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## Teacher Candidates' Perspectives on Self-Care: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Mary S. Thomas  
*University of Louisville*, shelley.thomas@louisville.edu

Penny B. Howell  
*University of Louisville*, penny.howell@louisville.edu

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## Teacher Candidates' Perspectives on Self-Care: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

### Abstract

How are teacher candidates conceptualizing self-care during the COVID 19 pandemic?

We initiated focused attention on educator self-care for teacher candidates after identifying this content as a missing yet necessary component of trauma-informed teaching (Authors, 2019). In the fall of 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic affecting every element of candidates' lives including our now remotely-delivered course, we reconsidered how that content needed to fit into the realities of learning to teach during a pandemic. Following these revisions, we explored the research question, how are candidates conceptualizing self-care during the COVID-19 pandemic? We describe findings and provide recommendations and resources for educator preparation programs (EPP) to include self-care content during COVID -19 and afterward.

### Keywords

Self-care, COVID-19, educator preparation

### Cover Page Footnote

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## **Teacher Candidates' Perspectives on Self-Care: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic**

How are teacher candidates conceptualizing self-care during the COVID-19 pandemic? We initiated focused attention on educator self-care for teacher candidates after identifying this content as a missing yet necessary component of trauma-informed teaching (Thomas et al., 2019). In the fall of 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic affecting every element of teacher candidates' lives including our now remotely-delivered course, we reconsidered how trauma-informed practices (TIP) should fit into the realities of learning to teach during a pandemic. Following these revisions to instruction around TIP to be more intentional around self-care, we explored the research question, how are teacher candidates conceptualizing self-care during the COVID-19 pandemic? We describe findings and provide recommendations and resources for educator preparation programs (EPP) to include self-care content during COVID-19 and afterward.

### **Context and Literature**

With increasing concerns about the mental health of teachers who teach while experiencing the impacts of COVID-19 across their personal and professional lives and the real possibility that many may leave the profession as a result (Horace Mann Educators Corporation, 2020), it is imperative to prepare teacher candidates (TC) with tools to address their mental health. Furthermore, as we prepare TC to think about the needs of their students, EPPs must consider conditions relevant to the current context of a global pandemic that will likely carry forward into the foreseeable future, including the recognition that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread impacts creating collective trauma. *Collective trauma* occurs when a traumatic event impacts an entire community or society, creating a shared memory of the event(s) (Hirschberger, 2018). These memories generally have a lasting societal influence; with

the disruptions to daily lives of TC and their individual experiences of illness and loss, EPPs must recognize how collective trauma is impacting their wellbeing, acknowledging that they, along with teachers and students across the community, are grappling with the collective impact of COVID-19 (Crosby et al., 2020). In response, EPPs can support adaptive behaviors for TC by explicitly teaching self-care and providing tools they can use throughout their professional careers.

Resources for trauma-informed schools identify self-care among education personnel as an ethical imperative (Wolpow et al., 2016). Given the foundational principles of learning to be trauma-informed, we grounded content on self-care for TC in the assumptions that they need information, language, and resources for creating sustainable routines for intentional self-care (Rossen & Hull, 2013; Wolpow et al., 2016). While integrated into the training of other helping professionals, (see Finlay-Jones, Kane, & Rees, 2017; Rudaz, Twohig, Ong, & Levin, 2017), self-care is not yet a routine, explicit component in our EPP.

Self-care begins with knowledge that teachers' health and well-being impacts how they care for students (Arens & Morin, 2016) and includes information and language for TC and practicing teachers to recognize and name their experiences to create a plan forward in response. It is also critical for TCs and practicing teachers to acknowledge that self-care is deliberate, planned, and requires change in habits and mindset to improve their health and well-being.

### **Methodology**

To explore the research question, how are candidates conceptualizing self-care during the COVID-19 pandemic, this practitioner research study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2010) was informed by sociocultural theory. As such, the authors occupy two roles, the first role was as practitioners who recognized a “problem of practice” (p. 42), and as researchers exploring how

teacher candidates develop trauma-informed perspectives and practices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, as instructors, we noted that TC exhibited more than typical patterns of avoidance and anxiety as they described their stress, and we recognized the potential for these patterns to carry over into their practice as teachers. In response, we created a module around self-care drawing from the aforementioned resources.

