

# The role of self-compassion in teachers' psychological well-being in face-to-face and online teaching during COVID-19

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## Abstract

Recent research shows worrying results concerning teachers' psychological well-being. The challenges have further increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has forced teachers to rapidly change their teaching. In this quantitative study, we address the differences in schoolteachers' experiences of face-to-face and online teaching during COVID-19 from the perspective of self-compassion (an important source of resilience when faced with life stressors and sudden changes) and teaching-related well-being. The teachers in one Finnish municipality (N=116) answered an electronic questionnaire measuring their self-compassion and teaching-related well-being (stress, burnout, self-efficacy) in face-to-face and online teaching contexts. Three teacher profiles were identified: (1) Self-compassionate teachers, (2) a mixed group reporting both self-compassion and self-criticism and (3) self-critical teachers. The results show that online teaching had challenged all teachers' well-being, but the protective element of self-compassion was present in both contexts. Therefore, strengthening teachers' self-compassion can be seen as a sustainable investment in the teachers' well-being.

## Keywords

*Self-compassion, teacher well-being, face-to-face teaching, online teaching, COVID-19 pandemic*

## Tiivistelmä

Viimeaikaiset tutkimustulokset opettajien hyvinvoinnista ovat huolestuttavia, ja hyvinvoinnin haasteet ovat edelleen lisääntyneet COVID-19 pandemian aiheuttaman äkillisten opetusjärjestelyjen muutosten seurauksena. Tässä kvantitatiivisessa tutkimuksessa tarkastelemme peruskoulun opettajien itsemyyötätuntoa, joka on keskeinen resilienssiä tukeva tekijä, sekä psykologista hyvinvointia työhön liittyvän stressin, uupumusrisin ja pystyvyysuskomusten kautta. Opettajien kokemuksia tarkastellaan sekä lähiopetuksessa että etäopetuksessa COVID-19 pandemian aikana. Tutkimukseen osallistui erään kunnan perusopetuksen opettajat (N=116), jotka täyttivät itsemyyötätuntoa, stressiä, uupumusriskiä ja pystyvyysuskomuksia mittaavan kyselylomakkeen. Tutkimuksessa tunnistettiin kolme opettajaprofiilia: 1) itsemyyötätuntoiset opettajat, 2), itsemyyötätuntoiset ja itsekritiittiset opettajat, sekä 3) itsekritiittiset opettajat. Tulokset osoittavat, että etäopetus oli haaste kaikkien opettajaprofiilien työhyvinvoinnille, mutta itsemyyötätunnon suojaava vaikutus oli läsnä molemmissa konteksteissa. Itsemyyötätunnon tukemista voidaankin pitää kestäväenä tapana tukea opettajien työhyvinvointia.

## Avainsanat

*Itsemyyötätunto, opettajan hyvinvointi, lähiopetus, etäopetus, COVID-19 pandemia*

## Introduction

In spring 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were confronted with the need to rapidly adapt to online teaching. Online teaching is often dominated by information delivery, and teachers have expressed challenges in providing activating and student-centred online teaching (Hodges et al., 2020; König et al., 2020). A study conducted in the upper secondary school context in Finland during COVID-19 showed that online teaching was implemented successfully, mostly because of teachers' previous experience with online communication. However, teachers were faced with several challenges, such as the lack of authentic interaction and spontaneity (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). Also, planning online teaching was time-consuming, and teachers described being worried about their students' progress (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). Previous research has shown that student-centred teaching is related to teachers' well-being and positive emotions, while teaching based on information delivery is associated with negative emotions towards teaching (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011). Therefore, online teaching, indicating difficulties to implement interactive student-centred practices, can challenge teacher well-being more than face-to-face teaching. Studies conducted before the pandemic already show worrying results concerning teachers' psychological well-being (see, e.g. Pyhältö et al., 2021). Combining this with the additional challenge that online teaching puts on teacher well-being, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly challenged teacher well-being.

