FOSTERING THE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF EDUCATORS THROUGH A
VIRTUAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

A Dissertation
by
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Abstract

FOSTERING THE EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE OF EDUCATORS THROUGH
A SELF-CARE VIRTUAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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Educators support students and families in numerous ways and commonly encounter inconsistent support which can lead to stress. Educators' stress usually combines unfinished training and non-supportive work environments. These stressors can compromise instructional quality and affect well-being. Educators benefit from social support that enhances their teaching and emotional well-being. My school provides professional development (PD) centered on social and emotional learning (SEL) to support educators' instructional and emotional skills. As a school counselor, one of my responsibilities is implementing SEL PD for my school staff, and self-care is a significant component of SEL. Teacher planning time is limited during the school day, leaving little time for deeper reflection and integrating new knowledge into existing practice. This action research study promoted self-care strategies in a virtual professional learning community (virtual PLC) by enlisting a small-scale group of educators *(n = 8)* that met four times to focus on self-care. Literature suggests that self-care and social support in the virtual PLC would influence

resilience and stress. Through this action research, the value of educator self-care was confirmed to positively impact stress and resilience.

Keywords: virtual professional learning community, social-emotional competence, educators, resilience, self-care

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to YHWH, Thank YOU for blessing my life in the form of my parents Z. Ned and Mildred M. Smith and my brother Joel A. Smith. I strive to honor their memory every day of my life. Charles, Kendall and Daveon, may I do something to honor God and make you proud.

These woods are lovely, dark and deep,

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

--Robert Frost

Ruach Ha Kodesh leads me. Baruch HaShem Adonai.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Issue

Public school teachers support students in developing academic and social skills to become productive and well-adjusted adults. Educators strive to meet the academic and emotional needs which support student learning by balancing instructional duties, parental concerns, and administrative requirements. As a result, teachers face high stress levels which threaten longevity in the field. Educators expend great energy to teach so when students do not achieve expected growth, they may feel occupational stress, burnout, and low self-efficacy (Nuri et al., 2017). Because of these demands, teaching is considered a highly stressful profession.

Teacher stress is viewed as infectious and contributes to increased student stress; thus, student learning is affected (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). When teachers experience chronic stress they may exhibit signs of anxiety, depression, somatic related distress, and insomnia which contributes to their job dissatisfaction. It has been established that educators experienced occupational stress because of teaching demands; however, teachers experienced additional stressors starting in March 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic forced schools to close. Schools were forced to close and transition from in-person learning to virtual instruction. This transition and the disruption of teaching created additional stressors for teachers.

I know firsthand about these stressors as I was a classroom teacher for eight years. During this time, I worked with elementary, middle, and high school students. As a teacher, I quickly realized the importance of creating a safe and orderly classroom environment conducive to student learning. Over the years, I noticed how the emotional health of students increasingly affected classroom management and classroom instruction. Many students struggled with social and emotional issues that interfered with their ability to fully participate in a classroom setting

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leading to poor academic performance. For example, there were countless times that I had students who were crying or angry to the point they were unable to focus on their academic work until their emotions were under control. These repeated occurrences made it clear to me that low levels of social-emotional competence interfered with their academic performance.

As a teacher, I became frustrated at being held accountable for a student's academic growth when I knew the students had unaddressed needs. This was an isolating experience for me as there was also little time to focus on my own social emotional health during the school day. From my own classroom experience, I noticed how my mood impacted the classroom environment. When I was under stress, every student behavior was frustrating. However, when I was calm, I was more patient with a willingness to work with students. These frustrations became my motivation to leave teaching to become a school counselor. I understand the enormous responsibility that teachers face in balancing the educational and emotional needs of students. So, I left to support teachers in meeting the emotional needs of their students.

Teachers and I often confer about the best actions and communication styles to support difficult and struggling students. Since returning from Covid-19, our daily work with traumatized and stressed students is especially exhausting. While I first entered counseling to focus on the emotional needs of students, I soon observed that much of my attention was spent meeting with teachers. Most often, the meetings were centered on how to address student concerns, but over time I observed that many of the issues were related to the social and emotional needs of teachers. This led me to realize that my support of teachers was equally as important as my work with students. I want to decrease teacher stress, because it can interfere with making a positive impact in their daily work with students. Supporting teachers on a larger scale became my motivation for entering the doctoral program. I believe that my daily direct work with teachers is

the most important calling of my life. My ability to listen, reflect and seek answers has been transformed through my participation in the doctoral program. My goal with this work is to support the educators who are on the frontlines of supporting our students. I wish to share strategies that support educators' social emotional competence and build resiliency with the hope of positively influencing my co-workers. My hope is to inform school leaders in fostering teachers' social emotional competence to reduce teacher stress and improve their sense of meaningful work.

This dissertation study involved an action research project of a virtual professional learning community (virtual PLC) I created that promoted self-care strategies for a small-scale group of educators *(n = 8)* that met four times. In addition to the daily stressors educators experience, the school shutdown because of Covid-19 created additional stressors for teachers, students, and parents and further highlighted the importance of social and emotional well-being. How the Covid-19 shutdown created additional teacher stress is further described below.

Covid 19 School Shutdown and Virtual Learning

March 2020 changed education delivery with the shutdown of schools because of the Covid-19 pandemic. My school suddenly closed, and my fellow educators, our students, and their families began to shelter at home as required. Within one week of schools shutting down, we educators were required to implement new learning platforms to continue teaching our students through the challenges of inadequate internet connectivity, and low-quality electronic devices. We attended numerous virtual professional development meetings to learn how to engage students while learning to use these new online teaching platforms. Virtual professional development is specialized professional learning through an online platform intended to help

administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their professional knowledge, competence, skill, and effectiveness (Dorman, 2015; Goldschmidt & Phelps, 2010).

Some of the professional development that we attended began to address stress and mental health concerns. The next section explains how the delivery of our professional development changed when schools shut down.

Changes in Professional Development

Teacher professional development which is ongoing and for the purpose of sustained school improvement is called a professional learning community (PLC). A teacher PLC is where teachers share knowledge by working collaboratively to improve their practice and student learning (DuFour, 2004). PLCs are characterized by teachers' commitment to continuous improvement to support student learning. Teachers often meet by common grade level or common subject to increase their learning, affect their beliefs and practices, and impact their instruction, which ultimately improves student learning (Desimone, 2011). Before the Covid-19 shutdown, PLCs were face-to-face and supported teachers in learning best teaching practices. With the Covid-19 shutdown, professional development transitioned to support teachers virtually through PLCs. These PLCs taught content area strategies and online teaching strategies. Offering virtual professional development gave birth to a new phrase called virtual PLCs. Virtual PLCs are comprised of a group of educators who meet regularly using a virtual platform to share expertise and work collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students (Carpenter & Munshower, 2019). Virtual PLCs deliver content material with the same focus on continual improvement to support student learning. The only difference is that the meetings are conducted through an online platform such as Zoom.

In addition to teachers providing online lessons and attending virtual PLCs, they were also required to contact parents about poor student progress and poor online attendance. These difficult conversations with parents led to increased teacher stress. The different family needs that teachers encountered as they contacted the parents of struggling students are described next.

Varying Family Needs

As a school counselor, I work closely with teachers, administrators, and parents to support the emotional and academic growth of their children. During the pandemic I was in constant contact with teachers and students to search for signs of distress. In contacting parents, teachers soon discovered the varied physiological and safety needs of our families. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), humans require physiological and safety needs before greater self-actualization can occur. Physiological needs include food, sleep, and shelter. Safety needs include security of body, employment, and health. We supported families with widely varying needs and those needs affected the parents' ability to support their children and their learning.

Some parents were still fully employed and able to work from home so their basic needs for food, shelter, security, and employment were met. Once these parents were aware of their children's performance, they had the ability to monitor their children's performance and attendance more closely to get the children back on track. Other parents we contacted had experienced job loss or reduced work hours, so this affected their ability to secure food and shelter. This group of parents were under increased levels of stress, and although they wanted their children to improve, their more immediate need for securing food and shelter took priority with their attention. These parents were often unable to provide a great deal of support to their children because the security of their family was in jeopardy. Yet, another group of parents we

contacted were essential employees. Essential employees were in health care, transportation, law enforcement, store employees, and some factory workers who provided services. These parents held jobs which kept sheltered citizens healthy, fed, and safe. This set of parents were now working extended hours and encountered higher stress levels because they were often away from home. These parents were financially able to meet food, shelter and employment needs; however, they were working in areas where they were exposed to Covid-19. So, although they were employed, they were concerned about their own safety and the safety of their family to prevent contracting Covid-19. Those parents weren't at home to supervise their children, and although the learning of their children was important, school participation was no comparison to possible death.

As teachers contacted the parents of disengaged students, they empathized and connected families with resources. Because the physiological and safety needs of the family had to be addressed before addressing student disengagement, teachers shared resources to connect families with food assistance, rental assistance, utility assistance, securing student electronic devices, and student Wi-Fi hotspots. As a result of working so closely with struggling families and students, teachers encountered secondary traumatic stress. The next section defines secondary stress, which contributed to the already stressful job of teaching.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary traumatic stress describes the experiences of those who help someone exposed to trauma. Symptoms of secondary traumatic stress are chronic exhaustion and feeling scared, guilty, anxious, apathetic, and hopeless (Erdman et al., 2020). Teachers experienced secondary traumatic stress from listening to the traumatic stories of their students and families while managing the needs of their own families. Teachers worked to support their students while

supporting the learning of their own children along with the physical and mental health of their own family. Teachers experienced increased stress because they were supporting such a wide variety of student and family needs in addition to balancing their personal family's needs. The 2019-2020 school year ended with almost half of our students completing minimal work with little communication from students and parents. Teachers were reaching out, yet students and parents were unresponsive. The mental health of teachers, parents, and students alike was jeopardized because they experienced feelings of fear, helplessness, uncertainty, and isolation. We were hopeful that the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year would bring a return to normalcy through in-person learning.

Pandemic Learning Continues

Everyone was hopeful that Covid-19 would end and then we could return to face-to-face learning and get back to normal. Unfortunately, secondary traumatic stress was heightened as we started the 2020-2021 school year in a remote learning setting. Thus, the same issues with students and parents continued. The only difference was that teachers started seeing the learning losses students experienced from their time out of school. Students had poor work habits and high levels of anxiety. Students couldn't grasp the online material, and this led to avoidance of online classes as their teachers continued to engage them. Online learning continued from August 2020 through early March 2021 when our students returned for face-to-face instruction.

When students returned for face-to-face instruction in March 2021, the learning loss and social awkwardness were profound. Students exhibited learning gaps, poor work habits, and poor social skills because they had been at home in isolation for over a year. Schools implemented Covid-19 safety protocols, which created further trauma because of daily temperature checks, wearing masks, and staying in one classroom for the entire school day while teachers rotated

classrooms. Teachers simultaneously balanced teaching in-person and remote students by logging into the remote platform while engaging face-to-face students. Teachers taught the lesson, monitored chat rooms for questions and appropriate conversations, took attendance for both groups while monitoring face-to-face student behavior and social distancing. Students attended school through cohorts which were divided into A or B. Group A attended in-person on Mondays and Tuesdays while Group B attended classes online. Group B attended in-person on Thursdays and Fridays while Group A attended classes online. Wednesday was reserved for deep cleaning of the school and teachers posted assignments that students could complete independently.

Teacher stress was palpable. Teachers supported students academically and emotionally. Remediation addressed student learning loss while maintaining a calm demeanor supported anxious students. Teachers experienced stress not only from teaching expectations but also from concerns of catching Covid-19 from students. Students learn best through face-to-face instruction; however, the return to in-person learning, which is best for student learning, created a great deal of social anxiety for both students and teachers.

Return to Face-to-face Instruction

The start of the 2021-2022 school year saw a return to all in-person learning. We were still social distancing; however, teachers only taught face-to-face students. Safety protocols required all staff and students to wear masks while on campus which was socially awkward because masks affected the ability to communicate clearly through facial expressions, lip reading, and speech. Students had developed generalized and social anxiety that manifested with students wearing hoods and masks pulled so tightly that only their eyes were visible; therefore, they wore large jackets with hats and hoodies no matter the classroom temperature. The students

were also academically delayed by two years and this further contributed to their anxiety. Teachers felt tremendous stress to restore student learning loss and support the emotional needs of their students.

As I talked with teachers, students, and parents about their frustrations of returning to school, I worked closely with individuals who had varying levels of social emotional (SE) competence. SE competence is the ability to interact in a positive way with others, communicate feelings positively and regulate behavior. Skills needed for healthy social and emotional development can include self- esteem, self-confidence, friend-making skills, self-control, persistence, problem solving, self-sufficiency, focus, patience, good communication skills, empathy, and knowing right from wrong (Dorman, 2015). Teachers with high SE competence can express deeper levels of care and respect for others and recognized how their decisions influenced others. They can better manage their emotions in difficult situations to make decisions that build an encouraging classroom environment. Teachers with higher SE competence report greater feelings of well-being, are more social, and have more control over their emotional impulses; therefore, they have better interactions with students, are better able to organize their classrooms, while giving emotional and academic support to students. I also noticed that teachers who appeared to have lower SE competence reported more acute stress and feelings of being overwhelmed. They also had more difficulty in establishing routines as well as difficulty engaging parents and resolving conflicts. These difficulties led to parent complaints about impatient teachers with poor communication, and a greater number of students who reported feeling anxious. I began to see how SE competence was affecting teacher stress along with student anxiety and performance. The next section explains how social emotional support can reduce teacher stress.

Reducing Stress by Improving Social Emotional Competence

It is vital for school districts to provide social emotional (SE) support to teachers which can reduce their stress level, reduce attrition, and support student learning. The general stress of teaching compounded by the stressful conditions surrounding Covid-19 led to teachers feeling emotional and physical fatigue. Teacher stress can lead to poor teacher attendance because they feel unwell and emotionally exhausted (Baracsi, 2016; Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2019). When teachers encounter stress and do not receive social and emotional support, they may plan to leave teaching (Merida-Lopez et al., 2020). Improving teachers' social emotional competence strengthens their ability to handle stress and prevents burnout so they can stay committed and not leave the profession (Buettner et al., 2016).

Teachers with higher SE competence desire to stay in education because they have higher self-efficacy and feel capable of handling the stressors they experience (Wu et al., 2019). The problem of unaddressed teacher stress is described below.

Problem Statement

The Problem of Teacher Stress

Attrition is a major issue in the teaching profession with teacher stress being a leading contributor. Chronic stress can lead to job dissatisfaction, teachers feeling unwell and emotionally exhausted (Baracsi, 2016; Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2019). Stress and burnout contribute to higher absenteeism (Schonfeld, 2001), increased teacher burnout, (Johnson et al., 2005), and poor-quality classroom instruction (Pianta et al., 2007). When teachers experience chronic stress over time, this contributes to symptoms akin to anxiety and depression (Martinez-Monteagudo et al., 2019). Teachers who experience stress and burnout cannot provide the emotional support required to create supportive classroom environments, so teachers are not able

to support student emotional needs which contributes to poor student performance. Stressed students who perceive little teacher support feel discouraged and have low overall performance and poor work completion (Romano et al., 2020). Reducing teacher stress by building SE competence is key to maintaining good teacher attendance so they can provide students with an encouraging and consistent learning environment. Therefore, schools can reduce teacher stress and support student learning by presenting SE competence through professional development sessions. In the following section, I explain how professional development is beneficial and how time restraints during the school day prevent adequate time for reflective practice.

The Problem of SE Competence during Professional Development

As noted above, SE competence is the ability of individuals to learn how to interact positively with others, while positively communicating their feelings, and regulating their behavior. SE competence is not innate, so as individuals grow into maturity, they develop varying levels of these skills. The encouraging news is that professional development training can improve SE competence skills. Through PLCs teachers can learn resiliency to manage stress and maintain positive relationships with students (Ferreira et al., 2020). Providing SE skill development in PLCs is essential for continuous teacher professional growth (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Learning these skills supports teachers by improving their self-efficacy, resilience and quality of work life. This in turn encourages them to stay in their chosen profession (Sathya Kumar & Iyer, 2012).

Research indicates that introducing new SE content through PLCs and then allowing time for reflection can significantly improve SE competence and improve student outcomes (Brown et al., 2020). During PLCs, teachers must have time to reflect on how to implement new

information into their practice. This interaction with peers is essential to help teachers develop SE competence and self-actualization that support student learning (Wood, 2007).

Teachers are grouped in PLCs by common grade level or content area, and these meetings are held during the daytime when teachers have what is called a planning time. Planning time is when a teacher's students go to elective classes such as art, technology, and Physical Education. When students go to these elective classes the core teachers have a break during the daytime which allows them to eat lunch, make copies, attend parent conferences, complete lesson planning, and attend PLCs. At my school, students attend two 45-minute elective classes per day which allows teachers 1.5 hours for PLC meetings. The problem is that even though the SE PLC content is useful, time constraints make reflection and dialog difficult. Both are needed to genuinely support teacher learning.

To address the need for developing SE competence through PLC meetings, my school district has adopted the SE framework from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2011) to support SE learning. SE learning is the process through which young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2011). CASEL's framework fosters self-awareness and self-management strategies to strengthen adult SE so educators can support student SE competence. This includes teacher self-care habits. CASEL suggests strengthening adult SE competence by: (1) reflecting on how teacher SE competence benefits students; (2) naming emotions in front of students, and; (3) engaging fellow educators as resources in problem solving.

A part of my job is to work with district personnel to help implement CASEL's social emotional learning (SEL) modules. There were district representatives who came to our school to share the CASEL framework with our school. This experience felt very superficial because the presenter did not personalize the information for the specific issues which my school faces. My school is racially and socioeconomically diverse. We have some racial issues, however, most of our issues with students' centers around socioeconomic differences because we have students who live in mobile home parks, dairy farms, and very expensive homes. There are white, black, Native American and Hispanic students at all levels of the socioeconomic ladder. For example, we have some students who feed their livestock before coming to school and wear their muddy boots to school and sit beside car riding students who were dropped off in their parents' Porsche. Thus, the conversation our district representative shared about racial bias was ineffective when we experience more socioeconomic bias. The district representative spoke with us without understanding these complexities, so the presentation did little to improve social emotional competence. We needed a deeper dive into the content by someone who understood more about the dynamics of our staff and our school population. I extended the content by offering the virtual PLCs so I could do something that might make a difference for my stressed teachers.

Research suggests that effective teacher PD should be based in a school, allow collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) and be part of lifelong personal development (Dolev & Leshem, 2017). SE PLCs increase self-awareness and self-management through supportive, participatory, and well managed meetings that allow teachers time to reflect on how their values and belief systems, habits and perceptions relate to their teaching practice (Merida-Lopez et al., 2020). At my school we have the framework for implementation of SE PLCs however, time constraints prevent reflection and actualization.

Because of the problems I experienced in my job, I was compelled to conduct an action research study to address teacher stress through a virtual PLC. The following research questions are what I explored through this action research study of a virtual PLC.

Research Questions

Based on what we know about effective professional development, more needs to be known about how SE professional development implemented through a virtual PLC influences self-care habits. The problem is that even though the SE PLC content is useful, time constraints make reflection and dialog difficult and both are needed to genuinely support teacher learning. This study aimed to address this problem by exploring the impact of virtual PLCs on the stress and self-care habits of educators. The purpose of my research is to investigate how the use of virtual PLCs can help foster the SE competence of educators. The research questions that guided my study are:

1. How do middle school educators perceive the importance of their self-care?

2. How do teachers describe self-care development?

3. How do teachers understand the impact of the virtual professional learning group?

This brings us to a definition of action research and why it lends itself so well to the work I encouraged through the virtual PLC for my dissertation project.

Methodology

Action research is defined as a research method that allows educators to evaluate, investigate, and analyze problems or weaknesses in order to develop practical solutions to address problems quickly and efficiently. Action research is also called a cycle of action or cycle of inquiry since it typically follows a predefined process that is repeated over time. The steps of the action research cycle are: 1) Teachers identify a problem to be studied; 2) The data is

organized and analyzed to develop a plan to address the problem; 3) The action plan is implemented; 4) The results of the actions are evaluated; 5) The process is repeated to identify a new problem (Coghlan, 2019).

I decided to address teacher stress through an action research study of a virtual PLC which delivered SE competence content. Offering virtual PLCs after work would allow more time for reflection while teachers learned from peers how to reduce stress and improve SE competence.

I chose to conduct an action research study that included a pre-survey, observations, and interviews. I wanted to determine if self-care habits could be fostered through a virtual PLC to support teacher well-being and if the practices were feasible. If these measures were not effective or feasible, why are they not? Interviews were conducted to examine the practicality of creating self-care habits and whether virtual PLC's supported social emotional professional development (SE PD). The challenge was to assess the practicality of creating self-care habits during virtual PLCs instead of traditional face-to-face PD.

This study was intended to bridge the gap between self-care habit creation and PD delivered through a virtual platform. The results from this study will inform teacher PD and self-care habits to reduce anxiety, encourage self-efficacy, and support student learning. Action research lends itself well to the continual learning which is encouraged within PLCs. This study explored virtual PLCs to allow time for teachers to effectively dialog and reflect with peers about social emotional competence because it can improve a teacher's ability to handle stress. My work with students, staff, and families allowed me to see the common difficulties everyone experienced. I sought to support teachers through this research.

Significance of the Issue

This research was needed because few studies have explored fostering teacher self-care practices to strengthen their SE competence. Teachers must possess a level of SE competence to teach these skills to students effectively by integrating SE into everyday classroom practices (Ferreira et al., 2020; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Teachers must believe in and have personal experience of the material they teach. Increasingly, teacher development focuses on self-regulation and other non-cognitive skills to support teachers' work in the classroom (Gabrieli et al., 2015). Research shows that there is a deficit in the teaching of SE competence (Ferreira et al., 2020). Effective SE PD supports teachers by giving them strategies to instruct students and is highly effective when teachers can collaborate, engage and reflect (Merriam, 2004). Supporting teacher's SE competence through a virtual format allows time for reflection which encourages lasting change by building their confidence. Building an individuals' capacity to change their situation through their action steps builds SE competence and that confidence ultimately reduces teacher stress because they begin to see their own ability to change their situation.

Few studies have explored implementing teacher SE PD by focusing on taking small self-care action steps. Taking small self-care action steps supports teachers in developing confidence and competence to act more thoughtfully in difficult situations. Taking small self-care actions steps encourages resiliency and reduces teacher stress which ultimately impacts student learning. This study incorporated small self-care habits to improve the SE competence of teachers through a virtual platform which allows participants time to plan, create, and implement action steps and then reflect with peers on the results. The full immersion of teachers into the SE content ensures they have a firm grasp of the content they will teach to students. Participating in virtual PLCs

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allows such immersion. Information from this study can inform schools and districts in providing necessary SE support to teachers through sustainable and cost-effective virtual platforms. Few studies have addressed how teachers can build SE competence through self-care practices, and this study sought to fill this gap. The next section defines terms commonly used in this work.

