

Implementing Self-Care Assignments as Means of Caring for Preservice Teachers

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Abstract: In this article, a first-year teacher educator reflects on the intentional design and inclusion of self-care assignments in the training of preservice teachers (PSTs). Using students' discussion posts and in-class conversations, this article explores the benefits of encouraging self-care among PSTs. Specifically, the author notes the self-reported changes in the preservice teachers' dispositions and in their attitudes toward their classrooms and students.

KEYWORDS: pre-service teachers, first year teachers, self-care, professional development schools

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

Essential 2: Clinical Preparation: A professional development school (PDS) embraces the preparation of educators through clinical practice.

Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation: A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.

Implementing Self-Care Assignments as Means of Caring for Preservice Teachers Contextualizing the Practice

With the return to the classroom after teaching remotely during the early phases of the pandemic, districts across the country were besieged by teacher shortages (Bill et al., 2022; Carver-Thomas et al., 2022). This was likely fueled by the continued decline in teachers' quality of life as their increased responsibilities pose more stressors with fewer rewards (Lizana et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021). Unfortunately, preservice teachers (PSTs) are also asked to bear the weight of these shortages. Though not classified as certified teachers, PSTs carry many of the same responsibilities of the classroom and as many emotional connections with students as their mentors do. Additionally, preservice teachers are also full-time college students at a time when college students report declining health and increased stress (Czeisler et al., 2020; Huckins et al., 2020). In other words, not only are PSTs expected to learn the nuances of teaching, but they must also balance the responsibilities of coursework and extracurricular activities, which exacerbates their already difficult and intense classroom experiences. The intersection of these two identities necessitates additional instructional measures within clinical experience courses that foster PSTs' well-being to prevent their burnout. This becomes especially necessary as teachers and students navigate the potentially traumatic experiences of the pandemic.

Unfortunately, while there is an emphasis on preparing teachers to attend to the mental well-being of their students through strategies in social-emotional learning and trauma informed instruction (Minkos & Gebler, 2020; Ressler et al., 2022), there is a lack of attention given to fostering this same mentality of self-care and social emotional learning for both certified educators and PSTs (Carr et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2020; Ressler et al., 2022). Consequently, as PSTs transition to early career teachers, they are more susceptible to mental health struggles (McLean et al., 2017). Thus, greater attention needs to be given to supporting PSTs' mental well-being through the development of programs that foster PSTs' self-care and emotional awareness (Carr et al., 2018; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019; Ressler, 2022).

The author of this piece is a first-year teacher educator working with PSTs studying middle and secondary English at a midsize, private university in the Texas. Having taught in both middle and secondary classrooms, I understand well the struggles involved in balancing the role of teaching with the necessity of caring for one's self. Consequently, in working with PSTs, I draw heavily upon Noddings' care ethics (2012), knowing that attention, response, empathy, and receptivity form the foundation of caring relationships. With this understanding, the aim of educators, especially teacher educators, should not be only to impart knowledge, but to cultivate an atmosphere of relation and reciprocity in which students feel comfortable to openly confront their struggles, knowing they will be heard and supported. Building an atmosphere of care contributes heavily to the development of teacher identity, for teacher identity is shaped by the negotiation of personal and professional influences (Sachs, 2005; Beauchamp & Taylor, 2010). When teacher educators emphasize professional development to the neglect of personal development when working with PSTs, the continued stress and pressure ultimately leads to the PSTs' burnout (Nias, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Galton & Macbeath, 2008; Day & Qing, 2009; Said, 2014). The message is clear: if

teacher educators want to minimize the negative effects tethered to the teaching profession, they must attend to both the PSTs' professional *and* personal identities.

