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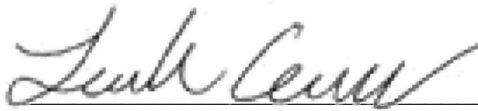
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THE CARE AND KEEPING OF TEACHERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY  
OF EDUCATOR SELF-CARE

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By  
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in  
Interdisciplinary Leadership

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Omaha, NE  
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## Abstract

Being an educator can be both challenging and rewarding. Teaching requires skill, commitment, relationship, and stamina. Occupational standards within education consistently set high expectations for teachers without concretely promoting self-care. When a teacher's stress and burdens continuously outweigh their ability to care for themselves, burnout, compassion fatigue, and chronic stress symptoms arise while well-being and teacher functioning are diminished. Although studies on educator wellness and resilience have increased over the past several years, more must be known about the needs and struggles educators face when practicing and developing self-care. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the phenomenon of self-care as it related to the lived experiences of K-12 educators in the U.S. The study sample consisted of 13 teachers representing the states of Montana, Idaho, Wisconsin, and Florida. The data collected was coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. Data analysis resulted in six major themes and three sub-themes describing contextual and education system impacts on teacher stress and self-care, multidimensional educator self-care, self-care as a relational construct, the significant effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher self-care, the most prevalent barriers, and creating cultures of self-care in schools. The findings offer six key insights regarding educator self-care and inform the identified solution – the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap. The Roadmap provides six guideposts with tangible practices that administrators, educators, and leaders can implement to better support holistic and teacher-centered self-care initiatives that care for the whole teacher.

*Keywords:* Educator Self-Care, Resilience, Multidimensional Self-Care, Occupational Stress in Education, Cultures of Self-Care

## Dedication

To my husband, Shawn. You have been steadfast in your encouragement, and unwavering in your belief in my capabilities. Thank you for supporting this educational journey and helping me make this happen in innumerable ways. To my children, Aden, Asher, and Mirabelle. You each inspire me every day to grow, learn, and live each moment to its fullest. I love you all, mucho, mucho!

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Finally, I offer my sincere thanks to the educators who participated in this study. Your powerful stories, your wholehearted care for your work, and the students whose lives you have changed for the better will stay with me always. Keep taking good care! Kelley Milton, Kristin Dantagnan, and Susie Vaughan - a special thanks to each of you for serving as my teacher consultants and field experts. Your generosity of time and expertise were essential to the success of this study.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Self-care is more than an intermittent luxury; it is a necessity for optimal personal and professional functioning (The International Self-Care Foundation, 2020).

Holistically, self-care encompasses the physical, emotional, psychological, social, professional, environmental, spiritual, and financial domains of an individual's functioning (Taylor, 2020). The International Self-Care Foundation (ISF) (2020) frames self-care as the habits and actions individuals take to establish and promote health and well-being. Approaches for caring for oneself include maintaining health and well-being through preventative measures, health literacy that is inclusive of physical, mental, and emotional health, and responsive interventions that address areas of illness or concern as they arise (World Health Organization, 2020).

In the human service fields of medicine, nursing, psychology, and social work, practicing self-care is considered an ethical imperative and a critical area of professional development. The topic of self-care as it relates to resilience has gained traction in the professional spheres of leadership and education as well (Aguilar, 2018). Professionally and ethically speaking, Dorociak et al. (2017) have asserted that "Self-care is defined as a multidimensional, multifaceted process of purposeful engagement in strategies that promote healthy functioning and enhance well-being" (p. 326). The focus of this study was self-care as it relates to educators, and the combined realms of psychology, social work, and education research and practice informed the following process of inquiry.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed by this study was the occupational stress that occurs for educators when the ethical guidelines and professional training objectives convey high

expectations for teachers and educators-in-training without consistently highlighting, presenting, or actively fostering self-care as a crucial preventative measure against stress effects and burnout, and as an area of professional and personal development (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Lopez, 2017; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Although more schools are investing in wellness programs for their staff, these programs focus most often on physical activity and health related approaches that do not incorporate self-care and well-being across various dimensions like mental and emotional well-being, mindfulness, work-life balance, and stress reduction (Lever et al., 2017). While ethical and educational system standards in the profession are high, understanding and practice regarding educator self-care are incomplete (Lopez, 2016).

The professions of psychology and of education set clear standards of practice in their operating codes of ethics. The American Psychological Association (APA) Code of Ethics articulates the principles of Beneficence and Nonmaleficence, which require that professionals under its purview work single-mindedly toward a client's or patient's best interest and commit to doing no harm (American Psychological Association, 2020a). These principles also state that each practitioner must be self-aware regarding individual struggles in functioning and address these accordingly through appropriate self-care (Posluns & Gall, 2019). Likewise, the National Education Association (NEA) Code of Ethics relays that educators are ethically committed to placing their students' betterment and their profession above personal gain and biases. The preamble of the NEA Code points out that educators must believe in the inherent value of their students while striving for excellence, fairness, and fidelity in their profession (National Education Association, 2019).