The need to address teaching-related well-being among teachers is widely recognised (Pyhältö et al., 2021; Salmela-

Aro et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2016). One way of doing this is through the concept of self-compassion. Research reports on promising interventions how self-compassion can promote well-being among teachers (Bluth & Neff, 2018; Roeser et al., 2013; Taylor, 2016). However, there is a lack of knowledge about the link between self-compassion and well-being among teachers (Roeser et al., 2013). Also, self-compassion is an important predictor of well-being and resilience when faced with life stressors and sudden changes (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Bluth & Neff, 2018). Thus, the role of self-compassion can be significant when investigating how teachers cope with stressful situations (e.g. Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020) or how self-compassion acts as a buffer against stressful situations in a proactive manner (e.g. Neff et al., 2007). Therefore, the present study addresses teacher well-being through self-compassion and investigates its role in rapid changes in teaching – in our case, the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Psychological well-being of teachers

Psychological well-being is a concept that can be addressed in different dimensions. In the present study, we investigate teachers' psychological well-being through the concepts of self-compassion, stress, burn-out and self-efficacy. *Self-compassion* refers to an orientation to care for oneself (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003b). Instead of being harshly self-critical, it entails being kind and understanding toward oneself in instances of pain or failure (Neff et al., 2007). According to Neff's (2003b) original definition, self-compassion includes three aspects: 1) self-kindness – treating oneself with tenderness and understanding when facing suffering rather than with

harshness or self-judgement, (2) a sense of common humanity – seeing one’s failures as part of the human condition rather than feeling isolated and (3) mindfulness– having a balanced awareness of the present experience instead of over-identifying with painful thoughts and emotions. Many studies show that self-compassion contributes positively to well-being (Bluth & Neff, 2018; Zessin et al., 2015). In the context of work, self-compassion has been viewed as a coping strategy in stressful situations (Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020; Jazaieri et al., 2013) or as a buffer against stress, anxiety and burnout (Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020; Neff et al., 2007). Therefore, self-compassion can be regarded as an adaptive strategy to recover from stress, but also as a proactive strategy to deal with future stressors in work before the stress has a severe impact on one’s health (cf. Taylor et al., 2016).

Stress refers to a particular relationship between the person and the environment appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding their resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986). When experiencing negative *stress*, a person might feel tense, restless, nervous or anxious and may be unable to sleep at night because of a troubled mind (Elo et al., 2003). In the context of teaching, stress has been characterised as experiencing unpleasant emotions resulting from work as a teacher (e.g. Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Therefore, it is notable that teaching has been characterised as a stressful profession. Experiences of stress are common among teachers (Aloe et al., 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017), and prolonged stress poses a risk for teacher burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

Teaching-related *burnout* is a serious occupational problem comprised of three symptoms: (1) emotional exhaustion – a

*Teachers with strong self-efficacy are open to new ideas.*

feeling of chronic fatigue and depletion of emotional resources, often caused by a heavy workload; (2) cynicism – feelings of losing interest in one’s job and negative and detached approaches toward others; and (3) professional inefficacy – reduced feelings of personal accomplishment and weakened productivity (Maslach et al., 2001). Research indicates that burnout evolves gradually as a consequence of prolonged stress. And in full-blown burnout, all three symptoms are experienced to a high extent (Maslach et al., 2001). In the context of teaching, research shows that exhaustion and cynicism are the core symptoms of burnout and that teachers especially suffer from these two dimensions of burnout (Pietarinen et al., 2013). Also, Pyhältö and colleagues (2021) point out that teachers with various combinations of burnout symptoms are at risk of gradually progressing to burnout. Teachers’ burnout is linked to lower self-rated health and ability to work (Hakanen et al., 2006).

Teacher *self-efficacy* describes teacher’s beliefs in their ability to plan, organise and carry out activities that are required to attain given educational goals (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Teachers with strong self-efficacy are open to new ideas, experiment with innovative teaching methods (Hoy & Spero, 2005) and trust in their ability to engage students in productive learning processes (Temiz & Topcu, 2013). In the times of COVID-19, it is interesting that teachers’ self-efficacy is also related to their persistence to continue when confronting obstacles (Bandu-

ra, 2000). There is evidence of the link between self-compassion and self-efficacy. Learning to be more compassionate towards oneself increases the teacher's self-efficacy beliefs (Smeets et al., 2014). Also, weak self-efficacy beliefs are linked to teaching-related burnout. The relationship might be bi-directional so that low self-efficacy causes burnout, and burnout weakens teachers' self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Therefore, it is important that the teachers have the tools to cope with stressful situations and can adopt strategies to avoid the risk of burnout (Pyhältö et al., 2021; Roeser et al., 2013).

