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Self-Care amongst First-Year Teachers

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Abstract

This paper explores a study completed with two first-year teachers over a three-month period while self-care strategies were suggested and practiced. The paper discusses the impact that practicing and not practicing self-care has on first-year teachers' attitudes and attendance. It also includes firsthand accounts from journal entries completed by both first-year teachers.

Key Words: Teacher self-care, first-year teachers, wellness, well-being

Introduction

The topic chosen to study is the impact of self-care strategies on first-year teachers' attitudes and attendance. This topic was decided when the facilitating teacher not only became a first-year teacher, but when the facilitating teacher started working with other first-year teachers. In doing so, it was noticed how difficult it was to do the things that are enjoyable because of the daily demands that this profession entails and that colleagues were also struggling. Attendance rates began to fall, irritability ensued, and plans outside of school began to deteriorate. Self-care is defined as the "actions that an individual might take in order to reach optimal physical and mental health" (Good Therapy, 2019, para. 1). Practicing self-care and doing the activities that are enjoyable at least a few times a week may help to increase positive attitudes, attendance rates, and benefit well-being both inside and outside of school.

Review of the Literature

Although teaching has its rewards, teaching can also be a very stressful profession. The field of education is a demanding one requiring additional work outside of school hours. If a teacher is not staying late after school, they are likely at home working on something school related. If a teacher has extra grading, planning, or organizing to do, they might be found

working at school on a Saturday or communicating with families during evenings. These hours, in addition to the required hours, leave little time for self-care. The literature review summarizes the work of professionals who work to support educators who can benefit from assistance with strategies to battle stress.

Larivee (2012) writes about the causes and effects of stress and how these stressors impact teachers, further noting how teachers can combat stress and renew their state of mind to avoid potential burnout. Larivee (2012) points to research that found teacher burnout stems from three core components including being exhausted physically, feeling depersonalized at work, and feeling a “lack of personal accomplishment” (pp. 9-10). Teachers just starting out are more susceptible to these feelings (Larivee, 2012).

One way Larivee (2012) explains stressors is “it is not what others do to us, or what happens to us, that causes upset and stress. Rather, it is how we choose to interpret our experiences, so in effect we cause our own distress” (p. 91). Certain therapeutic approaches can assist in changing long-held beliefs that lead to, at times, irrational thinking as well as destructive thoughts on situations and experiences into constructive thoughts that will help to reduce stress in the long run (Larivee, 2012). These therapeutic approaches “attempt[s] to show how we behave in self-defeating ways and how to change these ways” (Larivee, 2012, p. 95).

Jennings (2018) writes about the impact mindfulness practices and programs have on educators. She discusses the impact mindfulness practices have on teachers and how teaching has improved because of these. Jennings (2018) talks about the co-created program called “Cultivating Awareness and Resilience for Educators” (CARE) which was developed to benefit educators who are struggling with mindfulness techniques. Programs, such as Jennings’ (2018) CARE program, are developed to give educators the “opportunities to develop emotional

awareness and focus on self-care (so) educators can be more responsive and present for their students” (p. 67). She further discusses the important role that mindfulness plays in the field of education by empowering educators as they approach situations with teaching that cause stress. Using “techniques to calm their body and mind--and then apply a heightened sense of self-awareness to assess the problems and modulate their emotions accordingly” (Jennings, 2018, pp. 65-66), helps teachers deal with these stressors.

Cardinal and Thomas (2016) discuss self-care strategies to help each person fulfill their potential and note signs of those who do not practice self-care versus the signs of those that do. They outline benefits that practicing self-care has on not only the person practicing self-care, but also others. Strategies to promote self-care include:

- Knowing yourself so that you can best approach prioritization related to what you do and assist with time management;
- Taking care of your own physiological needs;
- Making sure that you are safe as well as those who are important to you;
- Taking care of important relationships by focusing on those that “create memories” (p. 6) and promote bonding;
- Working on your own competences that can include mentoring and leading;
- Seeking opportunities to learn new skills;
- Taking in the natural beauty of the world around you;
- Realizing “your own human potential is self-fulfilling” (p. 6);
- Helping others recognize their own potential

If teachers are not at their personal best, then they cannot be at their best for others, especially their students. “Projecting and modeling positive attitudes and constructive behaviors are

fundamental methods for being a positive role model in the lives of others (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, students)” (Cardinal & Thomas, 2016, p. 7).

