# STUDENT TEACHERS IN SOUTH AFRICA Using Mindfulness and Compassion to Grow in the Face of Stress

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#### Introduction

Teachers worldwide experience severe stress, and recent concern has focused on the number of student teachers who leave soon after qualifying. In South Africa, trauma is widespread due to the country's history of state-sponsored violence and socio-economic disparity.



Photo 1: South African student protests, 2015

Living under stress produces a sense of threat to teachers' mental and physical well-being which reduces their capacity to provide a safe and caring environment for their pupils (Kyriacou, 2001). This is exacerbated for student teachers taking the 1-year Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) who undergo a 'struggle for survival' stage (Maynard & Furlong, 1995) in the face of having to make such a rapid transition from student to teacher. However, a potential positive outcome of stress is the growth in resilience which is possible if people learn effective coping strategies, but few teachers in South Africa have access to such training, or indeed, appear to be aware of the level of stress they are under. Research on mindfulness overseas has shown its promising potential as a way of building and strengthening resilience, as well as for professional growth (Roeser et al, 2012; Meikeljohn et al, 2012).

#### Method

**Population**: 14 PGCE student teachers, from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

Mean Age: 25 years.

**Ethics Clearance**: informed consent, confidentiality assurance and disclosure risks, as required by the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).

**Data Collection**: Mixed methods to allow for an iterative investigation into this new area of study, while building on existing theory.

Instruments: Self-report questionnaires to provide baseline data, including the Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS-21), the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) and the Self Compassion Questionnaire (SCQ) and sequential interviews, processed using standard procedures of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Intervention: adapted from the Mindfulness Based Living Course (MBLC) (Nairn, 2009) and condensed into six weeks to meet the availability of students between their two periods of teaching experience (TE). This course was chosen as it includes compassion practices, which were anticipated as important for the South African context.

# **Quantitative Findings**

Improvements were found in the self-report measures carried out before, during and after the intervention (Figs 1, 2 & 3).