### Aims and research questions

Research indicates that self-compassion is an important predictor of well-being and resilience when faced with life stressors and sudden changes (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Bluth & Neff, 2018). Therefore, the aim of the present study is to investigate the role of self-compassion in teachers' experienced psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Psychological well-being is addressed through the concepts of stress, burnout and self-efficacy, both in face-to-face teaching and online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the present study contributes to our understanding of how to support teacher well-being in times of constant changes. The following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What kind of profiles of teaching-related self-compassion can be identified among the teachers?

RQ2: How do the teacher profiles differ in their experiences of psychological well-being in face-to-face and online teaching contexts?

## Methods

### Context

The research was carried out in the context of Finnish comprehensive schools, which include both primary schools (grades 1–6) and lower secondary schools (grades 7–9). The students are from 7 to 16 years of age. In Finland, all teachers must have a five-year university master's degree. Teachers have broad autonomy in their work as they can transform the curriculum content into meaningful lessons by counting on their own professionalism (Erss et al., 2016). Furthermore, teachers are engaged in curriculum development to increase teachers' ownership of curricula (Haapaniemi et al., 2020). In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Finland, and schools were given two days to move all teaching online. The teaching remained mostly online for the spring term but in autumn, when the data was collected, face-to-face teaching was organised again.

### Data collection

The data was collected in autumn 2020 from comprehensive schoolteachers working in a medium-sized municipality (approx. 20,000 inhabitants) in Finland. The teachers voluntarily answered an electronic questionnaire as a part of their professional development session. The teachers gave their active consent to participate in the research. Quantitative data was collected in a single session with a questionnaire that measured teachers' self-compassion and experiences of stress, burnout and self-efficacy through five-point Likert-scale items (1=completely disagree, 5=completely agree). Items measuring self-compassion were prompted once to the teachers so that they were asked to

think of themselves as teachers in general. When responding to the items measuring stress, burnout and self-efficacy, the teachers responded twice to the same items so that they first reflected on their face-to-face teaching in general, and then on their online teaching during COVID-19.

The questionnaire items are presented in Table 1. Self-compassion was measured with the shortened Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) consisting of six items – three for self-compassion and three for self-criticism. The shortened version originated from the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a), which includes three aspects of self-compassion, namely self-kindness (positive) versus self-judgement (negative), common humanity (positive) versus isolation (negative), and mindfulness (positive) versus over-identification (negative). In this study, we followed the recommendations of López et al. (2015) and used the shortened two-factor solution of the SCS formed by combining the positively formulated items from self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness into a self-compassion factor, and the negatively formulated items from self-judgement, isolation and over-identification into a self-criticism factor. The six items from the SCS were adopted as such to the present study. Because of the generic nature of the items measuring self-compassion, the items were prompted only once to the participants, not separately for face-to-face and online contexts.

The experiences of teaching-related well-being were addressed with the concepts of stress, burnout and self-efficacy. Stress was measured through three items. The first item is the item Elo et al. (2003) suggest as a single-item measure of stress. The two additional items intend to contextualise stress in teaching. The items meas-

uring burnout and self-efficacy are part of the HowU Teach questionnaire (Parpala & Postareff, 2021), which was developed based on the HowU Learn questionnaire (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänné, 2012). The burnout items originated from the School Burnout Inventory (SBI; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009), and the self-efficacy items originated from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ; Pintrich et al., 1991). The items were modified to measure teaching contexts since the original version addresses learning contexts. For burnout, scales measuring exhaustion and cynicism were used as they are central to teacher burnout (Pietarinen et al., 2013). Items measuring stress, burnout and self-efficacy were asked twice from the participants. They first considered face-to-face teaching and then online teaching (see Table 1).

## Participants

A total of 127 teachers answered the questionnaire (response rate 85 %). After deleting teachers who did not give their research consent or had complete scales unanswered, the final sample consisted of 116 teachers. The great majority of them (77 %) were women. This is in line with the teachers' gender distribution in Finnish schools (Opetushallitus, 2020). Most of the teachers (35 %) were between 35 and 44 years of age. The rest of the teachers quite evenly represented the age groups of 25–34, 45–54 and 55–64. Over half of the teachers (57 %) had more than 10 years of teaching experience, while only around 10 % no more than two years of teaching experience. Almost half of the respondents (47 %) were classroom teachers, while the rest were subject teachers (41 %) or special education teachers (11 %). With a few exceptions, the subject teachers taught grades 7–9 in second-