As researchers, we find sociocultural theory's emphasis on human social and cultural interaction (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996) particularly pertinent in the context of the COVID-19 era's experiences that include social distancing and quarantining.

### **Participants**

Participants included 28 TC enrolled in the first course of their undergraduate program in middle and secondary teacher preparation. All 28 completed a self-care module as a component of TIP. We did not collect demographic information from participants; they referenced intersecting identities routinely in conversations and assignments.

### **Data sources and analysis**

Data included the completed self-care module. The module included chapter two in Wolpow et al. (2016), titled *Self-Care: An Ethical Obligation for those who Care*. The chapter introduces terms such as secondary or vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout. In the reading, participants also learned about the impact of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout on teachers' personal and professional lives and received information about prevention of these impacts as well as tools for creating a self-care plan. Next, participants completed the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL5) (Stamm, 2010), a 30 item self-assessment. ProQOL5 results are reported in three categories. These include *compassion satisfaction* (pleasure from doing work well), *burnout* (associated with helplessness and difficulties dealing

with work), and *secondary traumatic stress* (work-related exposure secondary exposure to stressful events) (Stamm, 2010).

After reflecting on their ProQOL5 scores, participants responded to the prompt: were you surprised by your scores? Why or why not? Finally, they created a self-care plan as recommended by Rossen & Hull (2013) and Wolpow et al., (2016) that included the following six categories and explanations:

- *Physical Self-Care*, things I do to take care of my body in healthy ways;
- *Emotional Self-Care*, things I do to take care of my feelings in healthy ways;
- *Cognitive Self-Care*, things I do to improve my mind and understand myself better;
- *Social Self-Care*, things I do in relation to others and the world around me;
- *Financial Self-Care*, things I do to spend and save responsibly; and
- *Spiritual Self-Care*, things I do to gain perspective on my life

(Johnson, 2002).

The self-care modules were analyzed using descriptive coding during the first cycle, followed by pattern coding around the research question (Saldaña, 2015) using the three categories in the ProQOL5: *compassion satisfaction* (pleasure from doing work well), *burnout* (associated with helplessness and difficulties dealing with work), and *secondary traumatic stress* (work-related exposure secondary exposure to stressful events) along with the self-care categories (Stamm, 2010).

## Findings

Completion of the ProQOL5 gave participants useful information about themselves and language to describe their experiences. When participants reflected on their ProQOL5 scores,

responding to the prompt *were you surprised by your scores*, many found their burnout score higher than they expected and commented that they had not even started teaching yet, and their burnout score was higher than it should be. One remarked:

I have felt burnt out lately but after the assessment and thinking about it I think that I am burnt out in ways outside of my work. I think that I am burnt out with everything going on in the world but finding happiness in my work, which is shown by my Compassionate (sic) Satisfaction Score.

Another referenced their new insights regarding the reciprocity of each area: “I didn’t know the affect (sic) the people I help have on me and what they go through and how it affects me” This insight underscores the importance of providing information and language for TC to name or describe their experiences.

All 28 participants’ plans described actions already in place. Many, regardless of content area, listed literacy practices as a form of self-care, naming journaling, reading, and writing (for example, writing short stories, comics, and game designs). Though none cited the pandemic explicitly as an influence on their ProQOL5 scores, they did name COVID-19 as influencing two areas of their plans: the areas of physical self-care and social self-care. Some credited the pandemic for prompting healthy changes. For example, one described they were “using the pandemic to increase exercise” while another acknowledged their approach to exercise changed under the circumstances: “I used to exercise quite frequently... due to the pandemic, I take walks around campus...I am still getting up and moving around to take care of my physical health...also a way that I take care of myself emotionally.” Thus, they connected their revised physical self-care to another area, emotional self-care.

Overwhelmingly, participants described how COVID-19 affected their social self-care, often mentioning activities such as parties and simply hanging out with friends as “pre-Covid” and explaining how COVID-19 complicated formerly routine get-togethers. Importantly, they also regretted how COVID-19 affected their ability to connect with each other, and how important human connections remain for them:

I was excited for the fall 2020 semester because it was my first semester in the teacher preparation program and I was excited to meet new people. However, that has not gone exactly as planned because of COVID-19. Nonetheless, I have tried to be a little more open and friendly with my classmates in the Zoom class meetings and outside of the class.

