



A Self-Compassion Module to Support Psychological Well-Being of Special Needs Teachers

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Abstract

Teachers in special schools face complex psychological challenges related to high emotional demands, workload, and adaptive responsibilities when supporting students with special needs. These conditions often affect teachers' psychological well-being and increase vulnerability to stress and emotional exhaustion. This study aimed to explore self-compassion experiences among special needs teachers and to develop a self-compassion module as a promotive effort to support psychological well-being. A qualitative case study approach was employed with supportive quantitative data. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and the Self-Compassion Scale. A pretest–posttest design using a 12-item instrument was applied to examine changes in self-compassion levels following the module implementation. The participants consisted of two special needs teachers selected through purposive sampling. The findings indicated that both participants experienced improvements in self-compassion, emotional awareness, and adaptive emotion regulation after engaging with the module. The module facilitated self-kindness, reduced self-judgment, and supported reflective coping strategies in managing work-related stress. These results suggest that a self-compassion module may serve as a practical and contextually relevant promotive intervention to enhance the psychological well-being of special needs teachers.

Keywords: self-compassion, psychological well-being, special needs teachers, emotion regulation, work stress

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1. Introduction

Education plays an important role in shaping the quality of human resources, including for children with special needs. In Indonesia, Special Schools serve as institutions that provide adaptive and equal educational services for students with developmental disabilities. Based on Permendiknas Number 16 of 2007, special school teachers are expected to have adequate academic qualifications and professional competencies to accommodate the unique needs of each student. Inclusive and special education settings place complex emotional and professional demands on teachers, making psychological well-being a critical factor in sustaining teaching quality and effectiveness (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020).

These duties not only include teaching and learning activities, but also psychosocial assistance, simple therapy, and creating an environment conducive to children's emotional and social development. Teachers' psychological well-being is closely related to their capacity to manage emotional demands at work, and research has consistently shown that self-

compassion is positively associated with teacher well-being and resilience across educational contexts (Postareff, 2021; Wong et al., 2025). From a theoretical perspective, mindfulness-based awareness is believed to foster self-compassion by promoting nonjudgmental engagement with internal experiences (Schutte & Malouff, 2025).

Previous studies have shown that self-compassion plays an important role in supporting psychological well-being by helping individuals respond to personal difficulties with kindness and emotional balance. Research published in *Psyche 165 Journal* indicates that self-compassion is significantly associated with higher levels of subjective well-being (Nugraha, 2023). Special education teachers often face psychological pressure due to heavy workloads. Alfian et al., (2021) found that work stress among teachers at SLB Negeri 1 Padang was triggered by factors such as excessive workloads, limited resources, challenging student behavior, and long working hours.

This condition is in line with the findings of this study, in which teachers showed a tendency to experience emotional exhaustion and increased self-criticism when facing difficulties in the teaching process. Similar patterns of emotional exhaustion and work-related stress among special education teachers have also been reported in international studies, highlighting the global nature of these challenges (McGrew et al., 2023). In the context of special education, self-compassion can be viewed as an inner psychological capacity that enables teachers to respond to work-related difficulties with greater emotional balance and understanding.

Rather than reacting to challenges with excessive self-criticism, individuals with higher self-compassion tend to acknowledge their struggles while maintaining a kind and accepting attitude toward themselves. This capacity supports teachers in managing emotional demands, particularly when facing complex student needs and high work pressure (Sirois et al., 2015; Zessin et al., 2015). In the long term, this not only affects teachers' well-being, but also impacts the quality of their interactions with students. To address these challenges, teachers need healthy and sustainable emotional regulation strategies. In practical terms, self-compassion reflects a teacher's ability to approach personal limitations and emotional strain with patience and self-acceptance. For special education teachers, this attitude becomes particularly relevant, as it allows them to sustain emotional resilience while continuously engaging with demanding instructional and caregiving responsibilities (Neff, 2003). Empirical research in educational settings further indicates that self-compassion is positively associated with teachers' emotion regulation and work engagement (Zhang & Fathi, 2024).

Recent qualitative research shows that practicing self-compassion can help reduce stress and burnout among teachers (Awwad-Tabry & Levkovich, 2024). According to Neff (2003), self-compassion involves three interrelated components that shape how individuals relate to themselves during times of difficulty. Self-kindness refers to treating oneself with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment. Common humanity emphasizes the awareness that personal struggles are part of shared human experiences, while mindfulness involves maintaining balanced emotional awareness without over-identifying with negative emotions.