Self-care should not be a forced task, however, self-care could be easily incorporated into the day. Juarez, Becton, and Griffin (2020) express how teachers are already busy people and practicing self-care should not add more stress. Improving the quality or quantity of sleep, eating better, getting physical, spending time socially and spiritually, and practicing good emotional hygiene are the self-care strategies that they say “should be easy to incorporate into life at work and at home” (para. 9).

Good Therapy (2019) discusses the importance of self-care and the many benefits of practicing it. In education, teachers are working to meet the needs of their students, families, and coworkers before they meet their own, which can take a toll on their well-being. Good Therapy (2019) explains, “people who are able meet their own physical and emotional needs are typically better equipped to take care of others” (para. 8). Good Therapy (2019) further shares some self-care activities to boost well-being including:

- Eating well
- Exercising regularly
- Engaging your brain
- Spending time alone
- Volunteering
- Connecting with nature

Roberts and Kim (2019) discuss multiple factors that affect teacher well-being; not only do individual factors affect teacher well-being, but so do contextual factors. They argue how a teacher’s well-being is often expected to be fixed solely by the educator being affected and when

we set these expectations, we end up treating the symptom rather than identifying and fixing root causes. Roberts and Kim (2019) explain that “by focusing only on the more ‘easily treatable’ individual factors (sending teachers to trainings to build competencies, for instance), only a small sliver of well-being is addressed. If a real change is to happen, the onus cannot be solely on the educators themselves” (para. 3). They then share with readers the contextual factors that affect teacher well-being including:

- Social and cultural factors
- Professional regulations and policy
- Organization factors and leadership
- Practice environment and conditions

“Organizations, systems, and policies play a crucial role in supporting teacher well-being and our teachers deserve better” (Roberts & Kim, 2019, para. 7).

Purpose

The researcher sought to determine whether practicing mindfulness and self-care had an effect on first-year teachers. To determine the impact of the practice of self-care and mindfulness on first-year teachers, the following questions were researched:

Question 1: What activities do new teachers engage in to practice self-care?

Question 2: How does practicing mindfulness impact the emotional wellness of first-year teachers’ throughout the day/week?

Question 3: How does self-care impact first-year teacher attendance?

Question 4: Did the teachers involved in the study perceive the wellness tips were beneficial to their overall health and wellbeing?

Methodology

Implementation

The research was conducted over a three-month period involving two female first-year teachers. Both teachers teach in an elementary school setting in an urban school district. The first year teachers will be referred to as Teacher 1 and Teacher 2.

After an initial survey to understand the self-care activities that Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 enjoy doing, Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 journaled at least once a week about their feelings and attitudes overall; how they felt throughout the week, what caused those feelings, and could those feelings have potentially been changed if self-care strategies had been implemented. These journal entries were analyzed to determine whether the self-care activities these teachers enjoy doing were implemented and whether or not weekly attitudes were changed because of the implementation of the activities or lack thereof.

Mindfulness tips were also sent to Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 each week to provide them with strategies they might not have had before to help combat potential stressors. Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 journaled about whether these mindfulness tips were implemented, if they helped, and how they were helpful. Journal entries were analyzed further to determine whether the mindfulness tips were implemented and whether or not they were helpful to these teachers' weekly attitudes.

Lastly, Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 were asked how many days of school both first-year teachers had missed prior to implementation. Then, both teachers were asked to journal about the reasons behind missed days. Weekly journal entries were also utilized to keep a record of how many days of school both teachers missed and why.

A challenge that was troubleshooted during implementation was a teacher's lack of response. Due to this teacher's lack of response, this teacher had to be removed from the research and another teacher added; therefore, this teacher's responses were no longer included in the research.

The resources used to complete the strategy included self-reported attendance records of both teachers being studied, Google Forms for surveys, and Google Docs for online journaling. The results gathered indicate whether self-care activities and mindfulness strategies have a positive impact on teachers' attitudes for a given week. Also, if the practice of self-care and mindfulness boosted first-year teacher attendance, it indicates the strategies had a positive impact on attendance rates.