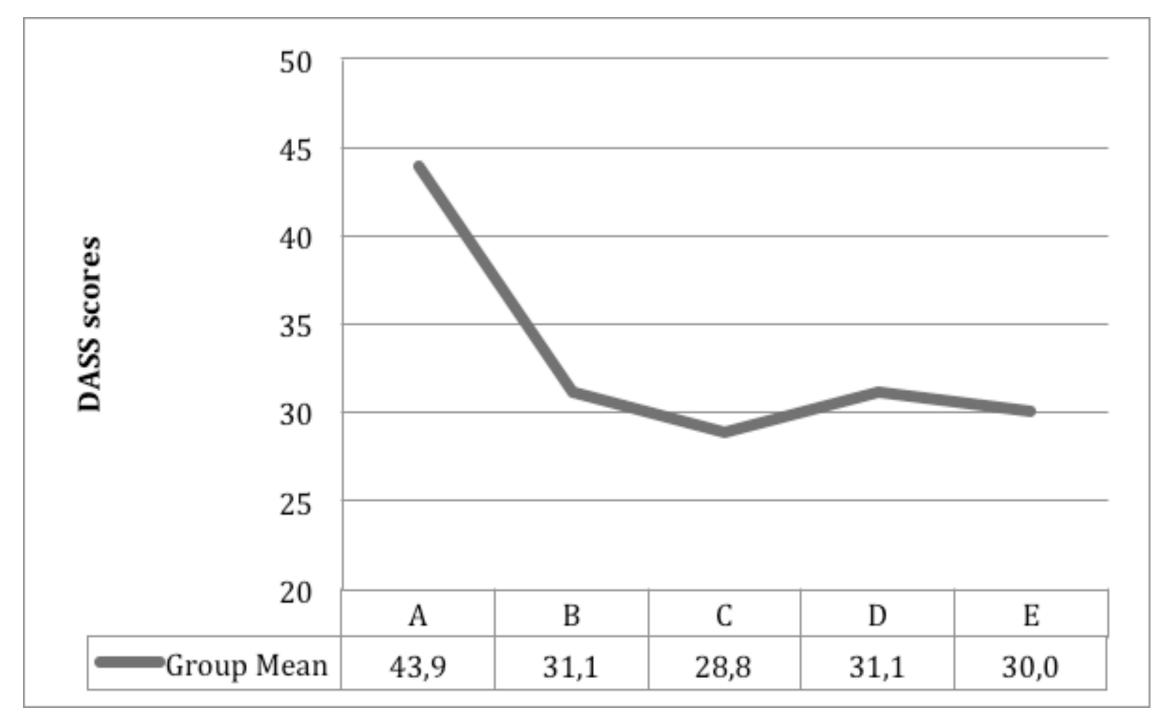


Fig 1: Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21doubled) Scores

The baseline mean score of 43.9 was shocking compared to normative studies overseas: 18.86 in a UK non-clinical sample (Henry & Crawford, 2005) and 25.4 in a Australian High School sample (Szabo, 2010). The results were more comparable with a US Clinical sample, scoring 42.7 (Brown et al, 2007) and a South African trauma sample, scoring 46.4 (Roe-Berning, 2009).

Women scored higher (54) than men (30.33), although the small sample size and high score variance meant that no statistical significance was shown for gender.

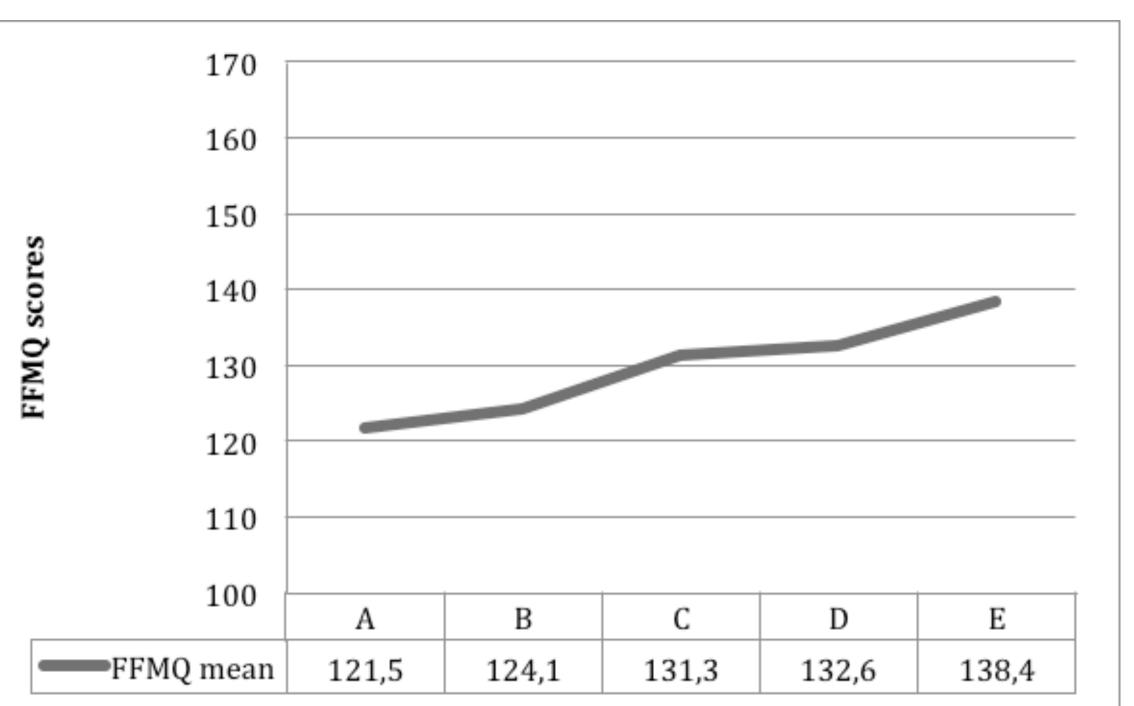


Fig 2: Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire Scores

The FFMQ scores increased as expected, from 121.5 to 138.4, even one month after the training finished. These scores reflected Baer et al's research (2008) with students, who scored 124.