In teaching contexts, especially in special education settings, these components help educators regulate emotional reactions and maintain psychological stability when encountering daily challenges. A number of studies show that self-compassion can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression while increasing resilience and psychological well-being (Ferrari et al., 2019; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Research focusing on educators indicates that self-compassion contributes to reduced work-related stress and enhanced

psychological well-being among teachers (Leung et al., 2024; Postareff, 2021). Empirical studies indicate that self-compassion functions as a protective psychological resource for teachers by reducing vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Educators who are able to respond to work-related stress with self-kindness and mindful awareness tend to demonstrate better emotional regulation and higher psychological well-being. This protective role is particularly important for special education teachers, whose professional demands often exceed those experienced in mainstream educational settings (Hu, 2023). Therefore, in the context of SLB teachers, developing self-compassion can be an important strategy for improving psychological well-being. Although empirical evidence supports the benefits of self-compassion, most intervention studies have focused on general teacher populations or other helping professions, leaving special education teachers relatively underrepresented in the literature (Braun et al., 2020).

Most studies emphasize interventions in college students, adolescents, or caregivers of children with special needs (Hidayati, 2018). Yulia et al., (2024) states that although the concept of self-compassion is understood, its practice is often hampered by work pressure and limited social support. This indicates a research gap, especially regarding how self-compassion can be developed specifically in special needs teachers who face greater challenges than teachers in mainstream and inclusive schools. Although the benefits of self-compassion are well documented, intervention-based research focusing specifically on special education teachers remains limited in the international literature (Matos et al., 2024).

Based on this background, this study seeks to explore the experience of self-compassion among special education teachers through a qualitative case study approach. The main focus is to identify the real needs of teachers in strengthening self-compassion while developing practical modules as a means of self-reflection, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being improvement. This research has a dual contribution: theoretically, it enriches the literature on self-compassion in the context of special education, which has been rarely studied; and practically, it presents a structured intervention that can help special education teachers carry out their roles in a healthier and more sustainable manner.

Thus, this research is important to address the needs of special education teachers in maintaining their psychological well-being. Through the development of a self-compassion module, this study not only offers an academic contribution to expanding the understanding of emotion regulation in special educators, but also provides practical solutions that can be directly applied to support the mental health and professional sustainability of special education teachers.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The focus of the study is directed at exploring the needs of Special Needs School teachers in strengthening self-compassion and evaluating the effectiveness of the developed module. The case study design was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply understand the personal experiences and specific contexts of the participants. The use of a small number of participants was intentional, as this study adopted an exploratory qualitative case study design. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences within a specific context rather than generalization to a broader population.

2.2 Participant

The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) special needs teachers (2) willing to participate in the intervention, and (4) not currently undergoing other psychological programs. Two female teachers from the River Kids Special School for Autism in Malang participated in this study, namely RH (24 years old), a teacher with two years of teaching experience, and AR (23 years old), a new teacher. The selection of participants with different backgrounds was aimed at obtaining a richer picture of the variety of cases.

2.3. Instrument

The research data was collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured format to explore the teachers' personal experiences, work pressures, and coping strategies. In addition, participant observation was conducted on teaching activities and teacher-student interactions. Self-compassion was measured using two instruments. First, the Self-Compassion Scale was used to determine the level of self-compassion in both subjects. Second, to measure changes before and after the intervention, the researchers developed a pre-test and post-test instrument consisting of 12 statements based on indicators of self-compassion behavior. This additional instrument underwent expert judgment to ensure its content validity and suitability for the research objectives.

2.4 Research Procedures

This study was conducted in several stages. After the initial data collection, an intervention in the form of a self-compassion module was implemented. The module was designed as a self-guided intervention consisting of five structured sessions focusing on self-kindness, mindfulness, emotional regulation, and reflective practices tailored to special needs teachers.

The structure and content of the self-compassion module are summarized in Table 1.

Tabel 1 Self Compassion Module (Methods)

Session	Material	Objective	Activity
1	Getting to Know Self-Compassion	Teachers were introduced to the basic concept of self-compassion and its importance for psychological well-being.	Brief reflection and discussion of personal experiences.
2	Reducing Self-Judgment & Accepting Weaknesses	Train teachers to reduce excessive self-criticism by replacing negative thoughts with positive affirmations.	Short journaling and practicing writing loving letters to yourself
3	Difficulties as Part of Humanity	Cultivating the awareness that challenges are part of the human experience	Sharing stories, reflections, togetherness, and writing down lessons learned from difficult experiences.
4	Recognizing & Managing Emotions	Teaching emotional awareness and strategies for responding to stress in a more adaptive way, including aspects of religiosity.	Practice emotional pauses (stop-breath-pray-respond) and write down experiences of managing emotions in class.
5	Taking Care of Yourself & Getting Used to Reflection	Helping teachers establish self-care routines and strengthen self-compassion.	Create a weekly self-care plan, journal your gratitude, and practice positive affirmations.

