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Emotions in Teaching: Self-Compassion

Stacey Freeman

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Emotions in Teaching: Self-Compassion

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It has been hypothesized that negative emotions, left unresolved, contribute to feelings of burnout experienced by teachers. Self-compassion offers a kind, mindful way of approaching difficult emotions. The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers experience self-compassion by qualitative means. In semi-structured interviews, four elementary school teachers shared critical incidents of self-doubt or disappointment in their teaching. They also completed Neff's (2003a) Self Compassion Survey. Through intra-case and cross case analysis the findings revealed how teachers' lived experiences include episodes of conflict, reflection, resolution, and self-compassion, but in differing orders. Also, participants experienced self-compassion in ways that align with previous work on self-compassion, however an additional element of support seeking emerged. This study provided a context to understand the common ways in which self-compassion was lived out in the classroom while highlighting the differences in participants' experiences. This additional insight into the lived experience of the teachers adds to the body of knowledge regarding emotionality in the classroom and positive ways that teachers can and do regulate emotion through self-compassion. Additionally, participants' drive to seek support from others exposed a social side of self-compassion that Neff's (2003a) definition or a simple dictionary definition did not include.

Keywords: self-compassion, emotion regulation, teacher burnout

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Five years ago I sat at The Pizza Factory with a friend, Tiffanie Miley, and listened to her describe her experiences in the Teacher Education master's program at Brigham Young University. She showered the program with praise, and encouraged me to start paying attention to the questions that popped into my head regarding my teaching experiences. Though I acknowledged the truth and sincerity of her comments, I thought that there was no way that I would give up my summers and free time to go back to school. But she had planted a seed.

Within a year or two I started paying attention to the questions that rested on my mind. I wrote them down. The emotional battles of teaching have always been the hardest ones for me to fight. In my fifteenth year of teaching, I found myself without patience in regards to a particularly difficult student. Regret became a constant companion. Then I experienced a transformation in the way I treated myself and responded to him, and I felt a need to learn of other people's experiences in regards to interactions with students.

So I thank my advisor, Dr. Melissa Newberry, for having a passion for the topic in the first place, for teaching me that writing is really rewriting, for all of the hours she spent working in my behalf, and for looking at me with kind eyes at my breaking points.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

It was my 15<sup>th</sup> year of teaching and an evaluation year. As my principal sat in the back of my room, conducting the scheduled observation, I kept track of all of the aspects of the lesson that were not going well. Frustration, embarrassment, and fear welled up inside me. I approached him at the end of the lesson and was surprised to hear him say, ‘You are an expert teacher.’ Our perspectives differed so greatly. I wondered if there might be a way I could have eyes that looked upon myself like his did in that moment.

Teaching is an emotional practice (Bullough, 2009; Hargreaves, 2000), despite the tendency of recent reforms to focus attention on results. Teachers’ decisions about practices revolve around their relationships with their students (Hargreaves, 2000), but they have to balance time spent on learning subject matter and how to teach it with maintaining relationships with students, parents, faculty, and administration, as well as additional responsibilities. In the act of balancing, most experience periods of burnout and renewal (Fessler, 1992; Huberman, 1989; Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000). Within burnout, the symptoms of withdrawal can cloud aspirations to help students (Bullough, 2012; Steffy et al., 2000).

Chang (2009) hypothesized that burnout might be understood more completely by studying the negative emotions experienced within teacher-student relationships. Teachers must constantly make decisions on how to respond to and best aid students. In some instances, those decisions may not prove as beneficial as hoped and, at times, regret over interactions can be the result. Frustrations that occur before, during, and after teacher-student interactions and the repetitive cycles of teachers’ and students’ responses to each other could only add to many other

individual and organizational stresses. Productive ways of approaching negative emotions might be helpful to teachers as they navigate teacher-student relationships.

Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006) expressed the need for teachers to be exposed to different ways of regulating emotions; of working through them in healthy ways to encourage resilience, decreasing the amount of emotional labor that results in exhaustion and improving relationships with students. Rimé (2007) explained that emotional recovery is a state where emotions are regulated enough to stop negatively influencing current experience. Persistent feelings of guilt, shame, frustration, or anger can impede emotional recovery. Teachers' ability to be kind to themselves when situations elicit unpleasant emotions might allow them to step back and come to new understandings of themselves and their students.

Research on the construct of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b) has considered a kind, mindful approach toward oneself in regretful situations. According to Neff (2003a), self-compassion can be broken into three categories: (a) self-kindness—showing kindness instead of criticism to the self, (b) common humanity—understanding that experiences are common to humankind and not isolating, and (c) mindfulness—being able to keep negative feelings at bay and not personalizing them. Research on self-compassion is most developed in the field of psychology where examinations of self-compassion have been related to psychological wellness (Neff, 2003b).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Because teachers have a tendency to experience periodic burnout, we need to increase what we know of teacher emotional states and the ways in which they may regulate their emotions (Chang, 2009). Research exists on emotion regulation strategies in teaching, but self-compassion as a strategy is relatively unexplored in education. In addition, designs typically

involve self-report on Likert-type scales (Benn, Akiva, Arel, & Roeser, 2012; Neff, 2003a). There is value in quantitative measures and analysis, but to understand the construct of self-compassion more fully, it is important to gain a deeper understanding through viewing it from many perspectives. I argue that the body of knowledge attained already through quantitative means needs to be strengthened through a qualitative approach. Hearing the stories, expressions of individuals' thoughts and feelings in their own words, may deepen our understanding of what it means to be self-compassionate.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers experience self-compassion and to either validate the construct of self-compassion or expand upon it. The hope is that this study will provide insight into how teachers resolve negative emotions toward the self when they have experienced self-doubt or disappointment in their interactions with students. Eventually this could lead to further work exploring how teachers' responses-to-self correspond to their responses-to-students with whom they have experienced emotional difficulty.

### **Research Questions**

This study will address the following questions:

1. How do teachers experience self-compassion?
2. In what ways does the teachers' experience relate to Neff's (2003b) construct of self-compassion?
3. In what ways do the descriptions of experiences with self-compassion help interpret the mean scores, total and subscale, for each teacher on the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS, Neff, 2003a)?
4. How might self-compassion mitigate negative emotions?

## **Limitations**

This study aims to deeply examine the thought processes of a few individuals through semi-structured interviews. Although the results may not be as generalizable as many quantitative studies, the accounts of the lived experiences that will emerge from the study will contribute to the current research by adding a qualitative dimension to what has until now mainly been examined through quantitative means.

It is important to note that this study found its beginning in my teaching life. Throughout my career, I have found myself burdened somewhat by the memory of teacher-student interactions gone badly. I wondered how others experienced what followed after such interactions. I understood the need to keep an open mind to the possibility of quite different descriptions from others and not let transference occur from my situation to their accounts of their own lived experiences.

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

Because of the need for teachers to be present, available, and connected to students (van Manen & Li, 2002), it might be of use to review emotions in teaching that, at times, lead to burnout as well as to resiliency. In the following literature review, first, I will examine the emotional aspects of the classroom, then the conditions and processes under which emotions are formed and regulated. Last, I will introduce self-compassion, a construct new to the field of education that has the potential to ease negative aspects of teaching (Roeser et al., 2013).

#### **Emotional Aspects of the Classroom**

The cognitive aspects of teaching are easy to identify and embody, but the “pathic,” (van Manen & Li, 2002, p. 219) or relational, features are the ones remembered by students. The quality of the teacher-student relationship finds its way into students’ development in cognitive, social, and emotional ways (Davis, 2003). Academic achievement of students is linked to classrooms with high emotional support (Davis, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Jennings, 2015; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Students who feel like their teachers care about them report higher levels of satisfaction in school (Baker, 1999). Teachers’ responsiveness to students’ needs predict students’ emotional involvement in school (Davis, 2003; Jennings, 2015). Learning to maintain a supportive emotional climate is part of the job of teaching.

There is a pedagogy of caring, listening, and understanding that teachers can enact in their teaching (Noddings, 2012; van Manen & Li, 2002), however, maintaining a positive emotional climate in the classroom is difficult at times. In addition to having to manage a number of responsibilities, teachers find themselves managing many emotions throughout their days (Chang, 2009; Newberry, 2013). These emotions range from caring, joy, and satisfaction to

anger and frustration depending on if teachers' experiences align with their goals (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Anxiety, guilt, sadness, excitement, and love all fit somewhere on the range of felt-emotion, which can take an emotional toll when felt in such high amounts along with the stress of other important work required of teachers (Newberry, 2013).

### **Emotion Appraisal**

In her review of the literature on teacher emotion and burnout, Chang (2009) proposed further research should be done on the discrete emotions that might explain the development of exhaustion in teaching. She asked, "What is the emotion teachers generally experience that may contribute to their burnout? Is it anger? Is it frustration? Or is it the culmination of unpleasant emotions over time that leads teachers to repeatedly experience burnout?" (p. 202). Frustration and anger are the most commonly reported negative emotions felt by teachers (Chang, 2009; Sutton, 2004).

Appraisal theory helps explain how emotions are triggered. Evaluations that individuals make of situations determine the emotions felt (Gross & Thompson, 2007; Smith & Kirby, 2009). Two individuals might be involved in the same situation but experience very different emotions because of their differing judgments. Researchers have simplified the appraisal process into two parts, the primary and the secondary appraisals (Lazarus, 1991). In the primary appraisal, the emotion that initially emerges is related to goal-congruence (Lazarus, 1991). If goals and actions align, positive emotions result; if they do not, negative emotions occur (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Lazarus, 1991; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Secondary appraisals entail assigning accountability for the occurrence of an event and its likelihood of recurring (Chang, 2009; Lazarus, 1991). Applied to the teaching context, when goals for student learning and outcomes do not match in any given situation, negative emotions can result. Then,

teachers make judgments about what to do about the situation, where responsibility lies, and then make plans to prevent the recurrence of unpleasant situations.

In addition to initial emotions experienced in relation to difficult events, “collateral consequences” can occur, which Rimé (2007) summarized as “emotional feelings under the form of anxiety, insecurity, helplessness, estrangement, alienation, loss of self-esteem, and so forth” (p. 467) that are secondary to the actual event. These secondary emotions (which also can be positive in nature at times) stem from the primary emotions elicited from the event. Secondary emotions can also be formed depending on the individual’s personal traits and past experiences. For example, the introductory vignette describes a situation that elicited negative emotions—frustration and embarrassment that actions did not align with the goals I had set for the lesson. These primary emotions tapped into long-standing insecurities regarding my belonging in the profession. One could assume that personal traits and past experiences both contributed to the production of this collateral or secondary emotion of insecurity in this situation.

### **Emotional Labor and Resiliency**

One can see the work involved in the appraisals of situations. Once the initial estimate of the situation has been made, including assigning accountability and predicting its futurity, individuals must make decisions about what to do next in an effort to diffuse or increase emotions (Lazarus, 1991). Sutton (2004) found that teachers regulate emotions to meet the goals of academic learning as well as for nurturing relationships with students. This could include trying to keep positive emotions or discard unwanted ones (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). This process can intensify or de-escalate an emotion experienced in relationships with others.