Definition of Terms

This section includes an alphabetical list of commonly used terms in this inquiry.

Action Research. Action Research refers to a wide variety of evaluative, investigative, and analytical research methods designed to diagnose problems or weaknesses and help educators develop practical solutions to address them quickly and efficiently. Action research may also be called a cycle of action or cycle of inquiry, since it typically follows a predefined process that is repeated over time. The steps of the action research cycle are: 1) Teachers identify a problem to be studied; 2) The data is organized and analyzed to develop a plan to address the problem; 3) The action plan is implemented; 4) The results of the actions are evaluated; 5) The process is repeated to identify a new problem (Coghlan, 2019).

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning provides a multidisciplinary framework for school districts to teach evidence based SEL to students and staff (CASEL. 2011).

Professional Development (PD). Professional Development a wide variety of specialized training, formal education, or advanced professional learning intended to help administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their professional knowledge, competence, skill, and effectiveness (Goldschmidt & Phelps, 2010).

Professional Learning Community (PLC). Professional Learning Community is a group of educators (including small groups) that meet regularly, share expertise, and work

collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students (DuFour, 2007).

Social Emotional Competence (SE Competence). Social Emotional Competence is the ability to interact in a positive way with others, communicate feelings positively and regulate behavior. Skills needed for healthy social and emotional development can include self- esteem, self-confidence, friend-making skills, self-control, persistence, problem solving, self-sufficiency, focus, patience, good communication skills, empathy, and knowing right from wrong (Dorman, 2015).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Social Emotional Learning is the process through which young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2011).

Virtual Professional Learning Community (virtual PLC). Virtual Professional Learning Community is a group of educators who meet regularly using a virtual platform to share expertise and work collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students (Carpenter & Munshower, 2019).

Organization of the Study

The remaining portions of this work are divided into chapters. Chapter two includes the literature review which outlines the literature and theoretical framework which informs this work. Chapter three gives an overview of the methodological approach, the rationale for the design of this research and the Institutional Review Board process along with how participants were selected. Additionally, this chapter discusses the interview protocol, how data was coded

and analyzed with a discussion about ethical procedures and trustworthiness. Chapter four

introduces findings which are organized by research questions, a description of the participants,

and the results. Chapter five contains the conclusion, my analysis of the findings, implications,

and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

The literature to be reviewed below focuses on factors that contribute to making teaching a stressful profession leading to burnout, guilt, demoralization and isolation. Literature related to social emotional (SE) competence, SE learning, and professional development are then presented as part of the self-care and well-being needed by teachers to manage stressors which were intensified during the pandemic. Self-efficacy and habit formation are also introduced as key aspects of social emotional competence.

Teacher Stress and Burnout

Teaching is considered a highly stressful profession. Teacher stress is defined as a condition that affects an individuals' ability to be productive and effective. Maslach and Leiter (2016) define burnout as chronic stress where individuals feel physical and emotional fatigue and are cynically detached, and ineffective. Teaching is considered a highly stressful profession as shown by two recent surveys. According to a survey from the National Educational Association, Walker (2022) found that 55% of teachers plan to leave the profession before they had planned. Specifically, the Teacher Working Conditions Survey North Carolina (2022) showed that 7.22% of the 112,529 respondents plan to leave the profession. This means that within North Carolina over 8,000 teachers are planning to leave education entirely. The number of teachers planning to leave education speaks to the high stress levels teachers experience. Stress affects teachers' health, affects students, and affects the learning environment (Bhrigu, et al., 2021).

Continual unresolved teacher stress contributes to symptoms and disorders akin to anxiety and burnout (Hamann & Gordon, 2000; Martinez-Monteagudo et al., 2019). The National Alliance of Mental Illness (2022) define anxiety as feelings of panic, fear, uneasiness,

and not being able to stay calm related to environment, trauma, and negative life events. Siebert (2007) defines burnout as fatigue, anxiety, boredom, and depression resulting from emotional overstimulation. Therefore, we understand that teachers who experience chronic stress and burnout may exhibit anxiety, depression, somatic related conditions, and insomnia, leading to job dissatisfaction. Teachers who experience these symptoms are unable to support the academic and emotional needs of students each day in the classroom which leads to further feelings of anxiety and uneasiness.

Research has shown a correlation between teacher turnover and burnout (Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2019). Chronically stressful conditions can lead to poor teacher attendance because they feel unwell and emotionally exhausted (Baracsi, 2016; Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2019). Teachers who feel unwell and have higher absenteeism are at a greater risk of leaving the field. The intention to leave teaching increases when teachers encounter stress and do not receive social and emotional support (Merida-Lopez et al., 2020). Teachers who experience stress and burnout cannot provide the emotional support required to establish supportive classroom environments. The inability to sustain an encouraging classroom may lead to teachers feeling guilt. Feelings of guilt are also involved in the burnout process (Figueiredo-Ferraz et al., 2021). The feelings of anxiety and guilt resulting in burnout can form a vicious cycle which contributes to teachers intending to leave the field.

Teacher stress is infectious and contributes to increased student stress (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Stress was particularly acute while schools attempted to return to normal after the Covid-19 school lockdown. The 2022 Teacher Working Conditions Survey North Carolina shows that 49.1% of teachers report spending 50% or more of their time re-teaching prior grade level standards. Stress continues to be acute while teachers strive to reduce the learning loss

experienced by students during the Covid-19 lockdown. Teachers also feel an inability to support students' emotional needs since returning from the pandemic. Respondents of the 2022 Teacher Working Conditions Survey North Carolina indicate that 68.67% of teachers feel that since returning from the Covid-19 pandemic, their students need somewhat or much more social emotional support than a typical school year. Teacher stress and feelings of inadequacy can result from the inability to support student needs. A teachers' inability to provide social emotional and academic support contributes to poor student performance. Teachers who experience stress and burnout cannot provide the emotional support required to establish supportive classroom environments. According to Dorman (2015), students feel significant stress from teachers who do not have the skills to support the students' emotions. Research by Han and Weiss (2005) found that teachers experiencing burnout were less engaged in instruction and disinterested in implementing new practices. Ransford et al. (2009) found that teachers who experienced burnout and low administrative support implemented low-quality lessons. School districts must support strategies to reduce stress, anxiety, and burnout for both educators and students.

Students who perceive teacher support feel encouraged with improvements seen in overall performance and work completion (Romano et al., 2020). Hadley and Dorward (2011) indicated that students with higher math assessment scores have teachers with lower anxiety suggesting that teacher stress affects student achievement. Teacher and student relationships are ongoing and created by verbal and non-verbal interactions (Lippard et al., 2018); therefore, students perform better when teachers remain responsive, calm, positive, and caring when attending to multiple student needs (Lippard et al., 2018). It is essential to support teachers with managing feelings of anxiety and stress so they can support the academic and social emotional

needs of students. Teachers are very caring and may experience feelings of guilt which forms a malicious cycle that leads to further teacher stress by not meeting student needs. This brings us to the issue of teacher guilt and demoralization.

Teacher Guilt and Demoralization

Expressions of teacher guilt can be defined as a teacher's belief about how their own performance is inadequate compared to their perceived standard of practice (MacMillan & Meyer, 2006). Performance includes the professional and moral duties teachers perform for students and what it means to be a teacher. Teachers belong to a community which has behavioral norms and expected behaviors. These norms and behaviors are shaped by societal expectations which in turn affect the delivery of teacher education programs. Teacher education programs focus on expectations of how teachers care for students and this cultivates teachers' beliefs about their professional identities (Noddings, 1992). These beliefs are shaped through societal and personal expectations about how teachers practice and serve students (Bowles & Gintis, 1999). These behavioral norms become powerful standards that teachers then internalize and measure their professional and personal identity (Giddens, 1991).

When teachers realize the difficulty of meeting teaching obligations, they can experience feelings of guilt (MacMillan & Meyer, 2006). When teachers discuss feelings of guilt, they talk about how they fail to measure up to the expectations of the profession along with their own beliefs about those standards (MacMillan & Meyer, 2006). Teachers feel a great sense of obligation to meet the standards of saving children. This notion of saving children can also be called a hero mentality where teachers seek to save children and fail to preserve their own well-being (Santoro, 2018). Teachers strive to push through feelings of guilt to meet the professional and moral duties of the profession and at times may experience fulfillment. However, when the

profession changes suddenly, as with the Covid-19 school shutdown, teachers may feel demoralization in addition to guilt.

Demoralization is when teaching expectations change to such a degree that teachers feel unable to find the moral rewards they once felt (Santoro, 2018). Teachers experiencing guilt during the Covid-19 pandemic may become demoralized by striving to meet changes and new requirements. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed education delivery and required teachers to quickly learn new skills to meet their professional duties. Since the school shutdown, teachers increasingly face students who are struggling academically and with mental health challenges. Teachers are working to support students in recovering their learning loss while working through student feelings of stress and anxiety. Teachers may feel demoralized because their work to meet the needs of struggling students has eroded.

Feelings of guilt and demoralization can lead to teacher depression and exhaustion (Santoro, 2018). Symptoms of teacher burnout, guilt, and demoralization show similar effects which are apathy, exhaustion, bitterness, depression and feelings of isolation (Santoro, 2018). The major distinction is the source of these feelings. Burnout can stem from the typical stressors experienced from the teaching profession while demoralization stems from job changes that the teacher no longer feels able to meet (Santoro, 2018). Therefore, teachers feel demoralization from the structure of education because the structure itself becomes chronically stressful for workers. Addressing demoralization and the resulting stress require a collective response from the education structure. One structure within education which causes teacher stress is isolation which is explored more in the next section.

Teacher Isolation

Teacher isolation can be defined as feelings of being separated from others (Murray, 2021). Feelings of isolation contribute to teachers feeling frustration, lack of resilience, low motivation, poor commitment, and a desire to exit the profession (Lux Gaudreault & McCullick, 2011; Ostovar-Nameghi & Shekahmadi, 2016; Pissanos, 1995). Lortie (1975) identified three different types of isolation which teachers may feel: physical, psychological, and adaptive. Physical isolation is the physical separation teachers feel by being in separate learning spaces. Cookson (2005) called this the "egg crate" structure because rooms are physically separated, and schools follow a very confined calendar which makes professional collaboration difficult. Physical isolation results because teachers are usually the only adult within their teaching space and time constraints during the day prevent regular dialogue with colleagues about their teaching practice (Ostovar-Nameghi & Shekhahmadi, 2016). When teachers can interact, such encounters are brief and limited to cordial small talk instead of issues about student learning or professional practice (Hadar & Brody, 2010).

Psychological isolation is what teachers feel by not interacting with other adults within the classroom. Psychological isolation can result from few teachers being employed for a given subject area. Thus, teachers are unable to talk with colleagues about student learning and solving problems related specifically to their content area (Trower & Gallagher, 2008). Adaptive isolation involves the feelings teachers have in their struggles to meet new demands. Adaptive isolation can result from new demands placed on teachers especially stressors created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Physical and psychological separation can lead to teachers feeling they are the only individuals struggling to meet demands.

The inherent physical and psychological separation teachers experience prevents dialog with peers about problems and teaching practice. The next section explains more about the need for teacher collegiality to discuss their teaching strategies which could reduce stress and feelings of isolation.

The Need for Teacher Collegiality

Feelings of psychological and physical isolation described in the previous section explain the need for teacher collegiality. Without fostering collegiality, teachers may feel frustration, a lack of resilience, low motivation, poor commitment, and a desire to exit the profession (Lux Gaudreault & McCullick, 2011; Ostovar-Nameghi & Shekahmadi, 2016; Pissanos, 1995). One way to reduce the ill effects of isolation is to have planned opportunities for collegiality and inquiry (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Providing opportunities for teachers to discuss their teaching practice and strategies to implement social emotional competence could reduce stress and feelings of isolation. The importance of having a sense of meaningful work and how it is related to teacher stress is explained in the next section.

Sense of Meaningful Work

Lavy (2022) defines a sense of meaning at work as an individuals' feelings that their work is valuable and allows them to use their abilities to obtain a worthwhile goal. For teachers the sense of meaningful work is centered on supporting children in learning and developing into productive adults who will contribute to society. When teachers feel a sense of meaningful work, they feel that their work with students holds significance, is purposeful and allows them to positively affect students for the betterment of society (Lavy, 2022).

Teachers work closely with students daily and are first to see that their work with students is positively impacting students' academic and emotional growth. However, when

teachers sense that their work with students has a limited impact, then they may feel a decreased sense of meaning at work. Often the structure of education and demands of the job interfere with a teachers' ability to attain their teaching ideal. Not attaining their teaching ideal can lead to teachers feeling frustration, low-self-valuation and burnout (Lavy, 2022). A study by Yinon and Orland-Barak (2017) found that teachers who left the profession felt that the structure of education and the related stressors hindered their capacity to perform to their potential as they had aspired. Furthermore, these researchers found that teachers who left felt exhaustion and frustration from not feeling they were making a long-term contribution to students. The resulting exhaustion, frustration, and low sense of meaning at work can lead to teacher stress and burnout (Lavy, 2022). This brings us to the importance of SE competence to combat teacher stress and burnout.

Social Emotional Competence (SE Competence)

CASEL (2011) defines SE competence as the ability to interact in a positive way with others, communicate feelings positively and regulate behavior. These skills are necessary for healthy social and emotional development which builds self-confidence, self-control, and self-sufficiency. SE competence equips teachers to choose their actions instead of automatically reacting in ways that may escalate a situation. SE competence can decrease student stress (Schonert-Reicht, 2017); therefore, students demonstrate greater resiliency when they encounter stress (Romano et al., 2020). SE competence can help teachers remain resilient and adaptive during challenging classroom interactions thus building strong positive relationships with students (Ferreira et al., 2020). Teachers with lower levels of SE competence experience significant stress and reduced student performance (D'Amico et al., 2020). Low teacher SE competence positively correlates with poor student academic performance, including off-task,

argumentative, and impulsive behaviors (Merida-Lopez et al., 2019). Teachers need SE competence to manage difficult student behaviors such as bullying, aggressive, and non-responsive students.

Improving the SE competence of teachers strengthens their ability to handle stress to prevent burnout so they can stay committed and not leave the profession (Buettner et al., 2016). Teachers with higher SE competence desire to stay in the field of education because they have higher resiliency and feel more capable to handle stressors they experience (Wu et al., 2019). Teachers with higher SE competence have a greater capacity to be patient during instruction (Anjum et al., 2020). SE competence helps teachers manage and regulate feelings of frustration which arise from job-related stress (Al-Bawaliz et al., 2015). Teachers with higher SE competence have greater self-awareness and self-management, which helps them remain empathetic when handling impulsive student behaviors and resolving conflicts (Alrajhi et al., 2017). Developing SE competence supports teacher mental and emotional health so they can function efficiently to foster student learning. SE competence is fostered through a social emotional learning framework which is described in further detail next.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

CASEL (2011) defines SE learning as the framework school systems implement to teach SE skills through collaboration and the creation of positive relationships between students and adults. SEL programs teach SE competence in an organized and systematic way which improves the likelihood of teachers learning SE for themselves and then modeling for students as their skills improve. According to CASEL (2011), SEL has five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Self-awareness is the ability of individuals to recognize their feelings, thoughts, and emotions, along

with the ability to recognize their strengths and the strengths of others. Self-management is the ability of individuals to manage their emotions in stressful situations to meet a specific goal. Social awareness is when individuals can use their thinking to regulate their emotions and they may choose how and when to share those emotions. Relationship skills allow individuals to recognize basic emotional expressions, situations, and experiences with peers and while maintaining friendships or solving interpersonal problems. Responsible decision-making is when individuals recognize that they have choices in how to respond to situations when solving problems. These skills are taught at developmentally appropriate levels to students in grades preschool through grade 12.

CASEL's Adult SEL Toolkit provides the framework to implement SE competence at the school building level. CASEL's Adult SEL Toolkit has four focus areas to develop the SE competence of teachers and staff. The first focus area is building support and creating an organized plan for implementation to strengthen adult SEL through organized competencies. Teacher capacity promotes SEL for students by building adult SEL, cultural competence, staff trust, community, efficacy, and continuous improvement. The second focus area is attending to adults' well-being and mutual support. The focus should be on the SE needs of the adults working with students. Providing SEL to educators in direct daily contact with students is essential because they implement the SEL competencies (Elbertson et al., 2010). Fostering supportive relationships allows adults to share experiences, process emotions, and support each other through challenges. The third focus area provides SEL for students. Once adults possess SE competence, they can provide a safe and supportive learning environment with predictable routines and structure. Teachers can integrate SE competence into the classroom community

through such an environment while teaching the required curriculum. The fourth focus area encourages reflection on progress and making changes as necessary.

As teachers improve their SE competence, they can better influence the development of their student's SE competence. SEL programs are effective with students by decreasing in and out of school suspensions, improving academic achievement measures, and greater school engagement; therefore, individuals can learn how to create and sustain positive relationships to develop good decision-making skills. Teacher SEL impacts the learning environment of the class, the school, and their relationships with students; thus, it is essential for school districts to support teacher SEL. One way to foster the continuous learning of teachers is to provide social emotional competence training through professional development.

Professional Development (PD)

Teacher PD can be defined as the experiences that improve the knowledge and skills of teachers to advance their professional practice while enhancing their social, emotional, and personal improvement (Desimone, 2011). Teaching requires numerous skills that must be continuously cultivated, renewed, and advanced through PD. Effective PD fosters teacher learning, which is collaborative, contextual, and continual (Barr et al., 2015; Goldschmidt & Phelps, 2010; Van Driel & Berry, 2012). Effective PD allows professional inquiry which is comforting and engaging with challenging interactions that include the ability to influence decision-making (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Garet et al., 2001; Jenkins & Agamba, 2013). PD opportunities for teachers traditionally focus on improving the content knowledge of teachers. Recently more attention has been given to providing social emotional PD which benefits teachers while they teach SE skills to students (Tschannen-Moran & Carter, 2016). Promising research indicates that continual PD improves teachers' SE competence, and improved competence

through personal development (Baracsi, 2016; Dolev & Leshem, 2017). Therefore, improving teachers' SE competence through PD can help teachers and the students they serve. The promise of virtual PD is described below.

Virtual Professional Learning Communities (Virtual PLCs)

Matzat (2013) defines virtual PLCs as a teacher group that connects using a virtual platform to discuss a common area of professional learning topics using a virtual platform to discuss a common area of professional learning topics. This format provides flexibility and convenience for teachers to engage in PD. The early 2000s saw an increase in computer and internet availability allowing teachers to collaborate more quickly and conveniently using online platforms (Hough et al., 2004). Virtual PLCs are beneficial because teachers have limited time during the school day to collaborate and reflect, so web-based conferencing facilitates dedicated meetings that do not conflict with school responsibilities (Nicholson & Bond, 2003). Online meeting platforms and discussion boards allow effective ways to conduct reflective PD (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). Video conferencing supports teachers and breaks down geographic boundaries to allow teachers to interact through PLCs (Carpenter & Munshower, 2019).

School lockdowns necessitated the use of video conferencing platforms. Widespread use of these platforms started in 2020 for teaching and learning to occur during the pandemic. Covid-19 restrictions are easing and face to face meetings are resuming; however, the availability and flexibility of virtual PLCs can facilitate meaningful learning opportunities for educators. Conducting virtual PLCs allows participants to save time and avoid inclement weather and traffic because travel is unnecessary. Educators who must care for older adults or children can feel a sense of safety by remaining with those loved ones at home. Participants can also feel a

sense of safety by remaining in their current environment, which is vital if an individual must care for older adults or children.

During virtual PLCs, participants have the autonomy to choose how to share their thoughts and feelings either through chat box or verbalization which encourages comfort and builds self-efficacy. Virtual PLCs support self-efficacy and motivation through the process of asking for information, responding to, and engaging with others through the web-based conferencing platform. Virtual PLCs offer teachers support especially since returning to in person learning after the Covid-19 school shutdown. The next section explains more about Covid-19 has affected student learning.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Since December 2019, COVID-19, a coronavirus, has caused a global pandemic. The World Health Organization (2020) confirmed 93,800,000 cases of COVID-19 and 2,000,000 deaths as of January 2021. COVID-19 is highly contagious, so social distancing, masking, and sanitation of surfaces are ways to mitigate the spread of the virus (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Schools were closed worldwide in 165 countries, and over 63 million teachers have been affected by those closures (Gewertz, 2020). Educators are considered frontline workers, and once schools closed, teachers were responsible for transitioning to remote learning for over 1.5 billion students worldwide. Schools closed for in-person learning and transitioned to remote learning in March 2020. Teachers learned to use online programs to continue providing student instruction. Teachers were negatively affected by the quick transition to online learning and the uncertainty of staying healthy amid a global pandemic (Gewertz, 2020). Teachers continued teaching children through the challenges of poor internet connectivity and aging electronic devices. As a counselor, I spoke daily with various individuals. I quickly

realized how teachers, parents, and students felt helpless, uncertain, and isolated during this sudden transition to sheltering in place and social isolation. Physical and mental health concerns became apparent. Everyone was at home, so families with chaotic home lives and little structure were suddenly overwhelmed even further because they had even less structure. Individuals once had routines, schedules, and the ability to leave home to interact with others and get some physical activity, but all this changed suddenly. Teachers worked to support the learning and emotional needs of students. These additional stressors affected the mental health of teachers.

Educators experienced the harmful mental health effects of COVID-19 because of the school shutdown. Teachers work closely and regularly with their students, so they hear their stories firsthand, which negatively affect their stress levels and daily sleep patterns (Pahr, 2020). Disturbed sleep and lack of physical activity are just two examples of the need for teachers' self-care. The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (2020) surveyed 5,000 teachers who reported increased anxiety and fear due to the COVID-19 virus. Two categories of pandemic induced stress involve personal and professional needs. First, teachers were generally fearful that a family member might acquire COVID-19. Second, teachers felt profound stress from managing the needs of their families while working from home to support student learning with new technology. The teachers in this survey attempted to create work-related boundaries to reduce stress and support their mental health (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020).

Educators returned to in-person learning; however, there are lingering teacher stressors and student learning losses. In addition, teachers were concerned about their own health. Russ (2020) reported that around 29 percent of teachers aged 50 and older were at an increased risk for COVID-19. Students returned to in-person learning with social distancing. However, class sizes remained high making social distancing very difficult. To mitigate the spread of COVID-

19, teachers and students always remain masked, leading to difficulties breathing and communicating. Studies have shown that students experienced psychological problems resulting from the pandemic (Brown et al., 2020, Lee, 2020). Research indicates that student stress, anxiety, and nervousness resulted from the changes students observed in their parents, changes in society, school shutdown, isolation at home, masking, frequent handwashing, and temperature checks (Smith et al., 2020).