**Table 1.** The scales, factors and items in the questionnaire.

<b>Scale</b>	<b>Factor</b>	<b>Item</b>
<b>Self-compassion</b>	<b>Self-compassion</b>	<p>I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.</p> <p>When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation.</p> <p>I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.</p>
	<b>Self-criticism</b>	<p>I'm disapproving and judgemental about my own flaws and inadequacies.</p> <p>When I fail at something important to me, I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.</p> <p>When I fail at something important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.</p>
<b>Stress</b>		<p>Stress means a situation in which a person feels tense, restless, nervous or anxious or is unable to sleep at night because his/her mind is troubled all the time. I continuously feel this kind of stress. I feel the kind of stress mentioned above in face-to-face/online teaching situations.</p> <p>The kind of stress mentioned above has a negative effect on my face-to-face/online teaching.</p>
<b>Burnout</b>	<b>Exhaustion</b>	<p>I feel overwhelmed by work related to face-to-face/online teaching.</p> <p>I often sleep poorly because of matters related to my face-to-face/online teaching.</p> <p>I brood a lot over matters related to my face-to-face/online teaching during my free time.</p> <p>In face-to-face/online teaching situations, the pressure of my teaching causes problems in my close relationships with others.</p>
	<b>Cynicism</b>	<p>I feel a lack of motivation when I am teaching, and face-to-face/online teaching situations make me consider alternative career paths.</p> <p>In face-to-face/online teaching situations, I feel that I am losing interest in my teaching.</p> <p>I am constantly wondering whether my face-to-face/online teaching has any meaning.</p>
<b>Self-efficacy</b>		<p>I believe I can cope with my teaching tasks in face-to-face/online teaching situations.</p> <p>I am confident that I can manage even in the most difficult face-to-face/online teaching situations.</p> <p>I am certain that I have the necessary pedagogical skills to manage in face-to-face/online teaching tasks.</p> <p>I am confident that the students learn from my face-to-face/online teaching.</p>

ary school, while the others taught one or more grades (1–6) in elementary school. Almost all teachers (97 %) had a pedagogical qualification.

## Analysis

The data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26 software. The data contained under 0.5 % missing values. As all teachers responded to every factor, the factor analysis was carried out with list-wise deletion. The factor score was eventually computed as a composite of its items, and the data set became complete. As the sample size was not sufficient for confirmatory factor analysis, the factor structure was analysed with an exploratory factor analysis procedure (principal axis factoring and direct oblimin rotation). Exploratory factor analysis is a statistical procedure used to extract factors from a collection of items, enabling the investigation of latent variables that cannot be measured directly. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) was above 0.7, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was  $p < 0.001$  for all scales, both supporting the performance of the factor analysis. The proposed factor structure explained over 50 % of the variance within all scales. All factors were checked for internal consistency with Cronbach’s Alpha. The reliability levels are above the 0.7 threshold and can therefore be considered accept-

able. The results from the exploratory factor analysis are presented in Table 2.

The teachers were clustered according to their responses on the self-compassion scale. Cluster analysis refers to a set of statistical procedures used to create subgroups of cases in a way that the cases are similar to cases within the same cluster and different from cases outside of the cluster. The dendrogram produced in the hierarchical cluster analysis based on squared Euclidean distance with Ward’s linkage was used to identify the number of clusters, and K-means clustering was used to identify the cluster membership. The chi-squared test was used to analyse the clusters in relation to the reported background variables (gender, age, teaching experience, type of teaching position (classroom, subject, special education) and pedagogical qualification). Because some of the factors violated the univariate normality assumption and the clusters turned out to have different sizes, non-parametric tests were used. The Kruskal-Wallis with post hoc -test and Bonferroni correction was used to compare the clusters in one context, and the related samples Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to compare the contexts within a cluster.

**Table 2.** The results from the exploratory factor analyses.

Scale	Factor	# of items	Cronbach's alpha	
Self-compassion	Self-criticism	3	0.816	
	Self-compassion	3	0.800	
Teaching-related burnout	Exhaustion	4	0.788	0.822
	Cynicism	3	0.785	0.852
Self-efficacy	Self-efficacy	4	0.849	0.896



## Results

The results are reported in two sections. First, we present the three teacher self-compassion profiles (RQ1). Then we compare these profiles both in face-to-face and online teaching and in relation to stress, burnout and self-efficacy (RQ2).