Teachers often realize the need to display emotions that are beneficial to students despite what is being felt within; they feel the need to interact positively towards students (Sutton,

2004). Hochschild (1983) called the act of trying to change one's emotional state to align with the demands of occupational situations "emotional labor" (p. 7). Maintaining a positive exterior when feeling differently within can become laborious over time and even lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Chang, 2009).

Because of the labor involved in this play-acting of sorts, it is important to find ways to regulate negative emotions. Doing so is the "hidden curriculum" for teachers (Newberry, 2013, p. 35). According to Gross and Thompson (2007), there are five main ways to regulate emotions: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change and response modulation. The first four ways of regulating occur before or during the appraisal process (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Situation selection involves choosing whether or not to participate in events based on the anticipated emotional experience (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Similarly, in situation modification, one changes the conditions of the situation to produce positive emotions (Gross & Thompson, 2007). If individuals focus attention on or away from particular aspects of the situation they are using attentional deployment (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Cognitive change happens when a situation is reappraised or looked at in a different way to change the emotions associated with it (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Response modulation is when anything is done to influence "physiological, experiential, or behavioral aspects of emotions" (Gross & Thompson, 2007, p. 17). It is important to remember there are no good or bad ways to regulate emotions (Gross, 2003). Emotions could be regulated in a number of ways, depending on the situation and goals of the individual.

Rimé (2007) offered another perspective on emotion regulation that includes meeting interpersonal needs. He stated that in order to achieve emotional recovery, a state where one no longer feels the need to process the events that created the emotion, there are three different



regulation needs that must be met: socioaffective, cognitive, and action needs. Socioaffective needs involve obtaining comfort, love, understanding, and reassurance from others (Rimé, 2007). Cognitive needs may require changing goals or motives, making meaning of the event, changing representations of the self and others, or reframing the emotional event, as explained above under the title of cognitive change (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Unless a situation is reappraised at some point, the same emotion will be generated when the memory of the event is refreshed (Rimé, 2007). Finally, action needs are met by replacing a positive experience for a negative one. For example, a teacher who just had to give some hard feedback to a student might call the student over and tell her what fine work was done on the last essay. The work of meeting these regulation needs might be done during and after a day of teaching, often unbeknownst to students.

On the road to emotional recovery, purpose can be found in negative emotions. They have the potential to act as a vehicle for change, helping individuals plan to avoid further violations of values or missed opportunities in the future (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000; Gross & Thompson, 2007). Teachers need to learn to accept their negative emotions, listen to the truths they speak about situations, and glean information from them (Chang, 2009). For example, when feeling anger towards a student it might be helpful to pinpoint which behavior is triggering the anger, what trait it reveals in the student and in the teacher, and what kind of positive ways those traits can be channeled for benefit in the classroom.

Though emotional labor and burnout are related, emotional labor can have positive ends as well. Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006) found that unlike Hochschild's generally negative interpretation of emotional labor, positive feelings can occur despite and as a result of the labor involved in teacher-student relationships. The feeling of satisfaction that comes from caring for

students and seeing changes in them as a result can outweigh the frustration and anger felt in the process. The way that students respond to teachers can influence the ways that teachers perceive the student, the emotional connection to the student, and the resultant emotional labor necessary to deal with students (Newberry & Davis, 2008). The effort required to regulate the emotions is what determines what is emotional work of teaching and what is emotional labor (Winograd, 2003). Often the emotional work of teaching, especially in difficult situations, results in growth (Bullough, 2005).

Just what causes some individuals to experience constant renewal rather than burnout? Research on resilience offers some insights into the ability of teachers to meet difficult circumstances with a set of coping strategies in response to the negative aspects of teaching. One strategy in particular is the ability to find a place for humor (Bullough, 2012). Morrell (as cited in Bullough, 2012) stated that at a point of cognitive shift, where there is a difference between what is expected and what is really happening, individuals can actually enjoy the moment by turning to humor. The act of leaving the negative emotions and choosing a more positive viewpoint, one in which seeing the experience as worthy of laughter or jest, frees the mind up to cognitively process a situation, to cope, and connect with others in the process (Martin, 2006). Difficulty depends on perspective.

The ability to select resources to best deal with a situation is a premise of teacher resiliency as defined by Polidore's theory (2004). His theory explains that resiliency is a developmental concept rather than an inborn trait. Adults become resilient individuals over time and through experience (Polidore, 2004). After interviewing and hearing the stories of four teachers who taught in southern schools before, during, and after desegregation, Polidore (2004) identified a number of characteristics of resilience, one of which was having the quality of

optimism. The characteristics that Polidore identified can be considered resources that teachers can choose from in any given situation to help regulate emotions. Being self-compassionate might be related to resilience in that a positive mindset is adopted. Self-compassionate individuals see difficult experiences in a positive light, as important steps in the process of becoming a more whole human being (Neff, 2003a).

### **Self-Compassion**

Most people are more comfortable with speaking of compassion directed towards others than they are towards the self (Jazaeiri et al., 2013). Some researchers categorize compassion as an emotion, separate and distinct from other similar emotions such as love, empathy, pity, or sadness (Goetz, Kelner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). Others view the construct as an attitude, inferring that individuals choose to have compassionate thoughts (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Compassion is also described as having many facets: cognitive, affective, intentional and motivational (Jazaeiri et al., 2013). Despite the differences of opinion regarding the definition of compassion, most agree that it involves a general awareness of another's suffering with a desire to aid in some capacity (compassion, n.d.; Goetz, Kelner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010; Jazaeiri et al., 2013; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005).

Similarly, self-compassion refers to a way of treating oneself during painful experiences (Neff, 2003a). Since the introduction of the construct of self-compassion in the field of psychology, more than 200 dissertations and research articles have been written on the subject of self-compassion (Germer & Neff, 2013). Neff (2003b) argued that self-compassion is not unlike the compassion we speak of having towards others—the desire to serve and console when suffering, show kindness and understanding, and help oneself see that mistakes are part of life. She advocated a definition of self-compassion that is summarized in three main themes: self-

kindness (choosing self-kindness over self-judgment), common humanity (choosing to be part of the whole of humanity over isolation), and mindfulness (choosing mindfulness regarding the ownership and implications of emotions rather than over-identification with them). Ideally, a self-compassionate mindset would allow individuals to be more peacefully present in all experiences, even the painful ones (Neff, 2003a).

Self-compassion is not self-esteem. Self-esteem involves determining the value of the self (Neff, 2011). Recent reviews of the research on self-esteem show its decline in popularity possibly due to its association with inflated views of the self or obsession over the self in general (Neff, 2011). When being self-compassionate, the focus is not on evaluations of the self or measurement of the self in comparison to others, but rather on kind responses to difficulty or connections to others' experiences (Neff, 2003b).

Even before Neff introduced her construct of self-compassion, other theorists had explored the idea of responding to oneself with kindness. Rogers, Maslow, and Ellis adopted a forgiving and loving stance towards one's own failings (Barnard & Curry, 2011). Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts, and Hancock (2007) found that when in situations that involved failure, rejection, or embarrassment, whether they were imagined, real, or remembered scenarios, self-compassionate people did not play the event over and over in their minds. Instead, they reviewed their shortcomings and accepted how those weaknesses contributed to the way things turned out. According to Neff (2003a), self-compassionate individuals allow awareness of weakness, but maintain a healthy attitude towards it.

Gilbert and Procter (2006) explained self-compassion from a different angle. Relying on social mentality theory, they explained that external stimuli arouse physiological systems within individuals. For example, affection from another might elicit the creation of oxytocin.

Additionally, they claimed that even the imagination of affection induces the physiological systems as well. Thus, the body can respond similarly to both external and internal stimuli (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). Such physiological responses can work for negative as well as positive emotion arousal, as in the case of self-critical thoughts, such as, “I don’t belong in teaching,” “I don’t have the ability to work with parents,” or “I say the wrong things all the time,” possibly triggering stress responses in the body and resulting in the release of cortisol (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). In contrast, self-soothing thoughts such as, “Everyone makes mistakes; it is part of the learning process,” “I have weaknesses and strengths, and that makes me a whole person,” and “It’s okay to feel frustration right now. I can take a step back and be open to this experience in my life,” can help individuals have more positive physiological experiences (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). The idea is to cultivate healthy self-to-self responses—to recognize self-critical or self-attacking responses to situations and counter those, sometimes intuitive, patterns of response with caring and kind responses.

Based on her research, Kristin Neff (2016) has created workshops that follow a similar pattern of confronting self-critical thoughts and replacing them with self-compassionate ones via guided meditations. For example, she instructs listeners to think of a personality trait or a mistake that has been bothersome and created some feelings of inadequacy. In the meditations, Neff prompts individuals to identify the feelings and sensations in the body when they awaken the memory and then allow them to exist. Then, she helps them pinpoint the suffering that is caused from self-judgment, encouraging individuals to turn toward the self with compassion. Finally, Neff leads listeners in repeating some self-kind statements, “May I be safe. May I be peaceful. May I be kind to myself. May I accept myself as I am” (Neff, 2016, audio recording). She reminds listeners that they are all imperfect beings, inadequate in some way.

A number of other programs for developing self-compassion have been designed. One example is Loving-Kindness Meditation, which encourages meditators to focus attention on the heart and think of someone they care for deeply (Fredrickson, Cohn, Kimberly, Pey, & Finkle, 2008). Directions are given to extend the feelings conjured up in relation to the significant other towards themselves first, then to others (Fredrickson et al., 2008). Another method, Compassion Cultivation Training follows the same pattern of applying compassion to the self and others (Jazaieri et al., 2013). The steps are as follows: (a) focus the mind, (b) learn what loving-kindness and compassion to self and others feels like, (c) apply that compassion to the self, (d) apply it to others, (e) extend it to all beings, (f) imagine taking away another's pain and replacing it with joy. Notice the order of both of these programs—first the self, then others (Jazaieri et al., 2013). They both emphasize the need to be compassionate towards the self before extending it to others in the mind. This implies an apparent need for order in the relationship between compassion for self and the other. Compassionate Mind Training (Gilbert & Procter, 2006) approaches self-compassion in a different way by focusing the individual on accepting habitual self-attacks in response to situations as understandable reactions, and then turning the mind to a compassionate image. This image can be a tree, a place or a person that symbolizes certain qualities of strength, wisdom, warmth, and acceptance (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). Similarly, Neff and Germer (2013) developed Mindful Self-Compassion Training where teachers are led through a variety of meditations and daily practices that cultivate the habit of self-compassion. All of these programs require teachers to meet for a couple of hours a week for a certain number of weeks and report benefit to various aspects of well-being.

In Barnard & Curry's (2011) review of the correlates of self-compassion, the construct was related to positive affect and wellness in a number of studies. Understandably then, it is

negatively correlated with anxiety and depression (Barnard & Curry, 2011). On the emotion regulation front, self-compassion was positively correlated with mindfulness and coping strategies such as acceptance and reinterpretation; and negatively correlated with rumination, thought suppression, and avoidance (Leary et al., 2007). Individuals that measure high in self-compassion have been found to experience negative emotions elicited from negative events to a lesser extent than those with less self-compassion (Leary et al., 2007).