In Fall 2021, when my PSTs were concurrently navigating the new and abundant responsibilities of their daily, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. teaching internship and the requirements of a methods course they attended on Monday evenings, nurturing the PSTs' personal identities became increasingly necessary. While the instructor of the methods course was confident in the overlap of her assignments with the requirements of the internship, the interns found themselves stretched thin and frustrated. This resulted in Friday seminars (which I conducted and were intended for the modeling of new teaching strategies and reflection on the week) becoming a forum for complaints and frustration. Committed to preparing my PSTs through clinical practice, I listened to and provided support to them through assignment reductions and extended due dates, but I knew this was neither sustainable nor helpful to their growth.

The National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) offers nine essentials to guide the continued growth and development of PSTs and the university-school-community partnerships. Of these, Essential 2 states that a PDS should embrace the preparation of educators through clinical practice, and Essential 4, states that the PSTs' clinical practice should be guided by a PDSs' commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge. Drawing from these essentials and in response to my students' stress, I developed an assignment that I believed might foster better work-life balance for PSTs. This article explains the activity, and discusses its impact on students' well-being, and its implications for future practice.

Description of Practice

After a fall semester of students feeling overwhelmed and their repeated reports of crying and late-night work sessions, I realized students needed to be held accountable for taking care of themselves. I developed a graded, weekly self-care assignment in which the interns were asked to commit one hour of their week to an activity that was not related to school work or teaching. This meant the activity could not involve homework, lesson planning, or no grading. Beginning January 29th, each PST uploaded an image and a brief description of the activity in which she participated to a discussion board on our school's digital learning management system (LMS). Although this added a due date to their calendar, the required upload ensured the PSTs actually took time to rest and allowed them to see their peers outside of their internship and seminar. The images served as a reminder of their humanity and identity outside the classroom—elements of self that can easily be lost when dedicated to one's students. Although I understood the value of this assignment, I wanted to ensure my interns saw the value as well.

In the last week of February 2022, I added a reflective question to the weekly discussion board. I asked my PSTs to consider the following question:

Has this process had any impact on your perspective? Well-being? Classroom demeanor? No matter the answer, please reflect on why you think this has/has not impacted you and how this process might be improved.

This question served two purposes. First, it led the students to reflect-on-action (Schon, 1983) so they could see how caring for themselves is linked to how they care for others. Second, because the assignment was new, it provided feedback for me, the instructor, regarding the alignment of outcomes with my objective for the assignment. Convinced the assignment fulfilled its purpose, I decided to carry it over into the first two weeks of March.

For our PDS partners, the second week of March coincides with spring break, so rather than continuing with a weekly due date, I combined the first two weeks into one discussion post. Students were given the instructions shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Instructions for Spring Break reflection

DUE MARCH 18th

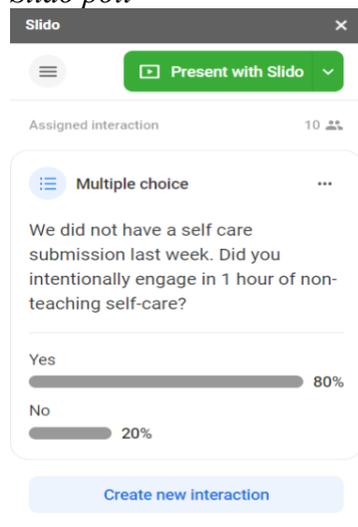
This is a reflection on the first two weeks of March. Be sure to answer each question.

- I want you to reflect on why this break was or was not necessary and how this time impacted your perspective about school/life.
- Do you think the break will have the same impact on your students?
- What do districts neglect when they remove holidays or replace snow/weather days with virtual class days?
- Share some of the most exciting, enjoyable, or relaxing things you did with your time (It's refreshing to see that y'all exist outside of the classroom!). Remember, the goal of this activity is to GET AWAY FROM SCHOOL! Unless it brings you great joy and comfort, please do not spend your break working on school stuff.