The APA and NEA ethical principles presented above emphasize an external focus toward serving or teaching others without speaking directly to the value of the educator or human service professional's well-being in the pursuit of educational or professional success. Foundational to the human services and education professions is an ethic of care, and a moral ideal of selflessness (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). There are consequences related to issuing such professional requirements without acknowledging and supporting the humanistic importance of self-care and well-functioning. One such effect is the limited ability of educators and human service practitioners to meet their personal care needs and to process their experiences, personal pain, or fatigue without judgment or the fear of professional ramifications (Lever et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2019).

Self-care for educators encompasses habits, routines, and actions that enhance an individual's ability to lead, teach, and support oneself and the well-being of others (Aguilar, 2018; Dorociak et al., 2017; Kuebel, 2019). Self-care also includes setting healthy boundaries and upholding personal and professional conditions that promote ethical and effective decision-making (Dorociak et al., 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Although self-care is essential for developing resilience and longevity as a professional in the field of education, more information and awareness are needed regarding educators' knowledge and perceptions of self-care, and of what areas of support and understanding are most impactful in enhancing self-care for educators (Aguilar, 2018; Dorociak et al., 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

Additionally, leadership and professional development in the educational setting are becoming increasingly focused on integrating trauma-informed practice, emotional

intelligence, and humanistic leadership strategies emphasizing relationship, compassion, and vulnerability into traditional settings (Brown, 2018; Northouse, 2016). In this evolving context, optimal personal and professional functioning involves creating a culture of self-care to help stave off compassion fatigue, burnout, and stress impairment (Lopez, 2016). If teachers, administrators, and educational systems are striving to maximize the well-being and learning capacity of the students and communities they serve, it stands to reason that a deeper understanding of educator self-care will aid in the above pursuit by fostering professional excellence, resilience, and career longevity (Aguilar, 2018; Tantillo et al., 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine educator self-care in the United States. The lived experiences of K-12 teachers were highlighted. Barriers to practicing self-care and the current societal context of how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting schools and teachers was also explored.

The field of education is considered one of the most stressful professions. Teachers face educational mandates and high expectations to support and shape students' social, emotional, and academic learning which can be as taxing as it is rewarding (Kempf, 2018; Koenig et al., 2018). When a teacher's burdens and professional demands outweigh their ability to cope, the stress can become toxic and negatively impact an individual's mental, physical, behavioral, and relational wellbeing (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017). Self-care can mitigate the effects of fatigue and stress, support teacher longevity in the field, and promote healthy school cultures (Kempf, 2018; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Researching self-care practices and barriers for educators has

the potential to bring to light the self-care needs, challenges, and hopes that matter most to teachers. The qualitative approach of this study with open-ended interview questions and researcher-interviewee rapport-building facilitated deeper sharing regarding what teachers' experiences were related to the phenomenon of self-care, contributing to the field of social science inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The knowledge offered by this study has the potential to inform priorities and decision-making for teachers, teacher educators, administrators, mentors, and educational system leaders (Aguilar, 2018).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

**RQ1.** What are the lived experiences of K-12 educators in the United States regarding self-care?

**RQ2.** What barriers to self-care do K-12 educators in the United States experience?

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study was three-fold. The first was to intentionally give voice to the experiences and self-care needs of educators. The second objective was to explore how the current context of COVID-19 has impacted the self-care and well-functioning of teachers and educators. Lastly, this study aimed to provide transformative best practices and guideposts for creating self-care cultures within learning communities (Aguilar, 2018; Lopez, 2016).

Self-care for career longevity and optimal functioning is often mentioned yet rarely discussed in detail (Lopez, 2017). General societal assumptions regarding self-care are incomplete and often dimensionally limited to physical health and fitness (Lever et

al., 2017). Likewise, the role of an educator calls for a process of caring for students and members of the learning community that is not unlike the caring relationship formed between a counselor or social worker and the individuals they serve (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) described this process as the Cycle of Caring. The Cycle of Caring includes developing empathy and a genuine attachment to students, actively working with and for the betterment of students, experiencing grief or loss when students move on in both expected or unexpected ways, and engaging in self-renewal for continued growth (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Because of the emotional labor inherent in the relationships formed by educators, self-care and wellness measures are paramount to teacher efficacy (Larrivee, 2012).