Recently an experimental study was conducted involving mindfulness and occupational self-compassion among teachers, hoping that the training would lower stress levels (Roeser et al., 2013). It was an 8-week, 11-session, 36-hour program after work that taught coping strategies to encourage emotional resilience (Roeser et al., 2013). Data were collected pre- and post-program as well as three months after the intervention concluded (Roeser et al., 2013). A total of 87% of the 58 teachers involved in the program reported that the intervention was helpful (Roeser et al., 2013). They reported reduced stress levels and fewer feelings of burnout, as well as an increased amount self-compassion and working memory capacity as compared to the control group (Roeser et al., 2013).

Neff (2003a) asserted that possessing a self-compassionate mindset has the potential for emotion regulation. Using her construct, she found that mindfulness can encourage holding emotions at bay, within view, recognizing their purpose, and “gently encouraging change where needed and rectifying harmful or unproductive patterns of behavior” (p.225). With this mindset, the unpleasant emotions are not suppressed, ignored, or over-identified with; rather the emotion is held in mindful acceptance, recognizing that making and learning from mistakes is a process that is familiar to humankind (Neff, 2003a). This approach suggests that self-compassion allows

the mind to find the elements in experiences that are not to be replicated while simultaneously letting the heart enlarge towards oneself in the process (Neff, 2003a).

In her review of the literature on teacher burnout, Chang (2009) argued that although student misbehavior is a strong predictor of burnout, it might be more helpful to look at teachers' habits of appraising situations that lead to repeatedly experiencing negative emotions. I argue that it would also be beneficial to look at teachers' appraisals of their own behavior and search for evidence of self-compassion. Individuals that score high on self-compassion scales experience less intense negative emotions (Leary et al., 2007). As teachers are able to become more self-compassionate and find meaning in difficult encounters, the wonder is if they will more often see themselves in their students as they witness students enduring their own difficulties. Seeing the self and the student on common pathways, undergoing common experience, and accepting weaknesses and negative emotions as part of the learning process could be a source of constant renewal.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Method**

In order to explore the construct of self-compassion among teachers, I asked teachers to share critical incidents (Corsini & Howard, 1964) involving students that they felt they might have handled differently if given the opportunity. The examination of these critical incidents provided insight into ways in which teachers display variations of self-compassion in response to their own actions.

### **Design**

Using the construct of self-compassion as a conceptual framework, the qualitative technique of semi-structured interviews allowed for the interpretation of the teachers' statements to reveal a new side of self-compassion that quantitative means could not expose. Guided by this construct and the idea that emotion regulation can help prevent burnout, this study explored ways in which self-compassion might fit in the space between action needs and emotional recovery (Rime, 2007).

The participants, all teachers, were asked to share their lived experiences regarding critical incidents in their teaching. Tripp (as cited in Halquist & Musanti, 2010) defined a critical incident as an everyday occurrence that is labeled as important because it holds some strong meaning to the individual, which causes them to stop and reflect. A critical incident can be seen as a turning point, and might contain a problem that can be analyzed (Corsini & Howard, 1964). Identifying critical incidents is useful for both educational researchers and teachers because they reveal how an individual, "thinks about, feels about, and would respond to the incident" (Bullough, 2015, p. 156). Critical incidents in this study involved interactions with students, parents, curriculum, assessments, or teaching programs.

## **Theoretical Lens**

Sociocultural theory explains how humans learn from social interactions (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). People exist, first, in a social environment, but they are able to take their experiences in that environment into a mental plane. The inner and outer worlds seem to be intertwined (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Humans are above other species because of their ability to be methodical about choices, to weigh possibilities in an intermediary space between action and the next action, or between thought and action (Lantolf & Johnson, 1997). Goals influence what actions are taken. Friends, family, co-workers and administrators help support an individual in the reconstruction of the intrapersonal space after interpersonal interactions, and can be instrumental to growth (McCafferty, 2002). With this lens, I explore the context in which teachers make meaning of their interpersonal experiences in intrapersonal ways.

## **Context and Participants**

I interviewed four teachers at the elementary school level. The teachers in this study were all employed by Aspen School District (name has been changed), a large district consisting of 55 elementary, 12 junior high, 11 special situation, and 9 high schools located just south of a large metropolitan city in the Rocky Mountains. My employment as a teacher or university supervisor in the district for the last 17 years has afforded me associations with teachers and principals in a number of elementary schools. For this reason, recruitment occurred through convenience or snowball sampling in the elementary grades. Two of the teachers were mentors that I worked with in my role as supervisor of pre-service teachers. Principals with whom I associate recommended the other two teachers because they are particularly reflective. There was no preference for gender, ethnicity, race or number of years of teaching. Please see Table 1 for a concise description of the teachers.

Table 1

*Participant Information*

Name	Years taught	Grade levels
Alice	5	4, 5, 6
Brynne	25	K-6 <sup>th</sup>
Jane	9	1, 2
Kate	5	3, 4

Recruitment of the teachers was conducted during the summer months. Institutional Review Board approval was attained before any contact was made with principals or teachers. I met with and obtained informed consent of all the teachers and discussed what to expect as well as answered any questions they had (see consent form in Appendix A). They were all informed that each one-on-one interview was to be audio-recorded, could last up to two hours, and transcript files of the interviews would then be stored on my computer and password protected. I assured them that after transcription and analysis, pseudonyms would be used in the presentation of the data. They were informed of the risks and benefits of participating in the study and their rights to withdraw at any time.

**Data Sources**

The primary source of data was a series of semi-structured interviews. A secondary data source, used only for comparison to the qualitative data findings was a self-compassion survey. Below each data source's design and usage is presented.

**Semi-structured interviews.** Interviews involving the sharing of critical incidents were the main source of data (see Appendix B for a copy of interview questions). The teachers were

asked to elaborate on a time when they felt some sense of self-doubt or disappointment, an experience that led them to think of themselves differently as a teacher. Follow-up questions were asked pertaining to the situations described to help the teachers elaborate. The sharing of critical incidents brought the teachers' experience into view, revealing how each individual responded to actions in difficult circumstances (Bullough, 2015). All the teachers were interviewed three times, at a convenient time and place negotiated and agreed upon by each participant. Interviews ranged from 20 to 40 minutes in length. They commenced in August, before school was in session, and occurred approximately every 6 weeks, allowing for transcription and review of the data prior to the next meeting. The first interview differed slightly from the last two interviews in that there were questions asked regarding the teacher's career up until the current teaching assignment. This gave me information about teaching experience, but more importantly, my intention was to put the teacher at ease by talking about a more factual topic initially. The purpose of multiple interviews was to allow ideas from previous interviews to develop and become more nuanced. Additionally, at the beginning of interviews, the teachers reviewed transcripts of the last interview for verification. This provided triangulation of data and allowed the conversation about the previous incident to continue, adding more depth and breadth to our understanding of the experience.

In the first round of interviews, the teachers were asked to give background on their teaching experiences up to that point. Next, they were prompted to recall a critical incident— an interaction with a student that led them to think differently about themselves as teacher, where they experienced some sense of self-doubt or disappointment in their actions. Initially, I intended these critical incidents to involve teacher-student interactions, but in addition, the

teachers shared experiences with parents as well as matters of lesson planning, curriculum and testing.

Before the second interview, transcripts of the first interview were sent to the teachers via email, and they were invited to come prepared to discuss the incident more in depth. After any discourse involving the prior interview, they identified a second, more recent, critical incident. This second interview was conducted with the hope that trust had been built between the participant and myself during the first interview, possibly easing the experience of sharing emotions that possibly had not yet been resolved. Unfortunately, audio recordings of the second interview were accidentally deleted. Subsequently, the third interview consisted of the participant retelling the critical incident from the second interview as well as sharing a new incident. A final meeting with each participant occurred after all of the data had been analyzed for the purpose of member checking.

**Self-compassion survey.** Following the third interview, the teachers were sent a link to complete the self-compassion survey (SCS; Neff, 2003a), which was my second source of data (see Appendix C). The SCS is currently the only scale that has been developed to measure self-compassion. The survey contains 26 Likert-type scale items. The teachers read a statement and rated themselves on a scale from one to five, indicating how often they behave according to the description given. The statements are designed to reveal how the participant responds in hard circumstances, specifically in three categories: self-kindness (being kind instead of critical of oneself), common humanity (recognizing that experiences are part of the human experience instead of feeling isolated), and mindful acceptance (the ability to keep strong feelings at bay instead of over-identifying with them; Neff, 2003b). The scale has shown high test-reliability as

well as construct validity, supporting that it is “a psychometrically sound and theoretically valid” (Neff, 2003b, p. 241; Neff, 2016) measure of self-compassion.

### **Limitations**

Although many researchers, especially in the field of psychology, have used the SCS, it is limited because of its self-report nature. Individuals vary in self-awareness. For example, the act of repressing an emotion is sometimes a subconscious process. Participants might report that little in-the-head activity occurred in response to a situation simply because they were unaware of the processing that took place (Neff, 2003a). Additionally, Likert-type scales sometimes fail to capture the individual’s real experience. In addition, because experiences vary, people report them differently, and the scales limit the options for response.

Semi-structured interviews also have certain weaknesses. The teachers’ shared experiences are often limited to the prompt given. In addition, in this case, the teachers’ exposure to the title of the topic might have influenced how experiences were shared. Despite their inherent flaws, semi-structured interviews allow individuals to bring into the present moment experiences from the past using their own words (Stern, 2004). Through combining the use of Neff’s (2003a) survey on self-compassion and semi-structured interviews, this study hoped to address some of the weaknesses inherent in self-report.

My professional experience is as a teacher in elementary school classrooms for 15 years. Additionally, I have worked as an instructional coach and supervisor of pre-service teachers. This background gives me empathy for teachers and lends me perspective on teacher-student interaction. My bias in this study is relevant as it influences my interpretation of the meaning the teachers attribute to critical incidents.

## Data Analysis

The data were examined by the use of three distinctly different methods: qualitative coding of transcripts; the creation of I-poems; and an interpretation of mean scores from the survey. In order to understand how teachers experienced self-compassion, I took multiple passes at the data using a mix of a priori and inductive coding.

**Data coding.** After each round of interviews, the recordings of interviews were transcribed and coded, specifically looking for elements of self-compassion as generically understood, and the opposite—self-criticism. Compassion was defined as a “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it” (compassion, n.d.). This general definition was used, but applied towards the self. Because the interviews consisted of a question or prompt and then replies of varying length, each text unit was defined as a complete thought, whether that occurred within a phrase or sentence.

To ensure trustworthiness, a portion of the transcripts was provided to my thesis chair for validation of the coding. We each independently coded the data, looking for examples and non-examples of compassion towards the self, students, and parents. This process included a clarification and negotiation of codes until we reached consensus. For instance, at times teachers took action to fix a problem, and we concurred that action would communicate an awareness and desire to alleviate distress. This process led to approximately 80% agreement. My thesis chair continued to serve as a peer reviewer in the process of analysis, looking over my work and checking the coding and meaning making from the themes that emerged.

