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The Role of Compassion during the Shift to Online Teaching for Language Teacher Wellbeing

Abstract

Research on compassion has received increasing attention over the past decades (Seppälä et al., 2017). However, empirical studies focusing on the role of compassion for teachers still remain sparse to date. This paper reports on a study designed to investigate the wellbeing of 21 language teachers across the globe during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. In particular, the study sought out to examine the ways in which compassion and self-compassion contributed to the wellbeing of language teachers during this time. Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured individual online interviews and were analyzed from a Grounded Theory perspective (Charmaz, 2006). Findings revealed that acts of compassion in the workplace and in the private lives of the teachers played a crucial role in shaping our participants' wellbeing during this time of crisis. Furthermore, self-compassion emerged as an important factor influencing the wellbeing of teachers during the pandemic crisis. Indeed, compassion and self-compassion served as core elements in their teaching and appeared to affect their relationships with their students, colleagues, and headteachers. In the absence of compassion, the stressful and challenging situation they were already experiencing was exacerbated. These findings imply the potential benefits of compassion and self-compassion training for teachers, administrators, and policymakers to support and promote wellbeing in the educational workplace.

Keywords: compassion, self-compassion, language teacher wellbeing, education, COVID-19 pandemic crisis

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, teachers around the world were required to switch to online teaching with little or no preparation. However, even before the pandemic crisis, teaching was already regarded as an increasingly stressful profession with a higher-than-average risk of burnout (e.g., Reimers et al., 2020). In language teaching specifically, teachers are confronted with additional stressors unique to the language classroom, such as high intercultural demands and low linguistic self-efficacy (Horwitz, 1996), intense levels of emotional labour (Dewaele & Wu, 2021; Gkonou et al., 2020), energy-intensive methodologies (Borg, 2006), and poor working conditions (Mercer, 2020). These stressors and strains can threaten their ability to thrive in their professional roles and can, in turn, negatively affect their wellbeing (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). During the pandemic crisis, teachers across the profession were not only trying to negotiate the unknown domains of online teaching and exploring new digital tools in their professional lives, many teachers were also battling challenges in their personal lives alongside the considerable social constraints resulting from national lockdowns.

In research, compassion and self-compassion have been linked with increased wellbeing and reduced stress and burnout (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Neff, 2003, 2011; Zessin et al., 2015). In this paper, we report on a study which aimed to explore language teacher wellbeing among 21 language teachers across the globe using interview data. The analysis revealed the key role played by compassion and self-compassion in both the professional and personal contexts of these teachers.

Literature Review

What is Compassion?

Research on compassion has received increasing attention over the past decades (Seppälä et al., 2017). Especially in challenging and unpredictable times, people strive for a world that is other-oriented and in which positive psychological states such as empathy, sympathy, and compassion are held high in esteem and exercised regularly (Saltzman et al., 2020). Social behavior, including compassion, is evolutionary rooted and has always been playing a central role in shaping human interaction (Carter et al., 2017). In fact, the practice of compassion has its roots in the earliest periods of Buddhism (Lavelle, 2017; Nyanamoli, 1964), being understood as a “supportive practise [...] on the path of awakening” (Lavelle, 2017, p. 45). Compassion is also regarded as a core component of all major world religions (Armstrong, 2008). As Cameron (2017)

points out, “compassion lies at the core of what it means to be human. All major religions, moral philosophers, and social theorists have valued compassion as an indication of virtue in human beings” (p. 544). Nowadays, compassion has been integrated into diverse psychological and clinical programs to increase people’s health, wellbeing, and prosocial behavior (Lavelle, 2017).

In research, compassion is described as a “cognitive, emotional, and volitional response to the suffering of others” (Peterson, 2017, p. 2) which can lead to actions to alleviate the suffering of others. Similarly, Singer and Klimecki (2014) define compassion as “a feeling of concern for another person’s suffering which is accompanied by the motivation to help” (p. 875). Goetz and colleagues (2010) also conceptualize compassion as an affective state established by subjective feelings and defining it as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (p. 351).

Although empathy, sympathy, and compassion are closely related terms, research has shown that there are certain features that distinguish these concepts from one another. In the literature, sympathy can be defined as “an emotional reaction of pity toward the misfortune of another, especially those who are perceived as suffering unfairly,” while empathy has been described as “an ability to understand and accurately acknowledge the feelings of another” (Sinclair et al., 2017, p. 438). However, compassion is different to sympathy and empathy in terms of one aspect: A compassionate person does not solely recognize the suffering of others but goes a step further and seeks to find ways in which to reduce the suffering through pro-active behavior (Dutton et al., 2014). This suggests a link between compassion and agentic behavior.