Data Analysis

Data for the research was coded according to similar themes that were identified between both first-year teachers' journals. Data collection began with an initial email to determine what both first-year teachers enjoy doing to practice self-care. This information was used in correspondence with theme one, which is that spending time with friends has a positive impact on first-year teachers' attitudes.

Google Docs were used by both first-year teachers throughout the duration of the research. This online tool was used as a weekly journal for both teachers to write about their week, answer questions that were posed, discuss self-care and mindfulness strategies they used, and whether or not they used and liked the mindfulness tips. This information was used in correspondence with all of the themes (1-7).

A final survey was sent to both first-year teachers in a Google Form to determine their overall feelings about the wellness tips, ways self-care was practiced, and the likelihood of the

continuation of practicing self-care next year. This information was used for themes one, three, four, five, and seven.

Results and Findings

The results of the action research are summarized under each of the corresponding questions. For each research question, themes that were discovered throughout the data analysis that correspond with that question are summarized.

Question 1: What activities do new teachers engage in to practice self-care?

Prior to research, an initial survey was sent to both first-year teachers to determine what activities new teachers engage in to practice self-care. In addition, an online journal was used to keep track of activities new teachers continue to do throughout the research. Lastly, a final survey was sent out to see if the activities the new teachers enjoy doing have changed since the start of the research.

Coding and analysis of the data demonstrated that spending time with friends has a positive impact on first-year teachers' attitudes. Both teachers had several journal entries where they discussed that time was carved out to be with friends at least once a week as part of a self-care regimen. Teacher 1 said "I set time aside every Saturday. Saturday is my sacred time and I love spending this time by myself, with my husband or friends or all three!" Teacher 2 said "Once a week, my best friend and I like to watch a couple of TV shows together and eat dinner. This is one thing that I really enjoy doing because it allows me to just rant if I need to, or for her to just listen." In the final survey, both teachers were asked what wellness tips they found to be the most helpful and Teacher 1 said that the friendship tip was the most helpful because time spent with friends served as a de-stressor. Each journal entry that included information about

spending time with friends was positive, therefore proving that spending time with friends in correspondence with self-care has a positive impact on first-year teachers' attitudes.

Theme two arose as coding and analysis of the data continued, which was talking with coworkers and team members has a positive impact on first-year teachers' attitudes. Both teachers had a handful of journal entries where they mentioned that talking with team members as part of a self-care regimen was beneficial and helped them to de-stress. Teacher 1 said, "Something else I am trying to do is carve out time to talk with my coworkers in the morning and the afternoon. This helps a lot with stress because they are really uplifting people and can help to center me at work." While discussing teammates, Teacher 2 said, "I am lucky that I have them to ease my mind. They are very supportive. Talking with my team about my frustrations and realizing they are feeling the same feelings (while) being able to vent to them really helped."

In analyzing and coding the data, it was clear both first-year teachers had different approaches to practicing self-care. However, being surrounded by uplifting and positive people at work and spending time with a positive friend group outside of work were de-stressors that both first-year teachers had in common.

Question 2: How does practicing mindfulness impact the emotional wellness of first-year teachers throughout the day/week?

To determine how practicing mindfulness impacts the emotional wellness of first-year teachers throughout the day/week, weekly journal entries and the final survey were analyzed and coded to pull out overarching themes between both teachers. After analyzing and coding the data, the overarching theme that surfaced was the mindfulness tips shared primarily had a positive impact on both first-year teachers' emotional wellness. Teacher 2 said, "The more I used the tips, the better I felt." Teacher 1 said, "When it came to my mental health, all of the tips

played a part (in) helping me.” The data showed the mindfulness/wellness tips that were followed and impactful to both first-year teachers included: drinking enough water, exercising, breathing, lifting up others, and taking time to do things that you enjoy doing. Regarding the mindfulness tip about lifting up others, Teacher 1 said, “I used the tip to help lift others up when feeling down. I think that lifting others up really has helped me this week when feeling stressed.” Regarding the mindfulness tip about breathing, Teacher 2 said, “There were a couple of times that I just sat during lunch or recess that I needed to just breathe. I even closed my eyes. Sometimes little things can cause us to really get into stress mode, and doing the breathing just simply defuse(s) the stress mode.”