This same process of coding by a general definition of self-compassion followed each round of interviews. Once all data were coded, I created a data matrix that contained the categories of self-compassion and criticism that emerged through the coding along with

representative quotes that exemplified the categories, fitting inside and outside of Neff's (2003b) frame (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

After coding according to a general definition of compassion, I made another pass using the a priori codes that are part of the framework that Neff (2003b) created with her construct of self-compassion. I again looked for distinct thoughts in phrases or sentences according to the following six subthemes of Neff's (2003a) construct, which are: self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. Each of these main themes is further explained by five descriptors, (Neff, 2003a, See Appendix D) which were used in the coding. Then, I created a data matrix containing representative quotes for each of Neff's main themes across the teachers. Next, I tallied the number of responses that fit within the six main themes for all teachers and created a table to show the total numbers (see Table 3 in Findings). Finally, I calculated percentages of self-compassionate statements.

The coding of the data by two different definitions of self-compassion allowed unexpected themes to emerge. While conducting cross-case analyses, I noticed similar categories of steps, or elements on a plotline, of the process of reaching emotional recovery. The four elements of the plotline were conflict, reflection, resolution, and self-compassion. Following this cross-case analysis I conducted a within-case analysis, looking for teacher responses to their own mistakes and how the trajectories of their responses for each incident were similar and different (Bullough, 2008). I noticed that the teachers experienced self-compassion in varying places in the description of their critical incidents, therefore I noted the order in which they occurred in each participant's descriptions, creating a storyline for each teacher's critical incident.



**I-poems.** To check my analysis, I created I-poems for all of each teacher's critical incidents. Using the procedure outlined in Gilligan's listening guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2006), I highlighted each pronoun "I" used in the transcripts, the following verb, as well as any other words that needed to be included to maintain meaning. After highlighting, I pulled those sections of text out and created a series of poems for all teachers. Once the poems were created, I started to code the poems using Neff's (2003a) construct. This process served to validate the original coding done using Neff's construct. I-poems focus on what the participant is thinking or doing in clear, succinct ways by just focusing on the verbs and other describing words, if needed, to supply context for the reader. Verb choice can show the participant's perceived power in situations by noting the use of active or passive voice as well as positive or negative words in conjunction with verbs.

**SCS mean scores.** Mean scores from the SCS (Neff, 2003a) for each of the six categories of the construct, as well as total mean scores for all teachers, were calculated. Then I took one more pass through the data, tallying the number of examples or non-examples of self-compassion that were coded in the data according to Neff's construct (see Table 4 in Findings). The tallies for compassionate behavior were transformed into percentages, the summary of which can be seen in Table 3 in the Findings section. A comparison of the mean scores on the SCS to the percentages of actual examples of self-compassion provided insight into how teachers might have reported self-compassion one way while living it in another manner and how the qualitative data might explain the quantitative data.

In the end, I summarized my interpretations based upon these within-case and cross-case analyses. I was open to the idea that some themes might fall outside the construct of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b), which could lead to new theory in regards to the phenomenon of

responding to one's errors. Then I took the tables and findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to the teachers for review and approval to ensure my interpretations were representative of their experiences, allowing misconceptions to be resolved. The teachers were given the chance to remove any data they felt was too private.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

In this chapter I present findings regarding the lived experience of the teachers, including the plotlines of emotional recovery, storylines of individual teachers, as well as what was revealed from the SCS. I present the findings through representations of their stories, I-poems, and the words of the teachers themselves.

#### **The Lived Experience of Teachers**

Through the coding process, using both a general definition of compassion—a sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it (compassion, n.d.)—applied to the self, as well as Neff's (2003a) more specific definition revealed the ways that teachers experienced self-compassion and how it was defined. Neff's construct consists of the three positive subscale items and three negative ones. The positive items are: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. The data were also coded for self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification, the negative items. The following categories in which the teachers showed self-compassion, emerged: (a) connections with others' experiences, (b) recognizing distress, (c) identifying personal accountability, (d) allowing for the agency of others, and (e) seeking support. Four of the five categories of self-compassion that emerged from the use of the general definition fit listed above within Neff's framework of self-compassion: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. The emergent self-compassionate categories and their relationship to Neff's framework will be explained below.

**Connections with others' experiences.** The teachers commented that other teachers had experienced the same situation or feelings that they were living. Neff (2003b) referred to this as common humanity—an understanding that everyone experiences difficulty, inadequacy,

and personal limitations. She stated that these aspects of life are part of the human experience. One way that teachers in this study experienced this aspect of “common humanity” was by relating difficult situations they experienced with those they had heard from others in the profession. For example, after a particularly difficult interchange with a student, Kate reported initially thinking that she was the only one with a particular kind of student. Those thoughts changed quickly though. She recounted, “I’ve heard stories, and I know every teacher in this school has had students like this...they’ve survived, they’re happy, they’re good teachers. I can do this too!” (interview, August 10, 2015). Kate went from isolating herself in the immediate struggle to acknowledging ties with other teachers. Similarly, Jane also showed an awareness of common humanity by connecting her experience to that of her students (interview, November 10, 2015). She reported an experience of coming home from a vacation to quite a bit of work. Though overwhelmed, Kate recognized that teachers, in general, feel so good and then are suddenly overwhelmed after something new is thrown at them. She then pointed out how students in school experience the same phenomenon. Instead of believing that they were alone in their experiences, teachers countered those thoughts with ones that bound them to others in her profession. They reminded themselves that there were many others who felt similarly and, by so doing, made connections that led to self-compassionate ways of viewing the self and of coping with the situation.

**Recognizing distress.** All the teachers showed an ability to pinpoint when they were feeling distress. On the SCS, Neff (2003a) described an aspect of mindfulness as trying to keep emotions in balance when upset. The teachers in this study kept emotions in balance by recognizing, instead of repressing, the negative emotions, and that recognition caused them to stop and consider possible actions to alleviate them. The recognition of distress is a simple, yet

important part of the way that these teachers were able to show compassion towards the self. It marked a change in the trajectory of their actions or thoughts, a first step in adopting a mindful response to the conflict. The following excerpt illustrates this phenomenon:

I was worried about Kenzie. But when I started seeing hate notes to herself that said, 'I'm fat,' 'I'm ugly,' and 'I don't deserve to be here,' I realized the severity of the problem. Kenzie was a twin, separated from her sister for the first time in my 6<sup>th</sup> grade class. She was shy and didn't interact with her peers much. She began connecting with me and eventually wrote a note that scared me, berating herself and alluding to suicide. I worked with her parents and administration but nothing we were trying was working. Kenzie was relying on me more and more, and I wasn't fixing the situation; I felt like I was failing her. There were nights I couldn't sleep. I reached a point where I realized that it wasn't doing anyone any good for me to go home and ponder all night in a state of depression. I was taking on too much responsibility and needed to stop tearing myself apart. So I stepped back and trusted that the Lord would help me know what to do. I decided to sit down with her and make a list of what made her happy and what she wanted to learn. That was the turning point. (Alice, interview, August 12, 2015)

Alice often let her worries ruminate in her mind during evening hours. Eventually Alice recognized that she was placing undue responsibility on herself for fixing the situation, which was causing her distress as she tried to remain helpful and calm. Neff (2003a) defined mindfulness as keeping emotions in balance, or being open or curious about feelings. The distressing emotions must be acknowledged before learning how to keep them in balance.

Another example of pinpointing distress is demonstrated in a situation Jane experienced after an interaction with a parent. The parent's children (twins) had had a rough day in class, and

Jane called home at the end of the day to inform the parent about the day and ask if she might follow up with them so the same thing would not happen the next day. After Jane presented the problem, the parent turned on her, commenting that she could not imagine her boys doing anything bad. Jane was quick to smooth things over and end the call, but inside she was reeling. Jane reflected, “I remember going home and feeling like I didn’t want to come back the next day” (interview, August 12, 2015). In fact, she took the next day off. Because Jane pinpointed distress within herself in response to this situation, she was able to make a move to work through the emotions, attempting to keep them in balance (Neff, 2003a). Though actions are not included in this theme, identifying distressing emotions is what allowed the teachers to take further action to alleviate the distress.

**Identifying personal accountability.** Neff (2003a) suggests that mindfulness in addition to keeping emotion in balance, also involves taking a balanced view of the situation—looking at it from differing perspectives and considering the many factors at play. This balanced view was evident as the teachers made an assessment of personal accountability for the outcome of the situation. The teachers’ actions are a variable that contributed to the situation. In an attempt to right perceived wrongs, the teachers often first sought to understand if they had done anything wrong and then detailed a plan to change their own actions, hoping to resolve the conflict, and prevent such situations from re-occurring. Kate communicated this kind of thinking.

When I was critical about myself, I wasn't degrading myself and saying, ‘You're a bad teacher.’ It was more, ‘Okay what can I change?’ [I was] critical in a way like, ‘I can do this. I can figure it out.’ I was taught that you are responsible for your choices, and you are in charge of yourself . . . learning that [while growing up made] it easier for me to

realize what [I was] responsible for in each situation. . . . as long as I'm happy and satisfied with what I did that's all I can really be concerned about. That's all I have control over. . . . I was still upset about it because I knew I had done something wrong. I also knew if I can change this and learn from it then it'll be okay. (interview, August 10, 2015)

A pattern of looking at actions and learning from them is described in Kate's passage. She used the word critical, but explained that she is only critical to the point that helps her see what she is responsible for and can change. Jane critiqued the situation rather than being self-critical. Once she identified the changes that needed to be made and carried them out, then she was able to let it go. This is a clear example of the balanced view of which Neff (2003a) spoke.

Brynne, also, showed an awareness for the need to look at each situation and make changes on a daily basis.

I try to reflect on my day. I think about what went well and what didn't go so well. I think about situations with particular children or particular problems. I think, 'Next time I'm going to do this a little bit differently.' And I hope I remember my resolutions. (interview, November 6, 2015)

Instead of letting feelings about critical incidents pile up over time, like the other teachers, Brynne worked through her feelings daily by planning for how she would handle similar situations in the future. Aligned with the mindfulness component of Neff's (2003a) definition of self-compassion, Brynne tried to keep things in perspective. All teachers showed evidence of this kind of mindfulness illustrated by these examples; they quickly recognized their part in the conflict and planned for future actions.