Emerging research about the impact of COVID found that when students experience stress, the teachers who work closely with them can develop compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress. Compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress are synonymous terms that describe symptoms individuals develop as they work closely with those affected by trauma (Direktor, 2021). Both compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress can leave individuals feeling emotionally drained and physical exhausted. Symptoms can also resemble post-traumatic stress disorder and manifest in individuals feeling fearful, anxious, guilty, apathetic, hopeless, short-tempered, as well as having disturbed sleep, intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, and denying the existence of problems (Erdman et al., 2020). When teachers experience compassion fatigue, they need the ability to recover from these stressors and changes. Teachers need resilience.

Building resilience enables individuals to face challenges experienced in life and through COVID-19. There are no physical traits which foster resilience; however, being physically and mentally healthy contributes to resilience (Nickerson & Sulkowski, 2021). Educators may engage in compulsive behaviors such as overspending, overeating, gambling, and drug use to cope with stressors (Nicholson et al., 2020); therefore, teachers need to inject self-care into their

lives to maintain their mental and physical health. The interconnection between self-care, well-being, and resilience is explored next.

Self-Care, Well-Being, and Resilience

Boogren (2018) defined self-care as an individual's awareness of basic physiological and emotional needs. Attending to these needs shapes an individuals' routines and how they structure their environment. Self-care and well-being are sometimes used interchangeably; however, self-care practices lead to the well-being of individuals. Well-being is when an individual feels purpose, meaning, good health, happiness, and stability in life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Self-care encourages awareness of one's body and mind to attend to the physical sensations and thoughts which arise. When individuals pay attention to their bodily sensations and thoughts, they become aware of times when their actions and core beliefs are not aligned (Patel, 2020). When actions and core beliefs are not aligned, tension arises in the body, and thoughts can become harmful. When these conditions persist, stress and burnout can follow. Recognition of such internal conflicts and implementing a self-care plan to deal with stress are essential for physiological and emotional health. Self-care practices allow individuals to feel gratification, resiliency, fulfillment, balance in their professional and personal lives which leads to overall well-being (Lawler, 2020).

Lawler (2020) recommends five steps for creating and following a self-care plan. These steps are: (1) finding what makes an individual feel centered, (2) brainstorming how to incorporate these things into daily life, (3) setting goals, (4) evaluating after one week, and (5) adjust based on the evaluation. Practices that do not promote positive feelings and joy should be adjusted to determine what should be changed to obtain positive feelings. Lawler (2020) suggests

that teachers expect and explore challenges throughout the self-care process because the self-care road to well-being is a journey, not a destination.

Resiliency supports teachers in having a healthier self-perception and better care of themselves (Shepell, 2019). Self-care encourages and supports well-being, compassion, gratitude, and resiliency (Lawler, 2020; Gu & Day, 2007). Resiliency is an individual's ability to adapt to conflicts that arise in their environment and is not a fixed trait (Masten & Reed, 2005). Reivich and Shatte (2002) suggest four goals for resilience: overcoming previous obstacles, navigating everyday adversities, bouncing back after setbacks, and reaching beyond challenges; thus, resiliency happens when individuals face stress, adversity, or conflicts and can return to a sense of normalcy after facing these highly stressful circumstances or events. Resiliency supports teachers in having a healthier self-perception and better care of themselves Supporting resiliency by encouraging proper rest, better nutrition, movement, and connectedness is essential for school leaders to improve teacher mental health, reduce stress, and serve their students (Shepell, 2019). Building self-care routines which support resiliency require forming new habits.

Habit Formation

Habits are automatic actions that individuals complete without conscious thought as opposed to intentional actions from conscious thought (Meyers, 2020). When forming new habits, it more effective to replace an old behavior (habit) with a new behavior (habit). To effectively change the behavior and make it into a habit, there should be a cue of when to perform the behavior and a reward for completing the behavior (Hobbiss et al., 2021; Meyers, 2020; Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Webb & Sheeran, 2006). The cue, habit, reward cycle reinforces the habit and makes it more automatic so the behavior can be performed unconsciously.

Having systems in place to plan external cues may support the formation of healthy self-care habits. Individuals must create a system to promote conscious reflection that promotes habit revision and creation. Individuals can resist lapsing into old behavior habits when they create new habit associations for times when willpower and motivation were compromised (Gardner et al., 2021).

All actions can be broken down into a series of small steps and rewards which creates lasting positive habit formation (Gardner et al., 2020). Research suggests that creating new associations for habits in small steps reinforces and motivates individuals (Gardner et al., 2021). Individuals complete the small steps, receive rewards, and this propels them to complete larger steps until the goal is attained (Gardner et al., 2021). Therefore, to create self-care habits individuals must have a cue which is the awareness of when they engage in the old behavior habit. Through this awareness, the individual will complete small steps of the new behavioral goal. Completion of these small steps should be easy so that motivation is sustained. The new behavior habit should also have a reward. Thus, consistently engaging in small replacement behaviors with a reward reinforces motivation and encourages individuals to incorporate larger steps.

Personal self-care requires individuals to create habits centered on activities that they enjoy and will support the maintenance of their mental health. Gardner (2012) suggests that habits are automatic and are set in motion from our memory when we experience external cues (Evans & Stanovich, 2013; Wood et al., 2014). When individuals experience stress, the brain relies on habitual responses to behavior.

Behaviors are unlikely to change when individuals are in stressful situations unless there are changes in the environment alongside increased knowledge (Gardner, 2012; Webb &

Sheeran, 2006). Research by Hobbiss et al. (2021) suggests that habit formation can limit teacher growth and effectiveness because teaching quickly leads to automaticity (Feldon, 2007). Hobbiss et al. (2021) posit that teachers' most effective professional development involves repeated practice in the realistic setting of their daily lives to revise existing or create new habits. Teachers experience high-stress levels which interfere with conscious reflection and choice action essential for professional development (Biesta et al., 2015; Heck et al., 2019). When teachers are in stressful situations their habitual behaviors emerge and they can act without conscious thought or reflection of any consequences. When teachers take small steps to target replacement behaviors in a supportive environment these habits are more likely to be committed to unconscious thought and become a habit (Meyers, 2020). When teachers recognize that they have the ability to take small steps and implement changes in their own behavior they feel a sense of self-efficacy which is described more fully in the following section.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is based on Bandura's social cognitive theory (1997) and is defined as a belief in one's own skills and the impact they may have to influence their environment. Specifically, teacher self-efficacy is the teachers' belief that all children can learn and that their behavior can influence student outcomes with additional effort and specific techniques (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is vital to self-regulation as it allows individuals to control their actions. Bandura contends that self-efficacy develops and is variable among individuals and not a fixed trait. Teachers who have higher self-efficacy believe they can affect student outcomes and they show better lesson planning, classroom management, and higher student engagement (Love et al., 2020). Bandura (1997) posits that teacher's motivation, feelings and actions are based on what the individual believes about themselves, and these traits can be more of an influence on

performance than skill alone. Self-efficacy explains why individuals might have similar skill sets but operate differently because self-efficacy effects their confidence, beliefs and actions. Teachers' beliefs about their own ability or self-efficacy affects teaching strategies, teacher stress levels and classroom management; therefore, self-efficacy affects student outcomes (Love et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This chapter provided a review of the literature focusing on the factors that make teaching a stressful profession leading to burnout, guilt, demoralization, and isolation. Literature related to SE competence and SE learning through virtual PLC's were presented as part of the self-care and well-being needed by teachers to manage the stressors which intensified during the pandemic. Literature was presented about reducing stress, burnout, demoralization and guilt through professional development to support collegiality and a sense of meaningful work. Self-efficacy and habit formation were also introduced as key aspects of building SE competence and self-care. Chapter 3 will explain more about why I chose to complete this qualitative research project designed as action research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This action research project was designed to support teachers in creating a self-care plan through a virtual PLC. Within this chapter, I will define qualitative research and how it connects with action research to support the teachers in their virtual PLC sessions. Next, I will define action research, explain the steps in the process, and why I chose action research as a method for this project. Lastly, I will explain my use of virtual PLCs to conduct this research and why this is important for building teacher SE competence.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research explores and investigates a situation in a systematic way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research focuses on understanding the meaning of a phenomenon within its context. By collecting information through interviews, observation, and analysis, the researcher gains a better sense of the participant's experience. Through this research my purpose was to gain knowledge from participants to contribute to the understanding of building SE competence through virtual PLCs. This is valuable because isolation, guilt, and demoralization are factors in teacher stress and burnout. By learning about the factors that contribute to these educators' experiences of isolation, guilt, and demoralization, we can better support teachers and reduce stress and burnout. Learning from participants themselves can inform policymakers and administrators on best practices to support their mental health and help them stay in the profession (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This qualitative research focused on decreasing the stress educators feel in the school setting. By following a systematic qualitative research process, I strove to know more about factors that contribute to teacher stress especially after the Covid-19 pandemic (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). Since I was interested in learning about their self-care practices, I constructed questions to learn how these educators define self-care and how they engaged in self-care especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. I also wanted to learn more about collegiality that could be fostered through virtual PLCs. Studying the culture of educators requires an understanding of their beliefs, values, and attitudes all of which shape their behavior patterns.

Creswell (2013) asserts that individuals construct meaning through interactions with people, objects, and events where they live and work. This means that these educators have constructed meaning within their lives based on their individual lived experiences and their interactions with people within their specific school. An individual's knowledge and understanding of their world are subjective. Interaction with the environment is how individuals create knowledge and understanding.

As the researcher I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). During my conversations with participants, I continuously gathered data and was, therefore, able to immediately adapt and respond to participants' responses throughout the research process. My ability to adapt and respond to their responses through verbal and non-verbal communication facilitated their continued communication which allowed me to expand my understanding of their responses. Through my interactions with participants, I processed the information (or data) which participants shared and then I clarified and summarized their statements to ensure my accurate interpretation (Creswell, 2013). My immersion within the school culture as a fellow employee allowed me to be familiar with the school culture, conduct informal interviews, and know the happenings of the school in a way that an outside researcher would not have (Creswell, 2013). My immersion into the school culture and familiarity with participants allowed me to gather thick descriptions from the participants (Creswell, 2013).

Thick descriptions in qualitative research explore the context of events and behaviors to help participants and I better understand their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

A qualitative research design allowed me to learn more about the context of educators' stressors experienced during Covid-19 and since the return to face-to-face instruction. As a participant observer, immersed in the school culture, I gathered data about their attitudes, behavior, and history regarding their time in education and self-care practices through formal and informal conversations. This study utilized pre-surveys, informal conversations, observations of virtual PLCs, and semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative research collects information from the natural environment, which, for this research, was the virtual PLC (Merriam, 2002). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual PLCs have become a natural environment where professional development is conducted, and we continue to meet regularly through virtual PLCs to conduct a variety of conferences. Thus, this study explored the relationship between SE competence, self-care, and virtual PLCs. My research questions allowed analysis of the events and interactions within this virtual PLC social setting using an action research methodology (Creswell, 2013).

Action Research

This study is best described as an action research study which used components of qualitative research to get individuals to share their personal experiences. McNiff and Whitehead (2005) describe action research as a method for participants to study and then evaluate their performance to determine their own best practices. Action research is a cyclical process comprised of: (1) action, (2) perception, and (3) evaluation. This process supports teachers in developing teacher self-efficacy which improves their teaching practice and improves student outcomes. Action research is done by a member of the group or organization that is being

studied. As the inside researcher studying our group, I could be called a participant observer. The reflective process allows educators to study their own practices then evaluate their perceptions and revise future actions.

Action research allows individuals to collaborate through systematic actions to solve problems (Silverman, 2004). Freng et al. (2006) describe action research as a patterned process that includes observation, reflection, planning, and action. Action research focuses on participation, collaboration, and communication during a research study. Action research is often used in PD because it allows teachers to focus individually on a professional goal within their classroom. Action research in PD also supports school reform because it introduces teachers to new information, allows collaboration, communication, action, and reflection. In action research, teachers and/or counselors act by putting a plan into place, observing results, reflecting on why specific results were achieved, then communicating and collaborating with others as a part of the reflection process. Action research gives teachers and counselors more autonomy because they can address problems arising from their experience. Thus, teachers become agents of change for themselves.

Traditionally action research has been defined as a research approach centered on a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the participants. They are members of an organization or community to address an issue while developing actionable knowledge (Coghlan, 2019). Action research focuses on developing knowledge and action; thus, it is different from traditional qualitative methodology philosophically because of the focus on action (Coghlan, 2019).

Action research focuses participants' attention to create workable solutions to everyday issues with common sense (Cronin, 2017). I chose action research for this study because of the focus on workable solutions. By integrating my action research with the reflection required in the PD cycle participants create workable solutions to the everyday issues they face. By seeking solutions to our own problems, we are empowered, and this builds the self-efficacy and collegiality we need

Inquiry through action research includes knowing and action, which is constructed (assumptions, values, preoccupations) by individuals about themselves and their situation within their world. Action research is situation-specific, practical for those involved, and extends from verbal and non-verbal interactions including questions, hesitations, and exclusions (Coghlan, 2019); thus, it is different from scientific knowledge. Coghlan (2019) reminds us that practical knowledge is situational because no two situations are the same, which is why individuals must practically reflect and assess to understand what is needed and decide how to act within the moment.

Practical knowing within action research includes (a) pursuing practical concerns to improve and change a situation; (b) understanding how social constructions shape our understanding, and learning to critique that knowledge and understanding in concert with the beliefs of others in the group to create a shared understanding and collaborative action; (c) acknowledging the context of the current concern while reviewing what worked and what did not work in the past to develop insight, make decisions and take actionable steps; and (d) valuing situational current concerns, so individuals make choices and act on their values (Coghlan, 2019).

Through the phases of action research, I was supporting participants to recognize and focus their attention on a real problem in their lives. As the researcher, I was using the four phases of action research when I evaluated the need for the virtual PLC on self-care, implemented recruitment and had to revise my original plans, developed material to present during the virtual PLCs and had to revise this material as the process proceeded, and reflected on the meanings created by participants.

Even though I was considered the researcher and those who attended the PD were participants, developing new self-care practices by participants was like the action research process I was following. Through our weekly session, I helped participants identify a problem, plan an intervention, act toward a solution, and evaluate the results. Through this intervention, I strove to challenge participants' thinking patterns and actions to re-educate self-care and habit formation. I encouraged them to engage in new types of action and then reflect on the results to refine future action. The conversations I held were all geared toward seeking answers to the research questions which guided this study.

Research Questions

Based on what we know about effective PD, more needs to be known about how social emotional PD implemented through a virtual PLC influences self-care habits. This study aimed to discover the impact of virtual PLCs on the stress and self-care habits of educators.

1. How do middle school educators perceive the importance of their self-care?

2. How do teachers describe self-care development?

3. How do teachers understand the impact of the virtual professional learning group?

Design Rationale

I designed this research based on my experiences as a teacher for eight years, my own personal practices with habit formation, and my 19 years as a school counselor attending professional development. As a teacher just beginning the profession, I had low social emotional competence and experienced difficulties with managing my frustrations in challenging classroom situations. As a school counselor, I have learned more about social emotional competence, stress management, and self-care. As a part of my desire to overcome my issues with emotional eating and anxiety, I purchased the audio and hard back versions of *Atomic Habits* by James Clear (2018) and *The Craving Mind* by Judson Brewer (2017).

In his book *Atomic Habits*, Clear (2018) explains a process for creating systems that promote the creation of positive habits. Clear (2018) suggests that creating behavior systems is best for an individual to progress toward their goals (p. 24). Once individuals define their identity and who they wish to become, they then establish processes that will result in an outcome or goal (Clear, 2018, p. 29). Successful results are from small daily habits put in place over a lifetime, not just once in a lifetime (p. 18). The key is recognizing our habit loop processes, then creating apparent small steps which are attractive, easy, and satisfying with a reward (p. 54). This process has been life changing for me and I wanted to share this with participants to break self-care goals down into smaller manageable steps for our busy schedules.

The Craving Mind (Brewer, 2017) adds an additional step in the habit loop process. Brewer suggests using an acronym called RAIN where individuals are encouraged to have awareness and self-acceptance (p. 202). When individuals recognize they are caught in an unwanted habit loop they should: (a) "R" recognize and relax into the thoughts, emotions and cravings that arise; (b) "A" allow and accept their thoughts, sensations and cravings without

trying to stop, avoid, or feel guilty for having this experience; (c) "I" investigate bodily sensations to recognize what the body is feeling and what the mind is thinking; and (d) "N" notice what sensations, thoughts and emotions are most prevalent without judging these as good or bad, right or wrong (Brewer, 2017). Brewer suggests implementing RAIN to interrupt negative thought processes to calm oneself then engage in the more positive habit loop process. These two books have been instrumental in my own positive habit formation, so I implemented parts of both books to support my participants in creating their own positive identity, small steps, and non-judgmental self-acceptance.

The other factor in my design rationale is my experience within previous PD sessions when I received information that I could use immediately after leaving the session. Attending PD which has small and easily adaptable steps which I could implement into my daily practice are most helpful. This was my motivation for creating small actionable steps which participants could implement to improve their self-care practices, gain greater self-awareness and self-efficacy. My belief in self-efficacy is my philosophy behind this work. I believe that SE competence impacts the self-awareness and resilience of teachers to better their individual lives, therefore impacting the students and families they serve.

Role of The Researcher

I conducted this study as a school counselor in the school where I work. I believe that my relationship positively impacted my co-workers and the school culture. My position may unknowingly have impacted the participants' responses. Participants may have experienced fear that I would share responses with administrators. I reassured participants that responses and participation were confidential.

As a counselor I implemented the CASEL SEL professional development modules; thus, my presence in the study was inescapable (Hatch, 2002). As a counselor, I had mutual respect and trust with the participants before the study. I regularly assessed myself to ensure that my presence, my responses, hesitations, or silence did not display any bias before each virtual PLC session. I entered the sessions as a counselor seeking answers to questions that supported self-care and resiliency. Having this focus helped me to resolve pre-conceived biases and to objectively review the data.

Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations for this study included gaining informed consent and maintaining participant confidentiality. Participant identity was protected by not identifying names, race, grade level, and teaching subject(s). Providing subject area, grade level, age, and ethnicity would allow easy identification of these individuals. Participants needed to feel free to share thoughts and feelings openly without fear of risking their employment or retaliation. The coding of information was done in such a way that it did not identify individuals. I asked participants to maintain group confidentiality of discussion topics. The Appalachian State University IRB approved this study.

As the sole researcher in this qualitative research there are shortcomings and biases which have an impact on this study. First, the questions I asked and the actions I observed shaped the interview. Inherently this means there were questions that I chose not to ask and participants' actions that I did not notice. The relationship and rapport I had with the participants influenced the nature of the interview. Because of the relationships I had with the participants, they may have wanted to answer in a particular way in order to achieve a certain verbal or non-verbal response from me.

This research was characterized by complex ethical situations. As a school counselor I am trained in ethical behavior standards, and I used those in these situations. I worked with the participants and I knew them in multiple ways before this study. I had to ensure that I did not ever mention another member's name or any identifying information.

When I met in groups, I only identified participants as "another participant" when I shared personal stories. I shared personal stories during our meetings to strive for collegiality since the members did not work with each other. I did not speak with my administrators, fellow teachers, or other groups about the participation of members. I kept very thorough notes in a small personal notebook. There were no audio or visual recordings of the virtual PLC sessions. I did share meeting times or days with other participants. To manage these dual relationships, I clearly explained our ethical ground rules in the first meeting. I explained that I would maintain their confidentiality and they were expected to maintain confidentiality with each other. Each member agreed and we proceeded with the content.

Participant Recruitment

The potential participants were educators employed at a public middle school (grades 6-8). Administrators at the school gave consent for the middle school staff to have a flyer in their mailboxes to advertise participation in the study. The invited educators included teachers, counselors, assistant teachers, social workers, curriculum facilitators, media specialists, office staff, and administrators. Invited educators included those employed at the school between the ages of 21 and 75. All subjects had to be able to speak and understand English. Invitations were not extended to custodial and cafeteria staff because their work requirements do not have high levels of accountability with the same stressors as other school staff with more direct student

contact. Invitations did not include staff who do not speak and understand English. There were no exclusions based on race, gender, or ethnicity.

Interested participants contacted me via personal email after replying to the flyer. I obtained their preferred contact method, email or text, and their preferred meeting date and time. Interested participants received an IRB-approved consent form (see Appendix C), which was scanned and emailed to my confidential personal email. Upon signing, individuals had the opportunity to ask questions. All communications and participation status were confidential and were not discussed or shared with individuals openly at the school. School administrators were unaware of individual participation status.

Data Sources

This study took place in a public-school district in the county just outside an urban school district. The public school serves grades 6-8. This action research study allowed teachers to implement practical steps to implement a self-care regimen to support self-management, self-awareness, and resilience in everyday situations which can cause stress. Educators used their experiential knowledge to navigate the various situations that arise from daily interactions. This study supported teachers in building resilience by expanding emotional intelligence in a virtual PLC offered during afterschool hours. Teachers shared their experiences and knowledge through formal and informal meetings. Teachers were presented with research-based interventions and strategies to implement self-care. As the researcher during the virtual PLC, I talked with educators about their current practices. I then introduced research-based interventions to support them in targeting or expanding their self-care practices. The virtual PLCs focused on teachers' current self-care beliefs and practices, planning new strategies, implementing these strategies,

and reflecting on the success of the strategies. I invited all school staff members to participate except for custodians and cafeteria staff.

Data Collection

Data came from survey responses, journal reflections, observations, and semi-structured interviews. Virtual PLC meetings were held weekly for approximately 45 minutes each for four consecutive weeks.

Participants completed a confidential Qualtrics questionnaire that asked about their current self-care practices. As the researcher, I had access to the results of the questionnaires. The questionnaire and the interview results did not identify participants' age, race, teaching subject, or grade level. Education experience ranged from 1-3 years, 4-6 years, 7-10 years, and more than ten years. Pseudonyms named the school, the district, and the participants and participants' plans were kept confidential.

I maintained a journal about my experiences, notes about the content, and logs to document attendance of the virtual PLCs. After the post-intervention virtual PLCs, I individually conducted semi-structured interviews on an encrypted Zoom platform with each participant. Post-survey interview questions used pseudonyms and were audio-recorded only. Audio recordings and transcripts were kept on a password-protected computer.

Participants

This study had eight total participants, all public-school teachers at Anderson Harris Middle School (a pseudo name). Table 1 below gives the participants' pseudo names, experience levels, and study goals.