Coding and analysis of the data also demonstrated the tip on ensuring you drink enough water each day to stay hydrated was also beneficial. This tip serves as the fourth theme: drinking more water had a positive impact on both first-year teachers mentally and physically. Throughout the research, Teacher 1 became sick and said, “The tip from last week regarding water came in very handy! I drank almost 80 oz of water each day and through this, I feel that I had a much quicker recovery time.” Teacher 2 said, “I usually drink at least three water bottles full of water during school time. I got back on track and feel good about it.”

However, despite the practice of self-care, mindfulness, and wellness each week, the data showed that both first-year teachers still felt stressed during certain times throughout the semester. Each week, both teachers performed some form of self-care but after analyzing the data, the facilitating teacher noticed both teachers still felt stressed during particular times throughout the research. Teacher 2 stated she became “overwhelmed” because seven days of instructional time was missed due to snow days and there was still curriculum to cover before the

end of the quarter. In addition, Teacher 2 received four new students within the same quarter and stated, “I got very stressed out.”

Within the data, it was noticed schedule changes also proved to be stressful to both first-year teachers. Teacher 1 felt frustrated taking on extra children during school-wide testing and Teacher 2’s students were affected by the school-wide testing as well. Teacher 2 said, “My students were definitely wild. I tried to add more bathroom breaks and wiggle breaks. They were just pumped up with all this energy. Even students who I normally don’t have issues with were having issues.” Preparing for parent-teacher conferences, classroom observations, and testing required for progress reports were also instances where both teachers felt overwhelmed and stressed.

In analyzing the data, both first-year teachers performed different mindfulness and wellness tips depending on how the tips fit into their day. However, despite the use of these tips and the practice of self-care, schedule changes, testing windows, and preparing for conferences proved to still be stressful to both teachers. Overall though, the mindfulness/wellness tips had a positive impact both mentally and physically on both first-year teachers.

Question 3: How does self-care impact first-year teacher attendance?

To determine how self-care impacts first-year teacher attendance, weekly journal entries were analyzed and coded to see if there is a relationship between absences and the degree to which self-care is performed. Coding and analysis of the data demonstrated that the more self-care was practiced, the fewer absences there were. Both first-year teachers practiced self-care each week, whether it was spending time with friends, talking with coworkers, exercising, staying hydrated, or doing fun activities alone. Teacher 2 had no absences throughout the duration of the research and stated “The more I used the tips, the better I felt.”

Teacher 1 missed a total of six days throughout the duration of the research to practice self-care for a wedding. Teacher 1 said, “I implemented a lot of self-care after the last week of craziness. I went on a cruise. I took a whole week for myself and my new husband.” After the cruise, Teacher 1 took the sixth absence for the semester and said, “I missed one day this week and that was Monday. I COULD have gone in however, I got back at 2:30 in the morning and I knew it would not be the way I wanted to re-enter my classroom after a break so I made the choice to take off. I am really glad I did because it helped me get myself ready and feel really rested for my students.” After the wedding and cruise, Teacher 1 did not miss any more days.

In comparison, Teacher 1 had more absences than Teacher 2; however, the absences served as a form of self-care for Teacher 1. One of the days Teacher 1 did take off was to prepare for school the next day by resting rather than coming into school not rested. After Teacher 1’s sixth absence, Teacher 1 did not miss school anymore. The results of the data demonstrate that both teachers practiced self-care enough to stay both mentally and physically healthy. Since both teachers were healthy, they did not miss school for any other reason than for personal needs or celebrations.

Question 4: Did the teachers involved in the study perceive the wellness tips were beneficial to their overall health and wellbeing?

To determine whether the mindfulness/wellness tips were beneficial, the final survey was analyzed and coded to get both first-year teachers’ thoughts on the mindfulness and wellness tips that were sent out each week throughout the research. Coding and analysis of the data demonstrated that both teachers found that the tips were helpful; however, one teacher said that the “bigger” tips were the tips that were used the most. Teacher 1 said, “The wellness tips I used the most were the bigger ones. I did not use the smaller ones as much but the tips about drinking

water, getting a good amount of sleep, hanging out with friends, and spending time doing things outside of school were the most helpful tips for me. I think those are just really good life tips but they are things that humans in the workforce, especially teachers easily forget to do.” Teacher 2 said, “The tips on breathing and water are the tips that were found to be the most helpful and are things that were regularly done throughout the research to practice self-care.”