The continual process of connecting and letting go while experiencing stressors and rewards throughout the school year or the course of a career requires educator resilience and self-compassion, along with support and understanding from others. Teachers also necessitate support, awareness, and proactive promotion of wellness and self-care initiative by districts, schools, organizations, and educational systems (Aguilar, 2018). Santana and Fouad (2017) also argued that without increased knowledge of self-care behavior and a framework for building competencies in this area of professional functioning, those who work within fields like education are ill-prepared to navigate the inherent occupational stress and emotional fatigue. Lack of understanding and competency skills regarding intentional and consistent self-care, in turn, limit a practitioner's ability to ward off professional impairment (Santana & Fouad, 2017). With the above realities in mind, the ultimate goal of researching this subject matter as it

related to educators was to serve as an instrument of change in transforming individual and organizational awareness regarding the prioritization of educator self-care.

### **Definition of Relevant Terms**

The following terms were used operationally within this study.

*Anticipatory Grief:* Anticipatory grief refers to feelings of grief and loss associated with a predicted loss such as the end of a school year or an anticipated closure of a relationship (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

*Compassion Fatigue:* Compassion fatigue describes a cumulative state of drain, tension, and preoccupation with the traumas and struggles of those served professionally. It is categorized by feelings of avoidance, re-experiencing details, chronic arousal, diminished interest, and helplessness (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

*Culture of Self-Care:* A professional culture of self-care promotes a preventative stance to well-functioning that acknowledges an individual's holistic needs while honing skills and offering resources for organization members to face personal and professional stressors (Barnett et al., 2007; Lopez, 2017).

*Culture of Wellness:* A professional culture of wellness promotes opportunities for professional development, connection, and workplace programming that supports healthy functioning in various areas of health and wellness (Lopez, 2017).

*Educator/Teacher Efficacy:* This form of efficacy is an educator's perceived ability to have successful teaching outcomes in the context of various educational and student circumstances (Mankin et al., 2018).

*Mindfulness:* Mindfulness is active and present attention to sensations, reactions, and options; moment-to-moment awareness of oneself and others (Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019).

*Occupational Burnout:* Occupational burnout, as classified in the International Classification of Diseases Manual (ICD-11), is a syndrome that affects three dimensions of workplace functioning: lowered energy levels, pessimistic attitudes toward work, and diminished effectiveness (World Health Organization, 2019).

*Professional Impairment:* Professional impairment is when distress, symptoms of burnout, untreated mental health conditions, and self-neglect over time result in reduced professional competence and ethical decision-making abilities (Barnett et al., 2007).

*Psychological Safety:* Psychological safety relates to safety and security regarding the human needs of trust, self-esteem, autonomy, and safe interpersonal connections (Hydon et al., 2015).

*Resilience:* Resilience consists of the habits, mindsets, and ways of being that allow a person to rebound, strengthen from, and grow from adversity (Aguilar, 2018).

*Secondary Traumatic Stress:* This effect refers to the stress experienced by professionals and those who care for and about people who have experienced primary trauma and abuse. Apart from experiencing the central traumatic event, secondary traumatic stress symptoms are almost identical to symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

*Self-Care:* According to Dorociak et al. (2017), "Self-care is defined as a multidimensional, multifaceted process of purposeful engagement in strategies that promote healthy functioning and enhance well-being" (p. 326). This definition

acknowledges that personal and professional self-care are overlapping and best practiced consistently and proactively (Dorociak et al., 2017).

*Self-Reflection:* Self-reflection entails evaluating and appraising one's experiences, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to increase insight and enhance performance (Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019).

*Teacher Burnout:* In the field of education, teacher burnout is a health syndrome that presents as emotional or teaching fatigue, irritability, depersonalization, apathy towards duties, and reduced compassion for self and others (Koenig et al., 2018).

*Toxic Stress:* Toxic stress results when the demands of a person chronically outweigh the resources possessed to meet these demands (Harmsen et al., 2018).

*Wellness:* Wellness is a health paradigm that encompasses optimal functioning in the areas of physical, occupational, social, relational, and spiritual well-being (Lucas, 2017).

*Work/Life Balance:* Positive psychology describes work-life balance as the perspective that work and other aspects of employees' lives are not mutually exclusive, and that balance in other areas promotes high professional functioning (Dorociak et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2017).

### **Methodology Overview**

A qualitative methodology was used for this research study. Qualitative research is focused on the lived experiences and perceptions of a study population (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This study design employed a phenomenological research approach. Phenomenological studies strive to examine the lived experiences of a population in relation to a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological design

for this dissertation in practice provided an inductive means to study the phenomenon of teacher self-care through identifying insights and patterns to understand better the experiences, needs, and realities faced within the education profession (Babbie, 2017). A more in-depth exploration of educators' lived experiences and perspectives provided greater breadth and depth in understanding the subject of educator self-care (Yin, 2017).