### Teachers' self-compassion profiles (RQ1)

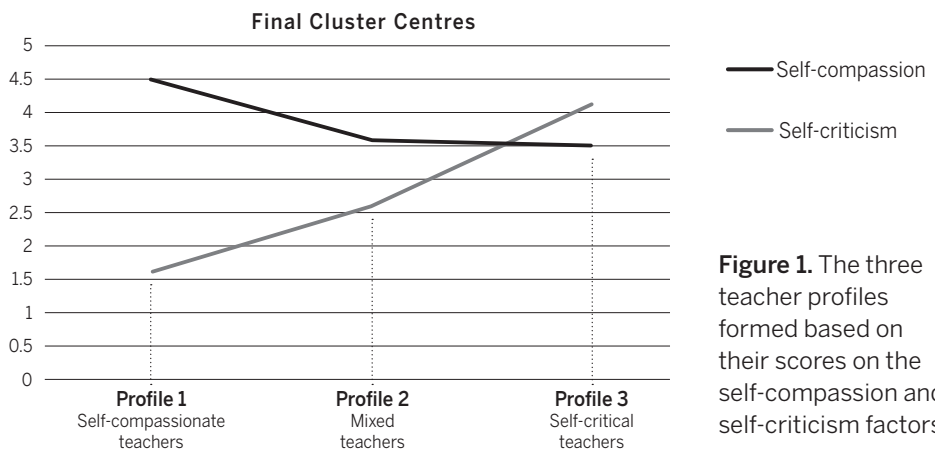
The teachers were clustered based on their responses to the self-compassion scale consisting of self-compassion and self-criticism factors. The teachers formed three profiles:

1. Self-compassionate teachers (N=49)
2. Mixed teachers (N=50)
3. Self-critical teachers (N=17).

The teacher profile levels on the factors are presented in Table 3 and Figure 1. The Self-compassionate teachers (Profile 1) scored high on the self-compassion factor and low on the self-criticism factor. In contrast, the Self-critical teachers (Profile 3) scored high on the self-criticism factor and low on the self-compassion factor. The mixed teachers (Profile 2) lay in the middle, reporting both self-compassion and self-criticism. The Self-compassionate teachers differed statistically significantly from the other two profiles in both self-compassion and self-criticism factors, and the Mixed and Self-critical teachers differed only in the factor measuring self-criticism. The profiles did not differ statistically significantly in any of the reported background variables.

**Table 3.** The three teacher profiles formed in cluster analysis based on their scores on the self-compassion and self-criticism factors.

Profile number	Profile label	N	Self-compassion		Self-criticism	
			Mean (95% CI)	SD	Mean (95% CI)	SD
1	Self-compassionate teachers	49	4.48 (4.36–4.61)	.43	1.63 (1.47–1.78)	.54
2	Mixed teachers	50	3.57 (3.44–3.71)	.47	2.60 (2.46–2.74)	.50
3	Self-critical teachers	17	3.51 (3.51–3.94)	.84	4.12 (3.84–4.39)	.54



**Figure 1.** The three teacher profiles formed based on their scores on the self-compassion and self-criticism factors.

A comparison of the profiles in face-to-face and online teaching (RQ2)

face and online teaching contexts than the other two teacher profiles.

The results considering the three teacher profiles in one context at a time are presented in Table 4. Overall, the teachers' self-compassion shows in the responses concerning their well-being so that the Self-compassionate teachers experienced less stress and exhaustion and reported higher self-efficacy in both face-to-

The results considering one teacher profile individually in both face-to-face and online teaching are reported in Table 5. On average, the teachers in all profiles experienced more stress, exhaustion and cynicism, and lower self-efficacy in online teaching compared to face-to-face teaching. The Self-compassionate teacher pro-