When compassion is not directed outward but inward, it is referred to as self-compassion. Self-compassion is, in fact, a form of compassion, where acts of compassion are directed towards yourself (Neff, 2011). Furthermore, Gerber et al. (2015) highlight:

Since compassion includes being open to the other’s suffering and generating the desire to heal the other through kindness, self-compassion would entail applying these same qualities toward oneself. By conceptualizing self-compassion as embodying one’s perception of one’s self as a subject, one could heal oneself through kindness. (p. 395)

As such, self-compassion portrays a kind, positive, and caring attitude toward oneself in instances of failure, perceived imperfection, and individual shortcomings (Zessin et al., 2015). Neff and Germer (2017) point out the importance of self-compassion and claim that, “just as we can feel compassionate for the suffering of others, we can extend compassion towards ourselves, regardless of whether our suffering resulted from external circumstances or our own mistakes, failures and personal inadequacies” (p. 478). Self-compassion is

as relevant as compassion directed towards others and it can help us overcome challenging times (Neff, 2011). By being self-compassionate, we understand that flaws are simply part of being human, and, as a result, we can approach our perceived weaknesses from a broad, inclusive, and more humane perspective (Neff, 2011). Furthermore, Neff (2021) makes a distinction between kind and fierce self-compassion, stressing that self-compassionate behavior can be viewed as a continuum, with one end being tender, kind, and soft, and the other fierce, strong, and ferocious. The latter, especially, can empower people by making them feel stronger, more competent, and assertive and less afraid of conflict to defend their own rights (Neff, 2021).

Compassion and Teacher Wellbeing in Times of the COVID-19 Crisis

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). Consequently, many countries quickly started applying measures to reduce risk of transmissions of the virus, such as physical distancing, temporarily closing educational institutions, and implementing national lockdowns (Sohrabi et al., 2020). Due to the shutdown of schools, many teachers across the globe were required to switch to online/remote teaching formats and to use new digital tools with little or no preparation and notice (Reimers et al., 2020). For those teachers who had not had much experience in teaching online and lacked digital skills, the pandemic placed enormous challenges on them, as they not only had to learn to use online formats but also had to guide their students in how to do distance learning, while, simultaneously, battling with their own wellbeing and that of their learners (MacIntyre et al., 2020).

In a time of a global crisis, people typically try to share their common suffering and support others, “creating opportunities for deeper connection, mutual help, and community” (Zaki, 2020, p. 588). As human beings are inherently social and rely on cooperation to survive and thrive, it is not surprising that compassion plays a key role in alleviating stress and loneliness (Zaki, 2020). In respect to the pandemic crisis, Galea (2020) points out that it is an occasion that “ultimately calls for compassion” (p. 1898).

In fact, several studies have shown that compassion appears to be positively related with wellbeing, especially in reducing emotional distress (e.g., Gilbert, 2010; Goetz et al., 2010; Neff, 2003). For example, MacBeth and Gumley’s (2012) meta-analysis revealed that higher levels of compassion appeared to lower levels of depression, stress, and anxiety. Thus, the authors suggested that compassion is a critical variable in understanding mental health, wellbeing, and resilience (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Research on self-compassion revealed that individuals who show self-compassionate behavior appeared to

have higher levels of perceived wellbeing (Zessin et al., 2015). Furthermore, a body of empirical studies has found that self-compassion can lower negative emotions, such as depression and anxiety, and can increase positive emotions, such as life satisfaction, optimism, happiness, self-confidence, resilience, and wellbeing (Neff, 2011; Zessin et al., 2015). As such, both compassion and self-compassion play a crucial role in positively influencing individuals' wellbeing during times of crisis and beyond.

In teacher research, the focus of identifying stressors and strains that can lead to teacher attrition and might result in teacher burnout has slowly shifted from a deficit viewpoint towards examining the lives of teachers from a more holistic perspective (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer et al., 2016), underscored by a positive psychology approach (e.g., Seligman, 2018). It is equally, if not even more important, to not lose sight of the factors that keep teachers in the profession and contribute to their overall thriving and wellbeing, than focusing on what makes them leave (Mercer et al., 2016; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). Factors that can potentially support teacher wellbeing are, for instance, teachers' positive relationships with their students, colleagues, and headteachers (Spilt et al., 2011), a high sense of self-efficacy (Han et al., 2020), resilience (Ergün & Dewaele, 2021), supportive school culture (Brady & Wilson, 2021), having a sense of meaning and purpose (Roffey, 2012), high job satisfaction (Dreer, 2021), and high teacher status (Troman, 2000).