Participants consisted of K-12 educators in the United States. Sample sizes in qualitative studies are smaller than in quantitative research to allow for a deeper study of individuals' responses and expressions (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This study's research sample consisted of 13 teacher participants. Utilizing a snowball recruitment strategy, participants were recruited with permission through social media groups specifically for educators, as well as through social media sharing of this researcher and via the researcher's professional contacts in the field of education (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2017). A clear and informative recruitment post was designed, utilized, and posted through social media for this study with mindfulness toward upholding continuity of recruitment messaging (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Consistent with the inductive nature of phenomenology, participant interviews were a critical component of this study's design and data gathering process (Babbie, 2017). The interview protocol for this study consisted of semi-structured and fluid interviews encouraging participants to subjectively interpret questions and formulate answers that felt genuine and relevant (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As the researcher, I guided each respondent through fifteen predetermined open-ended questions. One-on-one interviews were conducted via the Zoom video call platform, and each interview was recorded and transcribed with permission. Data was collected and analyzed using field

journaling and note-taking, reviewing each Zoom interview recording, reviewing and validating the interview transcripts, and coding data using Quirkos qualitative data analysis software (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2016). A five-step data analysis plan adapted from Creswell and Poth (2018) was implemented in conjunction a 6-step Thematic Analysis to represent and report the study's results and findings (Babbie, 2017; Braun & Clark, 2012; Fischer, 2009; Yin, 2016).

### **Delimitations, Limitations, and Personal Biases**

One delimitation of this study was limiting the scope of research to K-12 educators in the United States. Although self-care is relevant to global educators of all levels, limiting the population kept the scope to one country while allowing for a variety of states in the U.S. to be included. Only four states were represented in this study. Another delimitation of this study was the use of social media as the predominant recruitment strategy. Social media was a less personal and potentially less accessible medium for recruiting interested participants.

Limitations of this study centered predominantly around COVID-19 restrictions and methodological constraints. Because of the current pandemic, all interviews were conducted virtually. Although the interviews were structured to acknowledge the stress COVID-19 has caused educators, this stress and the lack of face-to-face rapport building nonetheless added to the Zoom fatigue many respondents were already feeling and served as a barrier at the recruitment stage. Methodologically, the smaller sample size of a qualitative study is known to present less reliability but more validity than other types of analyses. The data gathered from this study's 13 participants offered relevant information and insights though the perspectives were limited due to geographical location as well as

gender and racial homogeneity. Rather than generating statistical measures from a large population, this study provided a greater depth of understanding widely applicable to the experiences of other educators (Babbie, 2017).

As an interdisciplinary scholar-practitioner, my career as a mental health therapist offered me a unique perspective on the self-care needs of helping professionals. My professional background also introduced bias into this study in the form of an assumption and judgement held regarding self-care being an independent venture rather than something that was supported and practiced in relationships and community. Handling researcher bias was addressed in Chapter Three. Although I felt comfortable conducting clinical interviews without following a firm structure, I used a semi-structured interview protocol that ensured that my researcher interactions with participants were study-focused rather than therapeutic or clinical (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Another way I reduced the possible bias introduced by my background in mental health was to conduct interviews and data collection in a systematic, predetermined, and uniform manner (Babbie, 2017). Bracketing before data collection, in concert with using the technique of the hermeneutic circle throughout coding and data analysis cycles were employed to bring biases and assumptions to the forefront (Fischer, 2009; Peoples, 2020). Bracketing and the hermeneutic circle in conjunction with field journaling and thematic analysis promoted purposeful examination of my inner thoughts, reactions, impressions, and learning throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2016). Lastly, utilizing standardized recruitment posts as a quality measure provided a clear, concise description of the study regardless of where on social media the request was posted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner

As I reflected in anticipation of conducting research on this topic that I hold with high importance, I considered the research and learnings I had gathered through my doctoral studies on self-care and educators. I thought about the various processes and steps that support sound research and reminded myself to lean into the experience of being a learner and novice researcher and not yet a knower of how to design a complete study and write a dissertation in practice. I was reminded, at every phase and stage of research that it would take courage and vulnerability to trust in the unfolding of this process, and I held the contributing teachers and their stories as the inspiration to continue this process of openness and discovery (Aguilar, 2018; Brown, 2018).