The data showed the teachers involved in the research perceived the wellness tips that they did not have to go out of their way to perform as beneficial to their overall health and wellbeing. The data also showed that the wellness tips where they had to go out of their way to perform were less beneficial. For example, Teacher 1 said, “I feel that this tip was helpful but I had to go more out of my way to do this one. I like listening to music but I realized doing this tip, I don’t do it very often. It got me thinking that it might be self-care for me to listen to music in the morning.” Teacher 2 never mentioned performing the mindful listening activity but responded positively to the activities regarding breathing and drinking plenty of water.

According to the research, it can be said the self-care, mindfulness, and wellness activities that first-year teachers perform depends solely on that teacher and their interests. Overall, both teachers responded positively to the wellness/mindfulness tips; many of the tips were used, both teachers felt better after practicing the suggested self-care strategy, and the degree to which the tips each teacher liked grew as the semester progressed. Within the research, the self-care tips the teachers responded to the most were being around a positive friend group each week and staying hydrated; when the two were performed, both teachers felt better mentally and physically. In addition, the data showed both first-year teachers felt stressed and overwhelmed during testing windows, schedule changes, and preparing for conferences despite the practice of self-care.

When these stressors were not occurring, both teachers felt less stressed and had positive outlooks.

Practicing self-care and mindfulness can be beneficial to anybody who sets time aside for themselves. Both first-year teachers found what worked best for them, and continued to practice self-care throughout the research, which had positive effects on their attitudes and wellbeing overall. The research showed it is extremely important to continue to practice self-care and mindfulness during stressful times throughout the school year. Although these instances were still overwhelming to both teachers, it is believed the teachers would have been significantly more overwhelmed and absences would have been higher if it were not for their continued practice of self-care and mindfulness.

Conclusion

The research demonstrated practicing self-care and wellness has a big impact on how first-year teachers feel throughout the school year and the self-care strategies practiced depended on the teachers' interests. Although both teachers enjoyed doing different things, the themes that were found within the research were commonalities between the two teachers; both first-year teachers enjoyed spending time with friends to practice self-care, for example. The findings also echo Juarez, Becton, and Griffin's (2020) discussion that self-care should be easily incorporated into daily routines and both first-year teachers found the "bigger" the tips on self-care were to do, the more likely they were to practice that self-care strategy. In addition, first-year teachers have similar stressors throughout the school year; both of the teachers in the study were stressed during testing windows and conference week despite the consistent practice of self-care and mindfulness.

The facilitating teacher wants to take this research and share it with other teachers and administrators to emphasize the importance of practicing self-care. In sharing this research, it is the hope that not only first-year teachers, but also experienced teachers will understand how crucial it is to practice self-care and wellness to improve mentally, physically, and emotionally. The facilitating teacher also wants to take the research and share the stressors that first-year teachers experienced with administrators. Administrators understand how stressful testing windows and conferences can be, for example, but if this research is heard and can help administrators understand how stressful it is despite the consistent practice of self-care it is the hope that administrators will support teachers more during these difficult times. If teachers get more support and help during these stressful times throughout the school year, then maybe the stressful times will be considered less stressful.

The research conducted could be generalized to other educational settings. District leaders could use the research as a model to develop positions that support teacher self-care and provide teachers and administrators with professional development to learn about the benefits of self-care and how to practice it.

If another action research project was to be conducted based on the currently findings, the following are other stems that would be interesting to research:

- The practice of self-care and wellness amongst veteran teachers
- The practice of self-care and wellness amongst administrators
- The impact of teacher self-care on student self-care

The facilitating teacher plans to take the research and continue to practice self-care and mindfulness. Prior to the research, the facilitating teacher thought self-care and mindfulness was practiced enough, but after the study came to find it might not be practiced as much as it could

be. In using the strategies that were shared with the first-year teachers, it is the hope to become better mentally, physically, and emotionally to be a better teacher and coworker overall.

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