The meeting schedule was quite a balancing act because each group still went through all four virtual PLC sessions, and depending on their needs and the discussions we had during the

meetings, I modified the content and speed of the PD. The groupings worked well because of participant personalities, their needs, and the topics shared during each virtual PLC. The smaller group sizes functioned more as counseling sessions because we were able to talk more personally about their individual concerns. Participants were able to be more vulnerable in sharing their personal experiences than they would have been in a larger group which was strictly centered on PLC content. Initially during my planning stage, I was concerned about the participant's ability to feel vulnerable during the sessions since we would share personal information in a professional setting. I was also concerned about active participation because I did not want quieter members to "lurk" while other more talkative members shared most during group discussions.

Table 1

Participant Descriptions and Group Membership

Group and Meeting Time	Pseudo Name	Years of Experience in Education	Goal
A. Mondays at 7pm	Summer Ensley	More than 10 years	Become more confident in herself and her own decision making.
A. Mondays at 7pm	Hester Jones	More than 10 years	Become more organized.
B. Wednesdays at 7pm	Xander Manning	4-6 years	Reduce impulse buying and learn to say "no" to additional duties at work.
B. Wednesdays at 7pm	Shirley Leadman	More than 10 years	Learn to say "no" to additional duties at work.
C. Sundays at 3pm	Stella Baker	More than 10	Implement self-care routines into the school day.
D. Tuesdays at 5pm	Khloe Miller	4-6 years	Implement self-care routines into her day during and after school.

| E. Thursdays at 8pm | Delaney Stewart | More than 10 years | Eliminate emotional eating. |
| F. Thursdays at 5pm | Kayla Scott | More than 10 years | Implement self-care routines into her day after school. |

The groupings that occurred because of scheduling conflicts worked well because the members were already familiar with each other and their personalities meshed well. As a counselor, I recognized participants with more dominant personalities and those with a great deal to share, so during our sessions, they were allowed the time and space to share their experiences.

The virtual format allowed for all these varying schedules so I could meet with participants at a convenient time, and the small sessions allowed us to go deeper into more therapeutic topics at times. It worked well for the participants because they were able to meet at a time that was convenient for them, and we were able to communicate openly and actively plan during each virtual PLC. Presenting the four virtual PLC sessions at different times for participants required a great deal of organization on my part. As a presenter, it was challenging because I kept detailed notes about the day, time, and information covered during each session. Because of technical glitches, time constraints, and unexpected events, we sometimes had to end sessions early without finishing all the intended content or rescheduling. I revised presentations to divide content and present this during the next session. The revisions required an enormous amount of planning, time, and organization on my part because I held six different meeting schedules. I kept notes about what days, times, content covered, questions asked, and follow-ups I needed to provide during the week. Although participants indicated they enjoyed the sessions, I would caution future virtual PLC sessions being presented with this method because it became very challenging to manage the individual sessions.

Research Process

Participants were asked to participate in an action research study that aims to understand the impact a virtual professional learning community can have on educators' self-care practices. Information about teacher self-care experiences and knowledge were collected in this study. I do not plan to use this information in future studies. De-identified data may be shared with other researchers in the future. Participants were asked to complete a confidential questionnaire about current self-care practices before meeting in the virtual professional learning community. Participants participated in four virtual professional learning community meetings to discuss implementing self-care practices, successes, techniques, and barriers to self-care strategies both in and out of school. After the four virtual professional learning community meetings, educators participated in semi-structured interview lasting 45-60 minutes with questions related to their self-care practices and their experience of meeting in a virtual professional learning community. With permission I tape-recorded each interview. I was the only person with access to the records. Meetings were scheduled individually at a time that was convenient for each participant. Each person chose whether they wanted a face to face or virtual interview.

Data Coding

After completing the virtual PLC session and interviews, I began examining the data for themes and patterns. This examination helped me discern the data and make meaning of it. Analyzing qualitative data involves interpreting, reducing, and consolidating what participants have said and what I observed and read (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used the coding procedures and data analysis proposed by Creswell (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Table 2 outlines how I worked comprehensively with the data from the interviews to recognize recurring categories and themes that were evident. I coded statements blue when they were about the need

for self-care habits. Green coded statements were descriptions about teachers' self-care development. Purple-coded positive statements were about the practicality of virtual PLCs while red coding noted challenges. Through the color-coding process, I examined the data for themes. I organized and labeled participants' words, phrases, and notes into categories.

Table 2

Incorporation of Qualitative Research Design

Step	Creswell (2013), Merriam and Tisdell (2016)	Current Study
1.	Arrange and prepare the data to be analyzed. (Creswell, p. 238)	I examined results from the pre-survey questionnaire, the recorded sessions which had been transcribed onto a word document and my own journal notes.
2.	Examine the concrete data and the more abstract concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 202).	I examined transcripts then assigned colors to the findings to create categories
3.	Build themes and categories used to code the data (Creswell, p. 247).	I organized and labeled participants words, phrases, and my notes into categories.
4.	Report the findings (Creswell, p. 253).	Reduced and combined themes as narrative passages which arose from the language of the teachers.
5.	Interpret and validate the findings (Creswell, p. 257).	I identified patterns, categories, and themes based on the participant answers to my research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 216).
6.	Obtain the support outside of the study to explore transferability (Creswell p. 259; Merriam & Tisdell, p. 254) and generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 256).	My committee chair reviewed data analysis during editing to explore how findings might apply to other people in other situations and to provide adequate data which is descriptive and makes transferability more possible.

Note: Adapted from Creswell (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

I examined results from the questionnaire, the recorded sessions transcribed onto a word document, and my journal notes. The first pattern which emerged related to the self-care strategies participants used at work and home and included psychological, physical, emotional, and spiritual self-care strategies. The second pattern that emerged related to participants' job-

related stress and anxiety before the COVID-19 pandemic. Another pattern emerged regarding job-related stress and anxiety since returning to school after the COVID-19 pandemic. Another pattern was the desire to create systems to establish self-care habits to manage job-related stress and anxiety since returning after COVID-19. My committee chair supported my review of data during editing to explore how findings might apply to other people in other situations and to provide adequate data which is descriptive and makes transferability more possible.

Data Analysis

In action research, there is a relationship between data analysis and data collection (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2011; Maxwell, 2013). Action research focuses on what happens during the research and how the process happens throughout the plan, act, observe, and reflect cycle (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I collected and analyzed data simultaneously during formal and informal sessions and notes during intervention sessions and the final interviews.

I followed ten suggestions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011) to analyze the data as I collected it. I first forced myself to make decisions about not pursuing every idea so I would not end up with too much data which was inappropriate and unrelated. Next, I forced myself to stay focused on the goal of my study, which was to provide a detailed description of this study and the participants' experiences. Third, I developed analytic questions to learn about participants' self-care habits and worked to organize the data. Fourth, as the intervention progressed, I reviewed my notes to follow up with ideas during formal and informal conversations and future virtual PLCs. Fifth, I was careful to keep my journal and notes to reflect and think more critically about what I observed along with documenting events. Sixth, I wrote my journal reflections about the different things I was learning. Seventh, as I reviewed my notes I was reminded about possible themes and patterns so I could remember asking some participants follow-up questions during

future conversations. My eighth step was to explore and review literature about habit creation and self-care throughout the study to stay focused on effective practices. The ninth step was to continue asking myself about connections and what I was reminded of when interacting with participants so I could make connections and see analogies. The tenth and final step was to use visuals to stay clear about my analysis of what I saw. These steps guided me in simultaneously collecting and analyzing the data.

I will explain this qualitative data analysis in more detail. I used a combination of Creswell's (2013) six-step process and Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) guide for data analysis (See Table 2). Creswell linearly describes these steps. However, Merriam and Tisdell explain that through analyzing and interacting with the data, the organization of the data is not always sequential.

Trustworthiness

A review of quantitative data requires that such data be valid and reliable, while qualitative data requires that data be trustworthy and valid (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stringer, 2007). Trustworthy and valid qualitative studies have four primary requirements: (1) the study must be credible, (2) the primary notion of the study must have a level of transferability to some context outside of the study, (3) the development of clearly defined research procedures which are dependable, and (4) capability to validate that research occurred and can be confirmed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this qualitative action research study, trustworthiness relates to the accurateness of the results. It was essential to conduct this research with the utmost ethical standards of accuracy and truthfulness (Merriam, 2009).

Trustworthiness within action research requires ensuring accuracy by examining multiple data sources and participants' responses (Stringer, 2007). The researcher's responsibility is to

engage educators to analyze findings and determine if these findings can stand against more significant societal beliefs (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013).

Researcher reactivity and bias are challenges to trustworthiness (Maxwell, 2013). Researcher reactivity is the influence I had by being present and acknowledging my bias and preconceived notions. My every action was an intervention with implications. As an action researcher, I gathered data about my organization and was not a neutral participant. My observations of the organization through day-to-day activities with others generated data through my participation and knowledge as an inside action researcher. Coghlan (2019) suggests documenting observations and reflections in formal, informal, and virtual PLCs since there will be interaction with fellow participants daily. When observing communication patterns, group dynamics, norms, power, culture, problem-solving, decision-making, and interactions between members, I needed to question what I was observing while also working to help the individuals within the system. Documenting data in ways that would not create suspicion was vital. If others were not taking notes, then I did not take notes and wrote down observations after the interaction.

To address reactivity and bias, I had to be upfront about my biases and positionality when gathering data and writing this document. Evaluating data based on who collected data, when data was collected, what data was collected and why data was collected is critical to the study's confidence, worth, validity, and reliability (Coghlan, 2019). Reviewing the relevance of data to the research question along with the availability and accuracy also gives more support for trustworthiness. Reviewing data for patterns, themes, conclusions, and frequency of language use through rich data collection allows for data triangulation by using multiple data points to compare results. Readers can make their conclusions and review the results' applicability to their

organization and research. My knowledge of the participants and my participation as an "insider" within the organization supports my trustworthiness of the results of this project.

A member check is often conducted in qualitative research to allow participants to check their transcribed responses and ensure that the researcher accurately represented and captured the meaning of their responses. I did not engage in a member check because my knowledge of the school culture and my previous knowledge of the participants supported my ability to understand the meaning made by the participants. I am deeply committed to representing each participant accurately and I did so through the audio recording and thorough transcription of each semi-structured interviews.

Conclusion

This chapter explained my rationale for choosing to conduct an action research project. I gave reasons why qualitative and action research work so well with the reflective work of PD and why I chose virtual PLCs for the delivery. I explained my rationale for integrating two popular press texts rather than evidence based academic texts. Ethical issues, participant selection, coding, and analysis were discussed. My position in dual relationships was also explained to ensure confidentiality and trustworthiness. The next chapter explains the content of each meeting, the participants' goals, and how the virtual PLCs were structured. Responses from the pre-survey and interview are divided by research question to see commonalities and differences in individuals' experiences.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this study, teachers participated in PD through virtual PLCs to reduce stress by supporting SE competence in self-care. The results demonstrated the ability of virtual PLCs to encourage SE competence in self-care. Teachers confirmed that they could implement habit systems to focus on their self-care. Additionally, teachers verified that the virtual setting provided a professional network that allowed them to feel connected while sharing their experiences. In this chapter, I will explain the process of implementing the PD sessions, a description of the participants, and a presentation of the data.

Setting up the Virtual PLC

As a counselor, I relied on my training to maintain the confidentiality of group members, worked to build cohesion between group members, and reinforced self-care suggestions. I communicated with group members individually through text to schedule meeting dates and times. I did not send text messages to the joint group members. I negotiated changes in times and dates with each member individually because even though we were co-workers, I realized there were barriers to feeling vulnerable with each other. I created a PowerPoint presentation for the group sessions I shared on my computer screen.

Participants

I initially intended to have one virtual PLC meet once a week for four consecutive weeks, each meeting lasting forty-five minutes. All participants would agree upon one time and date which would be convenient in which to meet. After communicating with interested participants, it became clear that one meeting day and time would be difficult because there were so many different schedules and individual participant needs. The convenience of online platforms created

a variety of infinite meeting possibilities since we were not going to meet face to face at school. When I initially scheduled the study, the mask mandate and social distancing was still a policy in our school district, so meetings with more than two were prohibited. Once participants expressed interest and signed the IRB approved consent, I asked each participant to provide their email address and personal phone number so I could communicate with them more personally.

There were eight participants in the study. To accommodate the schedules of the eight participants, there ended up being six meeting groups (See Table 1). Early evenings and weekends were the most flexible common time, allowing participants to get home and mentally transition from work, check in with family, have dinner, and mentally prepare for our sessions. Each virtual meeting met on the Zoom virtual platform.

During our virtual PLCs participants identified goals and implemented small steps to create new habit loops. During the second meeting, I shared a Google Document that each participant used to create their identity statement, identify their current habit loops, their desired habit loops, and a method to chart their progress (See Appendix E). These strategies were a part of the *Atomic Habits* framework (Clear, 2018). Each participant completed a goal identity statement and a target behavior paired with existing behavior. Participants completed the statement, "What would a _____ person do?" "Would a _____ person _____ or _____?" I shared the Google document during our second virtual PLC, so each participant could save and create their own goal identity. I did not collect this document from participants, so I did not have access to their thoughts and written entries. We completed this as a group during the session so I could walk them through the process and have thoughtful discussion throughout. Participants also determined how they would chart their progress and build momentum. Below are the identity goal statements and habit tracking of the participants.

Hester worked toward a goal of organization at school and less procrastination. Her goal was to have the organization inspire her to become more organized at home. Her identity question was, "What would an organized person do? Would an organized person have things in order or have disorganization?" The habit loop she chose to implement was "after I fix my breakfast (current habit), I will spend two minutes organizing my desk (a habit she needs). After I organize my desk, I will enjoy my breakfast and check email (reward)." Hester chose to chart her progress by placing beads in a jar on her desk.

Summer worked toward the goal of being more self-assured during decision-making. Her identity question was, "Would a confident person ask others for their opinion, or would they act with confidence?" Summer decided that her small step would be to work to improve her self-reliance. When Summer decided about something, she would not ask others what they thought she should do (current habit); instead, she would think about what she wanted to do and decide how to act (a habit she needs). Moreover, she would feel proud of herself for making a decision (reward). Summer implemented this goal both at work and at home. She chose to journal her progress.

Xander had two goals. The first goal was to say "no" to extra duties at work, and the second was to restrict impulsive purchases. For Xander's first goal, his identity statement was, "Would a confident person say 'yes' to every request or only certain requests?" Xander shared, "when I sit down for my planning time (current habit), I will spend time listening to guided meditations and eating my lunch. I will do this instead of immediately rushing to make copies, going to extra meetings, or checking my email (reward and desired habit)."

For Xander's second goal, his identity statement was, "Would a financially stable person make impulse purchases or continue buying things without thinking?" Xander's small steps

were, "after I sit down in the evening with a glass of wine (current habit), I will not spend time clicking on the advertisements in my email (a habit I want). I will read the other items in my email. When finished, I will continue to enjoy my wine knowing that I did not yield to temptation (reward)." Xander charted his progress through a habit tracking app on his cell phone.

Shirley also worked toward a goal of saying "no" to extra duties at work. Her identity statement was, "Would a self-assured person say 'yes' to every request that others make, or should I pick and choose what duties to accept?" She decided that her small steps would be, "when someone asks me to do an extra responsibility (current habit), I will make an immediate decision saying yes or no, and I will not take time to think about it (a habit I want). Then I will be proud of myself for taking back my time (reward)." Shirley chose to chart her progress in writing on her work planner.

Stella worked toward a goal of organization at work. Her identity statement was, "Would an organized person take time to put things in order or have a messy desk?" Stella decided to chart her progress through a habit tracking app on her cell phone. She decided, "when I first arrive at work and every hour (current habit), I will take two minutes to straighten my desk (a habit I want), then I will take 2-3 minutes to enjoy my relaxation app before returning to the task at hand (reward)."

For Kayla's goal identity, she asked herself, "Would a person who takes good care of herself take on extra responsibilities or take time to care for herself?" Kayla worked toward having self-care routines within her busy schedule. She decided to implement small steps by saying, "when I get home after work (current habit), I will do something for myself (take a long shower or take a nap) if I do not have a facial, massage, or manicure already planned (a habit I

want). I will then feel relaxed and enjoy my evening (reward)." Kayla decided to chart her progress by making notes on her cell phone calendar.

Khloe worked toward the goal of managing stress and anxiety. Khloe's identity statement was, "would a calm person take good care of herself or just keep going until burnout?" The small steps Khloe put into place were, "when I feel stressed (current habit), I will recognize that I feel stressed and plan a break or take a break if possible (a habit I want). If I cannot take a break, I will pick up my fidget toy. Once I can take a break, I will draw or plan to take a walk after work (reward)." Khloe charted her progress through bullet journaling.

Delaney worked toward a goal of controlling emotional eating both at home and at school. Delaney's identity statement was, "would a person who is emotionally in control eat through their emotions, or would they stop eating healthy foods only when they are full at mealtime?" Delaney decided that she would stop purchasing snacks that were easily accessible at home and work. For Delaney's small steps, she decided, "when I feel stressed, sad, or upset (current habit), I will ask myself what I am hungry for and reflect on my more profound emotional need, and then I will drink some water (habits I want). I will then be proud of myself for not emotionally eating and recognizing my feelings (reward)." Delaney charted her progress through journaling.

Participants chose to develop these small self-care action steps during the virtual PLC to implement habits and create a system to improve their self-efficacy and SE competence. Participants reported that they enjoyed having a written product that included small concrete steps that would guide them throughout their week to remind them of their stated goal and allow them to chart their progress.

In summary, participants identified their current self-care strategies and defined self-care that allowed them to prioritize their preferences so they could relax and enjoy their lives. Participants described intensifying the need for self-care because of the COVID-19 pandemic, their use of self-care in managing daily stresses, and the need for self-care at home and work. All were able to develop goals for improving their self-care through participation in the virtual PLC.

Content and Process of the PD

Topics covered in the virtual PLC meetings are outlined in Appendix D and described below.

First Meeting

During the first meeting, participants familiarized themselves with the virtual setting. Even though we were all co-workers and were familiar with one another, it helped build rapport to talk with each other outside of the work setting. During this first session, I reviewed the consent to the research by explaining what they would do, the risks and discomforts, benefits, compensation, confidentiality, a breach of confidentiality, and the right to ask questions and report concerns. By remaining in the virtual PLC, they were in continued agreement with their previous written consent.

I created a self-care questionnaire by adapting and combining the San Francisco State University "Self-Care Questionnaire" and the Oregon State University "Self-Care Quiz" (see Appendix A). I shared the Qualtrics confidential survey link in the chat box, through email, and by text. I asked participants to complete the survey during the meeting because it was lengthy and completing it during the session would help get more thoughtful participation. Survey answers used a five-point Likert scale. The survey was entirely confidential with no identifiers present.

After each participant completed the survey, we talked about CASEL and SEL as a part of our district professional development and how this study was necessary to support the SE competence of teachers. I then explained that we would work to improve their self-care habits and work to reduce stress and anxiety (Brewer, 2017).

Participants were given an assignment for the upcoming week to become aware and mindful of what their behavior rewards were. Participants were to ask themselves what they were receiving or avoiding. I asked participants to think of the area in their life that they would like to change as I encouraged them to think about the survey they had just completed. I introduced them to the acronym RAIN (Brewer, 2017) to show compassion and non-judgment toward themselves. Furthermore, and most importantly, I asked them not to judge themselves or their feelings as good or bad, right, or wrong. I let participants know that I would email the presentation and check in with them mid-week.

Second Meeting

During the second meeting, our agenda was to create an individualized self-care plan and review strategies for the inevitable barriers (see Appendix E). The self-care action plan identified behavior or a lack of behavior where they wanted to focus their attention. We defined the type of person we want to become to identify the target behavior. Clear (2018) suggested that to begin a change process, we first identify the type of person we would like to be, deciding "who" an individual wants to become and not initially focusing on "what" or "how" to become that individual (p. 40). We focused on identifying what they stand for, what they want for themselves, and whom they wish to become. They completed the statement, "I want to become a person who is _____." For example, do they want to become thoughtful, physically healthy, physically active, financially stable, or loving with close connections? After naming our target

identity, we named habits to reinforce that identity. We completed the statements "What would a

_____ person do?" and "Would a _____ person _____ or _____?" to establish the current

behaviors which will reinforce the type of future person they wish to become (Clear, 2018, p.

41).

When participants identified the actions that reinforced their desired identity, they were

empowered to put small habits into place to move them closer to their goal. Participants then

decided how to pair their desired small habits with an existing habit they already did at the same

frequency as the goal habit and identify a reward. For example, participants wrote, "After I get

my morning coffee (current habit), I will say one thing that I am grateful for that happened

yesterday (a habit I need). After I say what I am grateful for (a habit I need), I will read the news

on my phone (a habit I want)." The next step is to pair the new habit with a way to track the

habit. For example, participants completed this statement: "After I put on my bedclothes (current

habit), I will write in my journal for 2 minutes (a habit I want). I will track my habit using the

habit tracker app on my phone. After I write in my journal (a habit I need), I will listen to my

favorite podcast (a habit I want) for two minutes."

A reliable visual must chart progress and growth toward the desired identity. Clear (2018)

suggests the two-minute rule to make starting the new goal simple and non-intimidating to not

trigger the fight or flight response. The two-minute rule allows individuals to do two minutes of

activity to practice the art of "showing up" and building consistency through small, regular steps.

Clear suggests that the habit-building process involves experiencing a cue, feeling the craving,

responding to the craving, then receiving the reward. In addition to discussing habit creation, we

discussed motivation and potential barriers.

We concluded by reviewing our completed self-care action plan and the strategies we could use when facing barriers.

Third Meeting

During the third virtual PLC participants shared their experiences with implementing their self-care plan, barriers they faced, ways they addressed the barriers, and revisions and modifications of the self-care plans. To begin reflecting on their self-care plan, I asked participants a series of reflective questions as outlined in Appendix D. I reminded participants that we would still work toward taking small, consistent steps with immediate cues of when to start and immediate rewards for task completion. In conclusion, we reviewed our self-care action plan and our strategies and RAIN to address barriers for the upcoming week.

Fourth Meeting

During the fourth and final meeting, participants shared their experiences with implementing self-care, what barriers they faced the previous week, and how they addressed them. Participants shared strategies that worked most straightforwardly and were more challenging to implement. We discussed how self-care is an ongoing process of action, reflections/evaluation, and revision/improvement. We shared unique and everyday experiences about implementing a long-term self-care routine both at home and at work beyond our virtual PLC. Participants shared strategies and supports that helped implement self-care routines at home and work.

During the individual meetings, we discussed self-care plan progress, anticipated and actual barriers, and how participants addressed barriers. I explained the interview question process (see Appendix B). This interview would be audio recorded, and they would select a pseudo name.

Survey and Interview Results

I derived research data from various sources including my notes, logs, and participants' Qualtrics survey results. I transcribed the interviews which allowed me to observe patterns of participants' self-care beliefs, practices, and practical strategies. The results presented below are organized by research question.