Throughout the writing of and research for this dissertation in practice, I revisited my *why* for studying the topic of self-care as it related to teachers. My *why* was to shed light on the subject that was under-represented in the literature regarding educators, and to give voice to the needs of educators as human service professionals. In the midst of my dissertation, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, impacting the education system and educators in undeniable and unforeseen ways. My *why* - the heart of this study - became underpinned with greater compassion for the work of teachers, honor for the stamina and grit needed to teach in the U.S., and urgency to tell and amplify the stories and experiences of the participants in this study. In tandem, I continuously recalled, as touchstones, the elements of qualitative research, ethical self-care, and humanistic leadership I learned throughout my doctoral studies which continued to inform my leadership lens. I applied a humanistic leadership perspective and witnessed myself

embodying the research process as a humanist and leadership scholar dedicated to well-functioning and the development of self-care across professions.

Palmer (2000) advised, "Self-care is never a selfish act - it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch" (p. 30). This quote inspired my research and continues to guide me to care for myself while supporting and researching the care of others as a way to enrich and inform the beneficial work that educators do in the world. I began this dissertation journey with nervousness, excitement, and reverence for entering my dissertation phase at Creighton University. I conclude this stage of my studies with greater humility and understanding of what it means to lead and live from the Jesuit values of *Magis*, *Cura Personalis*, and *Unity of Heart, Mind, and Soul*.

### **Summary**

Working in the field of education is both rewarding and demanding. Although educators must place the needs of their students before their own, this does not mean that educators must overlook self-care (Lever et al., 2017). The study outlined in this dissertation gathered current data and information regarding the self-care experiences of educators in the United States as a way to guide and inform individual and organizational support of teacher self-care and well-being. A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted, and greater depth of understanding of this subject matter was gained as a result (Babbie, 2017). The ultimate hope of this research was to contribute to increased self-care and resilience among educators while promoting the creation of more cultures of care within our systems of education (Aguilar, 2018; Lopez, 2017).

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem addressed in this study is the struggle and reduced well-being educators experience when occupational and personal stress is caused by high professional expectations and education system standards (Lever et al., 2017). The problem is compounded when high expectations are placed on educators without administrators and leaders consistently understanding or promoting self-care as a proactive and preventative measure for coping with and transforming stress (Aguilar, 2018; Barnett et al., 2007; Lever et al., 2017; Lopez, 2017; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Moreover, varied to limited significance is placed on educator self-care as a pertinent area of professional and personal development for teachers (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Lopez, 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the subject of self-care from the perspective of K-12 educators in the United States. A phenomenological approach centered on educator interviews was utilized for this study to better understand how U.S. educators practice self-care and what barriers or challenges impact teacher self-care (Babbie, 2017).

According to the World Health Organization (2020), Americans lack wellness and self-care in many areas, revealing a need for more considerable attention and guidance, in general, to promote self-initiated healthy functioning. From a public health perspective, addressing issues of well-being and professional functioning for teachers and educators is urgent and essential considering the compounding nature of occupational stress in the United States and the field of education (Lever et al., 2017). Although healthy, productive forms of stress and striving can motivate change and inspire learning, not all

stress provides incentive for improvement and diligence (Lever et al., 2017). Lever et al. (2017) articulated that when workplace stress and demands for educators outweigh an individual's internal and external resources, the pressure creates a toxic, chronic state of being for teachers causing difficulties in various aspects of life. The long-term effects of prolonged toxic stress and a lack of self-care is impaired function, mental health concerns, relationship struggles, unhealthy coping patterns, and burnout (Barnett et al., 2007). Burnout increases psychological and emotional distress while reducing other aspects of physical health and wellness (World Health Organization, 2020). Symptoms of occupational stress are of such significance, the condition of burnout is now formally recognized in the International Classification of Diseases Manual (ICD-11) (World Health Organization, 2019). Amplifying teacher self-care as a priority for occupational well-functioning was a guiding tenet of this study's conceptual perspective.

Salient areas of consideration about self-care, teacher wellness, and resilience in this study related to framing self-care as a construct, understanding the impacts of occupational stress and educator burnout, and fostering cultures that promote teacher well-functioning and self-care (Aguilar, 2018; Barnett et al., 2007; Lever et al., 2017; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). The following literature review discusses the conceptual frameworks shaping this study and examines research and academic knowledge on operationalizing self-care, the effects of stress on educators, and educator resilience and well-being. The search terms used included *self-care*, *ethical and professional self-care*, *educator self-care*, *teacher stress*, *burnout*, *compassion fatigue*, *secondary trauma*, *well-being*, and *resilience in education*. The databases used