**Allowing for the agency of others.** The teachers illustrated Neff's subcategory of mindfulness in an additional way by recognizing that they could not hold themselves accountable for another's actions. While taking personal responsibility for some aspects of the conflict, they also accepted students' and parents' agency and accountability for their actions. The following recounting of an experience Kate shared demonstrates this pattern of thinking which was evident in all of the teachers' interviews:

I had not understood autism until I taught Jeremy in my third year of teaching. He was my first truly challenging student I had worked with. He hated to write. I wanted to push him, but I also recognized that I could make accommodations for him and I didn't know where the line between the two was. One particular incident comes to mind. During writing he wanted to call his mom (what he would do when things got hard). I told him he couldn't and eventually had to move him to the alcove of my classroom so the other students could concentrate. For 45 minutes we engaged in a power struggle, him refusing to do anything until he called his mom, me refusing to let him call. Eventually the class had to go to a specialty class. After they left, I sat at my desk and let the tears flow. I reflected on what I had done wrong. Quickly thereafter, I entered the alcove and immediately apologized. I told him the things I regretted and said that he had done some things wrong too. We talked again the next day, focusing on things that he thought I could do to help him during writing time. So some days he dictated and I wrote for him, or he would use the computer. Other days nothing worked. I realized, though, that no matter the influence I think I have on people, I couldn't force them to do anything, ever. I never have that control over somebody; I shouldn't expect to. I shouldn't get mad at myself when they don't want to do what I ask. I felt like to be a good teacher I always



had to have students doing the right thing all the time—be able to get to every student, reach every student and coerce them into doing things. Then I realized that that's not what a good teacher, or even a good person, does. There should never be force or coercion. You're more of a guide to help them see the right choices and learn things. For them to really learn and grow as a person, that it has to be their choice. (interview, August 10, 2015)

This critical incident illustrates allowing a student to exercise agency. Kate clarified expectations of teachers and students—realizing that it is the teacher's role to give students opportunities to learn and let positive and negative consequences occur, but students ultimately choose how they will respond to those learning experiences. Kate could not force a student to comply. Allowing for student agency helped her feel less accountable for her students' actions—she was able to look at the situation with the realistic, mindful perspective that Neff (2003a) highlighted in her definition of self-compassion. Kate was able to consider the child's perspective, in addition to her own.

Brynne shared a similar sentiment in her first interview. After an incident where a student threw something at her she reflected,

I think at first I would feel kind of responsible for his actions. Like I should have taught him better. He should have known. I should have set my expectations better. It's a failure on my part because he threw this thing at me, or because he's explosive. But yet, when you look at it . . . . you can't judge yourself on somebody [else's] actions. That comes with, I think, some experience too, [realizing], 'This kid's going to throw a fit, but it's not going to necessarily reflect what I've done.' (interview, August 11, 2015)

In this excerpt, like Kate, Brynne initially had the tendency to take responsibility for her student's actions believing that the student only behaved the way he did because of something she had done. When Brynne stepped back and took a more balanced view (Neff, 2003a) of the interaction, considering how she approached the student and the student's responsibility for his response, she was able to relieve herself of the burden of the student's behavior. Allowing the student to exercise agency and face consequences of his choices freed her up to consider possible alternatives in her actions with more creativity (Bullough, 2012) and protected herself from self-blame. Not only was the mindfulness aspect of Neff's (2003a) definition present here, but Brynne was self-kind as well. Neff (2003a) explained that self-kindness involves being kind to oneself when experiencing suffering. Possibly a kinder alternative to taking full responsibility for situations is to recognize that conflicts are a combination of the choices made by both individuals involved.

**Seeking support.** This category emerged outside of Neff's (2003a) definition of self-compassion. Neff (2003b) emphasized the use of inner resources, explaining that individuals sift through thoughts conjured up from their own minds relating to the categories of self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification, and choose to believe some over others. The teachers in this study sought caring and tenderness, but from outside sources in addition to relying on the inner resources. Teachers repeatedly turned to others to find solace in the sifting process, injecting the thoughts of others into the landscape of the mind, being changed by their interactions with others, and feeling less isolated in the process. The stories that these teachers shared often included a turning to family or co-workers for support. The teachers spoke with spouses, administrators, teachers on the same grade level and

parents after critical incidents. The I-poem below highlights how talking to others helped one participant to change her thinking towards a student and resolve the conflict:

I was teaching fifth grade  
 I had a little student  
 I had these expectations  
 I would be able to be the one that would fix him  
 I had all these expectations  
 I thought, 'Okay he's going to be able to do this'  
 I told him to do something  
 I kicked him out  
 I went to my principal  
 I talked to my sister  
 I thought, 'Oh you're right'  
 I'm not going to fix everybody  
 I shouldn't have to  
 I think that was a big turning point  
 I realized I don't have to make everybody perform  
 I still have to remember (interview, August 11, 2015)

Brynne turned to the principal and her sister immediately after a troubling incident with a student. She stated that she had solved part of a problem in her head, had come up with some conclusions. But the words of her administrator were the “last part of the equation I needed” (interview, August 11, 2015). He had simply asked, “Do you think you’re the only one who’s tried?” pointing her to feel common humanity with other teachers in the past. The conversations with her administrator and family member made Brynne realize that she wasn’t going to be able to “fix” everyone. Sometimes treating oneself kindly involves accessing outside resources, including administration and family.

Nowhere in Neff’s construct is involving others in attempts at self-compassion mentioned, but the teachers in this study found it helpful. Neff’s (2003a) definition of self-compassion focuses on self-kindness in intrapersonal ways, but seeking emotional support from others is self-compassionate as well. These teachers needed a social network in which they could learn how to respond to themselves kindly by hearing kind responses from others. They

needed to speak their thoughts out loud in order to better reflect on and organize them. The drive to share thoughts and feelings regarding difficulties was common to the teachers in this study as illustrated in Alice's remark, "I found [that] anytime I talk to people about it, it really helps my brain start to think, 'Okay, this is a healthy thing that you're doing. This is not healthy. Stop this'" (interview, November 12, 2015). Alice's experiences demonstrate the benefit of seeking interpersonal support to clarify intrapersonal reasoning. Reaching out to others was an important way that these teachers showed care and kindness to themselves. This need to share experiences was common in the critical incidents explored. This makes self-compassion a social issue as well as a personal one. Based upon this work, Neff's construct should be reconsidered keeping in mind the sociality of human beings (Osterman, 2000).

There was only one statement in the interview data that exemplified isolation, or feeling alone in one's failures and disconnected from happier others (Neff, 2003a). Perhaps this tendency to seek support explains the lack of evidence for feelings of isolation in these teachers. Only Kate acknowledged that there was a moment where she thought that she was the only teacher who struggled with students like she did (interview, August 10, 2015). Overall, these teachers were willing to make efforts to connect with others to avoid feeling isolated in their struggles.

The five, common, specific categories of self-compassion aligned most heavily with mindfulness, the third positive subscale item of Neff's (2003a) construct. The teachers recognized their distress, identified personal accountability, and allowed others their agency, all ways of demonstrating mindfulness. Another way teachers experienced self-compassion was by establishing connections with others, aligning with Neff's (2003a) theme of common humanity. In addition, they sought support from others, a category of self-compassion that emerged through

their lived experience but was not included in Neff's (2003a) construct; an element that demonstrates the social need for teacher networks in dealing with critical incidents and becoming self-compassionate.

### **Teacher Storylines**

A common plotline composed of four elements emerged in the interview data that represented how the teachers experienced critical incidents in teaching. This plotline explains how teachers regulated the strong emotions that they experienced. The common elements include first, a conflict that involved a distressing emotion. This was followed by a time of reflection. The final two elements of the plotline, self-compassion and the resolution of the conflict, varied depending on the kind of critical incident; self-compassion even acted as the resolution in some cases. Although this plotline was common, the teachers each had a unique storyline in regards to how the elements of the plot surfaced. Below is the definition and description of each of the elements followed by the description of the variation in the teacher stories.

**Conflict.** When given the prompt to recall a critical incident, all participants recounted a situation where there was a conflict that elicited negative emotions. These conflicts included negative interactions with students or their parents, or internal dissonance created by personal response to curricular matters. In the teacher stories, conflicts involved a difference between what was expected to happen and what really happened. At times the conflict was initiated by a decision made by another individual that affected the participant, or it was simply disappointment in the participant's own decision. In a few instances, there was a catalyst that brought the conflict into awareness. For example, one participant started noticing the students in her class turn on a student whose name she called out frequently. This caused her to consider

other ways of responding to the student's behavior that didn't involve verbal reprimand. The conflict occurred after the observed consequences of an action (the students' treatment of the child), not the original action itself (calling out a student in front of his peers). The internal dissonance, or rift, between how she acted and how she believed she should have acted occurred after her initial actions made this a critical incident in her mind.

**Reflection.** Lantolf and Johnson (1997) speak of an intermediary space between action and the next action or between thought and the next action. In this study, I refer to this space as reflection (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Jarvis, 1987). Each participant described a period of reflection after the critical incident. They asked themselves questions about accountability and explored ways of solving the problems they faced. The reflections were self-initiated and varied in length, some lasting only a night and others extending over months. The teachers described self-reflections as well as reflective interactions with administration, parents of the students, co-workers or family members.

**Attempts at resolution.** All critical incidents reached a point of recovery, which was dependent on an attempt to resolve the conflict. There were a variety of ways, and sometimes repeated attempts, made to resolve the conflict such as through dialogue with the other person involved in the conflict, or looking for opportunities to have positive interactions with them. Resolution wasn't necessarily achieved after one positive interaction, but at times was an iterative process of either engaging in dialogue, enacting a change in interactional patterns, or altering one's thinking. If the conflict didn't involve other people, attempts at resolution involved changing thoughts regarding the situation. Resolution was not always permanent. For example, one participant in particular described revisiting old regrets when a new conflict occurred that brought the old ones she thought were resolved to mind again (Rimé, 2007).

**Self-compassion.** The teachers showed kindness to themselves by understanding the difficulty of the situation they faced, recognizing that others had experienced similar events, or maintaining clear thinking about events and strong emotions (Neff, 2003b). According to Neff (2003b), self-compassion involves recognizing that everything, the positive and negative, are part of human experience, that a certain distance from emotions can be obtained, and individuals can choose to treat themselves with kindness rather than criticism. The evidences of self-compassionate thinking happened in three spots of the plotline, before or after resolution, or serving as the resolution. Many of the teachers were able to be kind to themselves in the space between the incident and the resolution, while reflecting. Some teachers described finding relief in thoughts that were coded as self-compassionate, because they did not have a chance to try to resolve the conflict. Internal conflicts that occurred as a result of matters that were peripheral to the classroom were resolved mainly through self-compassion, though some interpersonal ones were resolved through self-compassion as well. At other times teachers showed self-compassion after the resolution—they had to do something to resolve the situation before they could be self-compassionate.

The four parts of the plotline are illustrated in an I-poem in which Brynne shares her third critical incident. In this poem she describes an interaction with a parent. While administering a reading assessment at the beginning of the school year, Brynne noticed that a student, who happened to be Hispanic, dropped from a score of 16 the prior spring to 12 in the fall after a summer out of school. Brynne told the student that she needed to apply herself more. The next day Brynne met with the mother about another matter, but she heard later from the translator, that the mother thought she was racist based upon what her daughter had told her.