Research Question One

The first research question asked how educators perceive the importance of their self-care. Educators must understand the importance of self-care and reflect on their current practices to determine how to improve or implement changes. Through the intervention participants worked to implement a system of new habit loops which supported changes in their self-care. All eight respondents indicated that they strove for some form of physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, or professional self-care and strove to balance their professional and personal lives.

Survey Results. The tables below show the results from the survey about physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and professional self-care activities in which teachers engaged. These results show that teachers believed self-care was essential and strove to implement it throughout their lives.

The first question in the survey asked participants to rank their current physical self-care practices as either frequently, occasionally, rarely, or never considered. Participants also had the option to skip any question they felt uncomfortable answering. Table 3 below shows the number of participants who answered each question and how they answered each physical self-care question. Participants reported eating healthy foods, attending regular preventive medical appointments, taking time off to rest and heal when sick, and maintaining personal hygiene. Additionally, participants reported being sexual with a partner or themselves, getting enough

sleep each night, wearing clothes that made them feel good about themselves, taking day trips or mini-vacations, and unplugging from harmful social media. The survey showed that participants rarely engaged in getting a regular massage or engaging in exercise. Because participants mentioned walking in the "other" section and during the interviews, participants may have felt that the question about exercise related to formal exercise routines. Results showed lower self-care implementation with eating regularly (breakfast, lunch, dinner), spending time alone with their romantic partner, taking a vacation, and taking time away from the telephone and email. Overall, participants answered that they frequently or occasionally engage in physical self-care.

Table 3

Survey of Physical Self-Care Activities

How often do you engage in the following physical self-care activities?	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never Considered
Eat regularly (breakfast, lunch, and dinner).	4	1	3	0
Eat healthy foods.	2	5	1	0
Exercise.	1	2	4	1
Get regular preventive medical appointments (checkups, teeth cleanings, etc.).	3	3	2	0
Take time off to rest and heal when sick.	0	5	3	0
Get massages or do self-massages.	1	2	4	1
Participate in fun activities like dancing. . . or some other physical activity that is fun.	1	2	4	1
Take time to be sexual – with yourself, with a partner.	0	5	3	0
Spend time alone with my romantic partner.	0	5	3	0
Take care of personal hygiene.	7	1	0	0
Get enough sleep.	4	4	0	0
Wear clothes you like that make me feel good about myself.	2	5	1	0

Take vacation.	0	4	1	3
Take daytrips or mini vacations.	0	4	2	2
Make time away from telephones and/or email.	0	3	4	1
Unplug from harmful social media.	1	4	2	0
Other	0	2	0	0

The second question in the survey asked respondents about their current psychological self-care practices. Results indicated two areas where participants frequently engaged: learning a task unrelated to work and receiving care from others. Most participants indicated they did not regularly write in a journal, see a personal counselor or therapist, or engage in activities where they were not the expert or in charge. Most psychological self-care responses showed divided results between participants frequently, occasionally, rarely, or never considering an activity. Results indicate that participants did not make time for self-reflection, read non-work-related literature, talk to someone they trust about problems, or notice their inner experiences. In addition, participants did not let others know different aspects of themselves, engage their intelligence in new areas, allow curiosity, sometimes say no to extra responsibilities, or take time off from work. Participants did not seem to engage in psychological self-care activities as frequently as they did the physical self-care activities. More responses for psychological self-care were rated as occasional or rare practices. The table below shows the results.

Table 4

Survey of Psychological Self-Care Activities

How often do you engage in the following psychological self-care activities?	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never Considered
Make time for self-reflection.	1	4	3	0

Write in a journal.	0	1	6	1
Have your own personal counselor/therapist.	1	1	5	1
Read literature that is unrelated to schoolwork.	2	2	3	1
Learn new things unrelated to schoolwork.	1	5	2	0
Do something at which you are not the expert or in charge.	2	1	5	0
Talk to someone you trust about problems or issues.	4	3	1	0
Notice your inner experience – listen to your thoughts, judgments, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings.	3	3	2	0
Let others know different aspects of you.	1	4	3	0
Engage your intelligence in a new area (go to an art museum, history exhibit, sports event, auction, theatre performance, etc.).	0	3	4	1
Practice receiving from others.	0	5	3	0
Be curious.	3	3	2	0
Say no to extra responsibilities sometimes.	1	3	4	1
Take time off from work.	1	3	4	0
Other	0	0	1	0

The third question of the survey asked respondents how they participate in emotional self-care. Participants reported enjoying time with friends and staying in contact with old friends and significant people. They affirmed and gave praise to themselves, loved themselves, did things they found comforting, and engaged in enjoyable activities with others. Participants identified and sought comforting activities, recognized their strengths and achievements, had stimulating conversations, and took deep breaths when they felt overwhelmed. The results for emotional self-care showed frequent engagement with several activities. Some participants allowed themselves to cry, showed emotions, expressed their feelings, and asked for help. Some

participants spent time with pets, found things that made them laugh, met new people, engaged

in enjoyable activities, and set boundaries with others at work and home. There were three areas

where participants rarely engaged, and those were expressing outrage through social action,

playing with children, and participating in hobbies. The table below presents the results of the

emotional self-care -survey.

Table 5

Survey of Emotional Self-Care Activities

How often do you engage in the following self-care emotional activities?	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never Considered
Spend time with others whose company you enjoy.	4	1	3	0
Stay in contact with old friends and/or important people in your life.	2	5	0	0
Give yourself affirmations or praise.	1	4	2	1
Love yourself.	1	4	2	1
Do something comforting (reread favorite books, re-view favorite movies, take a long bath).	4	2	1	1
Do enjoyable activities with others.	4	1	2	1
Identify comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places and seek them out.	4	1	2	1
Allow yourself to cry.	3	3	2	0
Allow yourself to show emotions.	3	2	2	0
Express feelings in a healthy way (talking, creating art, journaling, etc.).	1	3	3	0
Ask others for help, when needed.	2	4	2	0
Recognize my own strengths and achievements.	0	4	2	1
Spend time with pets.	3	1	2	2
Find things that make you laugh.	3	3	2	0
Express your outrage in social action, letters, donations, marches, protests.	1	2	5	0
Play with children.	1	2	4	1
Have stimulating conversations.	1	5	1	0
Meet new people.	0	3	4	1

Participate in hobbies.	2	1	4	1
Do enjoyable activities with other people.	2	3	2	1
Set boundaries in relationships with partners, family, co-workers, and friends.	1	4	3	0
Take deep breaths when getting overwhelmed and take time to tend to those emotions.	4	1	3	0
Other	0	0	1	0

The fourth question asked how often participants engaged in spiritual self-care practices. Interestingly there were no clear areas in which participants rarely engaged. In spiritual self-care, respondents engaged in reflection or meditation, were open to inspiration, and cherished optimism and hope. They were aware of non-material aspects of life, were open to not knowing, identified what was meaningful to them, and noticed its place in their lives. Participants prayed, read, or listened to inspirational literature, acted by their morals and values, and appreciated art and its impact on their lives. Participants had varied responses showing frequent, occasional, and rare engagement when asked about spending time in nature, having a spiritual connection with a community or church group, and having experiences of awe. The table below shows the results of the spiritual self-care questions.

Table 6

Survey of Spiritual Self-Care Activities

How often do you engage in the following spiritual self-care practices?	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never Considered
Make time for reflection and/or meditation	1	5	2	0
Find time to spend with nature	3	2	1	2
Find spiritual connections with a community, church or group.	2	3	3	0
Be open to inspiration.	3	5	0	0
Cherish your optimism and hope.	2	5	0	0
Be aware of non-material aspects of life.	3	5	0	0
Be open to not knowing.	1	7	0	0
Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life.	3	4	1	0
Pray.	5	3	0	0
Have experiences of awe.	2	3	2	1
Read and/or listen to inspirational (read, podcasts, talks, music, audiobooks etc.).	5	2	1	0
Act in accordance with your morals and values.	7	1	0	0
Appreciate art that is impactful to you (music, film, literature).	5	2	1	0
Other	0	0	1	0

The fifth question asked participants about their professional self-care habits and how often they engaged in certain activities. Most participants responded that they learned new things related to their profession and made quiet time to complete tasks. Most respondents also indicated that they did not take short breaks during work and did not arrange their workplace to be comfortable to allow them to be more successful. Participants gave mixed responses to identifying and taking on projects and tasks which were exciting and rewarding, improving their professional skills, saying no to excessive new responsibilities, and making time to talk or build

relationships with colleagues. The table below shows the results of the professional self-care survey.

Table 7

Survey of Professional Self-Care Activities

How often do you engage in the following professional self-care activities?	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never Considered
Take short breaks during work.	0	2	4	2
Learn new things related to my profession.	1	6	1	0
Make quiet time to complete tasks.	1	6	1	0
Identify and take on projects and/or tasks that are exciting and rewarding.	0	4	4	0
Arrange your workspace to be comfortable and comforting which allows you to be successful.	0	3	5	0
Improve my professional skills.	1	4	3	0
Say no to excessive new responsibilities.	0	4	4	0
Make time to talk and build relationships with colleagues.	2	3	3	0
Other	0	0	1	0

The last question asked participants how often they strive for balance. Respondents reported that they strive to balance work, family relationships, planning, and rest while managing their time. Even though respondents indicated that they strive for balance, results suggested there may be challenges to managing stress and an acceptance that some stress will be a part of their lives even as they strive for balance and time management. All respondents worked toward balance and no one answered that they did not. The table below shows the responses of participants when striving for balance.

Table 8

Survey of Striving for Balance in Work and Family Life

How often do you strive for balance in the following areas?	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Not Possible/ Never Considered
Strive for balance among work, family relationships, play and rest.	2	4	2	0
Strive to manage your time.	2	4	2	0
Strive to manage your stress.	3	3	2	0

Post Virtual PLC Interview Responses. Administering this survey allowed me to see in which areas participants currently practiced self-care and provided a baseline of which habits may choose to explore. Question two of the survey gave further insight into how participants defined and felt about self-care. Question two asked participants, "How do you define self-care?" Participants shared that self-care allowed them the freedom to take care of themselves first and focus on what they liked and preferred so they could relax and enjoy their lives. Khloe's response was a good summary of how self-care was important at work and home when she shared that she defined self-care as detaching from anything she needs just to let go of for her mental health. She realized that when something stresses her out, she has just to let it go. For Khloe, self-care was anything from eating healthy to working out a little bit by walking outside or just clearing her mind. Kayla felt that self-care allowed her to care for her entire body, mind, soul, and spirit. Delaney believed self-care positively impacts people at work by helping people not be so stressed out. All participants could clearly define what self-care meant to them.

Pandemic Stressors. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were limited professional development opportunities offered online, especially with SE competence, even though the need for self-care is essential. Participants in this study noted that their stress levels had increased

since returning to school for in-person learning. They felt that stress increased because of the push by districts to immediately return to "learning as usual," like before the pandemic. In returning face-to-face, these teachers experienced compassion fatigue because the students' social skills and work ethic were poor even though students physically returned.

Each educator noted that the students exhibited socially delayed traits that they were not experiencing before the pandemic. Xander noted, "they act like time stood still during the pandemic, their bodies grew bigger, but they are very immature." Delaney observed, "they want to hide behind their masks, hats, and hoodies and all I can see are their eyes." Khloe shared,

> They are so mean and lazy. At the opening of each class, students ask why they have to learn this, and then I spend the next hour struggling to get them to participate and complete the smallest amount of work.

Summer saw students with numerous attendance problems and shared:

> I have two students who have missed so many days because of anxiety. These students do not work in class and do not complete the assignments posted in Canvas, so I do not know what to do to help them.

These comments align with emerging research about the impact of COVID on stress experienced by students and teachers. Secondary Traumatic Stress and Compassion Fatigue can manifest in teachers in response to working with students who are feeling the stress and anxiety of returning to school. These educators worked daily with anxious, apathetic students, or both. Student stress has affected the educators who work most closely with students (Direktor, 2021).

Participants in this study also noticed that students returning after the COVID-19 shutdown exhibited poor social skills and were impatient and intolerant of differences of opinion. Each participant mentioned working with students much more to teach interpersonal skills

ordinarily present in middle school students. As a counselor, I observed the same. I worked very closely with our school social worker to support students with poor school attendance. There was a 20% increase from 80 chronically absent students to 100 chronically absent students. These were students who missed more than 30 school days. In talking with the parents, these students expressed stress, anxiety, and thoughts of self-injury and self-harm over the previous year before COVID. The social worker and I shared community resources with these parents. Backlogs and waitlists delayed parents in obtaining mental health resources. Parents with private insurance or Medicaid both experienced the waitlist. Parents chose between their children receiving delayed therapy or more immediate medication management with possible side effects. Parents did not want to push their child too much because they could see the apparent mental strain on their child, and they did not want to push the child into a mental health emergency such as attempted suicide. Some parents chose to remove their children from school to home school them. Some parents did not act. The child continued to accrue absences and did little work as the parents sought mental health support.

Teachers were working with parents experiencing guilt and stress, students experiencing stress and anxiety, and expectations from the profession to educate the students and get them back on track academically. Parent and student anxiety created an enormous amount of stress for participants. Each participant mentioned that expectations and the job-related stress were "just too much." The virtual PLC meetings after work offered participants an opportunity to foster resilience. All participants who finished the study found the meetings enjoyable and looked forward to the meetings as a way to connect and unwind. Four participants wanted to connect outside work for dinner after the study concluded. Fostering these supportive relationships

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among participants within and outside the study allowed them to share experiences, process their emotions, and support each other through the challenges of teaching through COVID.

Managing Daily Stress. Participants made changes in their lives to combat daily stress. Participants mentioned wearing more comfortable clothing, more comfortable shoes, and spending time together face-to-face. Question ten of the survey asked, "How do you cope when you feel overwhelmed or experience stress?" Responses indicated that self-care can support participants in managing their daily stress. Participants felt that self-care allowed them time to step away from stress to focus on what was most important to them to manage their daily stress. Participants shared that managing daily stress included positive self-talk, sometimes going to bed early, taking long baths, or enjoying their favorite cup of tea in a warm cozy blanket. During online meetings, Stella managed her stress by turning her camera off and using a relaxation app on her phone. Khloe coped with stress by engaging in deep breathing, enjoying the silence, solitude, guided meditations, and taking walks outside. Participants also mentioned prioritizing their time and energy to complete the activities most important to them and their self-care. Hester and Summer mentioned that if certain activities required too much energy and time to complete, they decided to "let go" of that activity. Their decision to "let go" allowed them to avoid the stress of trying to complete the activity and then prioritize their time and energy for other activities.

These responses also indicated that teachers understand what self-care means for them and that practicing self-care allows them to care for themselves without feeling guilty. Self-care is vital for teachers who give their time, attention, and energy unselfishly to others daily.

Self-Care Strategies at Home and Work. Participants described various self-care strategies they used outside of work including crocheting, watching TV, mindfulness practices,

spending time with friends and family, exercising, listening to online church services, getting a massage, relaxing baths, or playing video games. Hester shared that before COVID she knitted as a form of stress relief, but now when she goes home, she watched "mindless" TV or read on her laptop because she also had not been back to the library since COVID. Hester modified her activities because her habits had not returned to pre-pandemic. After all, she had gotten out of the habit.

Each participant gave vivid descriptions of self-care activities they enjoyed at home. For example, both Delaney and Shirley enjoyed regularly sharing meals with family members. Although Stella enjoyed connecting with family, she preferred virtual meetings because, as she put it, "I can put on a cute shirt and comb my hair, but I do not have to clean my house and entertain." Participants also agreed that these activities balanced their lives and protected them against the stressors experienced at work. Hester summed it up best when she said, "self-care lets me create space and balance to do my job and tend to my family better with less stress."

Interestingly, participants also faced regret management and guilt about self-care at home and work. They had to engage in the activity they would regret least, accept the regret of not completing other tasks, and then not feel guilty about their decision. An example is Stella who described herself as an introverted personality type. She shared that she felt guilty when she did not actively engage with her family members as much as they preferred. She used the COVID pandemic to explain why she chose to stay home and not engage with others. We talked about her enjoyment of quiet individual activities, but there were times when her family and friends felt her solitude was unhealthy. Stella felt guilty when family members mentioned that her introverted activities were excessive, so she explained that she was staying healthy by isolating herself from COVID. For her, the pandemic allowed her to enjoy solitude without explaining.

Even though Stella was unable to find time to engage in self-care at work, she thoroughly enjoyed her time alone at home. Other responses of participants suggested that self-care practices require managing feelings of guilt and regret to prioritize self-care goals. Delaney felt guilty if her self-care did not incorporate an activity with her daughter. Kayla stated, "I just have to accept that things are not going to get done," showing that she was aware of her regret management.

Participants who were deliberate with their dedication of time, energy, and the creation of space through prioritizing were most successful in implementing their self-care plans. Shirley looked forward to scheduling weekly rituals, and the anticipation of these rituals helped her relax because she knew something good was coming. Some rituals she looked forward to were spending Friday nights with her fiancé, Sunday dinner with family, and lunchtime at work with her friends. Shirley felt these planned moments got her through difficult times with brighter times to look forward to. Kayla had a cognitive response to stressors. She took a step back to view the problem holistically and asked herself, 'How severe is this problem? What will happen if I do not touch this for about five minutes?' She thought about the severity and decided how she could stay calm while not overreacting to determine how to go about solving the actual problem. Overall, participants expressed an awareness of their stressful moments, and they were able to implement self-care activities to help them manage their stress while at home.

Responses also pointed to teachers believing in the importance of implementing self-care at work. Hester believed self-care at work helped her create space and balance to do her job more effectively and with less stress. Hester's self-care involved bringing comfort items from the home to work to feel more comfortable. She brought chocolate chip cookies and fig newtons along with a rubber duck and some funny stickers on her water bottle. She shared that the little silly things like her duck reminded her of home and brought a smile. Xander shared that when he

became stressed at work, he focused on his breathing, being silent, having solitude, listening to guided meditations, and taking a brief walk outside. Xander noted that if he felt overwhelmed or stressed in the middle of class, he would focus on breathing and mindful meditation until he could get more of a break during his planning time.

Typically, during planning times teachers attended content-specific training (math, language arts, science) or attended parent conferences, covering classrooms, eating lunch, grading assignments, or making copies to prepare for the next classroom lesson. Protocols meant teachers were required to eat lunch during training and snacks while running errands and completing classroom tasks. Covid-19 protocols also required that teachers wait to eat during their planning time and not while students were eating and unmasked. As a counselor, I held parent conferences during the day to prevent conflicts with tutoring, sporting events, and club activities before and after school. So, I had to hold these meetings during the planning time during the day. I told teachers to turn their cameras off to eat lunch for online meetings. During these online meetings, when I had a question for the teacher, I would call their name before asking and speak slowly, so they would have time to answer. Teachers expressed appreciation for these small gestures that allowed them to have a break during their planning time.

Teachers had an opportunity to earn additional money by acting as substitute teachers during their planning time. Classroom teachers received pay to cover classrooms without subs because of a lack of reliable substitute teachers. Khloe used some of her planning time to earn extra income this way. Khloe covered classrooms Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. She reserved Tuesdays and Thursdays to catch up on duties and have a self-care break. Khloe found that on days she covered classrooms, she had to snack between duties, or she would not eat all day until after school. When Khloe was not covering a classroom or attending meetings, she

listened to audiobooks, enjoyed a cup of coffee, played with a stress toy, listened to music, or enjoyed the solitude and quiet in her room. Khloe also used her fidget toy and moved around the room a little bit when she was anxious, and students were in the classroom. She said the movement and having something in her hand helped calm her anxious thoughts.

While Khloe sometimes covered classrooms to earn extra money, others chose to use their planning time to engage in some form of self-care and sought ways to reduce the number of work-related responsibilities. Two participants actively sought to reduce additional work-related tasks. Shirley and Xander decided their self-care goal would be to say "no" to extra work responsibilities. In addition to not taking on extra responsibilities, Xander shared that he listened to guided meditations and read or enjoyed podcasts during his planning time. Shirley enjoyed having a second cup of coffee, having lunch with friends, and taking time to vent and talk about school-related business or personal things with trusted friends. Covid-19 mandates prohibited Shirley from eating with others. Gatherings of more than two adults, unmasked, especially while eating, were prohibited, so she admitted that meeting with her three other friends at lunch was a clandestine activity each day. However, she credited it for saving her mental health during the lockdown and upon returning to school.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked about how teachers describe their self-care development. Questions two through ten of the interview asked teachers how they define self-care, the strategies they chose to implement as a part of their self-care habits, and how they handled barriers to self-care practices at home and school. Participants identified that their self-care was evolving since the COVID pandemic. Each person could quickly identify an area in

which they wanted to focus. Participant responses showed that they were self-aware and implemented self-care habits when they began to feel overwhelmed and stressed.

The Importance of Self-Care. The importance of self-care, whether at work or home, was evident in the responses of all participants. Each respondent noted that self-care had become more urgent after returning to school after the Covid-19 shutdown and that their work performance was negatively affected if they did not do self-care at home. Participants believed self-care was essential for dealing with work stressors because of the time spent there. Self-care was usually easier to implement at home for most respondents.

Four survey questions asked participants how they engaged in self-care and what they believed to be the impact (See Appendix B). Question three asked, "Do you engage in any self-care routines during the day?" Question four asked, "Do you engage in any self-care routines outside work?" Question eight asked, "How do you believe self-care impacts you at work?" Question nine asked, "How do you believe self-care impacts you outside work?" The dominant theme that emerged from these questions was that participants believed that self-care practiced either at home or at work profoundly affected their ability to be more effective at work by completing tasks and preventing stress from affecting students and co-workers.

The theme that participants kept sharing was the idea of feeling re-charged to continue to do their work in education more effectively. Three participants, Xander, Shirley, and Stella, felt that engaging in self-care benefitted the quality of their lives outside of work. Xander felt that self-care gave him more energy to be helpful when he practiced self-care outside of work. Shirley believed that self-care helped her realize what is truly important in life and allowed her to feel rejuvenated so she could continue to support her work with students. Stella felt better able to manage job-related stress and stay sane. Even though Stella could not complete self-care goals at

work, looking forward to self-care and relaxing at home was a source of joy, and she felt this allowed her to improve her work performance. Delaney, like Stella, did not meet with success in implementing her original goal, so she adjusted her goal to spend more memorable moments with her daughter and engage in positive self-talk.

Two participants, Khloe and Kayla, considered an orderly home a form of self-care. Khloe and Kayla felt that self-care at home made their homes run more smoothly, and they could relax when their homes were clean and free of clutter. Khloe shared that she used LED lighting, candles, and aroma therapy to create an inviting atmosphere at home. Kayla had someone clean her home, and she believed this was a form of self-care because when she went home to the smell of a "clean home," she could spend time doing other things she enjoyed and coming home to a clean home reduced her stress after work.