Although still focused on the PSTs experiences, the prompt in Figure 1 also encouraged PSTs to consider not only the the impact of rest on teachers, but on school-aged students as well. Furthermore, they were prompted to consider the large-scale implications of removing holidays from school calendars. The latter question was brought forth by experience. The previous spring, a severe winter storm resulted in a one-week school shutdown. Consequently, snow days and spring breaks were removed from the school calendars to make up the lost time. Unsurprisingly, the PSTs (then teaching associates) and other student populations felt the weight of continuous schooling and the burnout stemming from being overworked. I wanted the interns to be aware that if a break was rejuvenating for them, it might have similar effects on their students.

The spring break assignment was our last self-care post. In the hustle and bustle of the semester, I failed to create discussion board posts past March 18th. When the students started asking about them, I took the opportunity to poll my students on whether they continued reserving one-hour for personal activity despite the lack of a formal assignment compelling them to do so. The poll (Figure 2) showed that all but one student willingly engaged in acts of self-care in the absence of formal accountability (the one “no” response was accidental and was corrected by the student). One student spoke up and said that these assignments were helpful for her because they forced her to stop and take care of herself, which improved her attitude toward her classroom and her interactions with her students. This student was not the only one who benefitted from the self-care activity in this way. Other students’ responses to the reflective discussion show similar attitudes and outcomes.

Figure 2
Slido poll



Impact of the Practice

Although I intentionally created this self-care assignment, I worried that formalizing self-care might become tedious and burdensome to the PSTs; however, their reflection responses proved otherwise. For our end-of-February reflection (Table 1), the PSTs reported that the self-care assignment forced them to pay attention to how they were spending their time and helped them recognize that caring for themselves enabled them to better care for their students. They also mentioned that they enjoyed seeing what their peers were doing via their uploaded images (Figure 3). Our spring break reflection (Table 2) prompted similar responses but also facilitated considerations of how breaks can be meaningfully implemented to mitigate students' and teachers' stress throughout the school year. There was a consensus that removing breaks and holidays and replacing them with virtual class days only adds to teachers' and students' burnout. Several PSTs also mentioned that while they believed that students require breaks for some students, schools provide a safe haven from challenging home lives. Ultimately, self-care helped PSTs solidify their identities outside the classroom and resulted in their more humanizing conception of both teachers and students.

Table 1

End-of-February reflection - Responses copied from the learning management system discussion board

Student 1	The process helped to remind me that it is okay to take time for myself to recharge. I really appreciate this assignment holding me accountable. I have had a hard time ever since I transferred to [University] with making friends and this process has helped me feel more connected to my classmates. Also, I agree with [R.] that it makes me happy to see everyone else taking time for themselves during the stress.
Student 2	This process has helped me stop and think about what I do for self-care and how much time I spend doing it. The process requires us to put intentional thought into what we do that is not required. For that reason, I find it beneficial. It is also fun seeing other peoples' photos.