I was doing [a reading assessment]  
I had noticed that one little girl dropped

I was talking to her  
 I was telling her  
 I had a meeting with her mother  
 Her mother thought I was being racist

I was really quite hurt  
 If I was really racist  
 I really wouldn't have  
 I would leave  
 I wouldn't care  
 I had to really realize  
 I came up with  
 I care  
 I'm not racist  
 I'm the opposite  
 I'm trying  
 I came to terms  
 I figured out

I thought  
 I didn't hear any more  
 I didn't take it further  
 I didn't confront  
 I didn't confront the little girl  
 I didn't confront the mom  
 I just tried  
 I just tried to make sure she knew I loved her  
 I thought  
 I'm kind of glad I showed her with love (interview, September 30, 2015)

The beginning of the first stanza describes the antecedent to the conflict—while Brynne was “doing,” she “noticed” a student’s score had dropped and used “talking” and “telling” to manage the issue. The student’s recounting of the “talking” and “telling” led the mother to label Brynne as racist. Being made aware of the parent’s judgment caused a conflict within Brynne. The second stanza contains her reflection mingled with self-compassion as she questions her own motives. She assessed her personal accountability and “came to terms” with and “figured out” that she “cared.” Brynne supposed that if she were really racist, she wouldn’t do anything about the problem. This thinking can be categorized as mindful because, although initially hurt,



Brynne was able to put her strong emotions on hold for a moment and try to view the situation from a new perspective (Neff, 2003a). After showing herself compassion in this mindful way, she resolves the conflict with the mother by expressing her love for the student at parent teacher conferences a week or two later. Put more succinctly, the parts of the plotline consisted of (a) a conflict that arose within Brynne because of an awareness of a parent's judgment of her actions; (b) the entering of a reflective period, (c) where she reviewed actions and intentions and applied self-compassionate thoughts, resolving the internal conflict; and (d) an attempt to resolve the conflict with the parent by expressing love for the student. In this case, self-compassion was found during reflection, before the resolution.

**Variation in storylines.** The teachers had common plotline elements, but sometimes experienced them in differing orders, likely dependent upon typical patterns of responding to situations for each individual. Below are examples of how self-compassion was found after making attempts at resolution, before those attempts, and as the resolution.

***Self-compassion after attempts at resolution.*** A common storyline was the need to resolve a conflict that occurred with another person prior to being able to experience self-compassion. For example, an incident occurred while Kate was administering a test to another teacher's class in the gym. A student was being disruptive and, after restating her expectations to him a number of times in private, Kate looked up just as it appeared that he was about to stab another student with his pencil. Immediately she yelled across the room to get him to stop. Though Kate acted in the other child's best interest, she felt bad for having to redirect the disruptive student in front of his peers. Kate had a conversation with him before class ended. She was able to communicate her intentions to the student and felt relief as he accepted her

actions. Kate felt the most self-compassion after the resolution. She later described how she generally obtains a sense of relief after interactions with students. Kate stated,

As soon as I see the students starting to understand why I did the things I did... That's when I start to forgive myself more... I think when I explain myself and they understand that, then that helps me feel better about it. It helps me be able to change because I'm not so mad at myself. (interview, September 24, 2015)

Kate's storylines exemplified the achievement of a self-compassionate response after making attempts at resolution.

***Self-compassion before attempts at resolution.*** In contrast, self-compassionate thoughts can also precede a resolution of the conflict. The following narrative is exemplary of this type of storyline:

I was gone for a week and had prepared for my absence from the classroom meticulously. When I returned, I dropped by my classroom to read the sub notes and look at student work for the week. Everything looked good. I was eager to see my students. After school on the Monday of my return, I went to a meeting where the principal mentioned that we needed to make a plan for how we would spend the money the PTA had collected through a fund-raiser. I put that on my list of things to do. Grades were also due that Friday. I needed to work on those, and the new teachers on our team would need help learning how to input grades; that went on the list too. Then the computer teacher came over and said that she was doing an assessment with the kids that week, and we would need to look at the assessment data. Then, while collaborating with the teachers, I was reminded that I should be monitoring progress of the students in reading to show growth on the state reading assessment. After our meeting, I went to my desk, reeling from all of

the situations that needed to be tended to in addition to teaching my class. I thought, ‘I can do this. I’m going to get caught up. I’m going to get my grades done. The reading assessment is easy; I can look at that. I’m ready to teach tomorrow, and I have great students. It will all get worked out with time.’ I remember a quote on my trip that read, ‘I hate to spoil the ending but everything’s going to be okay.’ Yes, everything would be okay. (Jane, interview, November 10, 2015)

First, the conflict can be seen during meetings after school that day. Jane was overwhelmed with all of the responsibilities that she became aware of in one afternoon. Jane was prepared to come back to teaching her class, but she had not estimated the other items that were added to her task list in order to implement certain programs or support other teachers on her team. Then, during reflection Jane was able to reach mindfulness as she sat at her desk by thinking of how she might approach the situation and deciding to take a balanced view by assuring herself that she could take it a day at a time (Neff, 2003b). Jane was self-compassionate before she actually completed any of the tasks signifying a resolution.

***Self-compassion as the resolution.*** The storyline in which self-compassion is the resolution can be seen in the following experience that Alice shared.

I was aghast when I discovered that Austin tried to strangle another student with a piece of string. I understood he was troubled, but I didn’t realize the severity of it. I had never witnessed the police coming into *my* classroom to remove a student. I was embarrassed. Shocked. I felt like a failure. These sentiments only worsened when my principal suggested that we remove Austin from my classroom and give him a new beginning elsewhere. Before the year started, the principal was going to place him in another teacher’s classroom but I volunteered to take him. The first couple of months were fine;

he challenged my authority from time to time, but I was always able to work things out. After Christmas his behavior started to change; he became more aggressive towards other students and less responsive to me. The piece of string incident occurred in March. The student in the class didn't say anything about it, probably because she was afraid of what he'd do. While I saw the wisdom in the decision to move him from my room, it was then that I started to worry that I hadn't done enough, that I had failed. Every time I saw Austin for the next two months I'd be filled with a sense of self-doubt. I went through every conversation, every interaction over and over again to assess what I could have done differently. Rather than directing my anger toward him, I focused it on myself. Finally, on the last day of school, as the kids were walking out the door I reviewed the school year and concluded that children really do have their agency. I can do all I can to pigeon hole them into making good choices, but in the end, I can't force them to do what's right; it's their choice. When I believed that thought, I felt a sense of relief come over me—I was able to forgive myself. (interview, September 28, 2015)

Although Austin's poor behavior increased after Christmas, we can see that the conflict for Alice did not occur until he was moved out of her class. That event initiated a reflective state that endured for a little over two months. Resolution came, not as a result of a new pattern of interactions with Austin or a change in his behavior, but through adopting a mindful view of the situation, the third part of Neff's (2003b) definition of self-compassion. That mindful thought put to rest the distressing emotions that kept cycling through her mind; being self-compassionate resolved the inner conflict.

Interestingly, though, this storyline has a twist. After what Alice believed to be the resolution, she shared additional information that shows how the incident was not completely resolved.

Immediately after saying goodbye to the students, all the teachers met together to celebrate the last day of school. During the festivities I was named 'Teacher of the Year'. I immediately wanted to give it back and say I did not deserve it. All of my doubts came back. My family tried to convince me that I couldn't judge an entire year on one student's behavior. It was hard for me to trust my principal's perspective when I had spent a good portion of the year wondering about my job performance. Within a week I accepted that I had done my best that year, and that I could let the student be responsible for his own choices. (interview, September 28, 2015)

Though resolution had been attained through recognizing her student's agency, one of the categories of self-compassion, the resurgence of painful emotions was nevertheless present in this situation. Resolution through self-compassion was re-attained through the acceptance of the belief offered by family and friends that she had done her best that year. Alice's renewed effort to be self-compassionate aligns with the self-kindness aspect of Neff's (2003a) construct. She chose to be loving instead of critical of herself at this last resurgence of distress. Her storyline followed this order: conflict (student moved), reflection (two months of self-criticism), resolution (self-compassionate thought), conflict (named teacher of the year, when she didn't believe she deserved it), reflection (consulting family and reconsidering previous thoughts), resolution (self-compassionate thought). When teachers find themselves in situations where the resolution of a conflict with an individual is not prudent or possible, other ways of coming to terms with the situation must be accessed, through self-compassionate means.

The teachers, although experiencing similar plotline elements of (a) conflict, (b) reflection on that conflict, (c) self-compassion, and (d) resolution, lived them through differing storylines. Self-compassion emerged in three places in the teachers' storylines—before, after, and as the resolution.

### **Understanding the SCS**

Now that the ways in which teachers experienced self-compassion has been explored, I turn to their self-report of self-compassion as captured on the SCS (Neff, 2003a). Neff's scale is unique in that the total mean scores include negative and positive aspects of the definition of self-compassion (Neff, 2016). The total mean scores come from the SCS and are meant to indicate the teachers' perceptions of their ability to be more self-compassionate than self-critical. Though the scale is considered valid (Neff, 2003a; 2015), the reflections of the teachers in this study added a layer of complexity to the scores. By comparing the scores to the qualitative data, we can see how the teachers responded to abstract generalities of possible situations in one way and described responses to real situations in other ways. I found that total mean scores on the SCS aligned more closely with percentages of compassionate statements found in the interview data than the mean scores of subscale items and their corresponding counts of compassionate statements. Each of these categories of findings will be discussed below.

**Total mean scores.** The teachers completed the SCS at the end of their third interview. Total and subscale mean scores were calculated. I coded the interview data looking for the positive and negative subscale items. I found examples of all of the six subscale items in their words, some items better represented than others. The percentages of compassionate statements show how often the teachers' words aligned with the positive subscale items in Neff's (2003a)

definition of self-compassion. For example, if 80% of a participant's statements were coded as self-compassionate, 20% of their statements were self-critical in nature.

In Table 2 the total mean scores are listed along the percentages of compassionate statements found in the interview data for each teacher. Currently there are no norms for what constitutes a low, medium or high score on the SCS (Neff, 2016). However, the median score on the rating scale is a three. Total mean scores under a three would indicate that an individual is less likely, on average, to perceive themselves as self-compassionate, while those above the median are more likely. According to the data displayed in Table 2, all of the teachers that were above the median—Jane, Kate, and Brynne—had similar percentages of positive compassionate statements. Alice, the only participant who scored below the median, also has the lowest percentage of compassionate statements. When the results are considered in view of the median score, there is an alignment of total mean scores and percentages of compassionate statements.

Table 2

*Total Mean Scores on SCS and Percentages of Positive Compassionate Statements*

	Alice	Jane	Kate	Brynne
Total mean scores on SCS	2.62	3.03	3.26	4.03
Positive compassionate statements	52%	87%	81%	86%

The difference between the teachers' experiences is indicated when the results are compared by category (Neff, 2003a). Table 3 shows the number of self-compassionate (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) and self-critical (self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification) statements found in the interview data of each participant. Alice had twice

the number of self-critical statements as did Jane, Kate, and Brynne combined. Perhaps this explains why she rated herself lower than the rest of the teachers on the SCS.

**Mean scores on subscale items.** When the sub-scale items in the SCS are compared with the numbers of compassionate statements, discrepancies are apparent. There is a difference between how the teachers perceive themselves as self-compassionate and how they described reactions to critical incidents in the interviews. For example, Table 4 shows that Jane rated herself the highest in the category of common humanity, but she had the least occurrences of that same category in the coded interview data. Alice's total subscale mean score for isolation was a four, the highest out of the three negative subscale items, and yet she offered no instances of isolation. Neff (2015) says that a limited amount of research has been done exploring self-compassion at the level of the subscale items. Though the total mean scores seem to be consistent with percentages of compassionate statements, there are distinct differences by category.