Teacher self-care is crucial for teachers who model SE competence for students. Khloe felt teacher self-care was essential because they teach, lead, and guide children in the right direction. She shared, "I think it is only natural that the person leading children has themselves under control because you do not want somebody to try to lead and guide when they do not even care for themselves." Her statement showed the importance of teachers possessing SE competence and setting an example for students to follow daily in the classroom. Overall participants felt that self-care was beneficial in helping them reduce stress and anxiety levels whether they implemented steps at home or work. Responses pointed to the recognition that self-care allowed them to prioritize themselves to better care for others.

Strategies. Teachers admitted that it was challenging to insert consistent self-care into their daily work schedule, and they had to take concrete steps to create boundaries. For example, Shirley and Xander both began saying "no" when asked about extra responsibilities. Xander

shared that he created a boundary by locking his classroom door, not answering his telephone, and waiting until the end of planning to check his email. He found these barriers to be highly effective at allowing him to protect his time so he would not spend his entire planning time addressing issues. He chose to preserve and prioritize his time and complete other activities later. Shirley and Delaney shared that when they needed a break, they would go to someone else's classroom or office so that they could not be accessible by phone, email, or pop-up visits by someone making a request. These strategies were deliberate and effective in helping these participants create boundaries; however, one participant, Stella, was unable to establish boundaries and create a self-care strategy.

Stella desired to engage in self-care routines during the day but could not find the time to do so as she had planned. Stella's goal was to schedule work breaks at the top of each hour (using the two-minute rule) to organize her desk for two minutes, then take a five-minute break to use a relaxation app on her phone. When Stella's timer alerted her for her break, she felt too busy to stop and complete the organization activity; she felt she had not earned the relaxation break, so she did not take it. Sadly, Stella could not find time to complete self-care tasks during the workday. Stella also had the self-care intention of scheduling breaks to enjoy healthy snacks, a lunch break, and an opportunity to catch up on paperwork; however, these goals did not materialize into action. She was able to engage in self-care at home.

Participants who consciously and purposefully implemented self-care routines at work chose how to use their time. They realized they were unable to wait for an opportune time because an opportune time never materialized, so they had to engage in regret management. In addition to managing regret, teachers also mentioned a feeling of guilt. Khloe shared that she was so busy that she would not complete some of her work, so she had to prioritize her duties

and accept that everything would not get completed at once. She felt guilty when someone entered her room and implied, she was lazy when they saw her engaging in self-care instead of completing a work-related activity. Teachers are expected to give of their energy and time; thus, self-care can be seen as selfish and cause internal conflict.

One strategy participants used to reduce workplace regret management was to engage in self-care practices outside work. Kayla took long showers before work. Khloe made time each morning to either exfoliate her face, do something special with her hair, spray perfume to feel prettier, or go for a walk outside, especially if she had been struggling with something. Both participants admitted that these practices added pep to their day and supported their stress management.

During the interview one participant mentioned the need for additional support after the virtual PLC ended. Hester noted that although she made progress during the meetings, she had difficulty with accountability once we stopped meeting.

Barriers. As a part of our habit-building discussion, we talked about potential barriers and how participants could address these barriers with positive thinking. This section includes those discussions.

During our second virtual PLC, I included a topic entitled "Troubleshooting." This section discussed mental barriers that participants might encounter when beginning to implement a new habit awkwardly. I encouraged them to select a habit with a short routine that would make them happy to complete, to start with steady, consistent repetition of the small routines and not perfection. We discussed their power to choose when faced with a decision by asking themselves, "Is my behavior choice a vote toward my identity?" I wanted them to be patient by giving themselves a consistent target and a long runway before they were ready to change. I

reminded them that we avoid things we dislike and then negotiate and rationalize giving in. So, I reassured participants to address their internal negotiation by saying to their internal voice, "thank you for your feedback," recognizing their ability to choose during moments of uncertainty, fear, and discomfort and push through these to follow their plan. When envisioning our identity, I reminded participants that we often fill our minds with all the possibilities that others are doing, so it is difficult to watch our imperfect, awkward steps toward our desired identity. There is no easy way past this stage; we must fight through it.

If they messed up, I encouraged them to reflect on what happened, determine what went well and did not go well, and learn from this experience. I also encouraged participants to use positive self-talk on days that did not go well. I asked them to forgive themselves and decide to start again tomorrow, making different choices.

As a part of our reflection during the third and fourth virtual PLC sessions, we discussed barriers they encountered as they moved throughout their week. The questions I asked are found in Appendix D. The questions centered around implementing their small steps, procrastination, how they pushed through uncertainty, fear, discomfort, and their ability to create reminders, visuals, notes, alarms, and cues. Xander noted that his barrier was learning to sit with his feelings of discomfort and say no to his impulse buying. Xander addressed his barriers by bringing awareness to his "craving" of saying yes to please people and his urge for impulse buying. Through the virtual PLC process, he shared that he let go of people-pleasing and impulse-buying cravings.

Shirley referred to her feelings of uncertainty and discomfort because she recognized that her thoughts were barriers. She realized that she had free will to choose and that others did not force her to make decisions; however, Shirley experienced guilt when she could help and did not.

To combat this, she decided to immediately decrease her internal discussion and say "no" to extra responsibilities to prevent internal negotiation.

Delaney shared how feelings of guilt and overwhelm were barriers. Delaney felt guilty taking time to have a break. She said she sometimes felt overwhelmed and "almost wants the world to stop spinning, just let me hit the pause button so I can catch up with everything I need to do to catch up." Delaney came to realize that by having self-compassion, she could be more attentive and face her feelings of uncertainty, fear, guilt, and shame.

Another pattern of barriers that emerged was the notion of letting go and regret management mentioned earlier. During our weekly virtual PLC, participants identified thoughts and practices they felt were barriers and decided to "let go." I reminded them of our RAIN acronym, that to mentally let go is an example of the "R" and "A" of RAIN. Participants Recognized that holding on to these thoughts was causing internal conflict and making the decision to Accept letting go allowed them to forgive and be non-judgmental toward themselves.

Unfortunately, Stella was unsuccessful in completing her work-related self-care goals. Through reflection, she shared that her most significant barrier was time and guilt because she stopped trying to meet her goal at work and decided instead to work toward self-care activities that she enjoys at home. I was proud of Stella because she did not let the guilt of not meeting the work-related self-care goal bring her additional feelings of guilt. Kayla offered another example of letting go when she said, "I just have to accept that things are not going to get done."

Khloe recognized when she was becoming stressed and would ask herself, "what can I do right now that I know would help?" Her strategies varied depending on whether she was at work or home. In both locations, she used positive self-talk to calm down as much as possible and, if possible, take a break from the stressor. While at work, she carried a fidget toy in her pocket, and

other times she called her mentor to cover her class so she could take a break from her classroom. Her statements showed a significant amount of self-awareness and self-efficacy because she recognized her moments of stress and then addressed these feelings with concrete strategies that supported her self-care. This self-awareness was one of the goals of this social emotional PD.

In summary, the importance of self-care, whether at work or home, was evident in the responses of all participants. Teachers admitted that it was challenging to insert consistent self-care into their daily work schedule. Those who implemented self-care routines consciously and purposefully chose how to use their time. Topics in the virtual PLC offered strategies for addressing barriers to self-care. These barriers included regret and guilt at having to choose not to do some work-related tasks because of prioritizing self-care and other feelings of discomfort. Participants described increased awareness of their choices as they addressed the barriers they faced.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked how educators understand the impact of the virtual PLC. The last three interview questions asked participants about their experiences within the virtual PLC to inform future professional development. All participants expressed enjoyment of the virtual format because of its convenience and flexibility.

Benefits of the Virtual Platform. All participants shared that they enjoyed participating in the virtual professional learning community because they already knew each other. They found collegiality within the small group sizes and they were able to share their experiences confidentially. They appreciated the relaxed atmosphere and that the work directly impacted them personally. Participants felt that the smaller groups allowed them to be more social.

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One participant, Shirley, generally preferred being virtual instead of meeting with strangers and having to drive to meet a group. She found that virtual meetings were often shorter and seemed more detailed and agenda friendly. She felt online presenters were more direct with less rambling conversation than in face-to-face meetings. Shirley enjoyed the time she saved by attending virtual meetings while also saving money with gas, cooking at home, and not eating out because she was too tired to cook by the time she returned home. Both Kayla and Khloe also liked the virtual setting and shared that they enjoyed being able to talk about their feelings and emotions, whether present in virtual or face-to-face settings. Delaney also enjoyed that it was just the two of us in her virtual PLC so that she could vent, and her sessions often became more therapeutic than my other sessions. Delaney enjoyed participating in the virtual PLC and most liked that the virtual meetings allowed us to meet after putting her daughter to bed, so childcare was unnecessary. Delaney shared that once she knew her daughter was taken care of, she was comfortable talking without feeling guilty about taking time away from her daughter.

Shirley also noted the collegiality within the group. In addition to enjoying the virtual format, Shirley noted that meeting with the three of us was easy and comfortable because, in the school building, we did not get to see each other that much. She liked Xander, so sharing her thoughts and feelings was easy. Shirley felt Xander was supportive, positive, and a good communicator. She enjoyed Xander's sense of humor during the session when she talked about him "testifying" and saying amen to something she said. She felt that Xander would make it sound like she said something significant no matter what she said. Shirley's response shows the importance of group dynamics in virtual PLCs and having group members who are more socially competent to be encouraging when others share.

As other participants noted, Shirley felt comfortable with Xander and I because she knew us and was comfortable with us already. She noted that larger groups and dominant personalities would make the dynamics different. Shirley discussed the importance of rapport, honesty, and being willing to give honest opinions and information. Shirley felt two things helped her during these virtual PLCs. She liked that I shared the PowerPoint presentations after the meetings, which reminded her of the action steps she was supposed to complete throughout the week. Shirley also liked that I shared an agenda to let her know our expectations and direction. She felt that the idea of "less is more" was for virtual meetings. Shirley felt the most effective virtual speakers needed more than one way to share the information. As a teacher, she learned that she would lose her audience if she did not have a visual to break up the presentation with a video or two.

Drawbacks of the Online Platform. One of the trends I noticed with two participants with more teaching experience was that they seemed to miss the face-to-face meetings and interactions that were the norm before COVID. Summer and Hester both noted that having connections with people made all the difference. Hester mentioned that meeting face-to-face would have been more fun because she felt that the virtual view created distance and took her away. Hester felt she was missing out on the content because her attention was on the screen by looking at herself. Both Hester and Summer felt that when they were face-to-face, they did not even think about how they looked. Hester preferred meeting face-to-face because, during some online meetings, extra work had to be submitted and posted online in the chat, whereas during face-to-face meetings, there were few written requirements. Hester enjoyed face-to-face meetings because she missed verbal and non-verbal connections through physical spacing and

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having a neighbor nearby. She missed sharing a knowing glance or a pat on the shoulder from those at her table because those things do not work when meetings are virtual.

Summer had similar experiences because, when she tried to share and participate in sizable online sessions, she ended up just listening because the conversation felt impersonal. She felt comfortable in the online format but admitted she missed being face-to-face for the social aspect and getting to know people. Summer felt that knowing Hester and I before the virtual meeting helped her participate in the virtual setting. Summer admitted that the virtual format allowed her to check out if there were too many people. She did this with meetings at work where she logged on, said "hello," turned off her camera, muted her microphone, and worked on "whatever" at her desk. Having smaller virtual PLCs ensures that participation is active.

Khloe's experience was different from Summer and Hester because Khloe did not find it particularly hard to express her thoughts or feelings in the virtual setting. She felt that listening did not require extensive effort. She mentioned that her outgoing, talkative personality might be a factor in her experience. She did not think it would be difficult to discuss this topic in a virtual or face-to-face setting, regardless of the number of people in attendance, even if she did not know me. Her opinions were uncommon because most participants noted that if they did not know me, they would not have been able to share this topic in the virtual setting. However, Kayla, Shirley, Stella, Delaney, Khloe, and Xander shared that they had no difficulties sharing and participating in this virtual setting. Summer and Hester did not have difficulties sharing even though they preferred face-to-face over virtual meetings.

Other Considerations. We had numerous technical glitches which required my starting, stopping, resending meeting links, and sometimes just rescheduling meetings. Technical glitches

were the most frustrating for me because I could not get assistance since I was at home. I would begin texting participants, and they would offer suggestions as best they could.

In summary, virtual PLCs save valuable time during the school day and allow teachers to attend to needs at home while furthering their professional development. Virtual PLCs also supported teachers' emotional health by providing a confidential space to voice frustrations and joys while building professional relationships. Drawbacks of virtual PLCs include the loss of a more personal bond, feelings of self-consciousness, and technical glitches. Virtual PLCs provide a cost-effective method for teachers to gain knowledge, build cohesion and discuss practical strategies.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Introduction

To conclude this study, I present a summary of the major findings of my research while identifying links to the research literature. Second, I describe the importance of this study along with its limitations and recommendations for future research. Before we look at the major findings, let us revisit the purpose of this research which is the need to improve social emotional competence.

Social Emotional Competence

Improving Social Emotional (SE) competence can support teachers in reducing their stress level, reducing attrition and supporting student learning (Wu et al., 2019). Teacher stress is a leading contributor to attrition within education. Research shows that teacher stress affects student stress (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Teachers were experiencing stress before the Covid-19 pandemic forced schools to close in March 2020. With the shutdown, teachers faced additional responsibilities of learning to teach and engage students online along with supporting the emotional needs of students and families. I decided to implement an action research study through virtual PLCs to support teachers with implementing self-care habits and reduce stress. The CASEL SEL framework, which my school district adopted, provided the foundation for this SE learning. I conducted this study to evaluate the impact of an SE virtual PLC because of time constraints which prevent reflection and actualization. The next section presents three primary themes characterizing the major findings of this study.

Review of Major Themes

I identified three primary themes through data analysis: (1) improved well-being and resilience through self-care, (2) the effectiveness of virtual PLCs, and (3) promoting professional

collegiality within small groups. Participants enjoyed the process of habit creation and the implementation of self-care habits helped them in their daily lives. Additionally, they found the evening virtual PLC format to be beneficial. The small group size allowed participants to feel that the virtual PLC was a supportive environment which prohibited lurking. They also enjoyed the comfort of collaborating with individuals with whom they already had some familiarity. This familiarity served as the springboard for more meaningful conversations which rarely occur during the workday because of time constraints. The first major finding was improved participant well-being through self-care.

Improved Well-Being through Self-Care.

Self-care practices integrate activities which improve the physical and emotional well-being of an individual through daily practice (Erdman et al., 2020). To support educators who experience secondary traumatic stress, a focus on cognitive-behavioral and mindfulness-based strategies may be most effective to help foster well-being (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2011). Self-care encourages individuals to focus on their physical, social, mental, emotional and spiritual health needs as best they can through daily practice.

Participants shared that, since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, they saw an increased appreciation for the need of self-care to improve feelings of well-being. Attending to these needs shapes an individuals' routines and how they structure their environment. Self-care and well-being are sometimes used interchangeably; however, self-care practices lead to the well-being of individuals. Well-being is when an individual feels purpose, meaning, good health, happiness, and stability in life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Self-care encourages awareness of one's body and mind to address to the physical sensations and thoughts which

arise. Self-care encourages and supports well-being, compassion, gratitude, and resiliency (Gu &
Day, 2007; Lawler, 2020).

When individuals pay attention to their bodily sensations and thoughts, they become
aware of times when their actions and core beliefs are not aligned (Patel, 2020). When actions
and core beliefs are not aligned, tension arises in the body, and thoughts can become harmful.
When these conditions persist, stress and burnout can follow. Recognition of such internal
conflicts and implementing a self-care plan to deal with stress are essential for physiological and
emotional health. Self-care practices allow individuals to feel gratification, resiliency,
fulfillment, and balance in their professional and personal lives (Lawler, 2020). This leads to
overall feelings of positive well-being.

Resiliency is an individual's ability to adapt to conflicts that arise in their environment
and is not a fixed trait (Masten & Reed, 2005). Reivich and Shatte (2002) suggest four goals for
resilience: overcoming previous obstacles, navigating everyday adversities, bouncing back after
setbacks, and reaching beyond challenges; thus, resiliency happens when individuals face stress,
adversity, or conflicts and can return to a sense of normalcy after facing these highly stressful
circumstances or events. Resiliency supports teachers in having a healthier self-perception and
taking better care of themselves (Shepell, 2019).

Participants felt self-care outside of work improved their resiliency and the ability to deal
with stressors. For example, Xander felt that self-care at home gave him more energy to be
helpful at work. Additionally, Kayla shared, "I believe that self-care is what keeps me sane. My
job responsibilities are overwhelming so knowing that I can come home and relax then focus on
what I enjoy is absolutely my source of joy." Summer shared that "Self-care at home just kind of
reminds me of what's really important and I'm not going to be much good to anybody if I'm

broke down." Likewise, Shirley believed that self-care helped her feel rejuvenated so she could continue to support her work with students. These statements provided insight that these teachers realized that they are better able to take care of others by taking care of themselves. In addition to home self-care supporting their resiliency, they also shared the benefits they experienced with self-care at work.

Participants believe that felt self-care at work reduced their stress levels at work. Kayla shared, "I believe that self-care impacts me at work because if I don't take time to care for myself then I am more anxious and in a bad mood." Delaney shared, "I believe that self-care positively impacts people at work because it can help people to not be so stressed out." Khloe shared:

> I think that self-care is very, very important especially as a teacher because you are expected to teach these children and lead them and guide them in the right direction. So, I think it is only natural that the person leading them has themselves under control, like as you know, you don't want somebody to sit here and try to lead and guide you and they don't even take care of themselves.

Xander stated, "I believe that self-care at work creates space and balance to do my job more effectively and with less stress." Kayla said, "self-care impacts me at work because I feel refreshed and able to focus more to get tasks completed."

Khloe, Xander and Kayla's responses were in line with Shepell (2019) who found that supporting resiliency by encouraging proper rest, better nutrition, movement, and connectedness is essential for school leaders to improve teacher mental health, reduce stress, and serve their students. One participant, Khloe, felt that the care of her home is intertwined with her personal self-care. She shared:

Maybe I just take five minutes to wipe down the counter. I want to care for my house like

I care for myself. So, if I'm up to par and my house is a reflection of my mind, I want to

make sure everything can be at least in order. If you don't have a clear mind, then it can

show in other places. And the last thing that you want to do it to bleed out in an

unhealthy way somewhere else.

Khloe took pride in the care of her home as an extension of her personal self-care. Participants'

responses indicated that implementing self-care practices was beneficial to their work lives and

their lives outside of work. The effectiveness of the virtual PLCs in supporting implementation

of self-care habits is described in the following section.

Effectiveness of Virtual PLCs.

Virtual PLCs offered an opportunity for collaboration and deeper exploration of personal

development. All participants expressed enjoyment of the virtual format because of its

convenience and flexibility. Shirley shared, "I enjoy being virtual because I am finding that the

meetings are shorter, and they seem to be more detailed and agenda friendly." As a facilitator, at

the end of every meeting, I sent the PowerPoint slides to each participant so they would have an

additional visual of what we covered during the session. The virtual PLCs were also effective

because we followed the reflective steps which guide traditional PLCs. The survey showed that

participants had a baseline of current self-care habits that we analyzed. With this information,

they developed their self-care action plan and the habits they wanted to implement. Participants

then determined the small behavioral steps they would implement as a part of their action plan.

Participants received the self-care action plan as a Google Document, and they received a copy

of the PowerPoint which explained creation of the action plan in greater detail. At the next

meeting, participants reviewed the success they had in implementing the small action steps of

their care plan. We then repeated the process to identify any new problems. The cyclical nature of PLCs allowed us to follow a similar format for the next meeting, so participants knew what to expect and looked forward to sharing their results.

The study participants found the virtual PLC format in the evening was beneficial because they felt they had more time and didn't feel so rushed. Xander shared, "I loved participating in this virtual professional learning community. It was something that I looked forward to each week and I enjoyed it." Kayla stated, "I enjoyed the online format and participating in the virtual professional learning community." Summer felt the same when she noted, "I like having meetings in the virtual setting." One aspect that was apparent during the meetings was that the virtual setting allowed the participants to visit, vent and gossip a bit before we dove into the meeting content. With the virtual format, we were not concerned about students or colleagues overhearing our conversation and they were safe to share their thoughts and feelings honestly. The ability to comfortably share frustrations and joys built a feeling of collegiality. This feeling of collegiality was another major theme of this research.

Promoting Collegiality within Small Groups.

Teacher collegiality is defined as a collaborative culture that is an authentic, often informal relationship between teachers (Murray, 2021). These participants were familiar with one another because they are employed at the same school. This familiarity helped with some of the awkwardness that can result from participants who are just meeting one another, especially through an online format. Even though participants knew each other their interactions at work were often brief, and because of time constraints, more meaningful conversations were not possible. Therefore, participants appreciated the support of meeting in smaller group settings so

they could actively participate, engage each other, and share their thoughts. An example is when Shirley stated:

> It was easy and comfortable to meet with you and Xander because we don't get to see each other that much but I really like Xander, so it was easy to express my thoughts and feelings. Xander is so supportive and a good communicator, always positive and nodding. And testifying and saying amen to what you say. It doesn't matter what I say, Xander is going to make it sound like I said something great.

Shirley and Xander enjoyed their time together since they did not get to engage often at work.

Participants also shared that knowing and being familiar with me as the facilitator supported their ability to share. An example is when Hester shared "it wasn't hard to express myself because I knew you and you are just amazing, but if I hadn't known you then I wouldn't have done it." Additionally, Stella shared "if I didn't already know someone before the virtual meeting then I have to really want to get to know them because if there are too many people then I just totally check out." This comment was further evidence that being familiar and engaged is essential for participation.

In this study, the first major theme I saw was improvements in participants' well-being through self-care practices. A second theme was the effectiveness of sharing content through a virtual PLC. Lastly, I found that the virtual PLC promoted collegiality within the small group setting. Links between these themes and the previous literature are explored below.

Links to the Previous Literature

Introduction

In this section, I will provide a link between the major themes I found in this research and previous literature. First, I will discuss how the self-care practices and SE competence of the

participants in this research are related to SE competence in the literature. Next, I will discuss how the use of virtual PLCs in this study are related to other studies which have implemented the virtual PLC format. Then, I will share how this virtual PLC fostered collegiality and why this is important to reduce teacher stress. Next, I will discuss teacher guilt and what participants shared about their own feelings. Lastly, I will discuss Covid-19 and the need for self-care as participants are emerging from the pandemic. The following section relates what I found about self-care and SE competence to the previous literature.

Self-Care and Social Emotional Competence

SE competence is beneficial for teacher and student well-being (Aldrup et al., 2020). Supporting teachers in developing self-awareness of their own self-care needs is critical for teachers to integrate SE practices into everyday classroom practices (Fitzgerald et al., 2022).

