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Compassion Fatigue within Pre-service Teachers

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Introduction and Literature Review:

In this research, we are curious if pre-service teachers show signs of compassion fatigue during the full-time student teaching semester right before they enter the teaching world.

This research is important since the teacher field is reporting an upsurge in individuals reporting burnout and compassion fatigue (Brunzell et al., 2021). Several factors contributed to this upsurge, including COVID-19, distant learning, social-emotional learning competencies, students with IEPs, and students experiencing trauma in the K-12 setting (Yang, 2021).

A study by Kasalak and Dağyar (2022) investigated the correlations between demographic variables and teacher burnout symptoms to teaching enthusiasm levels. Analysis of the results proved that the demographic variables, gender, seniority, and the teacher burnout symptoms of emotional exhaustion and a decreasing sense of personal accomplishment were significant predictors of both teaching and subject enthusiasm (Dağyar & Kasalak, 2022). Additionally, interpersonal communication's "dark side" can lead to compassion fatigue. Research by King and Wheeler (2019) explores the "dark side" of interpersonal communication allowing students to open up about traumatic personal experiences and the stress that can lead to compassion fatigue in teachers facilitating severe and serious discussion. This research compiled teachers' experiences of hearing students' course-related stories and the secondary trauma they experience, which can lead to compassion fatigue and even burnout (King & Wheeler, 2019). Ziaian-Gafari and Berg's (2019) qualitative research explored compassion fatigue and burnout, which both appeared when general education teachers worked with students with exceptionalities or those with trauma. Compassion fatigue has been shown to affect one's health-related quality of life negatively (Jackson et al., 2021). Another factor that can predict compassion fatigue may be working with students with exceptionalities.

Research Question:

With the growing signs of compassion fatigue in the teaching field, we were interested in exploring when this compassion fatigue begins to show during teaching. Specifically, our research questions are: (1) Do pre-service teachers show signs of compassion fatigue during the student teaching semester? (2) Do pre-service teachers report needing additional assistance during the student teaching semester, such as outside counseling, mentorships, or work/life balance seminars?

Instrument and Demographics:

We utilized the reliable and valid tool entitled *Professional Quality of Life Scale* or ProQLS. After Human Subject Review was granted, the ProQLS was distributed digitally to pre-service teachers during their student teaching semester at a mid-western liberal arts college with a teacher education program.

There was no incentive for completing the qualitative study. As a result, 55 out of 75 (73%) student teachers completed this questionnaire. During this semester, pre-service student teachers were placed in public, private, and charter schools. A majority (87.5 %) were placed in a public school, while 7.1% were placed in a private school and 5.4% were placed in a charter school setting. The majority of those surveyed were women as 76.4% were women while 21.8% of the survey takers were men. A wide variety of classes were represented within this survey. Every area from early childhood (birth-1st), secondary, middle school, elementary, art, to special education was represented within this study.

Methodology:

In this particular study, all researchers were trained in qualitative procedures of analyzing data and classifying categories. First Human Subjects Review was granted and the survey was given out to those individuals who were student teaching during the Spring 2022 semester. After reviewing the qualitative portion of the ProQLS, researchers identified and wrote down initial code categories. Then, the researchers independently analyzed the same data to determine if they arrived at similar conclusions; if disagreement occurred, discussion occurred and independently analyzed the data happened, whereupon a final decision was made. This technique incorporates the recommendations of Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) as a means of confirming that the researchers understood the responses, thereby ensuring trustworthiness and enhancing the credibility or validity of the data. From this, the interview results were consequently divided into topical units indicating patterns across the questions and placed in folders. This structure follows Berg (2004) recommendations since the practice of this cutting and sorting into file folders is used in qualitative analysis to organize categories, themes, and patterns. The specific categories are reported and discussed.

Result of the Qualitative Study

There were two main themes that were shown in this qualitative study of the ProQLS. We will report in detail on each theme.

THEME #1 Student teachers report the feeling stressed on all aspects of college life (including student teaching classes, friends, social life)- and would like more assistance with work/life balance:

There was an overwhelming response of the student teachers or pre-service teachers needing support balancing all aspects of their college life including but not limited to: student teaching classes, friends, and social life. This was the most prevalent response found when working with the interrater reliability categories. One commonality in responses was that students are not feeling accommodated with their class schedules outside of student teaching. This can be summed up in these few statements being, "I have no energy to work and knowing myself, I do not get my best work done," as well as, "I would like professors to consider student teachers' schedules and workload would be a huge help." In addition to students needing balance with their student teaching and class work; students are struggling to find time to prioritize their mental health. One pre-service teacher states, "I have not had as much self-care this semester with being busy as I usually do" Another pre-service teacher said, "I feel like we are told that amidst all of this that we will need to find time for ourselves... but with all that we are expected to do, that seems impossible." Feeling stressed on all aspects of college life, and needing help finding balance is one of the many categories found to impact student teachers' compassion fatigue.