Following the completion of the module, participants completed the posttest to assess changes in self-compassion levels.

2.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic approach (Miles, M. B., & Huberman, 1994) through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This analysis was used to identify the main themes related to teachers' experiences in managing stress, regulating emotions, and practicing self-compassion.

Meanwhile, quantitative data from pre-tests and post-tests were analyzed descriptively and comparatively by comparing scores and categories before and after the intervention. This approach was chosen because the number of participants was limited,

so the analysis focused on individual changes rather than population generalizations.

The validity of the module was tested through expert judgment involving a psychologist at the school as a validator. The assessment instrument used a 1–5 Likert scale for content, language, presentation system, and relevance to the module development objectives, referring to the instrument development procedure (Borg, W. R., & Gall, 1984).

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Module Trial Results

The feasibility and content validity of the module were evaluated through expert judgment conducted by a professional psychologist at the school. The assessment covered several aspects, including material relevance, instructional design, compliance with psychological principles, activities and evaluation methods, and visual presentation.

Table 2 . Module Validity Test Assessment Results

Assessment Aspects	Statement	Score
Material	Material on the concept of self-compassion in accordance with Neff's theory (2003) and relevant to the context of special education teachers	5
	The material provides an experience covering the six components of self-compassion and explains its application in the daily lives of special education teachers.	5
	The module provides a useful experience on the importance of self-compassion for special education teachers.	5
Instructional design	The module provides practical steps that can be applied in everyday life.	5
	Activities such as reflection, journaling, positive affirmations, and mindfulness exercises are designed specifically for special education teachers.	5
	Inclusion of religious aspects in sessions in accordance with expert input and subject needs	5
Compliance with psychological science	The module supports increased self-awareness, emotional management, and reduced self-criticism among special education teachers.	5
	The module is aligned with the clinical psychology approach in supporting individual psychological	5

well-being.

Activities and evaluations

Activities in each session are tailored to learning objectives and encourage active involvement by special education teachers. 5

Evaluation through self-reflection and evaluative statements at the end of the session helps assess understanding and impact. 5

Evaluative questions reflect the content of the session and support the development of self-compassion. 5

Visuals and appearance

The visual design of the module supports understanding through the use of appropriate fonts, colors, and illustrations. 5

The module display makes it easy for participants to follow the practical steps in the module. 5

The modules can be printed into booklets that are practical for independent use. 5

Table 2 presents the results of the module validity assessment. All evaluated aspects received a maximum score of 5, indicating that the module was rated as very good across all criteria. Based on the validator's evaluation, the module was considered suitable for implementation without requiring further revision. These findings indicate that the self-compassion module is theoretically grounded and contextually appropriate for special education teachers.

The alignment of the module content with Neff's self-compassion framework suggests that the intervention is conceptually sound and consistent with established psychological principles. Similar studies emphasize that expert validation is a crucial step in ensuring the feasibility and credibility of psychological intervention modules prior to implementation (Matos et al., 2024; Neff & Germer, 2013). Recent research emphasizes that the effectiveness of self-compassion interventions depends on contextual and individual factors rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, highlighting the importance of tailoring compassion-based programs to participants' lived experiences (Sahdra et al., 2023).

3.2 Pretest and Posttest Results

Measurements of self-compassion levels were conducted using the Self-Compassion Scale and a researcher-developed 12-item pretest–posttest instrument. Two participants, identified as RH and AR, completed the assessments before and after

participating in the module intervention. Prior to the intervention, RH obtained a total score of 40 on the pretest, which was categorized as moderate. After completing the module, RH's posttest score increased to 47, indicating a high level of self-compassion. This change reflects an improvement in the participant's self-compassion score following the intervention.

AR obtained a pretest score of 29, which fell into the low category. Following participation in the module, AR's posttest score increased to 42, placing the score in the high category. This result indicates a noticeable increase in self-compassion level after the intervention.

Table 3. Pre-test-Post-test Score Range Categories

Total Score	Categories
10-20	Very Low
21-29	Low
30-40	Currently
41-49	High
50-60	Very High

Table 3 presents the score range categories used to classify participants' self-compassion levels. The comparison between pretest and posttest scores shows an upward trend in self-compassion levels for both participants. The observed increase in self-compassion scores following the module intervention suggests that structured self-compassion activities may contribute to enhanced emotional awareness and self-regulation among special education teachers. Similar findings have been reported in recent intervention studies showing that brief self-compassion programs can effectively support teachers in managing work-related stress and emotional demands (Baelen et al., 2025).