Table 3

*Self-Compassionate and Self-Critical Statements by Category*

	Alice	Jane	Kate	Brynne
Self-kindness	3	6	2	2
Common humanity	1	3	2	5
Mindfulness	20	11	18	11
Self-judgment	8	1	3	0
Isolation	0	0	1	0
Over-identification	14	2	1	3
Total self-compassionate statements	24	20	22	18
Total self-critical statements	22	3	5	3



Table 4

*SCS Subscale Mean Scores and Coded Incidents by Category*

Category	Alice		Jane		Kate		Brynne	
	SCS	Coded	SCS	Coded	SCS	Coded	SCS	Coded
Self-kindness	3.20	3.00	3.00	6.00	3.60	2.00	4.00	2.00
Common humanity	3.00	1.00	4.00	3.00	2.75	2.00	3.75	5.00
Mindfulness	2.25	20.00	3.25	11.00	3.75	18.00	4.25	11.00
Self-judgment	3.20	8.00	3.60	1.00	3.00	3.00	1.80	0.00
Isolation	4.00	0.00	3.50	0.00	2.25	1.00	2.00	0.00
Over-identification	3.50	14.00	3.00	2.00	3.25	1.00	2.00	3.00

In conclusion, the lived experience of these teachers' self-compassion consisted of varied stories although each story contained elements of a conflict, reflection, and resolution with self-compassion, occurring before, after, or as the resolution. In addition, the teachers' lived experiences of being self-compassionate varied slightly from the construct that Neff has proposed and from their self-reports. The elements of recognizing distress, connecting to others through their experiences, identifying personal accountability, and allowing for the agency of others all aligned with the three main constructs of Neff's definition of self-compassion. Additionally, these teachers at times sought support from others in order to be self-compassionate. Finally, teachers' self-reported total mean scores on the SCS were explained

somewhat by the percentages of self-compassionate statements in the interview data. But when a comparison of the subscale items from the SCS and the counts of those same items from the interview data were made, there was less alignment.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study bring into question what really constitutes self-compassion. These teachers' scores on the SCS revealed one level of understanding, but there was a discrepancy between how teachers rated themselves and the self-compassion found in their explanations of responses to stressful situations. Self-compassion is more than what is represented on the SCS. The definition of self-compassion cannot be constrained to only include in-the-head behaviors. Neff's (2003a) construct of self-compassion directs individuals to draw on inner resources by choosing to respond kindly, recognizing the universality of experience, and remaining open and distant to emotions. While this is helpful in many instances, my study revealed the importance of acknowledging the need for sociality. My findings expose the social and emotional faces of self-compassion, in addition to the cognitive. In this chapter I discuss my findings in relation to the greater social culture of teaching and emotion regulation. I then briefly outline general implications and limitations of the study.

#### **Self-Compassion and Sociality**

There are social aspects of self-compassion that are not addressed in current definitions. In the previous chapter, five categories of self-compassionate behaviors were presented (making connections to others' experiences, recognizing their own distress, identifying personal accountability, allowing for the agency of others, and seeking support from others). Four fell within Neff's original framework, but one, pointing to the social networks of teachers, did not. Neff's (2003b) theory of self-compassion seems to communicate that we must reason by ourselves to truly care for the self, but in this study it is clearly evident that self-compassion for teachers is a social issue. The teachers reached out for connections and sought the assistance of

significant others. Conflict with students and parents, as well as reactions to curriculum and programs, is what drove the teachers to make meaning on the mental plane, to reflect. But in the process of reflection they accessed outside resources for knowing how to respond to the critical incidents instead of solely relying on self-reflection. Their interactions with students, parents, administrators, family, and friends helped them to revise their thinking, take time to reconsider responsibility and look at themselves and others more compassionately. It is self-compassionate to access help from others at times of difficulty.

Based on the findings of this study, I argue that it is actually more compassionate for individuals to turn to others for empathy and compassion in addition to accessing inner mental and emotional sources. These teachers were encountering ill-structured problems (Bullough, Young, Hall, Draper, & Smith, 2008), or problems that don't have a simple answer. Not yet independent in problem solving for the new types of crises, they turned to others in an effort to collaborate. Brynne's experiences shared in chapter 4 clearly exemplify this. The added insight of her administrator helped her to be self-compassionate as he prompted her to see that she wasn't responsible for fixing all students.

Socio-cultural theory explains the need for sociality seen in these teachers. We interact with others and then take those interactions into the intrapersonal plane, where we consider them further and change our views of the world and the people within (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). A combination of socio-cultural theory and Neff's (2003a) framework might say that what we are able to reason with another we will eventually be able to reason within ourselves. We take others' thoughts and either add them to our current beliefs or restructure our beliefs based upon the thoughts we encounter. What we believe, regardless of the source (currently within or from without), is then applied to situations in an effort to resolve negative emotions and heal. Neff's

(2003a) construct includes the need for individuals to understand that experiences are universal and that no one is alone in the problems they experience. However, it is more powerful to talk to others about one's experiences and to be reconfirmed of that truth than to mentally convince oneself of it alone. We need the reasoning, as well as the comfort, love, and reassurance that comes from others (Rimé, 2007).

Perhaps Neff's research did not reveal this aspect of self-compassion because the use of a self-report questionnaire limits such a finding. Though the SCS is a valid and psychometrically sound tool for measuring self-compassion as Neff (2003a) defined it, it was only in the social context of an interview that the need for sociality emerged. Neff's survey only allowed the teachers to respond within the constraints of the questions asked. The use of open-ended questions in the interview process gave the teachers more latitude to share a range of reactions to situations and provide rationale, context and motivations. The amount of research done on self-compassion, all of which is quantitative, leaves the research community lacking the understanding that qualitative research brings. Qualitative design reveals in-depth, context grounded perceptions of individuals in regard to situations and how each experiences those situations in an original way (van Manen, 1990). Such research in education seeks to give voice to teachers' experiences regarding perceived mistakes, contributing to the totality of the meaning of self-compassion in teaching, specifically its social side.

### **Self-Compassion and Emotion Regulation**

In addition to social implications, my findings inform the conversation regarding emotion regulation. At the outset of this study, I wondered how self-compassion might help mitigate negative emotions; based upon the findings, I would argue that self-compassion is part of emotion regulation. All the teachers employed the five categories of self-compassionate

behaviors, described in the previous section, as they journeyed from a point of conflict to emotional recovery. For example, as described in chapter 4, all of the teachers experienced similar shifts in recovery as they recognized distress, saw connections with others' experiences, identified personal accountability, allowed for the agency of others, and sought support from others. Self-compassion aided in emotional recovery, tempering the negative emotions felt as a result of conflict. Below I discuss self-compassion and emotion-regulation in terms of timing, resources, and appraisal of accountability that are indicated through the findings of this study.

**Timing.** Though there might not be a difference in the tangible outcome of a job done under a worried mind and one done without such diverted thinking, it is more beneficial to the doer of the job to have the mind freed up from such pervasive negative thinking (Eisenberg, Hofer, & Vaughan, 2007; Linehan, Bohus, & Lynch, 2007). If self-compassion mitigates negative emotions, then the earlier self-compassionate behaviors appear in the plotline the better. The four teachers experienced the same plotline elements of conflict, reflection, self-compassion, and resolution in differing orders. Some felt self-compassion earlier than others. Others spent longer periods of emotional effort fighting self-defeating thoughts before they came to a resolution and were self-compassionate. It is understandable that individuals are driven to fix things, but feeling a sense of wholeness before repairing damage with others or curricular issues prepares individuals to resolve situations more calmly.

No ideal timing of self-compassion is specified in Neff's (2003b) definition. But, the sooner one can let go of self-doubt and disappointment, the better (Sapolsky, 2007). In this study, it appears that it is more self-compassionate to treat oneself kindly early, even before or as the resolution to a difficult situation. Kate mentioned not being able to truly forgive herself until after interacting with a student. The teachers, on the whole, always reported feeling much better

after having a positive interaction with the individual with whom the conflict occurred and, according to Rimé (2007), that is a need that must be met. Consider, though, if Kate had been able to resolve the conflict between how she acted and how she believed that she should have acted, and forgiven herself for a perceived mistake before a discussion with the student. Her self-compassion might have inclined her to start the conversation with empathy, listen more openly to the student's account, and appreciate honest confessions instead of eliciting them to justify her actions. Or take the case of the teachers that were not able to have further interaction with the student or parent involved in the conflict; this is where self-compassion as an emotion regulation strategy perhaps demonstrates its greatest strength. The teachers were able to put to rest conflicts through self-compassionate behaviors. Whether self-compassion occurred as or before the resolution, evidence of self-compassionate thoughts as an emotion regulation strategy can be seen.

**Resources.** In order to accomplish emotional recovery, the teachers selected resources to best help them deal with emotions, which contributed to resiliency rather than burnout (Polidore, 2004). Polidore explained that these resources were characteristics developed over time in individuals that help them respond constructively to situations. This study shows how the teachers used internal (kind responses, acknowledging common humanity, and being mindful) and external resources (appealing to others during the reflective process) to put to rest disturbing emotions. If burnout results from the combination of a number of variables, including the build-up of negative emotions (Chang, 2009), and self-compassion is associated with well-being or psychological flourishing (see Jazaieri et al., 2013; Neff, 2009; Neff & Germer, 2013), then finding ways to be self-compassionate might be a means of emotion regulation by alleviating the

build-up of negative emotions. Again, this points to the social nature of self-compassion by the need to access external as well as internal resources.

**Appraisal of accountability.** Two of the categories of self-compassion especially aided in emotion-regulation: personal accountability and allowing for the agency of others. These two categories are linked in that they both assess accountability. In the case of conflicts with parents and students, the teachers were prone to evaluate the appropriateness of their actions as well as those of their students. Even if the teachers' actions were considered appropriate, teachers often made plans for change to meet individual students' or parents' needs. But in the process of making changes, if the other person's agency was recognized, this seemed to decrease excessive personal accountability and allowed for self-compassion. Although teachers recognized student agency, it did not negate accountability. This recognition helped them realize that they were not solely responsible for the outcome; the student or parent made decisions that affected the specific situation and ultimately the relationship as well. This is evident in Alice's story presented in chapter 4 of the student being moved from her class. After going over and over their many interactions hoping to pinpoint just what she should have done, Alice finally found solace in the thought that, in the end, it was the poor choices that the student made that got him removed from her class. Alice stopped rehearsing her responses when she acknowledged his agency and acknowledged that she did her best at the time. Personal accountability and acknowledging the agency of others are related in an intricate way (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003).

The teachers in this study experienced the negative emotions from goal misalignment, reflected on what they had done wrong, and planned to do things differently in the future. Assigning accountability to either the self or the other helped all of the teachers. Exploring the



variables at play enabled them to feel like they were doing something about the problem and preventing its future occurrence. In assessing difficult situations, the teachers sometimes struggled to understand who should be held accountable. In order to healthily process emotions, the teachers appraised the situation for individual responsibility and appropriately assigned each their part instead of taking on all the responsibility for difficult interactions. This would be an example of what Rimé (2007) describes as the second need that must be met to achieve emotional recovery; a cognitive change in how one represents the self or the other. The teachers were self-compassionate through consciously changing expectations regarding the other people involved in the conflict or of themselves.