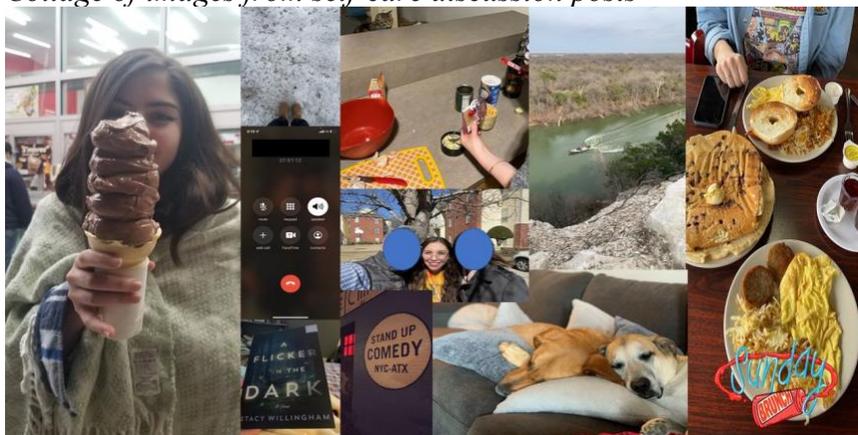
Student 3	This small assignment has helped me recognize how important taking time for myself truly is. During the craziness of Sing, I was shocked to find that it was difficult to find an hour that was spent just for me. With this project I have been intentional about taking time for myself and taking my mind off of school. I will definitely take this practice into my experience next year as I am on my own and without the friendly reminders from my peers to take time for myself!
Student 4	I think this process has definitely helped me be more aware of how I'm doing to better care for myself. It is easy for me to overlook or recognize that I need to take a break or rest. I think it's also a good reminder to my students to take a moment to breathe and refocus doing things they love if I model the same thing. It is so easy to let burnout and fatigue sneak up, but incorporating this into my weekly schedule has enabled me to fight fatigued by making a better "work-life" balance.
Student 5	This assignment has honestly brought so much light to my semester. It has helped me focus on taking time for myself that isn't related to school or work. I have been able to set aside some time for myself, friends, family and my relationship. I think it has over-all made my attitude towards school a lot more positive and energized. I think that this is very important since without the right mindset or positive mental health, then I am doing my students a disservice. Also, I think it is important for every student to learn how to take time for themselves, and I think this would be a really fun thing to include in a classroom! I am thankful for this assignment and I look forward to completing it every week!
Student 6	The weekly self-care assignment has reminded me that in order to best serve my students, I need to take care of my mental, emotional, and physical health. It has been easy for me to get sucked in to the world of teaching to the point where it has often felt like I no longer am a college student; this feeling was overwhelming and lead to significant anxiety and stress concerning school. This mindset has been difficult for me because I feel as though I am missing out on college experiences like getting coffee with friends before class, having class with friends, walking around campus, and being involved on campus. However, this semester has been significantly better than the last and I am working to put more of an emphasis on taking care of my own needs. This assignment has pushed me to still pursue some of these "college student-y" things that I have missed like taking walks around campus, going to Baylor events, and getting coffee with friends on Friday mornings :)
Student 7	I don't know that it's necessarily affected my wellbeing or classroom demeanor but it has helped me realize that I do still have time to "live life" the way I want to outside of teaching and school which I appreciate.
Student 8	In my junior year, I really struggled to find a routine and time for myself during my day. I wanted to make a commitment to myself this year, with all the wedding planning and school that I would make sure to take time for myself and do things outside of just school and my typical responsibilities. I am so glad I did. I have never felt so at peace with balancing school and my life outside of that. Making sure to have time for myself, and protecting that time has changed this year for the better for me.
Student 9	This was able to impact my well-being because it allowed me to get a breath of fresh air, as I am an outside type of gal. I love being with the students all week, but I really do value my outside time. No matter how busy I am on the weekend, I make it a priority to spend some quality time outdoors.

Table 2*Spring Break Reflection - Response excerpts copied from LMS discussion board*

Spring Break Reflection - Response Excerpts	
Student 1	<p>This spring break was 100% necessary. I spent most of my time either relaxing with friends or going out. I made a deposit on a new car, went on my first hike, did a 24-hour reading marathon, went to an arcade, saw the new Batman movie and Cyrano, and more. Whenever school is in session, I am usually too tired at the end of the day to do anything fun, and the weekends go by so fast that I just want to relax. This break really improved my mental and physical health, and I know I am rejuvenated to finish out the semester. Whenever districts take away our holidays and breaks and replace them, they neglect our mental health and motivation. Whenever employees and students don't receive proper breaks, their levels of burnout increase dramatically, and start to disengage with their learning. Considering this point of the semester, right before testing, I am hoping that this break had a similar impact on my students as it did for me.</p>
Student 2	<p>Spring break was a good reminder that it is okay and healthy to take time away. Even though I do love teaching and being with my students, I am realizing that needing a break is not a bad thing but better enables me to give more of my best for them. I hope that the break was as beneficial for my students; however, I am not naive to realize that they all don't have the luxury of being in an atmosphere that creates less stress because school may be their safe space. I hope they were well cared for and enjoyed time away from their commitments at school (academic and extracurricular). In time away from school for a week, I think they will come back with greater energy to focus and work with excellence. I remember throughout my elementary through high school education waking up early to watch the news to see if school was cancelled for weather, it always brought so much excitement to find out there was a snow day and to have an extra surprise day off from school. I think neglecting that is harmful to students. It inherently takes away opportunities from them to be a kid and enjoy the snow or one day holidays.</p>
Student 3	<p>I definitely think this break was very necessary. It gave the teachers and the students time to relax and catch up on any sleep and rest they may have needed. This is also super helpful as we are about to have STAAR testing to giving them this time off allows us to jump back in and have students that aren't mentally so exhausted. This allowed me personally to recharge and get my life in order to prepare for STAAR week!!</p> <p>I think the students needed the break as well and appreciated it. However, I feel that they almost seem more tired coming back as they messed up their sleep schedule. They did say that they enjoyed the time off though which is what matters in the long run.</p> <p>When districts remove holidays, they take away the human need to rest. It is exhausting for students and teachers to go to school for 8 hours a day for 5 days a week for so many months. It is so necessary to take time away from the things that stress us out so having even a week break makes a huge difference for teachers and students.</p>