included the Creighton University Library JaySearch engines, PsycLIT, EBSCO, Taylor & Francis, and Google Scholar.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The disciplines of psychology, social work, medicine, nursing, and humanitarian work integrate concepts of self-care and resilience into their professional frameworks (Dorociak et al., 2017; O'Shea et al., 2020; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016; Wagnild, Rodriguez, & Pritchett, 1987). The self-care lenses chosen for this dissertation in practice are derived from the perspectives of social work, educator resilience, and leadership development. Three specific viewpoints inform the conceptual framework for this study: Aguilar's (2018) Conceptual Framework for Teacher Resilience, Lee and Miller's (2013) Social Worker Self-Care Framework, and Humanistic Leadership principles. Integrating the three perspectives above for this study's conceptual framework addressed the interrelated personal and professional self-care needs and challenges teachers face, the contextual, organizational, and systemic influences on how self-care is framed and promoted for teachers, and the value of prioritizing self-care from a leadership perspective. This study explored the multiple factors that impact self-care behaviors, attitudes, and work cultures (Aguilar, 2018; Barnett et al., 2007).

Aguilar's (2018) conceptual model for teacher resilience informed this self-care study by underscoring four components of teacher well-functioning. The first is who a teacher is personally in terms of traits and values; the second, where a teacher is contextually and professionally; third, what habits of self-care and coping a teacher employs; and finally, how self-aware and reflective a teacher is in disposition. From a transformative perspective, educator resilience entailed shifting toward and supporting

self-care and renewal strategies on the individual, organizational, and systemic levels to promote cultures of self-care and well-being (Aguilar, 2018; Barnett et al., 2007).

According to Aguilar (2018), cultivating individual resilience was a distinct first point of power for educators in engaging in the mindsets, habits, and practices that mitigate and address burnout, compassion fatigue, or a chronic sense of distress. Organizational or school conditions were also needed to support individual resilience and wellness while proactively promoting work settings and learning communities that embodied optimal well-being (Aguilar, 2018). Ultimately, Aguilar (2018) purported that systemic promotion of teacher wellness and resilience involved addressing the political, societal, and economic structures that impact educators. Addressing teacher resilience within the spheres of individual, organizational, and systemic influence by improving self-care and well-being aided in transforming education settings, promoting career longevity for teachers, and fostering school cultures of well-being (Aguilar, 2018; Kempf, 2018).

Although the teaching profession is different from social work, elements from Lee and Miller's (2013) Self-Care Framework for Social Work applied to the exploration of educator self-care. In alignment with Lee and Miller's (2013) framework, this study presumed that intentional and preventative self-care is essential for holistic well-functioning, ethical decision-making, and optimal professional functioning. Also present was the assumption that personal and professional self-care are interdependent and dynamic spheres, not separate or isolated facets of well-being. Finally, this study views self-care development for teachers as not only a professional or ethical imperative but as a self-efficacy tool and pathway to empowerment and career longevity as an education practitioner (Barnett et al., 2007; Lee & Miller, 2013).

Lastly, humanistic leadership was the guiding leadership theoretical orientation of this study. Humanism is the birthplace of positive psychology, the arm of the social sciences that has made significant contributions to educational leadership (Acevedo, 2018). Humanistic and positive psychology tenets include social and emotional intelligence in leadership, organizational development based on transformation principles, and strength-based teaching and supervision strategies (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). A humanistic leadership philosophy values the holistic well-being of all people and endeavors to support the development and worth of everyone within an organization (Northouse, 2016; Tsao, 2018).

Educational leadership from a humanistic lens involves moving away from bureaucratic approaches that impose conformity and consider personal and professional growth to be mutually exclusive (Hamel & Zanini, 2020). Instead, humanistic educational leadership entails moving toward policies and practices that encourage creativity and wholeness as aligned with organizational missions (Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Northouse, 2016). Leading through a humanistic lens acknowledges and fosters the mental, emotional, and physical needs of others and the dynamics that affect individuals within social or cultural contexts as an organizational priority (Northouse, 2016). Humanistic leadership theory guided this study of self-care for educators from a person-centered and holistic perspective that values integrating and caring for all parts of an individual to benefit the whole profession (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

### **The Concept of Self-Care**

Self-care is the intentional act of caring for oneself consistently, ethically, beneficially, and across situations (Lee & Miller, 2013; Kuebel, 2019). Defining,

operationalizing, and describing a phenomenon's relevance are critical components of inquiry in the social sciences (Dorociak et al., 2017). The authors of the literature reviewed in this chapter unequivocally called for more studies regarding the professional and personal impacts of holistic self-care (Dorociak et al, 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Santana & Fouad, 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017). The studies reviewed showed that educators expressed a need to better understand and gain competency-skills for practicing and prioritizing self-care (Koenig et al., 2018; Kuebel, 2019; Lopez, 2017). The following section examines definitions of self-care, dimensions of human functioning, and the effects of both adequate and lacking levels of self-care. Barriers, considerations, and recommendations for future study and progress are also included.