Though assessing personal accountability and acknowledging agency aided in emotion regulation, there may be a question as to whether acknowledging agency is really just shifting blame. The balance between these concepts is delicate. Perhaps something in one's own actions really was wrong, regardless of how others contributed to the situation. An important solution might be to forgive the self. Rather than repeatedly revisiting actions chosen or recognizing wrong done by the other, being self-forgiving may be necessary in much the same way that one might forgive another for responding rashly in the heat of the moment. Perhaps that's why Alice recycled through her plotline. She spent a good amount of time reviewing her actions and reached a point of recovery when she acknowledged the student's agency. But for some reason she still did not believe she was worthy of the award she was given. Maybe self-forgiveness for perceived mistakes needed to happen to put to rest the situation and allow for deeper self-compassion to exist. In this case, as with the other teachers in the study, seeking support from significant others stimulated self-compassion. Her family rallied around her when she expressed discomfort at receiving the award. They showed to her the compassion that she could not give

herself at the time. It is likely much easier to forgive oneself when others so readily grant forgiveness. Emotion regulation cannot be limited to the in-the-head compassionate responses; support from others is consequential as well.

### **Implications**

Teachers and the administrators that support them would benefit from a greater understanding of the emotions involved in teaching. Any effort to support educators in the sometimes-daunting task of teaching will contribute to their well-being. The use of self-compassion as an emotion regulation technique could benefit teachers by helping them become more resilient, strengthen well-being, and ultimately improve teacher-student relationships and student learning. Thinking of self-compassion as a social construct would redefine teacher-student interactions.

Currently, self-compassion or other workshops that develop self-soothing techniques are available in many states (Jazaeiri et al., 2013; Neff & Germer, 2013), but workshops aren't necessarily the answer. In addition to personal, in-the-head resources, teachers need the social support networks that provide necessary time for reflection, opportunities for discussion and support to re-engage in meaningful ways. This would require a restructuring of the current support systems. Teachers in this study learned and experienced self-compassion through their social connections. True renewal might be experienced more fully through more natural forms of professional development, those where the teachers themselves discuss the problems related to the emotional side of teaching and then are given the stewardship of designing solutions (Goodlad, 1999). Or collaboration might be designed to allow for teachers to visit each other's classrooms, offering feedback in addition to that received as a part of evaluations by administration.

## **Limitations**

Despite the strengths of hearing the teachers' stories, the data was still limited by some factors. The teachers were sharing after-the-fact remembrances. The details of when, why and how events were experienced can become muddled with time. And though this study relied on interview data rather than only a questionnaire, interviews are still self-report in nature. In addition, this study only used data from four teachers. Lessons can be learned from individual experience, but findings may be generalized with caution. Similarly, the teachers described only a few incidents from their many years of teaching. The patterns of responding may not be representative of how they typically have responded to situations over the course of their careers.

## **Future Research**

The vignette in the introduction was a salient critical incident in my teaching experience. I now make conscious efforts to view situations with my principal's more compassionate eyes. I realized that my constant criticisms of my teaching were detrimental to my emotional health. As I responded to my own mistakes in self-compassionate ways, I noticed that my responses to students' misbehavior reflected a similar compassionate quality. Neff and Pommier (2013) found that self-compassion is significantly associated with other-focused concern, but it varies with life-experience and gender. For example, college-age students did not have compassion for others that equaled self-compassion. Moreover, women had higher compassion towards others than did men, but lower levels of self-compassion than men.

The mismatch between the data on the SCS and the recounting of lived experience indicates that more research is needed about the connection between how teachers explain themselves and how they act. The pursuit of this information through the use of a larger variety of data sources, such as interviews, focus groups, and observation would enhance our

understanding of the lived experience of teachers' lives when it comes to being and acting in self-compassionate ways. Additionally, further research should be conducted to determine how teacher self-compassion and compassion shown towards students are related and could address the question of whether self-compassion is a prerequisite to compassion toward others. Would teachers be more effective in helping students if they took steps to feel whole first? More work should be done on self-forgiveness as an aspect of self-compassion. Also, this study could be replicated with different populations of teachers—junior high, high school, and university level teachers. Questions of self-compassion according to years of experience in teaching could also be investigated.

A study that further explores self-compassion as an emotion regulation strategy would add much to the growing body of research as well. The need for this research is evident as still today, almost a decade after his work on teacher well-being, the sentiment expressed by Bullough (2008) rings true: “At this moment in time, as we research teachers' lives there may be no more important task before us than championing the cause of teachers and making clear the ineluctable connection between their well-being and the well-being of children” (p. 23). Teacher self-compassion may very well connect the two.

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## APPENDIX A

### Consent to be a Research Subject

#### **Introduction**

This research study is being conducted by Stacey Freeman at Brigham Young University to explore the construct of self-compassion with teachers. You were invited to participate because you are a full-time teacher in Alpine School District.

#### **Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- you will be interviewed for up to two hours on three occasions regarding critical incidents in your teaching career
- the interviews will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements
- the interviews will take place at a location and time convenient for you
- the researcher will contact you following the three or more interviews to have you check that the conclusions arrived at are representative of your experiences. This will last approximately one hour
- you will be asked to complete a fifteen minute online survey
- total time commitment will be approximately 435 minutes

#### **Risks/Discomforts**

There are minimal risks of participating in this study. Possible discomfort in discussing responses to mistakes made in teaching might occur. Degrees will vary by participant. The researcher is aware of the possibility of feelings of vulnerability and will create a safe environment for sharing.

#### **Benefits**

There will be no direct benefits to you. It is hoped, however, that through your participation researchers may learn about self-compassion and may be able to be more mindful and kind to yourself in difficult situations with students.

#### **Confidentiality**

The research data will be kept in a secure location and on password protected computer, and only the researcher and research consultant will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed, and the data will be kept in the researcher's locked office.

#### **Compensation**

No compensation will be offered for your participation in this study.

#### **Participation**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your employment or standing at the school.

#### **Questions about the Research**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Stacey Freeman by email at [sfreeman@alpinedistrict.org](mailto:sfreeman@alpinedistrict.org) or phone, (801) 787-5098, for further information.

**Questions about Your Rights as Research Participants**

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant contact IRB Administrator at (801) 422-1461; A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; [irb@byu.edu](mailto:irb@byu.edu).

**Statement of Consent**

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Name (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions

**First interview.** This study is meant to explore self-compassion as is found in the lives of teachers—how they are kind or critical of themselves in certain moments. Today, we're going to discuss your background in teaching and then focus in on some defining experiences, or critical incidents, from your teaching (early, mid or late career) where you experienced some self-doubt and disappointment that have led you to think about yourself differently as a teacher. So, it might be helpful to know that a critical incident is an everyday experience that you've labeled as important because it holds some particular meaning to you. It can be one that caused you to stop and reflect (Halquist & Musanti, 2010), and it may have a strong emotion attached or be seen as a turning point of sorts.

1. To begin with, tell me about your teaching story. How did you come to teaching?

Describe the journey you've taken in your teaching career from the beginning until now.

As you've observed yourself over time, what do you think your strengths and weaknesses are as a teacher?

2. Tell me about a critical incident in your teaching—an interaction with a student that led you to think differently about yourself as a teacher, where you experienced some sense of self-doubt or disappointment in your actions. Describe the dialogue that went through your head during and after, in response to your actions. What emotions did you feel immediately after the experience? What emotions do you feel now regarding the experience? If they have changed, describe the actions you took or thought processes

experienced to initiate the change. Impromptu questions will focus on adding more details about the context of the situation as needed.

**Second and third interviews.** Last time we spoke of how you responded to yourself in a past interaction, and I sent you the transcripts.

1. Is there anything you'd like to add to last session's discussion? Are there any more details that you would like to add that explains how you experienced that critical incident? Tell me more about this part (follow-up questions from reviewing the transcripts of the first interview).

This time, let's explore a critical incident that is more fresh. Think back on this week or even today. Was there a time where you had an interaction with a student that led you to think differently about yourself as a teacher, where you experienced some sense of self-doubt or disappointment in your actions? Tell me about it. Describe the dialogue that went through your head during and after, in response to your actions. What emotions did you feel immediately after the experience? What emotions do you feel now regarding the experience? If they changed, describe the actions you took or the thought processes experienced that initiated the change.

**Data meeting.** Do you think the findings and quotes from three interviews are representative of the thinking you have shared about your responses to the critical incidents you described? Are there any misrepresentations?



## APPENDIX C

## Self-Compassion Scale

To all interested, please feel free to use the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) for research or any other use. Masters and dissertation students also have my permission to use and publish the Self-Compassion Scale in their theses. The SCS is appropriate for ages 14 and up (as long as individuals have at least an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level). If you aren't that interested in using the subscales, you might also want to consider using the Short SCS (12 items), which has a near perfect correlation with the long scale.

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**Reference:**

Neff, K. D. (2003). Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, 223-250.

**Coding Key:**

Self-Kindness Items: 5, 12, 19, 23, 26  
Self-Judgment Items: 1, 8, 11, 16, 21  
Common Humanity Items: 3, 7, 10, 15  
Isolation Items: 4, 13, 18, 25  
Mindfulness Items: 9, 14, 17, 22  
Over-identified Items: 2, 6, 20, 24

Subscale scores are computed by calculating the mean of subscale item responses. To compute a total self-compassion score, reverse score the negative subscale items - self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification (i.e., 1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2, 5 = 1) - then compute a total mean.

(This method of calculating the total score is slightly different than that used in the article referenced above, in which each subscale was added together. However, I find it is easier to interpret the scores if the total mean is used.)

### HOW I TYPICALLY ACT TOWARDS MYSELF IN DIFFICULT TIMES

Please read each statement carefully before answering. To the left of each item, indicate how often you behave in the stated manner, using the following scale:

Almost never

Almost always

1

2

3

4

5

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. When I think about my inadequacies, it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. When I'm down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I'm intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. When I'm really struggling, I tend to feel like other people must be having an easier time of it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I can be a bit cold-hearted towards myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. When I'm feeling down I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. When something painful happens I tend to blow the incident out of proportion.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 25. When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26. I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.

## APPENDIX D

### Subcategories on the Self-Compassion Scale

#### **Self-Kindness Subscale**

- I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.
- I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.
- I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies.
- I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain.

#### **Self-Judgment Subscale**

- When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself.
- When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.
- I can be a bit cold-hearted towards myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.
- I'm intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.

#### **Common Humanity Subscale**

- When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.
- I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.
- When I'm down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.
- When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through.

#### **Isolation Subscale**

- When I fail at something that's important to me I tend to feel alone in my failure.
- When I think about my inadequacies it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world.
- When I'm feeling down I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.
- When I'm really struggling I tend to feel like other people must be having an easier time of it.

#### **Mindfulness Subscale**

- When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.
- When I'm feeling down I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.

- When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.
- When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective.

**Over-Identification Subscale**

- When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings.
- When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.
- When something painful happens I tend to blow the incident out of proportion.
- When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.