This study provided an account of context-specific interventions which could be transferable to other school systems to provide data and guide others in pursuing issues within their organization. Research has shown that the concept of sequence learning or chunking can support individuals in creating new habits and changing their behavior. Sequence learning or chunking is the strategy of dividing cognitive or behavioral sequences into a sequence of blocks or steps so that information is easier to remember (Fonollosa et al., 2015). Collaborating with individuals to sequence their thoughts and behaviors in order to create self-care habits became the foundation of my work with teachers. Through the sessions I offered small, concrete steps for participants to implement their self-care plan. We used Zoom as our online platform because it would allow us to see each other, and I could share my screen to present the SEL information.

CASEL provides an SEL framework for school districts to implement learning programs which support SE competence for students, staff and educators (CASEL, 2011). These SE

learning programs teach SE competence to support individuals in learning to communicate feelings positively, regulating behavior, building self-confidence, improving self-control, and improving self-sufficiency. Fostering SE competence is important because students with higher SE competence demonstrate greater resiliency when they encounter stress (Romano et al., 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). To foster student SE competence, teachers must first possess such competence in order to teach these valuable skills to students.

Time to reflect through professional development helps teachers build SE competence. Virtual PLCs offer time after school to meet for professional development because time during the school day is limited. The next section explains more about the use of virtual PLCs.

Virtual Professional Learning Communities

Matzat (2013) defines virtual PLCs as a teacher group that connects using a virtual platform to discuss a shared area of professional learning topics. Traditional PLCs and virtual PLCs have the same objective. The only difference is that traditional PLCs are face-to-face and virtual PLCs are offered online. PLCs are small groups of educators that meet regularly, share expertise, and work collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students (DuFour, 2004). PLCs support teachers through application of a continuous cycle of action and reflection. The cycle of continuous improvement includes inquiry, action research, data analysis, planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation (Hord & Roy, 2014). The inquiry steps use data to determine student or educator learning needs. Next, goals are identified which will support both the learning of students and educators. Third, sessions immerse teachers

in planning and implementing learning evidence-based content knowledge. Evidence is then used to monitor, refine and evaluate results.

Virtual PLCs use an internet-based conferencing platform that allows for audio and video conferencing on the computer. The virtual format provides flexibility and convenience for teachers to engage in PD that supports their lifelong learning, improves teaching skills which ultimately improves student academic performance. The early 2000s saw an increase in computer and internet availability allowing teachers to collaborate more quickly and conveniently using online platforms (Hough et al., 2004). Virtual PLCs are beneficial because teachers have limited time during the school day to collaborate and reflect, so web-based conferencing facilitates dedicated meetings that do not conflict with school responsibilities (Nicholson & Bond, 2003). The online meeting platform and discussion boards fostered effective and reflective PD (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). Video conferencing supports teachers and breaks down geographic boundaries to allow teachers to interact through PLCs (Carpenter & Munshower, 2019). This virtual PLC study offered an opportunity for teachers to collaborate and allow deeper exploration of self-care development. Consistent with the research, these study participants found that the virtual PLC format in the evening was beneficial because they felt they had more time and did not feel so rushed (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Nicholson & Bond, 2003).

Previous research has demonstrated that effective teacher PD should be school based, allow collaboration, and be part of lifelong personal development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). However, the school day had very restrictive time limits which prevented thoughtful discussions. Therefore, meeting in the virtual format was helpful because it was after school hours. Covid-19 restrictions are easing and face to face meetings are resuming; however, the

availability and flexibility of virtual PLCs can facilitate meaningful learning opportunities for educators. Conducting virtual PLCs allows participants to save time and avoid inclement weather and traffic because travel is unnecessary. The educators who participated in this study and cared for children and pets felt a sense of safety by remaining with those loved ones at home. An example of this was when Delaney shared how the virtual PLC allowed us to meet after she put her daughter to bed. She stated, "I was able to meet after my daughter was taken care of. So, once I knew she was good, then I was good and able to talk to you without feeling guilty." Another example was when Stella was able to be home to care for her pets. Stella shared, "when I am late coming home from work, I have to get the neighbor to come and pet sit, but when I have virtual meetings, I can just take care of them myself." These two participants felt a sense of safety by remaining in their current environment.

Meeting in the virtual PLC allowed teachers to decrease feelings of isolation and increase feelings of collegiality. I was concerned about moderating the meetings to ensure a culture of support and collective self-efficacy that enables participants to create a cohesive group (Lisboa & Coutinho, 2011). Bandura (1997) calls this the culture of the possibility of producing valued effects because each member contributes to creating an environment that facilitates mutual knowledge co-creation. Even though participants met in passing at work, their busy work schedules can leave them feeling isolated. Meeting afterwork in the virtual setting allowed them to connect with professional colleagues while being comfortable meeting their obligations at home. The importance of collegiality for reducing stress is described next.

The Need for Teacher Collegiality

Collegiality is a collaborative culture that is authentic and typically an informal relationship between teachers (Murray, 2021). Fostering collegiality relieves the stress teachers

may feel from isolation. Teacher isolation can be defined as feelings of being separated from others (Ostovar-Nameghi & Shekhahmadi, 2016). Lortie (1975) identified three distinct types of isolation which teachers may feel: physical, psychological and adaptive. Physical isolation is the physical separation teachers feel by being in separate learning spaces. Cookson (2005) called this the "egg crate" structure because classrooms are physically separated, and schools follow a very condensed calendar which makes professional collaboration difficult. Psychological isolation is what teachers feel by not interacting with other adults within the classroom (Flinders, 1988). Adaptive isolation involves the feelings teachers have in their struggles to meet new demands. Physical isolation results because teachers are usually the only adult within their teaching space and time constraints during the day prevent regular dialogue with colleagues about their teaching practice (Ostovar-Nameghi & Shekhahmadi, 2016). Psychological isolation can result from few teachers being employed for a given subject area. Thus, adaptive isolation can result from new demands placed on teachers especially stressors created by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Feelings of isolation contribute to teachers feeling frustration, lack of resilience, low motivation, poor commitment, and a desire to exit the profession (Lux Gaudreault & McCullick, 2011; Ostovar-Nameghi & Shekahmadi, 2016; Pissanos, 1995). According to the participant interviews, the smaller groups helped participants to feel more comfortable and willing to share their own experiences. This finding falls in line with what Wood (2007) found in her research that optimal groups for professional development were groups smaller than five to six participants. Rapport was also essential in all the groups. These teachers were co-workers and participants, so I worked to maintain the confidentiality of our sessions while extending the working relationship we had already established. I found myself constantly checking my level of anxiety and present level of awareness. Our working relationship was our initial contact and

participants were familiar with one another, but interactions were brief and limited to cordial small talk instead of issues about student learning or professional practice (Hadar & Brody, 2010; Trower & Gallagher, 2008).

Muller et al. (2011) found that purpose, expectations, and social interactions were protective factors for teacher resilience. These factors were supported by my being emotionally present and situationally aware during our sessions. Several participants shared that being familiar with me was a factor in their comfort level. Delaney shared "Knowing you let me express my thoughts and feelings. You gave me time to vent and that let me get somethings out that I have been holding in." Summer shared, "meeting in the smaller sessions with you and Hester was fine because I knew you all and it was fine." Stella shared, "I like meeting in the virtual setting because I am comfortable at home and we already knew each other." Hester shared, "It wasn't hard to express myself because I knew you and you are just amazing but if I hadn't known you then I wouldn't have done it." The responses of these participants showed that the smaller groups and collegiality helped the participants feel comfortable and reduced feelings of isolation. During our virtual PLCs we discussed self-care and work-related issues. The smaller groups also fostered a sense of meaning of work because we met with those we did not see often, and we found that we shared common experiences within our school culture. Feeling a sense of meaning with work fosters collegiality.

Sense of Meaning at Work

Teachers' sense of meaning at work is defined as feeling that their work with students is meaningful, purposeful, and will contribute to their students' academic and emotional development (Martela & Pessi, 2018). When teachers do not see their work as a positive impact on the academic and emotional development of students, they may begin to feel a decreased

sense of meaning which leads to stress and burnout. Seeing a positive impact is especially difficult as teachers are working to support students since returning from the Covid-19 shutdown. Research by Lavy (2022) found that teachers' may experience decreases in burnout when their sense of meaning at work increases therefore, supporting teachers to reduce burnout is essential to improve meaning. Furthermore, research by Lipscomb et al. (2021) suggests that supporting teachers with what they need to do their job effectively can increase their sense of meaning at work.

Providing teachers with support through the virtual PLC meetings may explain why teachers used their time outside of work to attend these meetings. Even though these meeting extended into their personal time, teachers may have felt that a sense of meaning, and collegiality was restored; therefore, the meetings were worthwhile.

When facilitators allow teachers time for reflection in professional development, teachers may experience decreases in emotional exhaustion which is a part of burnout (Roberts et al., 2020). The comments which participants made about feeling comfortable with me may have a factor in their sense of meaning. Khloe stated, "knowing you let me express my thoughts and feelings. You gave me time to vent and that let me get somethings out that I have been holding in." These types of comments show the value of a facilitator who works to create a supportive environment that encourages reflection. Previous research indicates that teachers who have a stronger sense of collegiality experience a greater sense of meaning at work (Collie et al., 2011; McGinty et al., 2008).

The social support that teachers experience through professional development has the potential to support a sense of meaning at work (Minghui et al., 2018). Responses of the participants showed that they felt a sense of collegiality and social support. This statement by

Xander is an example: "what helped me express my thoughts and feelings in this virtual setting was how comfortable, loving and open we all were with each other." Stella had similar feelings when she shared, "I am glad that it was just the two of us. I felt more comfortable talking to you about things going on because I didn't feel like you were going to judge me or look down on me." The statements of these participants show the importance of the facilitator in establishing a supportive community which can foster a sense of meaning at work.

Creating a supportive environment through the virtual PLC and teaching skills to support teacher social and emotional competence shows potential for supporting stress management. Through fostering collegiality and a sense of meaning with work we were able to talk about sensitive topics. One of the sensitive topics that we discussed were feelings of guilt that some participants felt. Teacher guilt is explained further in the next section.

Teacher Guilt

Expressions of teacher guilt can be defined as a teacher's belief about how their own performance is inadequate compared to their perceived standard of practice (MacMillan & Meyer, 2006). Teacher education programs, societal and personal expectations shape how teachers practice and serve students (Bowles & Gintis, 1999). These expectations of how teachers care for students cultivates teachers' beliefs about their professional identities (Noddings, 1992). These beliefs have become the behavioral norms and standards that these teachers have internalized and now measure their professional and personal identity (Giddens, 1991). They realize the difficulty of meeting teaching obligations and they are experiencing feelings of guilt (MacMillan & Meyer, 2006).

In this study there were references to teachers experiencing feelings of guilt. For example, Shirley shared:

Initially when we first went virtual for Covid and everybody wanted to send a module to teach you how to do something and learn this platform and learn that platform, and I've even felt guilty like I wasn't working enough because I did not have my hands on students.

Delaney experienced feelings of guilt both at home and at work. At home she felt her work responsibility of participating in the group conflicted with caring for her daughter. She said that meeting virtually helped her manage feelings of guilt "I didn't feel guilty because I was able to meet after my daughter was taken care of. So, once I knew she was good, then I was good and able to talk to you without feeling guilty." Furthermore, Delaney expressed feelings of guilt with self-care at work when she shared, "a barrier I experienced was guilt for taking the time to have a break – I felt like it was unproductive time so I rushed through without really enjoying my lunch or my snack." Her statements showed that feelings of guilt impacted her both at home and at work. When Stella reflected on her inability to successfully implement her self-care plan, she identified guilt as a barrier. Stella shared, "my biggest barrier was time and guilt. I stopped trying at work and just decided to do the stuff that I enjoy at home."

These feelings of guilt are related to the research of MacMillan and Meyer (2006) who found that teachers can experience feelings of guilt when their actions fall short of the expectations set forth by society. Teachers self-sacrificing themselves for the sake of teaching the children is a reality in the lives of these participants (Erdman, et al., 2020). These educators devote much time and energy meeting professional responsibilities for many other people; therefore, they may not devote enough time for themselves (Erdman et al., 2020). Therefore, virtual PLCs which foster collegiality and self-care are so important.

These teachers discussed feelings of guilt when their behaviors did not measure up to the expectations of the profession along with their own beliefs about those standards (MacMillan & Meyer, 2006). Teachers feel a profound sense of obligation to meet the standards of saving children. This notion of 'saving children' can also be called a hero mentality where teachers seek to save children and fail to preserve their own well-being (Santoro, 2018). By implementing self-care practices, these teachers strived to push through feelings of guilt to meet the professional and moral duties. However, when the profession changes suddenly, as with the Covid-19 school shutdown, teachers may feel demoralization in addition to guilt.

Demoralization is when teaching expectations change to such a degree that teachers feel unable to find the moral rewards they once felt (Santoro, 2018). Teachers experiencing guilt before the Covid-19 pandemic may become demoralized by striving to meet changes and new requirements. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed education delivery and required teachers to quickly learn new skills to meet their professional duties. Since the school shutdown, teachers increasingly face students who are struggling academically and with mental health challenges. An example of this is when Summer was explaining how she sees a difference in the students since returning from the school shutdown. Summer shared:

> It just seems like this year everything turned into a problem. At first, I thought it was Covid-19, and because we hadn't been in school for two years, and their immaturity level was a big factor, but I am not sure now.

Summer's statement shows how she is working to support students in recovering their learning loss while also working through feelings of stress and anxiety. Teachers may feel demoralized because their work to meet the needs of struggling students has eroded.

Teacher depression and exhaustion can result from feelings of guilt and demoralization (Santoro, 2018). Isolation, apathy and exhaustion can lead to teachers feeling burnout, guilt, and demoralization (Santoro, 2018). The main distinction between burnout and demoralization is the source of these feelings. Burnout stems from the routine stressors experienced from teaching while demoralization stems from job changes that the teacher no longer feels able to meet (Santoro, 2018).

Therefore, burnout derives from an individual's stressors from their personal experience while demoralization occurs from external experiences placed on the individual. Teachers were experiencing symptoms of stress and burnout before the Covid-19 pandemic. The demoralization teachers feel from working to recover student learning loss compounds the effects of stress. Since the pandemic teachers recognize the increased need for self-care especially with the changes Covid-19 has brought to the education system. The following section explains more about recognizing the need for self-care since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 and Self-Care

During the Covid-19 school shutdown, there was a profound recognition of need for teacher self-care. Studies have shown that students have experienced psychological problems resulting from the pandemic (Brown et al., 2020; Lee, 2020). Some of the lingering effects of Covid-19 are evident in some of the participants' comments. Delaney felt that eating in the classroom away from students has become a form of self-care also necessitated by health concerns. Delaney shared "because of Covid-19 protocols we aren't supposed to eat with students in the classroom. I still wait to eat during my planning time. I don't eat with students so I can have a break." When talking about self-care at work during the pandemic, Shirley noted:

It may sound simple but if I didn't have my lunch bunch to talk to and look forward to seeing in the middle of the day, or if I didn't know that I had someone down the hallway to talk to then I don't know if I could have made it through all the Covid -19 cohorts and online teaching.

Her response showed her reflections about the small self-care steps she took while working through the pandemic.

Shirley and other participants noted that they had a renewed sense of self-care since the pandemic. Shirley shared that she has new self-care routines since the pandemic. Shirley stated:

When I've had a particularly hard day, I take a long bubble bath with a CD called "Classical Candlelight Piano." That's when I really need to de-stress. Bubbles, the CD and some candles. This isn't something that I did before Covid-19.

Additionally, Stella shared how her self-care focus has enhanced since the pandemic. Stella said:

I really like listening to romance audiobooks so I can relax while I am replanting flowers or doing a craft project. I have always liked doing things by myself but Covid-19 has made me need and want to be by myself even more.

In this research, one major theme I found was that self-care practices fostered the SE competence of the participants. I also found the use of virtual PLCs was beneficial to participants to share content while fostering collegiality and to reduce teacher stress. I found that teachers experience feelings of guilt and that self-care can support stress related to those feelings of guilt. Lastly, I found that participants have a renewed desire for self-care as we are emerging from the pandemic. Next, I highlight my purpose for this study by describing gaps that I found in the previous literature.

Gaps in the Literature Addressed by this Study

This study addresses the issue of implementing small self-care habits through a virtual PLC to decrease teacher stress. Providing PD opportunities is essential for continuous teacher professional growth (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic increased student anxiety and teacher stress. Reducing teacher stress after the pandemic is a challenge for school districts and offers opportunities to build teacher SE competence. While literature indicates that SEL programs increase SE competence and reduce teacher stress (Dorman, 2015), little is known about the effects of presenting PD through a virtual PLC specifically focusing on self-care. This action research study lends itself well to the work done in PLCs because both follow a cyclical pattern of continual learning by evaluating data and results. Through this study, I addressed teacher stress through a virtual PLC about SE competence. I explored fostering teacher self-care practices to strengthen their SE competence by implementing small habitual steps.

Research by Matsuba and Williams (2020) explored how teachers took incremental steps toward mindfulness through yoga self-care that was beneficial for stress reduction. Another study by Erdman et al. (2020) suggests that to reduce compassion fatigue, individuals should develop two or three specific and measurable self-care goals. Both studies suggested beginning slowly with small steps, then taking additional steps once a routine was established so participants would not become overwhelmed. My research sought to bridge the gap between taking small steps toward creating self-care habits to foster SE competence through a virtual PLC. This research gave participants the time and opportunity for meaningful reflection and thoughtful discussion of self-care during the virtual meetings and resulted in practice implications as described below.

Practice Implications

In this section, I give my recommendations for practice regarding habit creation, group size, suggested length of the PLC, and meeting flexibility. Participants enjoyed the process of habit creation. They found the virtual PLC format in the evening to be beneficial. Members appreciated the support of a small group and the small size prohibited lurking. Participants enjoyed the comfort of working with individuals with whom they already had some familiarity. Members also found they could implement self-care habits that helped them in their daily life. The findings of this research support that of Wood (2007) when she found that, during PD opportunities, teachers must have time to reflect on how to implement new knowledge into their existing practice. Interaction with peers is essential in helping teachers develop SE competence, impacting their self-actualization. The structure of this qualitative research allowed me to engage teachers to understand better the current stress they feel and self-care strategies to support stress reduction.

For future practice, I suggest starting with the habit creation process. Walking participants through their goal identity and the behaviors that reinforce that identity are key. After behaviors are targeted, then smaller steps can be identified and paired with an existing behavior. Once the small steps are identified a reward and a method of tracking can be implemented. Participants shared that my handouts which reviewed the habit creation process in small concrete steps was helpful for them to implement change. Participants also shared that they built motivation through the two-minute rule and their method of tracking. When they could see progress after engaging for two minutes they were motivated to do even more.

I suggest a small group size to prevent lurking and to enhance engagement. Virtual PLCs can feel impersonal, so the facilitator should work to build in opportunities for participants to

contribute, question and respond to others. A sense of collegiality and meaning can be fostered when facilitators build on the culture of shared beliefs both inside and outside the work culture.

The ideal length of a virtual PLC should focus on a balance between meaningful engagement with the material and enough time to reflect on transferring skills to the school setting. I was challenged with getting participants to attend only four meetings. I found that there wasn't enough time to reflect on how to transfer the self-care skills to school and implement teaching the skills to students in the classroom.

The virtual PLCs offered participants flexibility with individualized scheduling; however, as facilitator, this individualized scheduling was very time intensive and not manageable in a sustainable way. I was overwhelmed with scheduling changes, technology difficulty, and management of presentation sequencing that was required by the flexibility involved in the research format. The trade-offs were the collegiality and sense of meaning that I personally felt after each session. I am a teacher at heart so when participants shared their experiences of progress, motivation, and optimism I was overjoyed. This is the same feeling of joy I felt when I saw the light bulb of understanding with one of my students. I witnessed increases in collegiality as participants' comfort levels increased. At school when participants mentioned that they looked forward to the next online meeting, I was encouraged that my work with scheduling was making a difference. Seeing their growth was worth my extra efforts.

This project could be most helpful for school counselors in supporting classroom teachers while acknowledging that classroom teachers experience secondary trauma daily when they work with students who are challenged and become upset. It is essential to support teachers and address any feelings of inadequacy that might arise from working with difficult students. Having regular informal check-ins with teachers about challenging students gives school counselors an

opportunity to learn about the student and teacher who is struggling. It is important for counselors to realize they must provide unconditional positive regard for students and for teachers. Giving teachers a safe place to share their frustrations and discuss coping strategies can combat teachers' feelings of isolation and guilt.

Counselors are a resource for students, parents, and teachers. There are times that we will need to work with teachers to understand why the traits of some children are such a challenge for them. There may be aspects of the child's personality or home life which trigger the teacher. Understanding these dynamics and working with the teacher in a non-judgmental way to reflect on their own lived experiences and coping strategies can support the teacher personally and professionally. Providing a space for teachers to reflect and have this non-judgmental dialog supports teachers in a way that administrators are unable to provide. Teachers may feel guilty for having certain conversations with administrators. Counselors can provide time and space for teachers and students to share their frustrations. By providing time for reflection and a safe space, counselors can support both teachers and students who are struggling with anxiety, stress and feelings of inadequacy.

I further suggest that professional development should be done by those who are invested within the school community. We know that professional development supports teachers learning effective strategies which improve their practice; however, an outside facilitator has no way of knowing all the nuances and individual characteristics of a school. Having inside knowledge of potential obstacles with daily schedules, materials, layout of the building and realistic timetables facilitates implementation. Having such knowledge upfront helps with planning and troubleshooting potential obstacles to implementation. Outside facilitators often work numerous schools which means their time is divided so they often provide support during

planned visits and nominal support through email. An inside facilitator is more accessible to provide ongoing support through formal and informal conversations along with more immediate feedback.

Recommendations for Future Research

I have four future research recommendations. I suggest that future researchers evaluate the habit formation process, the transfer of self-care skills, the positionality of the researcher, and the possibility of teacher led action research.

First, I suggest that future researchers break down SE competence processes into smaller and more manageable steps for teachers. Breaking the larger task into smaller "chunks" allows individuals to implement new habits into their own practice and in turn teach their students. Self-care habit formation is a subset of SE competence and can be implemented by teachers with their students. Future researchers are encouraged to identify other manageable steps for implementation depending on the goals of their participants.

Next I encourage researchers to examine the process of transferring self-care skills practiced at home to application in the work setting and then implemented in classroom settings. Exploring the link from home self-care to applying self-care and SE practices in school setting would be beneficial.