THEME #2 : Need additional counseling/talking on behavioral and academic issues in the classroom or like it when we do these things:

Another theme found throughout this qualitative survey is "*Need Additional Counseling/Talking on Behavioral and Academic Issues in the Classroom or Like it When We Do These Things.*" This means that majority of the student teachers agreed that they wanted additional counseling and support with behavioral and academic situations they faced in their classroom or they liked it when they did receive encouragement in these areas of their student teaching. Some key quotes that highlight how the student teachers felt when it came to supporting one another says, "...allowing class time to just be sharing stories with other student teachers is really nice to hear their strategies and struggles...[which allows us to] fall back on each other when needed..." and they like it when conversations in the classroom are "...not necessarily about education, just about life as a student teacher because it removes the pressure of constantly performing and improving." Other people said they "...would love continued resources in how to handle situations where students have experienced trauma." Some student teachers want support from someone else so they have the "opportunity to talk to someone who knows what I'm going through..." Overall, student teachers want more support from each other, through resources, and from someone they can talk to.

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Discussion:

Looking at our results. It appears that these student teachers at this midwestern liberal arts college are having some issues with not only the beginnings of compassion fatigue and wondering how to deal with students in trauma, but also report having trouble with time management and work-life balance during this semester.

Firstly, a category that these pre-service student teachers report on is the need for more support during the student teaching semester with students' behaviors in the field. They report seeing more students with trauma and they are not experienced in how to react to these particular students and where to go for help. Research done by Brown and others found that an urban teacher preparation program's efforts to increase their pre-service teachers' knowledge and skills when dealing with trauma had positive effects (Brown, et al., 2020). It may be wise that the college, during the student teaching semester, goes into more detail about behavior management and students with trauma and where student teachers can get support during their school day.

This is an interesting note but the second issue is that these pre-service teachers are reporting stress with workload and time management. Because student teaching is done within the four years of undergraduate school, many people who are student teaching, which is a full-time job, are having issues with friends at college who are not in this stage of their lives during their senior year and these two worlds (working vs having fun during the last semester) are colliding. Unfortunately, this stress may be carried out into students' future careers as is shown in research by Clemons, Hall, and Linder. These researchers found professional success through intrinsic motivation was found to be connected with teachers' "personal life and feelings of contentment and happiness" (Clemons et al., 2021).

Finding a balance between work, family, and friends is very stressful for these student teachers. They seem to report much work and no life balance. In a research study on work-life balance, Pautz and Vogel had conversations with faculty members regarding their intrinsic motivation. Pautz and Vogel found that faculty members' desire to work with students, directly correlated with their stress, future, and burnout levels (Pautz & Vogel 2020).

From this study, it might be wise to have a night session right before student teaching on work/life balance and how to be organized during the student teaching semester. Another idea would be to have at least one class session right before student teaching that will go over the necessary time with work/life balance and where to go for assistance.

Limitations:

This study used qualitative research methods to assess the perceptions of **current student teachers and whether they feel stress and compassion fatigue during their semester of student teaching.** Despite the promising results, some limitations deserve mention.

First, generalization of the findings is limited because of the nature of the subject sample. Meaning, this study was only completed with 55 pre-service student teachers during one semester. This constituted a limited group and, therefore, may not be representative of all student teachers during this semester or even year or following years.

Further, social desirability is a concern when using surveys. That is, some participants may respond based on what they perceive is expected of them or what they deem to be socially or politically correct. Thus, although participation was voluntary, the validity of the findings may be limited due to the bias inherent in the data collection methods used.

This study provides new information on stressors, student trauma, and compassion fatigue and when it starts and if it starts during the student teaching semester. Many unanswered questions remain. For example, future research is needed to investigate the perceptions of mentor teachers that have the student teachers under them in the field. In addition, the coordinating supervisor from the college would be an excellent source of new data and what they are seeing in pre-service teachers during the student teaching semester. In addition, follow-up studies could help determine whether the changes in the college curriculum that train pre-service teachers more fully of students with trauma and time management strategies helped improve the student teaching semester.