This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that self-compassion interventions are associated with improved psychological well-being and reduced emotional distress in educators (Leung et al., 2024; Postareff, 2021). Effective emotion regulation strategies have been linked to enhanced teacher well-being and job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2025). Similar improvements following self-compassion based interventions have been reported in previous studies involving educators and helping professionals (Finlay-Jones et al., 2020; Kirby, 2017; Matos et al., 2024).

3.3 Qualitative Findings from Interviews and Observations

Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews and participant observations conducted before and after the module implementation. The findings indicate that both participants experienced

challenges related to emotional management, self-criticism, and work-related stress in their roles as special needs teachers.

Participant RH reported experiencing emotional fluctuations when facing classroom challenges, including feelings of frustration and emotional exhaustion. Observations showed that RH demonstrated awareness of emotional responses but sometimes had difficulty managing intense emotions during stressful situations.

Participant AR described feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty, particularly during the early stages of her teaching career. AR reported difficulty identifying and expressing emotions and tended to internalize work-related stress. Observational data indicated that AR often appeared hesitant and relied on avoidance strategies when encountering emotionally demanding situations. These qualitative findings provide an empirical description of participants' experiences before and after engaging with the self-compassion module and serve as supporting data for understanding changes observed in the quantitative results. Similar qualitative studies have shown that mindful self-compassion practices help teachers develop emotional awareness and adaptive coping strategies in challenging educational environments (O'Hara-Gregan, 2023).

These qualitative findings support the quantitative results by illustrating how self-compassion practices facilitated greater emotional awareness and reduced self-criticism among participants. Prior studies suggest that self-compassion enhances adaptive coping by allowing individuals to acknowledge emotional difficulties without excessive self-judgment, which is particularly relevant for teachers facing high emotional demands (Awwad-Tabry & Levkovich, 2024; Hu, 2023). This pattern is consistent with qualitative research showing that self-compassion practices promote reflective coping, emotional awareness, and reduced self-judgment in teachers facing high emotional demands (Awwad-Tabry & Levkovich, 2024; Braun et al., 2020).

From a scientific perspective, these changes can be explained through the core mechanisms of self-compassion embedded in the module. The integration of self-kindness, mindfulness, and reflective practices encouraged participants to observe their emotional experiences without excessive self-judgment. According to self-compassion theory, this process supports adaptive emotion regulation by reducing self-criticism and promoting balanced emotional awareness when facing personal difficulties. In addition, structured activities such as reflection and journaling may have enhanced participants' metacognitive awareness, enabling them to recognize emotional triggers and respond more flexibly to work-related stress. This mechanism helps explain why

improvements were observed not only in self-compassion scores but also in participants' reported emotional regulation and coping capacities.

4. Conclusions

Based on the results of research on the implementation of a self-compassion development program for teachers at Special Schools, it can be concluded that this intervention has a positive impact on teachers' psychological well-being. Through observation, interviews, and scale completion, it was found that teachers were able to better understand and accept themselves more fully, especially when facing emotional challenges while assisting children with special needs.

This increase in self-compassion is reflected in the teachers' ability to be more compassionate towards themselves, reduce their tendency to blame themselves, and foster a sense of togetherness with other individuals experiencing similar difficulties. These findings indicate that developing self-compassion is not only relevant for improving teachers' mental health, but can also support the quality of their teaching and interactions with students. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of providing psychological intervention spaces for special education teachers as a form of support for their emotional well-being and professionalism.

Based on the results of the discussion and evaluation, there are several suggestions that can be made. For special education teachers, developing self-compassion can be used as a personal strategy for maintaining psychological health, especially when facing emotional pressure in the classroom. Teachers are expected to continue to practice this skill independently, for example through self-reflection exercises, light meditation, or expressive writing. For schools, it is important to provide psychological counseling programs and self-development training that focus on self-compassion. This can be a form of institutional support to improve the emotional well-being of teachers as well as the quality of educational services for children with special needs.

For future researchers, this study still has limitations in terms of the relatively small number of participants, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized widely. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve a larger number of participants from diverse backgrounds to strengthen the validity of the results. Further studies could also develop more varied self-compassion intervention methods, such as through technology-based approaches (online intervention) or integration with other methods such as the cognitive-behavioral approach to examine effectiveness in greater depth.

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Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	W
Uli Ester Bethania Gandhi Purba	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ika Andriani Farida	✓	✓		✓					✓

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent

The researchers obtained informed consent from all participants involved in this study.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and confidentiality of participant information was maintained throughout the research process.

Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study can be obtained from the corresponding author, [UEBGP], upon reasonable request. The data contains information that could reveal the identity of participants and is therefore not available to the public.

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