I encourage facilitators to be a part of the school culture and have a clear understanding of participants and their personality traits. It would be very difficult for someone who is outside of a particular school to target and modify existing SE competencies for implementation in a school. Each school has its own dynamics and the personalities of individuals within that school. It is vital to build trust with the teachers in a school setting. The researcher must understand the complexities of this specific school culture. Striving to implement supports targeted to staff

dynamics, daily scheduling, and existing practices will engender trust, facilitate collegiality, and foster a sense of meaning.

Lastly, I encourage teachers to engage in their own action research process by exploring ways of developing solutions specific to their individual school settings. Teachers are thoughtful and student centered and can develop solutions that an outsider would not be able to develop. Ignoring the expertise of teachers is an arrogance of a top-down administration that undermines the potential effectiveness of social emotional PLCs.

Limitations

The results of this study were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most educators in this study felt the COVID-19 pandemic allowed them to slow down and prioritize their self-care. Educators concentrated effort and dedicated time to self-care because of the unique stressors they faced upon returning to work after the pandemic. One primary limitation was the time and opportunity to establish self-care routines and practices because educators faced many obligations during the workday and in their personal lives.

This study had eight participants. A larger study would have yielded more information because there are so many varied experiences within the staff. Although a larger study would have yielded more information, a larger group would not have yielded the same level of participation. The small group size resembled counseling sessions which helped participants feel more comfortable in sharing their thoughts and feelings instead of a larger PLC. Since the settings were small, this allowed participants to share and be more vulnerable than they would have been in a larger PLC.

This virtual PLC was optional and was offered as a supplement to the SE content shared during traditional PLCs held during the daytime. Having voluntary participation limits attendees

to those who have the time, availability and desire to learn more about a topic. The second set of limitations involved the size of this study, the participants who agreed to attend the meetings, this public-school setting, and the virtual format. Only eight participants agreed to attend the virtual meetings, and this school has unique issues that may be uncommon in other rural or urban school settings. Our school is located outside the city limits of a large city. There are just under 1,000 students who attend the school in grades 6-8. White students comprise 50% of the student population while Black students comprise 35% of the population. Hispanic students are 10% of the student population while Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Asian students comprise 5% of the population. Thirty-five percent of our school is classified as economically disadvantaged. Our students live in traditional neighborhoods along with rural areas and several family farms which are spread apart. Our attendance zone also includes a large mobile home park; therefore, each ethnic group is represented at each socio-economic level. There are clusters of ethnic groups in certain areas, however there is a mix of all ethnic groups at all socio-economic levels. This makes our school unique in that ethnicity is only loosely correlated with socio-economic and parent education level.

One final limitation of self-care is understanding the responsibility of administrators to provide a more humane culture within their school culture. It is helpful for individuals to engage in self-care practices to take responsibility for their own emotional well-being. Through collegial relationships and PLCs, co-workers can support the emotional well-being of each other. Both support an individual's mental health; however, it is essential for administrators to also provide a more humane system and culture which supports social-emotional competence of the educators. Administrators can provide a supportive culture by allowing the opportunity to identify difficult feelings. After identifying such difficult feelings, individuals need to become aware of the self-

talk that leads to feelings of stress, guilt, burnout, and demoralization. By allowing space for open discussions which are less formal supports individuals in experimenting and exploring how to adapt and implement new practices. Administrators should avoid close evaluation, surveillance and strict deadlines so, these can be personalized to meet the needs and resources of the school staff.

Post-Script

This research challenged me in so many ways. As a result of this work, I am working more closely with teachers who have behaviorally challenging students especially those who show signs of stress. I have started attending contentious parent conferences. Before the parent conference, I meet with teachers to learn more about the situation including their thoughts, feelings, and observations. After this research I realize that it is essential for the teachers to have a chance to express their thoughts, observations, and feelings in a non-judgmental space. After I know more about the situation, we develop a plan on how to address the situation. During the meetings I am able to make suggestions to the parents and teachers in a way that preserves everyone's dignity and mostly diffuses the frustrations expressed in the meeting. My goal is to encourage connectedness with the teacher while fostering their sense of autonomy. In doing so I want to build on our collegiality while helping them realize their agency. I often tell teachers that they know the answers and what to do – they just need to slowdown long enough and reflect on how to move forward. I give them that opportunity to reflect more objectively. The conversations I have with teachers beforehand are absolutely essential because I am able to gauge where their frustration lies. Does their frustration lie in actual behaviors or conversations or is the difficulty within the teachers' perception? I was recently in a meeting and the teacher admitted to the parent that they could have behaved differently in a situation. The teacher had shared this same

revelation from a conversation we met beforehand. This was an enormous moment of growth for this teacher and especially when the parent was receptive and understanding. Both the teacher and parent were able to recognize how frustrating the situation was and move forward understanding the perspective of each other.

Since conducting this research, I also incorporate more parts of the SE framework in small chunks. Modeling how to implement the framework in ways that is not overwhelming for teachers and their busy schedules is key. In our sessions teachers are encouraged to speak and they are respectfully heard while all forms of participation are welcomed. Some share through writing, some through partner work, and some feel comfortable to share aloud with the group. Also, during our PD sessions, I encourage participants to share their thoughts and observations that contribute to everyone's common experience. My hope is that these conversations will build collegiality from our shared experiences within our school culture. I model ways for teachers to share openers and optimistic closures within their classroom. As I break the SE lessons into manageable chunks, I remind teachers that particular strategies can be used with their students in the classroom. I sincerely believe that SE lessons must be broken into manageable steps that teachers can easily implement. I seek and share resources to help teachers implement SE strategies in small steps just as we did in our virtual PLCs.

One last thing that I do more since this experiment is listen more carefully. I now recognize how isolation, guilt, and sense of meaning affect the stress level of teachers. I want to reduce these difficult feelings, so I take extra time to reach out to teachers with the most challenging students. I ask them "how things are going" and I really listen for what they say and what they don't say. We have a fresh set of data which shows us how students have experienced learning losses since Covid-19 shut the schools down. I recognize the effort teachers are exerting

to catch these students up to grade level. I also recognize the guilt teachers feel in working to remediate students who have always struggled in school and were below grade level before Covid-19. I want to support teachers by taking some of the burden off them. To let them know that they are not alone and that I am here for them just as much as I am for the students. And that they must care for themselves so they can continue to be present for themselves, their families and their students.

This research has also made me more aware of power dynamics. I do not ever want to come across as though I am looking down on my co-workers. I want to convey a sense that I am in this situation with them and together we can search for a solution to this situation. I am more vulnerable in sharing my own feelings of inadequacy in the hopes that they will realize they are not alone. Through this research, I also realize the power of small steps. We implemented our habits in small steps and I will work to affect change with individuals in small steps. We must and we will work together to support ourselves and each other.

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Self-Care Questionnaire (Part I)

Self-care activities are the things you do to maintain good health and improve well-being. Self-care is an important part of social and emotional competence. You'll find that many of these activities are things you already do as part of your normal routine.

In this assessment you'll think about how frequently you are performing different self-care activities. The goal of this assessment is to help you learn about your self-care needs by spotting patterns and recognizing areas of your life that need more attention.

There are no wrong or right answers on this assessment. There may be activities that you have no interest in, and other activities may not be included. This list is not comprehensive but serves as a starting point for thinking about your self-care needs.

Answer based on how often you do each of the following statements.

5 = Frequently   4 = Occasionally   3 = Rarely   2 = Never   1 = It never occurred to me

Physical Self-Care

_____Eat regularly (breakfast, lunch, and dinner)

_____Eat healthy foods

_____Exercise

_____Get regular preventive medical appointments (checkups, teeth cleanings, etc.)

_____Take time off to rest and heal when sick

_____Get massages or do self-massages

_____Participate in fun activities like dancing, swimming, walking, running, playing

sports, singing or some other physical activity that is fun

_____Take time to be sexual – with yourself, with a partner

_____Spend time alone with my romantic partner

_____Take care of personal hygiene

_____Get enough sleep

_____Wear clothes you like that make me feel good about myself

_____Take vacation

_____Take day trips or mini vacations

_____Make time away from telephones and/or email

_____Unplug from harmful social media

_____Other: _____

Psychological Self-Care

_____Make time for self-reflection

_____Write in a journal

_____Have your own personal counselor/therapist

_____Read literature that is unrelated to schoolwork

_____Learn new things unrelated to schoolwork

_____Do something at which you are not expert or in charge.

_____Talk to someone you trust about problems or issues

_____Notice your inner experience – listen to your thoughts, judgments, beliefs,

attitudes, and feelings

_____Let others know different aspects of you

_____Engage your intelligence in a new area (go to an art museum, history exhibit, sports

event, auction, theatre performance, etc.)

_____Practice receiving from others

_____Be curious

_____Say no to extra responsibilities sometimes

_____Take time off from work

_____Other:_____

Emotional Self-Care

_____Spend time with others whose company you enjoy

_____Stay in contact with old friends and/or important people in your life

_____Give yourself affirmations and/or praise yourself

_____Love yourself

_____Do something comforting (reread favorite books, re-view favorite movies, take a

long bath)

_____Do enjoyable activities with others

_____Identify comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places and seek them

out

_____Allow yourself to cry

_____Allow yourself to show emotions

_____Express feelings in a healthy way (talking, creating art, journaling etc.)

_____Ask others for help, when needed

_____Recognize my own strengths and achievements

_____Spend time with pets

_____Find things that make you laugh

_____Express your outrage in social action, letters, donations, marches, protests

_____Play with children

_____Have stimulating conversations

_____Meet new people

_____Participate in hobbies

_____Do enjoyable activities with other people

_____Set boundaries in relationships with partners, family, co-workers, and friends

_____Take deep breaths when getting overwhelmed and take time to tend to those

emotions

_____Other_____

Spiritual Self-Care

_____Make time for reflection and/or meditation

_____Find time to spend time with nature

_____Find spiritual connection with a community/church/group

_____Be open to inspiration

_____Cherish your optimism and hope

_____Be aware of nonmaterial aspects of life

_____Be open to not knowing

_____Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life

_____Pray

_____Have experiences of awe

_____Read and/or listen to inspirational literature (read, podcasts, talks, music, audiobooks etc.)

_____Act in accordance with your morals and values

_____Appreciate art that is impactful to you (music, film, literature)

_____Other: _____

Professional Self-Care

_____Take short breaks during work

_____Learn new things related to my profession

_____Make quiet time to complete tasks

_____Identify and take on projects and/or tasks that are exciting and rewarding

_____Arrange your workspace to be comfortable and comforting which allows you to be successful

_____Improve my professional skills

_____Say "no" to excessive new responsibilities

_____Make time to talk and build relationships with colleagues

_____Other: _____

Balance

_____Strive for balance among work, family relationships, play and rest

_____Strive to manage your time

_____Strive to manage your stress

_____Other: _____

Self-Care Questionnaire: adapted from "Self-Care Quiz" Oregon State University; San

Francisco State University "Self-Care Questionnaire Part 1".

Appendix B

Participant Interview Questions Post Intervention

1. How many years of experience in education do you have, 1-3 years, 4-6 years, 7-10 years, more than 10 years?

2. How would you define self-care?

3. Do you engage in any self-care routines during the day? Please describe.

4. Do you engage in any self-care routines outside of work? Please describe.

5. What are strategies did you choose to focus your self-care attention?

6. What barriers did you experience?

7. How did you address the barriers you experienced?

8. How do you believe self-care impacts you at work?

9. How do you believe self-care impacts you outside of work?

10. How do you cope when you felt overwhelmed or experience stress?

11. What did you think of participating in this virtual professional learning community?

12. What helped you express your thoughts and feelings in this virtual setting?

13. Were there barriers to expressing your thoughts and feelings in this virtual setting?

Appendix C

Information to Consider about this Research

Fostering the Social Emotional Competence of Educators Through a Self-Care Virtual Professional Learning Community

Principal Investigator: Deirdre N. Smith

Department: Educational Leadership

Contact Information: Deirdre N. Smith; mcnairydn@appstate.edu.

You are invited to participate in an action research study that aims to understand the impact a virtual professional learning community can have on educators' self-care practices. The goal is to understand practices, strategies and techniques and barriers teachers experience when implementing self-care. This is essential because teaching is a highly stressful profession with the stress of educators being viewed as being infectious and contributing to increased student stress (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). You are being asked to take part because as a counselor I am interested in engaging in professional development. The findings of this research will be published as part of a dissertation. Information about your self-care experiences and knowledge will be collected in this study. I do not plan to use this information in future studies. De-identified data may be shared with other researchers in the future. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

What you will be asked to do

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to complete a confidential questionnaire about current self-care practices before meeting in the virtual professional learning

community. Participants will participate in four virtual professional learning community meetings to discuss implementing self-care practices, successes, techniques, and barriers to self-care strategies both in and out of school. After the four virtual professional learning community meetings, educators will participate in a semi-structured interview lasting 45-60 minutes with questions related to their self-care practices and their experience of meeting in a virtual professional learning community. With your permission I would like to tape-record the interview. I will be the only person with access to the records.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

Risks and benefits: The Institutional Review Board at Appalachian State University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. There is the risk that you may find some of the questions during this action research study to be sensitive. To manage this risk, you are free to refuse to answer any question and to discontinue your participation in the research at any time without penalty.

Benefits of Being in the Study

Your participation will assist in the development of a professional development module related to this study's focus area.

Compensation

You will be eligible for entry into a drawing for four $25 Amazon gift cards. Four participants will be awarded. All participants will receive self-care bags including lotion, hand sanitizer, snacks and chap stick.

Confidentiality

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. You will not use your name on the questionnaire. During the interview you will be identified by a pseudonym that you choose. Any report that is made public will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file cabinet with only the researcher having access to the records. Tape recorded interviews will be destroyed after the tape is transcribed which I anticipate will be within two months of the taping. Any electronic data (including the audio recordings) will be stored in a locked file cabinet. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Your confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed because IRB members and Research Protections Staff reserve the right to review identifiable research data and records.

Breach of Confidentiality

As the sole researcher, I am responsible for the confidentiality of participant information collected, stored and shared throughout the study. A breach of confidentiality is an adverse or unanticipated event related to data protection. A breach of confidentiality is an unanticipated problem which is taken seriously and will be reported to the IRB. Any breach of data will be promptly reported to the IRB to address the breach, reduce the level of risk to participants and determine what actions are necessary.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part in or skip some of the questions, it will not affect you. You are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

If you have questions, want more information, concerns about your rights, how you are treated, concerns, complaints, benefits or suggestions about this project please contact Deirdre Smith (dnsm277@gmail.com; mcnairydn@appstate.edu; 336-698-5527); or Dr. Karen Caldwell, PhD, Dissertation Committee Chair (caldwellkaren@appstate.edu; 828-262-6045). You can also contact IRB Administration (828-262-2692 or irb@appstate.edu) if you have questions about your rights as a research participant.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigator.

The Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved this study and has determined that participation poses a minimal risk to participants.

By continuing to the research procedures, I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years old, have read the above information, and agree to participate.

I agree to participate in the study.

_____   _____

Signature   Date

Appendix D

Topic Outlines for the Four vPLC Meetings

Discussion During the 1st Session

What you will be asked to do during this study.

Risks/discomforts of being in this study.

Benefits of being in this study.

Compensation.

Confidentiality.

Breach of Confidentiality.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns.

Questions.

CASEL and SE Learning.

CASEL Framework.

Professional Development and Purpose.

Our Focus in This Study.

Self-Care Questionnaire.

Your Personal Habits for Self-Care.

Habits and Our Brain.

Action Steps.

Conclusion.

Questions and Final Comments.

Discussion Questions During the 2nd Session

Identify your goal.

      o   Define who you want to become. Ex. I want to become a person who is more thoughtful and has gratitude.

Identify the behavior choices that you want to adopt as a part of your identity.

      o   Ex. What would a gracious and thoughtful person do?

      o   Would a thoughtful and gracious person journal and pray or act mindlessly?

Identify one or two habits that really matter to you and focus all your energy on doing those things well.

      o   Plan very small steps that you will do with clear focus for a long period of time.

      o   Trust yourself because you already know what you need to do to improve in a certain area.

      o   Stay consistent with these very small steps.

      o   Ex. I want to focus on being a more thoughtful and gracious person by journaling and praying daily.

Pair your desired habit with a current/existing habit that you already do each day at the same frequency (daily, two times a day) that you want to do the new habit.

      o   After I (current habit), I will (habit I desire). After I (habit I desire), I will (habit I want).

      o   This way you are rewarding yourself with continued motivation which encourages your will power in small steps to avoid fight/flight/freeze.

- Ex. After I put on my bed clothes (current habit), I will write in my journal for at least 2 minutes (habit I desire). After I write in my journal for 2 minutes (habit I desire), I will listen to my favorite podcast (habit I want).

Create a visual measurement such as a food journal, workout log, calendar, personal journal, marble jar, paper clip jar, habit tracking app etc. How do you plan to track your habit?

- Ex. After I put on my bed clothes, I will write in my journal for at least 2 minutes. After I write in my journal for at least 2 minutes, I will put a bead in the jar on my nightstand and listen to my favorite podcast.

Questions Asked During the 3rd Session to Promote Reflection

Do you believe that you identified an appropriate habit and identity to address?

As you moved throughout your week implementing your small steps:

- How did you feel doing small, easy things on a more consistent basis to master the habit of showing up?
- Were there days that you did less than you hoped?
- Were there days that you did more than you hoped?
- How did this affect any and "all or nothing" thinking?

As you moved throughout your week implementing your small steps:

- Were you able to create a plan before starting? Did the plan help you follow through without procrastinating?
- How did you push through moments of uncertainty, fear, or discomfort?
- Were you able to create reminders, visuals, notes, alarms, or other cues? Were you able to plan the time and space for your habits? How did any of these help?

Was there a day that you felt like you totally messed up?

- o When you reflected on what happened in your day – were you able to determine what went well, what didn't go well, and what you learned?

- o Did you forgive yourself and decide to start again tomorrow?

We also discussed creating a visual measurement such as a food journal, workout log, spending log, personal journal, marble jar, paper clip jar, habit tracking app, etc.

- o How did your method of habit tracking work for you?

Do you have the desire to modify, revise, or refine your current goal?

- o If so, what information will you use to decide what you want to change?

Think about what you would like to change.

- o The goal you are working toward?

- o The length of time you engage (2-minute rule)?

- o The frequency (how many times per day)?

- o The tracking (how you document your progress)?

Was your initial goal to change a habit at home or at work?

- o Do you have the desire to add an additional goal in the other area?

- o It is perfectly fine and ok if you want to stay with the same goal in the same area with the same frequency!

If you want to add to your plan, identify one or two habits that really matter to you (at work or at home) as we did last week, we will focus all our energy on doing these things well.

We will still make our plan to stay consistent with our very small steps.

We must have immediate rewards and immediate cues when creating your goal. We must have consistent cues (current habit) about when to start your behavior (habit I need) and immediate rewards (habit I want).

Questions Asked During the 4th Session to Promote Reflection and Bring Closure

Do you believe that you identified an appropriate habit and identity to address?

As you moved throughout your week implementing your small steps:

- o How did you feel doing small, easy things on a more consistent basis to master the habit of showing up?

- o Were there days that you did less than you hoped?

- o Were there days that you did more than you hoped?

- o How did this affect any and "all or nothing" thinking?

As you moved throughout your week implementing your small steps:

- o Were you able to create a plan before starting? Did the plan help you follow through without procrastinating?

- o How did you push through moments of uncertainty, fear, or discomfort?

- o Were you able to create reminders, visuals, notes, alarms, or other cues? Were you able to plan the time and space for your habits? How did any of these help?

Was there a day that you felt like you totally messed up?

- o When you reflected on what happened in your day – were you able to determine what went well, what didn't go well, and what you learned?

- o Did you forgive yourself and decide to start again tomorrow?

We also discussed creating a visual measurement such as a food journal, workout log, spending log, personal journal, marble jar, paper clip jar, habit tracking app, etc.

- o How did your method of habit tracking work for you?

Do you have the desire to modify, revise, or refine your current goal?

- o If so, what information will you use to decide what you want to change?

Recognize that success isn't a destination. Success is a system that allows us to improve and endlessly refine (Clear, 2018).

Keep these small habits in place and understand that the key to lasting change is to never stop striving to improve (p. 253). The key to atomic habits is "tiny changes, remarkable results" (p. 253).

Self-Care Action Plan

1. Identify your goal. Define who you want to become.

    I want to become a person who:

    [type your response here]

2. Identify the behavior choices that you want to adopt as a part of your identity.   Complete this sentence.

    What would a _____ person do? Would a _____ person _____ or _____?

    [type your response here]

3. Identify one or two habits that really matter to you and focus all your energy on doing these things well. Plan very small steps that you will do well and with a clear focus for a long period of time. Trust yourself because you already know what you need to do to improve in a certain area. Stay consistent with these very small steps. I want to focus on one or two habits

    [type your one or two habits here]

4. Pair your desired habit with a current/existing habit that you already do each day at the same frequency (daily, two times a day) that you want to do the new habit.

    When preparing to complete your new behavior don't take more than 5 minutes to plan/prepare. Plan on engaging with your habit for a time span of at least two minutes.

    Habit Process #1

    After I (current habit) _____, I will (habit I need)_____.

    After I (habit I need) _____, I will (habit I want) _____.

    [type your response here]

    Habit Process #2

    After I (current habit) _____, I will (habit I need)_____.

    After I (habit I need) _____, I will (habit I want) _____.

    [type your response here]

Make habits so easy that you will do them even when you don't feel like it. It is better to do less than you hoped than to do nothing at all.

4. Create a visual measurement such as a food journal, workout log, calendar, personal journal, marble jar, paper clip jar, habit tracking app, etc. How do you plan to track your habit?

[type your response here]

After I (current habit) _____, I will (habit I need)_____. I will (track my habit) by _____.

After I (habit I need) _____, I will (habit I want) _____.

[type your response here]

Avoid all or nothing thinking – if you can't do something perfectly then you shouldn't do it at all. You have a choice in every moment to choose the identity you want to reinforce today with the habits you choose today. Think about the behavior choices that you want to adopt that will move you toward your identity.

Vita

Deirdre Nedene Smith Isom was born in Rocky Mount, North Carolina to Ned and Mildred Smith. She graduated from Madison High School in May 1987. The following autumn she entered East Carolina University where she studied English and in May 1993, she was awarded the Bachelor of Arts degree. The following autumn, she entered Elizabeth City State University to obtain her teaching license. In December 1994 she received her teaching license. January 1995, she began her career in education as a 6th grade teacher. In the fall of 1998, she began study toward a Master of Science degree at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University. The M.S. was awarded May 2004. Her work in education began as a school counselor. In May 2007 she entered High Point University to obtain her school administrative license and received this in December 2008. In May 2013 she commenced work toward her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University. Deirdre is an active member of Hope Community Church in Winston-Salem, NC. She resides in Greensboro, NC with her husband, cat, and dog. She and her husband have two married adult children and one grandson.