rakes, 2011), thereby promoting students' academic development. These outcomes resonate well with the social-cognitive view that self-efficacy is a potent force in affecting the motivational, affective, cognitive and selective processes needed for desired goals to be realized (Bandura, 1997). In their research Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001)

distinguish three relevant dimensions related to teachers' self-efficacy, namely instructional strategies, classroom management and student engagement. The dimension of instructional strategies captures teachers' capacity in using various instructional methods. The dimension of student engagement measures the extent to which teachers feel able to activate students' interest in their schoolwork. In addition to instructional strategies, the dimension of classroom management maps teachers' ability to organize students' time, behaviour, and attention. A study by Tsouloupas et al. (2010), examining the relation between self-efficacy and externalizing problem behaviour, has shown that teachers who experience a large amount of externalizing problem behaviour in their classroom feel less competent at handling difficult behaviours and stressful situations. This is a concerning finding, as the personal competence of teachers is acknowledged worldwide as one of the most important sources for adequate teacher functioning (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001).

It is important to note that self-efficacy may also play role in the prevention of emotional exhaustion. Research shows that teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy experience less emotional exhaustion than teachers with a low sense of self-efficacy (Betoret, 2006; Evers et al., 2002; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). This suggests that feelings of self-efficacy may modify the effects that externalizing problem behaviour has on feelings of emotional exhaustion in teachers (Dicke et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2012; Pas, Bradshaw, Hershfeldt, & Leaf, 2010; Tsouloupas et al., 2010). Tsouloupas et al. (2010) found that the relation between student misbehaviour and emotional exhaustion was mediated by self-efficacy in handling student misbehaviour. Also, in their study on the relation between self-efficacy in classroom management, emotional exhaustion, and classroom disturbance, Dicke et al. (2014) found that self-efficacy in classroom management predicted emotional exhaustion via classroom disturbances, only when self-efficacy was low. In addition, Martin et al. (2012) found that instructional management mediated the relation between teacher's feelings of self-efficacy and student misbehaviour, and that student misbehaviour affected the level of teacher's emotional exhaustion. Nevertheless, the risks that externalizing problem behaviour of students poses for important elements of teacher's occupational well-being and their turnover intentions (Tsouloupas et al., 2010), highlight the need of providing teachers with strategies to effectively handle such behaviour in their classrooms.

1.2. The role of the teacher-student relationship

An underlying factor that is likely to impact the influence of externalizing problem behaviour in students on teachers' sense of self efficacy, is the teacher student relationship. Due to students' externalizing problem behaviour, the teacher-student relationship deteriorates, which then may lead to a decrease in teachers' self-efficacy. The quality of the teacher-student relationship is often characterized by two aspects; closeness and conflict, and has been associated with teachers' sense of self-efficacy. Closeness refers to an affective, warm and open relationship between teacher and student, whereas conflict refers to a negative and conflictual relationship, including tension, anger and mistrust (Koomen, Verschueren, van Schooten, Jak, & Pianta, 2012). Research shows that experiencing many conflicts in the teacher-student relationship can cause decreased feelings of self-efficacy in teachers (Yeo, Ang, Chong, Huan, & Quek, 2008). Studies into the relationship between self-efficacy and teacher-student closeness (as opposed to conflict) show a less clear picture: this relationship is not proven convincingly and the direction of effects is less clear (Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2008; Mashburn et al., 2006; Yoon, 2002;

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