However, compassion can play an equally important role in the lives of teachers. In fact, several studies have been conducted to understand the link between teacher wellbeing and compassion in the workplace. For example, De Stasio et al. (2019) investigated compassion in pre-school teachers' work engagement. Their findings showed that subjective happiness and compassion at work triggered positive feelings and enhanced teachers' wellbeing and their attitudes toward work. In another study by De Stasio et al. (2020), the authors reported that experiencing compassion with colleagues made teachers feel more involved in their work and enhanced their perceptions of their working environment. These findings align with research by Eldor and Shoshani (2016), who examined the influences of compassion from colleagues and principals on teachers' engagement and subjective wellbeing in their professional lives. They found that, when teachers receive compassion from headteachers specifically, it can positively influence their job satisfaction and commitment, and reduce teacher burnout. It appears crucial, to implement (self-)compassion and other compassion-based skills into our educational contexts, in order to create more caring, thoughtful, and mindful classroom experiences, which are beneficial for both teachers and students (Kudo & Hartley, n.d.).

During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, only a small number of studies have looked at compassion in the school context to date. For example, Lepp et al. (2021) showed that online teaching has shifted teachers' focus from subject

matter competences to a greater valuing of socialization and the wellbeing of students, and thus, the importance of teacher compassion. Another study by Gates and colleagues (2021) found that having implemented principles of both compassion and self-compassion in their university in Australia during the shift to online teaching helped teachers and students to overcome challenges and better deal with stressors that the pandemic brought along.

In this study, we aim to contribute to the field of research on compassion and teacher wellbeing by examining what acts of compassion were important for the wellbeing of 21 language teachers across the globe during the pandemic crisis. Although the data were generated during the crisis, the insights are relevant for the field of wellbeing more broadly and help contribute to understandings about the role compassion can play in fostering positive mental health and job satisfaction in the workplace.

Methodological Design

This study explores the role of acts of compassion in the wellbeing of 21 foreign language teachers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to answer the following research question: What is the role of compassion for the wellbeing of 21 foreign language teachers during the shift to online teaching in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis?

Context and Participants

Before the global pandemic occurred, as part of our broader research project, a global survey was administered to secondary-school foreign language teachers across the globe. The survey aimed to investigate language teacher wellbeing and remained open from January to March 2020. The participating teachers were given the opportunity to provide an email address if they wished to take part a follow-up interview; from among 472 completed responses, 114 teachers left their email addresses and were contacted to ask if they would still be willing to participate in a follow-up online interview. Twenty-three participants agreed to be interviewed; however, the data of two participants who were teaching in the university settings were not analyzed in this reporting of the study in order to retain a focus on secondary education. The interviews took place between June and September 2020. In this article, we present the data based on these interviews which focused on the role of compassion in participants' wellbeing during the pandemic crisis.

All participants in this study ($n = 21$) were foreign language teachers at secondary schools, and they were working in the following continents: Europe ($n = 10$), Oceania ($n = 3$), North America ($n = 4$), Central America ($n = 1$), and South America ($n = 3$). Detailed background data about the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Biodata and Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Country of residence	Gender	Years of teaching	First language	Teaching subject(s)	Living situation during the pandemic
Alice	New Zealand	F	24–30	English	French, Spanish	with a partner/spouse
Maria	Argentina	F	16–23	Spanish	English	with a partner/spouse and children
Jennifer	UK	F	4–7	English	French, German, Spanish	with a partner/spouse and children
Liliana	Hungary	F	4–7	Hungarian	English	with a partner/spouse
Robin	Netherlands	wishes not to specify	4–7	Dutch	French	with a partner/spouse and children
Charlotte	US	F	0–3	Spanish	Spanish	with parents or extended family
Hilary	Argentina	F	4–7	Spanish	English, German	with roommates
Naomi	Argentina	F	24–30	Spanish	English	alone
Christine	Australia	F	24–30	Estonian	English, French	with a partner/spouse
Eliza	US	F	16–23	German	German	with a partner/spouse and children
Jakob	Austria	M	8–15	German	English	with a partner/spouse and children
Maddison	Australia	F	8–15	English	Japanese, Spanish	with a partner/spouse
Louise	Switzerland/France	F	4–7	English	French	with children
Adrian	Germany	M	24–30	German	German	alone
Penelope	Greece	F	16–23	Greek	English	alone
Victoria	UK	F	16–23	English	French, German, Spanish	with a partner/spouse
Amber	US	F	4–7	English	German	with a partner/spouse
Gabriela	Nicaragua	F	4–7	Spanish	English	with parents or extended family

cont. table 1

Jane	UK	F	8–15	English	French, Spanish	with a partner/ spouse
Suzy	US	F	8–15	English	English, German	no answer provided
John	UK	M	8–15	English	French, German	alone