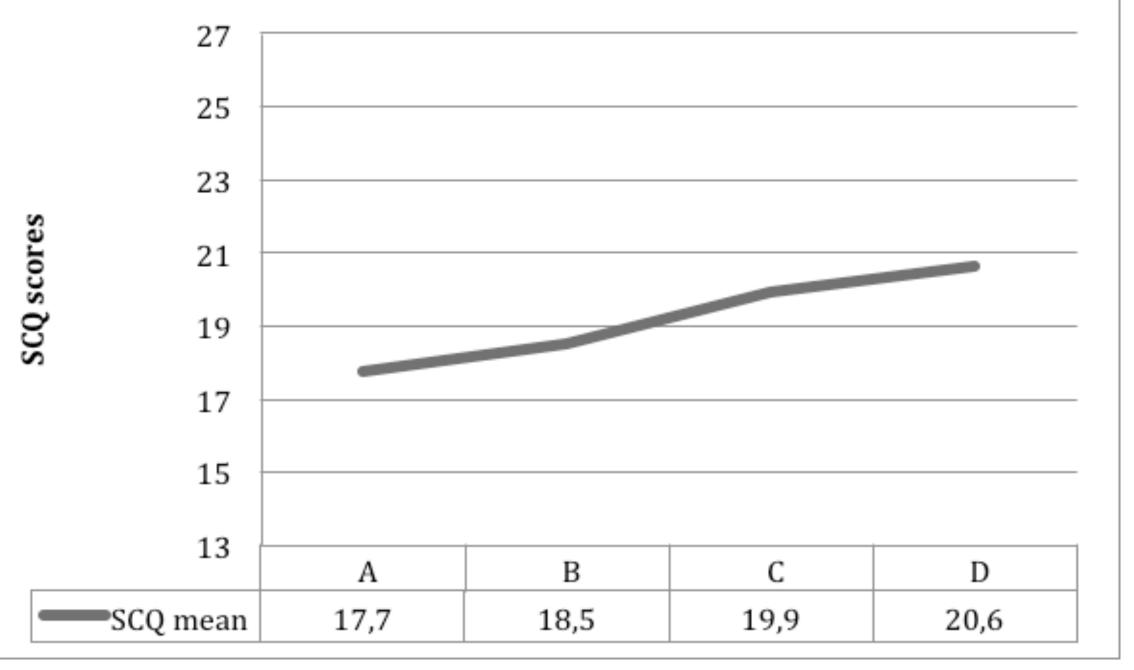


Fig 3: Self Compassion Questionnaire Scores

The scores started at 17.7, somewhat lower than Neff's research with undergraduates, who scored 18.25, but did increase to 20.6 after the compassion training.

# Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data provided explanatory information for the quantitative findings. These data were analysed through IPA and developed into superordinate and subordinate themes, covering the range of stressors experienced by these young adults [Table 1], their personality characteristics, and the ways they utilised the mindfulness and compassion techniques [Table 2].

#### **External Stressors**

These related to the PGCE course, as in international studies, but more significantly, to the external conditions of living in South Africa. Many students spoke of their experience with crime, domestic challenges and transport issues. The #FeesMustFall protests of late 2015 came as little surprise to the researcher, having interviewed several black students who were experiencing extreme financial hardship [Photos 1 & 2]. The Funza Lushaka grant was administered 5 months late, and some students were never informed of the outcome. One student withdrew from the course, and could only continue when the university itself offered to provide financial support.



Photo 2: #FeesMustFall protests of 2015, due to financial concerns

### **Personality Characteristics**

The internal stressors, notably driven behaviour, due to perfectionism, guilt and shame, related with students who experienced low initial self-compassion scores. There was also a sense of pressure on black students who needed to uplift their families and were afraid to 'go back to where they came from'.

#### Mindfulness-Based Intervention

The MBI revealed promising results [Table 2], particularly in the use of compassion practices for improving resilience, and several students reported how their practice of mindfulness had enhanced their sense of presence in the classroom.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Teacher Education	Academic: Deadlines, exams, course content
Course	Teaching Experience: 'Apprenticeship of ob-
	servation'
	Anticipated stress - students, supervising
	teachers
	Discipline, jealousy from colleagues, criminal
	behaviour
Traumatic Life Events	Crime: Murder, Armed Robbery
	Unexpected Events: Red Ants, Death of friend/

Stressors Experienced by the Wits Student Teachers

	relative, Car Accidents
Financial Concerns	Limited financial resources, FUNZA issue
	Part-time work commitments
Domestic Issues	Interpersonal conflicts: Fights with partner, rel-
	atives, jealousy, divorce of parents