Candidates used the opportunity to reflect on how they modified social plans or how they might do so in the future. Two mentioned how joining a club would give them the connections they desired: “Once the pandemic is over, I would love to either start or join a book club” and another:

It would be difficult with the coronavirus pandemic but joining a club or a group would definitely benefit my social life. I have not been involved with a group or community at (the university) and it would help me both find new passions, meet new people, and potentially make new friends. As I only have a small circle of friends and none go to (the university), I would love some friends to hang out with on campus.

Others referred to the importance of human relationships and interactions for self-care, noting how the pandemic changed how these look.

Obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic makes socializing a little harder than normal, but I will still find ways around the problems it presents. At the very least, I will continue to



make efforts to check up on my friends by giving them a phone call should I be unable to meet up with them... I have found that keeping my friends close is essential to my mental health...

In this example, the candidate considers their COVID-19 interactions and looks ahead to post-pandemic self-care.

...Playing games with my friends over the internet has been one of the most important parts of my huge amount of time at home thanks to COVID-19. It lets me keep in contact with them while in my home and have fun while doing it. Once COVID-19 is under control I plan to begin auditioning for shows again and getting back to my theater community. It is such a warm and accepting community that brings a lot to my life, and it has been lacking recently.

Finally, candidates routinely recognized the importance of connections with family as they reflected on social self-care:

The pandemic has made it difficult to do things in person. However, my family has monthly dinners every first Friday of the month...either been Zoom calls or heavily socially distanced with our own meals/seating in a park, but it's been great to gather with family, no matter how unconventional. I'm also used to seeing my grandparents weekly, but I've had to cut back a ton on seeing them because they're an at-risk population and I am an essential worker.

Another candidate also looked forward to reconnecting with a grandparent: "Before COVID, I had just started to have annual lunch outings with my grandma which is something I hope I can continue soon."

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

As the COVID-19 pandemic challenged candidates in unexpected ways, exploring self-care gave them the format, language, and tools to process their experiences and plan for a post-pandemic, psychologically healthy professional career. Helping professions such as psychology and social work integrate self-care as part of professional preparation; educator preparation must follow suit. Self-care in EPP can draw from established principles and processes in those professions. For example, Wise et al. (2012) explained the principals in psychology:

Four foundational principles are interwoven throughout our consideration of effective self-care for psychologists: an emphasis on flourishing (rather than merely surviving), intentionality, an awareness of reciprocity in care of self and others and the benefits of integrating self-care into our daily practices and routines (p. 487).

As part of the routines in our class, we begin each session with announcements and celebrations, modeling community-building for classrooms. This practice, as carried over into the remote format, provided opportunities to monitor candidates' engagement and well-being at a glance. We were able to identify candidates' strengths, interests, and needs. During COVID-19, their responses, including non-responsiveness and lack of enthusiasm, prompted more extensive and individual check-ins. In response to what we learned through our data analysis around self-care, we will create more intentional self-care practices into our routines as well. Furthermore, as described in Wise et al. (2012), within the data, candidates describe examples of flourishing as they included actions they already initiated as well as their capacities to plan beyond the pandemic. Use of tools such as the ProQOL5 (Hamm, 2010) enabled candidates to self-assess and supported instructors' preparation and plans for follow-up with TC, for example, with additional supports for their reflection and planning.

Our recommendations also extend beyond the individual course. We urge EPPs to create expectations for self-care through policy (Ollison, 2019) and practice. In other words, beginning with the time teacher candidates enter their programs and throughout each course, EPPs can continue to build TC knowledge around self-care as a routine, professional practice and support regular planning and self-care practices. Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for trauma-informed work that is dynamic and contextual (Harper & Neubauer, 2020). The pandemic has also created calls for pausing and re-imagining better ways forward (Roy, 2020). The inclusion of self-care as an intentional component of trauma-informed educator preparation, along with the recognition that TC did, in fact, establish a routine to help them flourish during the pandemic, can be part of a new way forward for EPPs.

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