Research Tools and Procedures

Before the interviews took place, all participants were asked to complete a survey on their wellbeing during the pandemic, which was divided into two sections. The first section addressed their work and living situation during the pandemic. The second section aimed at gathering quantitative data and included the following measures: PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule) (Watson et al., 1988), PERMA (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) (Butler & Kern, 2016), work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2006), Psychological Capital (PsyCap; Luthans et al., 2007) and coping strategies (Carver, 1997). However, in this article, we focus only on the qualitative data from the interviews.

To promote a more conversational style of interviews, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. These allowed researchers to compare data across participants but remain flexible and responsive to individuality and uniqueness (Dörnyei, 2007; O’Leary, 2021). The interview protocol included questions regarding seven main themes, including the participants’ teaching biography, their teaching life (e.g., workload, online/remote teaching, job satisfaction, and engagement), professional relationships (e.g., school climate, relationships with parents and students), their perceived teacher status, identity and meaning, overall wellbeing (e.g., coping strategies, physical wellbeing work-life balance, sources of stress), and personal relationships, both prior to and during the first pandemic wave. All interviews were conducted online via Skype or Zoom between June 25 to September 13, 2020, and each interview lasted between 55 and 90 minutes. In total, 24 hours, 27 minutes, and 38 seconds of data were transcribed for content analysis, and this generated a corpus of 205,162 words.

Ethics

In this study, before data were collected, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee from our institution. Prior to the interviews, participants were given a participant information sheet and a consent form which included

detailed information of the study, participants' right and involvement, any foreseeable risks, storage of data, and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. Participants were also made aware that they have no obligation to answer any questions they perceived as uncomfortable and right to withdraw any time up to the point of publication without giving a reason. All interviews were audio-recorded only and transcribed by our research team. Audio-recordings were saved on password-protected computers and destroyed upon transcription. Pseudonyms were given to each participant at all stages of the research and any identifying markers were removed during the transcription process.

Data Analysis

All members of the research team familiarized themselves with the data by carefully reading through all the transcribed interviews and adding memos and comments in a joint document which served as a basis for discussion. Interview transcripts were then put into Atlas.ti for the coding process. An inductive line-by-line coding approach (Charmaz, 2006) was adopted for the first cycle of coding. Then, the researchers discussed the dataset and first set of codes in a team meeting and decided on the next stage of focused coding of the dataset. All the codes were then compared and refined, and a unified code list was generated. During the final stage, through frequent discussions about coding and memos, compassion emerged as the main theme across the data.

Four categories of compassion became apparent: self-compassion, compassion for/from learners, compassion for/from colleagues and headteachers, and compassion for/from personal relationships. These themes are elaborated on in the following findings section.

Findings

Self-compassion

Self-compassion is understood as compassionate behavior directed inward and includes being caring towards ourselves through being mindful, kind, and accepting that as human beings, we are all imperfect and make mistakes (Neff & Germer, 2017). During times of crisis, Kotera and Van Gordon (2021) explain that self-compassion and self-care competencies can lead to more resilience and

stability and can therefore serve as a useful resource to protect one's wellbeing during periods of difficulty and beyond.

In this study, the analysis revealed that 14 out of 21 participants explicitly mentioned that self-compassion played a key role in shaping their wellbeing during the pandemic crisis. One teacher (John, UK) mentioned that he found it difficult to be compassionate with himself during the stressful situation of the pandemic. Throughout his whole interview, John showed a lack of self-compassion and reported on being unconfident, unhappy, and unsatisfied in his professional role, even before the pandemic, as he struggled with student behavior and had the feeling that his "career might be coming to an end." Six teachers did not explicitly discuss self-compassion and did not report on any self-compassionate behavior in their interviews.