Living Conditions

Transport Issues Transport Issues: Road rage, crime, cost

able	1: Exte	rnal S	tressors,	related t	o the	course	and	structural	conditions	in	South A	Africa	

Themes from the	e Mindfulness Based Intervention			
Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes			
	Vivid perceptions			
	Greater concentration			
Presence and awareness	Clear and boundaried			
	Aware of the environment			
	Not taken by surprise			
	Improved sense of well-being			
	Commitment to self care			
Kindness and compassion	Reduced self criticism			
to self and others	Reduction in mental proliferation			
	Sensitivity to the suffering of others			
	Motivation to help others			
	Not suppressing feelings as much			
	Able to witness / label emotions as they			
Emotion Regulation	arise			
	Not so reactive to situations			
	Less need to be in control			
Behavioural flexibility	More relaxed in uncomfortable situations			
	Increased awareness of breath and physical			
	sensations			
Reconnection with the	Sleeping and eating better			
body	Increased energy			
	Able to relax after traumatic events			
	Not taking things personally			
Sense of perspective	Less self-imposed pressure			
	Ability to approach rather than reject diffi-			
	cult situations/feelings			
	Awareness of overwhelm			
	Feeling less isolated			
Connectedness with	Ability to use a support network			
others	Feelings of connection with the group			

Table 2: Improvements reported after the Mindfulness-Based Intervention

## Presence, Compassion and Application to Teaching

"Even some of the most adverse situations that I've faced recently, I've been able to deal with them, because of the presence of the mind, because of the breathing. I'm not caught napping, so to say." Sipho

"Being compassionate to myself...has helped, and it's continuing to help, with not being too harsh on myself." Luthuli

"Controlling the class, I was very aware of what they were doing. I had eyes everywhere, that's how I felt. I would notice someone doing something and I was able to address it." Imogen



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Conclusions

**Extreme Stress** 

trauma and violence.

**Need for Compassion Practices** 

Potential for Mindful Classrooms

Mindfulness and Psychotherapy

Mindfulness, Spirituality and Religion

Developmental Model of Mindfulness

resilience.

emphasized.

logical support.

ferent needs.

Summary

Restorative

Relaxation practices.

passion. Daily life

3 minute breathing

space or self-compas-

cope in challenging social conditions.

compassion, towards self and others?

mindfulness.

Intention | Self regulation

Practices ported by self-com-

Student teachers were experiencing clinically high lev-

knowledge of appropriate coping strategies to improve

High Demand for Stress Management Interventions

They reported multiple benefits from the MBI, particu-

They noted the use of composssion practices, which

taught them self care and motivated them to help oth-

The importance of creating compassionate classrooms

The secular MBI was evaluated as accessible and appr-

Although several participants spoke of unsatisfactory

complemented and opened them to on-going psycho-

Based on the progress of the student teachers, a model

Self exploration

Focused atten-

supported by

ly sitting practice.

compassion prac- practices.

**Transformative** 

>10,000 hours of

ting practice and

retreat. Non-refer-

ential compassion

formal daily sit-

Self liberation

was developed to advise on different practices for dif-

Focused attention and tion, developing

Mini-meditations e.g. | tices. Formal dai-

Table 3: A Developmental Model of Mindfulness, showing graduated practices

For MBIs to fulfil their potential in RSA, compassion

practices need to be integrated in order to allow hu-

How does the history of South Africa's transition

and the philosophy of *ubuntu* affect the cultivation of

man service professionals to develop the resilience to

past experiences with psychotherapy, mindfulness both

priate, even by those from a religious background.

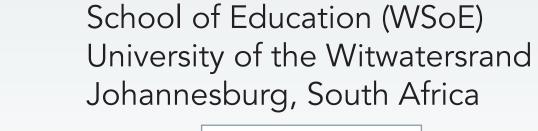
where pupils feel safe and can learn more easily was

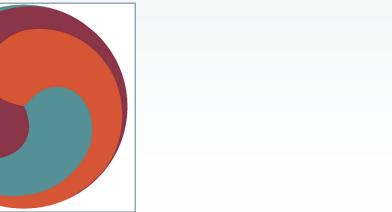
larly necessary in a country with such high incidents of

els of stress, and harsh teaching conditions, without



**Future Research** 





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