**Table 4.** Comparison of the three teacher profiles in one context at a time.

Item/factor	Face-to-face	Online
<b>Stress 1</b>	Self-critical teachers experience more stress than Self-compassionate and Mixed teachers.  $\chi^2=17.719$ , $df=2$ , $p<0.001$ (1 < 3: $\chi^2=-37.564$ , $p<0.001$ ; 2 < 3: $\chi^2=-26.851$ , $p=0.008$ )	Self-critical teachers experience more stress than Self-compassionate and Mixed teachers.  $\chi^2=10.813$ , $df=2$ , $p=0.004$ (1 < 3: $\chi^2=-28.237$ , $p=0.006$ ; 2 < 3: $\chi^2=-27.871$ , $p=0.007$ )
<b>Stress 2</b>	The stress shows in teaching situations less for Self-compassionate teachers than for Self-critical and Mixed teachers.  $\chi^2=11.912$ , $df=2$ , $p=0.003$ (1 < 2: $\chi^2=-16.190$ , $p=0.032$ ; 1 < 3: $\chi^2=-27.372$ , $p=0.006$ )	The stress shows in teaching situations less for Self-compassionate teachers than for Self-critical teachers.  $\chi^2=7.196$ , $df=2$ , $p=0.027$ (1 < 3: $\chi^2=-23.611$ , $p=0.030$ )
<b>Stress 3</b>	NS	NS
<b>Exhaustion</b>	Self-critical teachers experience more exhaustion than Self-compassionate teachers.  $\chi^2=7.707$ , $df=2$ , $p=0.021$ (1 < 3: $\chi^2=-24.641$ , $p=0.027$ )	NS
<b>Cynicism</b>	NS	NS
<b>Self-efficacy</b>	Self-critical teachers experience lower self-efficacy than Self-compassionate teachers.  $\chi^2=10.541$ , $df=2$ , $p=0.005$ (1 > 3: $\chi^2=27.820$ , $p=0.008$ )	Self-critical teachers experience lower self-efficacy than Self-compassionate teachers.  $\chi^2=7.402$ , $df=2$ , $p=0.025$ (1 > 3: $\chi^2=22.172$ , $p=0.005$ )

**Table 5.** The results reported on a group and profile levels in both face-to-face and online environments.

Factor	Profile	Face-to-face		Online		Mean difference	Wilcoxon signed ranks test
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Stress 1	All	2.40	0.92	2.68	1.18	-0.28	2.876**
	Self-compassionate	2.10	0.85	2.49	1.10	-0.39	2.546*
	Mixed	2.38	0.78	2.53	1.15	-0.18	1.154, p=0.249
	Self-critical	3.29	0.99	3.59	1.12	-0.29	1.311, p=0.190
Stress 2	All	2.12	0.92	3.00	1.15	-0.88	6.337***
	Self-compassionate	1.80	0.76	2.69	1.12	-0.90	4.556***
	Mixed	2.24	0.85	3.12	1.12	-0.88	4.139***
	Self-critical	2.71	1.21	3.53	1.12	-0.82	2.074*
Stress 3	All	2.41	1.19	2.68	1.62	-0.28	2.342*
	Self-compassionate	2.27	1.20	2.49	1.17	-0.22	1.225, p=0.221
	Mixed	2.42	1.13	2.82	1.10	-0.40	2.489*
	Self-critical	2.76	1.30	2.82	1.29	-0.059	0.156, p=0.876
Exhaustion	All	2.21	0.80	2.91	0.97	-0.70	6.948***
	Self-compassionate	1.99	0.72	2.77	1.02	-0.78	4.699***
	Mixed	2.29	0.80	3.00	0.91	-0.71	5.247***
	Self-critical	2.61	0.87	3.06	0.98	-0.44	1.528, p=0.126
Cynicism	All	1.66	0.79	2.40	1.01	-0.74	6.358***
	Self-compassionate	1.59	0.72	2.15	0.94	-0.56	3.551***
	Mixed	1.58	0.66	2.48	0.97	-0.90	4.879***
	Self-critical	2.11	1.15	2.86	1.20	-0.75	2.069*
Self-efficacy	All	4.42	0.57	3.70	0.85	0.72	-7.678***
	Self-compassionate	4.60	0.45	3.92	0.87	0.68	-4.744***
	Mixed	4.37	0.56	3.62	0.69	0.75	-5.214***
	Self-critical	4.06	0.73	3.29	1.07	0.76	-3.047**

file reported statistically significant differences in online teaching compared to face-to-face teaching for stress in teaching situations, exhaustion, cynicism and self-efficacy. Also, the Mixed and Self-critical teacher profiles reported similar results. As an exception, the Self-critical teacher pro-

file reported statistically a non-significant difference in the exhaustion factor. Their scores were also high in face-to-face teaching. Note also that although all profiles reported more cynicism in online teaching, the difference was smallest for the teachers in the Self-compassion profile.