Among the 14 teachers, 12 teachers mentioned the importance of self-compassion even before the pandemic crisis. For them, self-compassionate behavior mostly included assigning more time to themselves and seeking to reduce workload. One example was provided by Jakob (Austria), who realized that he could not fulfill his excessive workload anymore and therefore needed to reduce the amount of work in order to improve his wellbeing, without feeling guilty about it: "I think it has definitely become even more of a concern to me that I want to care more about life and not just work. And so that has changed."

To do so, he decided to say no to all non-essential work opportunities and made a note of this in a calendar, so he had a visual reminder of "seeing stuff that [he] didn't have to do in [his] to-do-list." He further added: "That really helped and that sort of strengthened this idea of doing less [and] that made it a bit easier." Another example was Jennifer who was aware of the importance of affording time for herself and protecting her boundaries: "I actually quite like some time to myself, I try to cut corners with workload wherever I can."

Indeed, the transition to online teaching and the high levels of stress experienced in this situation triggered 12 teachers to become more aware of the need to prioritize self-care and their wellbeing. Eliza (US), for example, mentioned that during the pandemic she decided to "remove [herself] from a lot of things" since she juggled multiple obligations at the same time. She even concluded that this act of putting herself first was "the one good thing the pandemic has done." Similarly, Naomi (Argentina) also realized that she had to be more compassionate towards herself during the pandemic crisis. At first, she felt "down and cried all the time," but soon she consciously engaged in positive self-talk and took a social comparison perspective to realize how this situation not only affected her but other people globally as well. Indeed, one core component of self-compassion is the ability to recognize common humanity and reframe one's own perspective; understanding that we are not alone during challenging times, helps us to feel less isolated and eases one's pain (Neff & Germer, 2017).

In contrast, a lack of self-compassion appeared to affect one teacher's (John, UK) wellbeing negatively. John's interview showed that throughout his life he has struggled with self-regulation and self-compassion. He reported often feeling tired, depressed, and engaging negative self-talk:

I'm not self-disciplined enough to be working from home [...] And it is frustrating that we don't know what the students are doing. And I think that's going to be very hard to fix next year when we start—hoping that we see the next year, that's still far from certain.

His negative feelings were further amplified by the pandemic crisis. Although he was aware that he had to take care of his wellbeing and treat himself kindly, he just could not manage this and constantly reported feeling guilty “for wasting that time” during the pandemic. In contrast to the social comparison which highlighted the shared humanity for many participants, John's social comparison processes implied to him a failure and missed opportunity:

I've done the reading, [...] I've watched a lot of TV, but I haven't tidied my house. It's those things that there's always an opportunity, I could have spent my time more productively and when we get back, I will regret that my house is still untidy when I had this opportunity to deal with it.

Studies have shown that a lack of self-compassion is associated with anxious behavior, depressive symptoms, and rumination, whereas self-compassionate people tend to have higher levels of wellbeing and experience less emotional exhaustion and burnout (e.g., Raes, 2010). Therefore, findings from these interviews showed that teachers who were self-compassionate and proactive in enhancing their wellbeing were better able to regulate their stress during the pandemic crisis.

Compassion for/from Learners

In the educational workplace, compassion is a crucial asset and is typically expressed by teachers towards their students through forms of “affection, caring, generosity, and tenderness” (Eldor & Shoshani, 2016, p. 126). Teachers who express acts of compassion towards their students experience higher job commitment, feel more satisfied in their chosen profession, and make their work more meaningful, thus affecting their wellbeing (Dutton & Worline, 2020).

Findings revealed that all 21 teachers in our study were compassionate towards their students during the pandemic. These acts of compassion were

expressed in different ways: Focusing on socio-emotional learning in the classroom, trying to reach out to all students even if they appeared disengaged, and generally putting their students' needs first. Eleven teachers explicitly said that in light of the pandemic crisis they had shifted their focus from content-based teaching to the wellbeing of their students. For example, Maria (Argentina) explained: "When the pandemic started, there was a moment at its top, and I said, 'Okay, what do I want my students to have at this moment? Content? Support? What?' And what I realized was that they need my support." She continued: "So I left content aside, I planned my lessons focusing on their emotions [and] how I can help them realize that among these negative situations, they could find something positive." In another example, Louise (Switzerland) also explained that she was very concerned about her student's wellbeing during the pandemic: "I think it was really important that we focus on the welfare of the children while they were isolated in their rooms." Although, at first glance, teachers in this study were more occupied with the wellbeing of their students, they were also aware that the social interaction with them and their compassionate behavior towards them could be beneficial for their own wellbeing, as highlighted by Penelope (Greece):

The thing about wellbeing is that it is a dynamic process. [...] We are social beings. Our wellbeing depends on other people to a various extent. And we should be kind to other people so that we can be kind to ourselves.