### **Self-Care Defined**

Self-care was predominantly defined as a multifaceted process of intentionally applying actions, tools, and energy to well-being and optimal human functioning (Dorociak et al., 2017; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). Efforts and research centered on better defining and categorizing self-care have included the concept as a multidimensional process of decision-making and development (Dorociak et al., 2017; Lopez, 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020). The practice of self-care was seen as active, behavioral engagement, and embodying a way of being that demonstrated a caring and compassionate approach to oneself. Proactively caring for oneself meant developing the ability to practice care across various dimensions while seeking out resources and accepting assistance when needed (Dorociak et al., 2017; Neimeyer & Taylor, 2019; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). The viewpoint that self-care is the active, regular practice of and engagement in habits and choices that promote well-being

in all areas of life was reiterated throughout psychology-centered research on the subject (Bettney, 2017; Lopez, 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020).

Self-care was framed as a professional imperative for those working in the human services that must uphold personal and professional self-care as interrelated rather than separate realms of being (Lee & Miller, 2013; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019; Zahniser et al., 2017). Dorociak et al.'s (2017) study supported the above assertion and presented findings showing that a strictly defined personal and professional self-care domain did not exist and that self-care across both domains interact for lowering stress and increasing overall satisfaction in work and life. Newell (2018) further supported integrating personal and professional self-care definitions and stated that holistic, multi-domain or multidimensional self-care is the ability to care for oneself personally, relationally, physically, and spiritually to effect positive professional outcomes and boundaries. Studies defining self-care repeatedly challenged the impression that personal life and professional functioning are separate realms of human experience and action (Barnett, 2007; Santana & Fouad, 2017). Wholeness and balance as an individual and as an educator are reinforced by self-care complete, mindful, and growth-centered definitions (Dweck, 2016; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

### **Interrelated Domains of Self-Care**

One of the most notable scales developed in psychology was Dorociak et al.'s (2017) Professional Self-Care Scale (PSCS). Dorociak et al. (2017) developed the PSCS to validate and reliably measure the construct of self-care and differentiate personal from professional self-care. Developing the PSCS entailed generating items and analyzing factors to construct a measurement tool representative of both expert feedback and

comprehensive statistical analysis from study participants' responses regarding self-care (Dorociak et al., 2017). Through the course of creating the Professional Self-Care Scale (PSCS), Dorociak et al. (2017) captured five statistically significant domains representing both categories of personal and professional self-care. The domains that emerged from the study's analysis of factors were professional support, professional development, life balance, cognitive strategies, and daily balance. The researchers found little statistical significance between the efficacy of personal self-care activities and professional strategies as both presented as relevant and interconnected (Dorociak et al., 2017).

Likewise, Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison's (2016) Skovholt Practitioner Professional Resiliency and Self-Care Inventory measured vitality and stress in both the personal and professional spheres reinforcing the interrelated nature of these practices to holistic well-functioning. Additional researchers and scale developers used the PSCS as a model framework for different studies and others, like Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016), advanced unique measurement tools and assessments, revealing differing and also overlapping construct domains (Kuebel, 2019; Neimeyer & Taylor, 2019; Santana & Fouad, 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016; Zahniser et al., 2017). The domains that emerged in the literature reviewed for this Dissertation in Practice (DIP) included physical, mental and emotional, life balance, support and help-seeking behavior, self-awareness, social and relational connection, and spiritual self-care.

### ***Physical Self-Care***

The domain of physical self-care presented in the literature included focused attention toward sleep, nutrition, hydration, exercise, and physical health and fitness (Kuebel, 2019; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Sleep hygiene practices like regular bedtimes,

sufficient sleep each night, and refraining from technology and screens in the evening were linked to burnout prevention (Newell, 2018; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Lucas, 2017). Physical activity and a healthy diet were also identified as protective factors that contributed to proactive well-functioning for human service professionals (Dorociak et al., 2017; Kuebel, 2019; Lever et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Additional behaviors in this category encompassed resting when tired or not feeling well, taking breaks or vacations, and spending time in nature or with views outdoors (Kuebel, 2019; Santana & Fouad, 2017). Incidentally, Dorociak et al.'s (2017) study reported that physical self-care did not emerge as a statistically significant factor concluding that a better measure of this domain would have been through a composite health and lifestyle assessment rather than the individual items included in the factor analysis.