## Discussion

The challenges concerning teacher well-being have further increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced teachers to quickly change their teaching. There is evidence from previous research that self-compassion plays an important role in supporting well-being when sudden changes occur (see Bluth & Neff, 2018), and there have been promising interventions of how self-compassion can promote well-being among teachers (Roeser et al., 2013; Taylor, 2016). The present study provides new perspectives on the role of self-compassion in teachers' psychological well-being by identifying teachers' self-compassion profiles and exploring the profiles' characteristics in relation to psychological well-being in both face-to-face and online contexts.

The present study sheds light on the variation in teachers' self-compassion by clustering the teachers based on their responses to the self-compassion and self-criticism factors. Three teacher self-compassion profiles were identified, namely Self-compassionate teachers, Mixed teachers and Self-critical teachers. For the two first profiles, self-compassion dominated self-criticism, but the Self-critical teachers scored higher on self-criticism than self-compassion. The identification of the teacher self-compassion profiles allowed us to further investigate the profiles in relation to the teachers' psychological well-being, but this in itself is an important opening in understanding the nuanced ways teachers experience and apply self-compassion in their work.

When investigating the teacher self-compassion profiles in one context at a time, the results clearly showed that

self-compassion is positively related to the teachers' well-being. The protective element of self-compassion was present in both face-to-face and online contexts so that the Self-critical teachers experienced more stress and teaching-related exhaustion and reported lower levels of self-efficacy compared to the other two teacher profiles with higher levels of self-compassion. This is in line with prior research stating that self-compassion is an important source of resilience when faced with life stressors and sudden changes (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Bluth & Neff, 2018; Zessin et al., 2015) and implies that the protective element of self-compassion is present across contexts.

When investigating one teacher self-compassion profile at a time, the results show that the rapid change to online teaching challenged all teacher profiles' teaching-related well-being. However, in these investigations, it is also evident that self-compassion protects teachers from stressors. All the teacher profiles reported higher levels of cynicism in online teaching compared to face-to-face teaching, but the difference was smallest for the self-compassionate teachers. This is important as cynicism is a key element in teaching-related burnout (Pietarinen et al., 2013). Moreover, self-compassionate teachers reported higher levels of exhaustion in online teaching than in face-to-face teaching. For the self-critical teachers, there were no statistically significant differences between the two contexts; their level of exhaustion was high in both. Previous research shows that many teachers have been worried about their students' progress during the pandemic (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). Also, there are indications that self-compassion can increase teachers' tendency to feel empathy for students (Taylor et al., 2016). In this light, it can

be that the Self-compassionate teachers are vulnerable to experiencing this kind of worry, which could explain why they reported higher levels of exhaustion in online teaching compared to face-to-face teaching.

The results of the present study imply that self-compassion protects teachers from stress and the risk of burnout. The online teaching challenged all teacher self-compassion profiles, but for the Self-compassionate teachers, the difference between face-to-face and online teaching was the smallest. Therefore, strengthening teachers' self-compassion can be seen as a sustainable investment in teachers' well-being. As self-compassion plays an even more central role when sudden changes such as a pandemic occur (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Bluth & Neff, 2018; Zessin et al., 2015), self-compassion is a key element in teachers' adaptability to changes in their work. In light of the results and in line with previous research (Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020; Neff, 2003b), we suggest as a practical implication that self-compassion could be enhanced through supporting positive interactions in the teachers' working environment, providing supportive feedback and sharing experiences for connectedness and a safe social environment.

### Limitations of the study and future research

This cross-sectional study draws on teachers' self-reported data on their experiences of face-to-face and online teaching. The data does not allow us to make claims about changes that would be possible with longitudinal data. However, the response rate is high, so the data well represents a typical Finnish municipality, and the conclusions can be seen as relevant to Finn-

ish schoolteachers in general. It is also notable that at the time of data collection, the teachers had returned to face-to-face teaching. This can have an impact on the teachers' accounts of well-being as the presumably stressful period of online teaching was over.

Self-compassion among teachers remains an underexamined research area. Research combining different methodologies, e.g. questionnaire and interview data, is needed to shed more light on how self-compassion and self-criticism emerge and how self-compassion could be cultivated among teachers. Also, investigating how teachers' ability to teach in a student-centred and interactive manner is related to self-compassion, and more generally to psychological well-being, would increase understanding of the role of self-compassion in teaching.

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