Similarly, teachers are not only the ones to express compassion for their learners, but they may also receive compassion which can, in turn, affect their wellbeing. Indeed, the "act of receiving compassion may reenergize teachers and provide them the strategies to effectively cope with stress" (Eldor & Shoshani, 2016, p. 133). All 21 teachers mentioned that some of their relationships with students had changed in context of the pandemic crisis and, as such, affected their wellbeing. These changes were both positive and negative, depending on individual students. Thirteen teachers reported on how some of their relationships to students had improved and described acts of mutual compassion. For example, Charlotte (US) explained: "I think it's a great relationship. I keep on getting emails every week, like 'Hey, I really miss you, I want to go back to school. Please tell us if we are going back to school!'" In another example, Amber (US) talked about a similar experience with her students: "Some of the students sent me some really nice emails, like, 'Thank you. You've still tried to make remote learning interesting for us and we appreciate your hard work!'" These forms of compassion affected the teachers positively and gave them a welcome motivational boost.

However, thirteen teachers reported that learners showed disengagement and a lack of interest in schoolwork, which was damaging to the student-

teacher relationship. John (UK), for example, explained: “In some cases, the relationship is no longer there, because I’m not in any meaningful contact with them [...]. They don’t do the work and they don’t respond to messages I send them.” Nevertheless, all of the teachers explained that although they could not reach every student during the pandemic crisis, they still felt compassionate towards them and tried to do their best. A good example was provided by Penelope (Greece), who said:

I try to do my best for them. What I think is best for them, of course, might not be what they think is best for them [...] At the very least, I try to talk to them. And I try to be open to them.

These acts of compassion between students and teachers played a key role in the wellbeing of these educators during the crisis. If teachers receive compassion from their students, it can simultaneously affect their wellbeing positively and improve their work engagement (Eldor & Shoshani, 2016).

Compassion for/from Colleagues and from Headteachers

Compassion in the workplace is understood as behavior and acts of kindness that are intended for the wellbeing of others, without expecting any organizational benefits in return (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005).

In the current study, eight teachers reported that they felt their colleagues were compassionate towards them during the time of the pandemic crisis by offering help, support, and sharing workload. For instance, Naomi (Argentina) described her distress when she encountered technological problems and the way in which her colleague showed compassion and practical advice:

I contacted her crying and crying. I said, “I cannot do this.” She said, “[Naomi], relax. When you are ready, when you feel that you can speak without crying, call me. [...] I’m going to explain with a cell phone on the computer part by part by taking pictures and everything how Zoom works [...]” And we did it.

Not only did these teachers report that they felt supported by their colleagues, but the interview data revealed that nine teachers also tried to help their fellow teachers. Jennifer (UK) explained that in her school all language teachers split their workload and supported each other in this way. In another instance, Jane (UK) helped a colleague by taking over her Spanish classes and doing her marking, as she had family obligations and was struggling to balance work and private life. Similarly, Eliza (US) explained: “All of us teachers

are trying to help each other out. Just keep our heads up in the water.” Such collegiality appeared to be extremely important for the teachers in practical as well as emotional terms.

Five teachers also felt they received compassion and support from their headteachers. For example, Alice (New Zealand) mentioned that her headteacher was very supportive and did not pressure them to be “amazing teachers.” Alice further explained that her headteacher said: “We know that it’s not going to be easy, and you just have to do what you can do and don’t beat yourself up about things that you can’t do.” It appeared that such compassionate behavior eased teachers’ distress, helped them cope during the pandemic, supported their self-efficacy, and, on the whole, positively influenced their wellbeing, as is in line with previous research (Griffith, 2000).

However, seven teachers also reported experiencing a lack of compassion from their colleagues and headteachers. In Suzy’s case (US), she was forced to make a life decision due to lack of understanding and support from her headteacher. Suzy was teaching online in another country and due to her sister getting COVID-19, she asked her school to go back to her home country and teach. However, her headteacher told her: “You signed the contract, you have to be here.” She further explained: “So they just weren’t really willing to discuss things with me or negotiate things. And I was like, well, if my sister dies, I want to be at home. [And] I resigned.” In another example, Louise (Switzerland) felt disappointed about the lack of compassion and lack of contact from her headteacher: “I don’t think she was that interested in the teaching. You know, she wasn’t a teacher. Only interested in the money.” She added: “I think I spoke to her once during the pandemic.”