<p>Student 4</p>	<p>I think the break has a similar but somewhat different impact on students. Right around this time, I feel students are overwhelmed with state and district testing. Therefore, the break provides them a chance to not worry about school, tests, assignments, etc. for a while. As a result, it allows students to come back refreshed and focused for the rest of the semester (or we hope!).</p> <p>I think districts neglect the positive impact of a personal life. I feel like as a teacher, we are always seen as that - a teacher. While that is not always a bad thing, I think everyone needs a small break every once in a while to flip their professional switch off and just relax and focus on other things in life. Therefore, when districts take away holidays or weather days, it takes away more opportunity for both teachers and students to take a break from their responsibilities and reset.</p>
<p>Student 5</p>	<p>I strongly think the break for students is a vital time to recharge. A lot of my students have confided in me with their mental health struggles and it shows in the classroom as well. This break gives students a chance to recognize their health needs and put school as second priority.</p> <p>Districts fail to acknowledge that students need the chance to have self care just as much as the teachers do. I think districts need to consider how social and emotional factors play into learning as well. Student's can't function at their best learning capacity without a break to relieve stress.</p>
<p>Student 6</p>	<p>I think that the break was necessary. I needed time away to recharge and get ready for the final push for the spring semester. This break allowed me to work on things that I haven't had as much time to do over this semester. However, I feel that the break came too early this year and would have preferred it a week or two later in March. It felt like we had just gotten into the swing of things and then went on break. I think spring break is necessary for students as well; however, I notice that it takes about a week or two to get students back into the swing of things. With STAAR tests so close, I think spring break would be better suited after STAAR tests for students. It has really been a struggle for them to come to school and be participates in class after a week-long break with no structure.</p>

Figure 2
Collage of images from self-care discussion posts



Implications and Discussion

By formalizing an activity that should come naturally, I was able to encourage my interns to make time for themselves and to spend time developing their personal identities. Rather than promoting a split self, the reflection questions I posed intentionally tied self-care to classroom attitudes and practices, thus fostering a more humanizing perspective of teachers and students. When PSTs were able to see the value of taking time to enjoy their personal interests (e.g., dogs, friends, the outdoors, ice cream), they were empowered as teachers and were able to reflect on the intersection of personal identity and professional practice in ways that inspired consideration of how to incorporate similar activities in their own classrooms.

Ultimately, the self-care assignment, developed through care ethics in response to the PSTs' overwhelming stresses, helped the PSTs feel more satisfied with their experiences in the classroom. The PSTs reported feeling rejuvenated, recharged, and ready to reengage their students in the classrooms. At a time when burnout and teacher shortages abound, assignments like this can help PSTs find and maintain their balance despite the challenges associated with carrying out the responsibilities related to in-service experiences and university course expectations.

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