Moreover, nine teachers reported that during the pandemic, relationships between colleagues deteriorated and they experienced uncompassionate and uncollegial feelings in the workplace. For example, Gabriela (Nicaragua) explained: “[A colleague] was screaming at me. [...] Those situations happened because all of this, the tension, the stress. And so yes, the relationships between some teachers are different. Everything has changed. Everything.” Penelope (Greece) also mentioned that some of her colleagues were “not willing to take the extra step” for other colleagues. This lack of understanding and compassion discouraged her: “This is a low for me, because obviously, this is a case where I cannot change my colleagues’ minds.”

It seemed that a lack of compassion from colleagues and headteachers added to teachers’ stress in already difficult times and, indeed, is a key factor underlying teacher stress and attrition under normal working conditions (Prilleltensky et al., 2016). In contrast, reciprocal compassion has been shown to be linked to positive emotions and can serve as a buffer against stress (Cosley et al., 2010). These data show the importance of compassion in the workplace not only from leadership but amongst colleagues.

Compassion for/from Personal Relationships

Compassion was also a key factor in participants' private relationships. All 21 teachers in this study discussed compassion in their personal relationships including family members, partners, and friends during the pandemic crisis. Acts of compassion included protecting their loved one's health, staying physically distant but remaining in close contact, and supporting each other in daily life matters, such as housework chores, grocery shopping, and looking after their children.

Eight teachers worried about their family's health during the pandemic crisis and as such, put their family's needs first. For example, Maria (Argentina) explained that, although she had the urgent need to see her parents, she opted not to, in order to keep them safe: "My parents are at risk because of the pandemic, so we don't have so much contact with them, just for urgency." However, she added that they are in frequent contact via phone. Similarly, Amber (US) mentioned that she tried to take care of her health, not to put her family in any danger: "My mom and my sister [are] both immunocompromised. So [...] I just want to try to stay healthy because if I want to be around them ever, I don't want to get them sick, because that would be awful." John (UK) couldn't see his partner during the pandemic, since he belonged to the risk-group, but John made a constant effort to call him every day and to encourage him as his partner was feeling lonely and vulnerable. Another example was provided by Gabriela (Nicaragua) whose whole family depended on her taking care of them:

I live with my parents and my sister and my grandma. [...] So, I had everything on my back. I was the one cleaning, I was the one making sure everything is okay, I was going to the supermarket, I was doing pretty much everything. [...] It's kind of hard.

As such, these teachers' compassionate behavior stemmed from their worry about keeping their families healthy and safe, even if this meant putting their own needs behind for a period of time.

Similarly, five teachers reported on receiving compassion from their loved ones. Jane (UK) provided an example of her husband, who has been "really supportive" during the pandemic crisis. Likewise, Naomi (Argentina) explained how much she depends on the help of her sister, who does all the shopping, cooking, and cleaning for her: "So, it's my sister helping me all the time" which eased her stress during online teaching. Family members living in the same household as the teachers could see how stressful online teaching was, and therefore tried to be supportive and compassionate.

This effort of perspective-taking can be relevant for creating a compassionate relationship between family members and beloved ones, which, subsequently,

can serve as a motivating force to understand when and how someone needs help (Davis, 2017). In the case of the participants of this study, they offered and received both emotional (showing genuine interest, understanding, and providing encouragement) and instrumental support (taking over housework, going shopping, taking care of children) (Davis, 2017) that in turn led them to develop compassionate relationships with their partners and family members in a time of crisis.

Discussion

The aim of this research paper was to shed light on the role played by acts of self-compassion and compassion on language teacher wellbeing during the first wave of the pandemic crisis. The study has shown that these two psychological constructs played a crucial role in shaping language teachers' wellbeing and the ways in which they handled the challenges posed by the pandemic crisis. Firstly, a sense of self-compassion helped these teachers to prioritize their own wellbeing. As shown by the data, participants displayed different forms of self-compassion. Some teachers in this study adopted more fierce forms of self-compassion (Neff, 2021) by actively putting their own needs first to protect their wellbeing, while others showed acts of kind self-compassion through positive self-talk and reappraisal. These acts of self-compassion helped teachers to better regulate their own stress response during the time of crisis, but also made them aware to be more compassionate towards people around them. Indeed, self-compassion and other-oriented compassion are inherently interwoven and influence each other (Neff & Germer, 2017).

Furthermore, teachers in our study foregrounded compassion as a core element in their teaching during the pandemic and beyond. A time of crisis can enhance the community's wish to support other members of society; this positive prosocial tenor can "also generalize beyond the situation and over time" (Vollhardt, 2009, p. 76). Not only did teachers in our study enact compassion but they also received it from their students. Indeed, compassionate behavior for and from students influenced teachers' motivation and wellbeing. However, especially within collegial settings, several teachers in this study reported on a lack of compassion from their fellow teachers and headteachers, which added to their stress and amplified the negative emotions teachers were experiencing due to the pandemic crisis (Prilleltensky et al., 2016).

Finally, language teachers in this study did not solely take meaning from acts of compassion in the workplace, but also showed and received forms of compassion in their private life domains. In fact, research has found that

being kind and compassionate towards others is not only beneficial for the receiver of the act of kindness, but also for the giver, as it can enhance one's own subjective wellbeing and self-esteem (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Malti, 2020).

Conclusion

In this study, we aimed to highlight the crucial role that compassion and self-compassion play in the workplace of teachers as well as in their private domains. We would like to emphasize the central role of compassion in the educational setting in order to make teachers, policy makers, and educational stakeholders aware of its relevance and links to teacher wellbeing. In recent years, research has argued for a more compassionate style of leadership (de Zulueta, 2016), and we argue that this supportive form of management should also become established in educational contexts, as headteachers need to positively engage and enable their staff to thrive in their professional roles, not only in times of crisis but beyond. Furthermore, we also emphasize the need for (self-)compassion interventions both for students and teachers to make them aware of the health benefits compassionate behavior can induce throughout their whole personal and professional life domains. Indeed, these interventions can increase participant's self-regulation, motivation, sense of agency, resilience, and overall wellbeing (e.g., Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017; Dundas et al., 2017). This research has highlighted the need to cultivate acts of compassion and self-compassion in educational settings, in order to increase teacher wellbeing, but also to encourage teachers and students to become compassionate towards each other and to help create a more compassionate society in the long term.

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Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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Die Rolle des Mitgefühls in Bezug auf das Wohlbefinden von Sprachlehrenden während der Umstellung auf Online-Unterricht

Zusammenfassung

Forschung über Mitgefühl hat in den letzten Jahrzehnten zunehmend an Aufmerksamkeit gewonnen (Seppälä et al., 2017). Empirische Studien, die sich mit der Rolle des Mitgefühls für Lehrkräfte befassen, gibt es allerdings nur wenige. In diesem Beitrag wird über eine Studie berichtet, in der das Wohlbefinden von 21 Sprachlehrer:innen aus aller Welt während der ersten Welle der COVID-19-Pandemie untersucht wurde. Insbesondere sollte erforscht werden, wie Mitgefühl mit anderen und mit sich selbst zum Wohlbefinden von Sprachlehrer:innen in dieser Zeit beitrugen. Die Daten wurden durch ausführliche, semi-strukturierte Online-Einzelinterviews gewonnen und aus der Perspektive der Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) analysiert. Die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass Mitgefühl am Arbeitsplatz und im Privatleben der Lehrkräfte eine entscheidende Rolle bei der Gestaltung des Wohlbefindens unserer Teilnehmer:innen in dieser Zeit der Krise spielten. Darüber hinaus erwies sich Selbstmitgefühl als ein wichtiger Faktor, der das Wohlbefinden der Lehrer:innen während der Pandemiekrise beeinflusste. Tatsächlich waren Mitgefühl und Selbstmitgefühl Kernelemente ihres Unterrichts und schienen sich auf die Beziehungen zu ihren Schüler:innen, Kolleg:innen und Schulleiter:innen auszuwirken. Ohne Mitgefühl wurde die stressige und schwierige Situation, in der sie sich ohnedies durch die Pandemie befanden, oft noch verschlimmert. Diese Ergebnisse deuten auf den potenziellen Nutzen von Trainings und Fortbildungen im Bereich Mitgefühl und Selbstmitgefühl für Lehrpersonen hin, wodurch ihr Wohlbefinden am Arbeitsplatz gefördert werden kann. Dies kann sowohl den Lehrpersonen selbst, als auch den Schüler:innen, Eltern, und dem Bildungssystem als Ganzes zu Gute kommen.

Schlüsselwörter: Mitgefühl, Selbstmitgefühl, Wohlbefinden von Sprachlehrer:innen, Bildung, COVID-19-Pandemie