### ***Mental and Emotional Self-Care***

The mental and emotional domains of self-care highlighted awareness and nurturance of one's thoughts, feelings, and psychological needs (Dorociak et al., 2017; Santana & Fouad, 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017). Included in this dimension were practices related to emotional regulation, cognitive reappraisal, healthy self-soothing, and intentionally participating in activities that acknowledge and support psychological and behavioral well-being (Bettney, 2017; Kuebel, 2019; Dorociak et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Santana & Fouad, 2017). Cognitive care further included promoting thoughts and internal self-talk that is supportive and strength-centered (Hydon et al., 2015; Kempf, 2018; Santana & Fouad, 2017). Finally, adaptability, coping with uncertainty, utilizing self-compassion, and goal-setting also represented self-care in the domains of emotional

and mental care (Neimeyer & Taylor, 2019; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019).

### ***Life Balance as Self-Care***

Life balance as a domain described self-care that extends physical, emotional, and psychological well-being through decision-making and discernment regarding time and energy devoted to professional, academic, and personal activities and responsibilities (Dorociak et al., 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017). Self-care focused on life balance includes nurturing interests outside of work or school, devoting time to actions based on values and priorities, practicing boundaries, taking time off for rest and renewal, and developing supportive work habits and settings (Posluns & Gall, 2020; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). Participating in fulfilling growth opportunities and interacting with uplifting and enjoyable people were also identified under this domain (Dorociak et al., 2017; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019).

### ***Professional Support and Social-Relational Connections***

Support and help-seeking self-care activities dovetailed with social and relational self-care. Professional, academic, and personal support systems were critical to maintaining well-functioning in various areas for human service professionals (Dorociak et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Zahniser et al., 2017). Self-care in the forms of nurturing robust social, professional support systems, and fostering self-honesty regarding stressors and distress tolerance related to well-functioning among participants (Lee & Miller, 2013; Zahniser et al., 2017). Moreover, maintaining healthy and supportive relationships, including friendship and familial ties, enhanced the balance sphere of self-care (Bettney, 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020). In the workplace, these

support and connection domains demonstrated self-care aimed at reducing isolation, asking for assistance when fatigued or distressed, and seeking professional help or coaching (Bettney, 2017; Dorociak et al., 2017; Kuebel, 2019; Zahniser et al., 2017).

### ***Self-Awareness and Self-Reflection***

Self-awareness as a self-care priority was discussed as activities that build professional competency and overall resilience (Dorociak et al., 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017). Self-awareness as a domain incorporated self-understanding regarding the demands of one's profession, honest appraisal efforts about the toll that human service work can take, and setting realistic expectations about what one can and cannot be responsible for in the service of helping others (Dorociak et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Fostering self-awareness regarding stressors and distress tolerance related to well-functioning among practitioners and required healthy vulnerability and self-acceptance (Bettney, 2017; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019; Zahniser et al., 2017). Daily self-reflection practices were detailed as critical to professional development, healthy career maturation, and integrated self-knowledge (Posluns & Gall, 2020; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019).

### ***Spiritual Self-Care***

Similarly, the spiritual self-care domain entailed self-reflection and self-attunement (Bettney, 2017; Kuebel, 2019; Santana & Fouad, 2017). The category of spirituality extended beyond religious practice to the continuous pursuit of making meaning and anchoring to one's higher or altruistic reason for working and teaching others (Hydon, 2015; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Specific strategies included prayer, meditation, time in nature, participating in a community with others possessing similar

values, journaling, and cultivating a daily gratitude practice (Kuebel, 2019; Posluns & Gall, 2020). The domains and approaches highlighted in the above subsections constituted the interdimensional qualities and possibilities of intentional and holistic self-care. Promoting self-care practices across multiple dimensions provided foundational teaching-points and knowledge to enhance professional development, graduate training programs, and individual self-reflection and care planning (Neimeyer & Taylor, 2019).

### **Stress Effects and Self-Care**

The long-term effects of prolonged toxic stress and a lack of self-care can impact all aspects of an individual's life. Per the research, insufficient self-care over time or during critical periods resulted in personal and professional disturbances including impaired function and decision-making, symptoms of depression and anxiety, substance use, relationship struggles, and unhealthy coping patterns (Bettney, 2017; Dorociak et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Lack of self-care was related to higher levels of professional distress as well as chronic symptoms of burnout, exhaustion, and emotional fatigue (Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). When self-care was sub-optimal and stress was not addressed, practitioners had lowered optimism and over-identified with their professional role of serving others (Bettney, 2017). Behavioral rigidity increased along with isolation and the development of mental health conditions (Bettney, 2017; Dorociak et al., 2017). Within the context of psychology or social work professionals, the cumulative effects of not practicing proactive self-care included negative affect, higher rates of burnout, and increased susceptibility to practitioner impaired judgement and diminished ethical decision-making which increased the risk of negatively impacting patients or clients (Barnett et al., 2007; Posluns & Gall, 2020).

The literature indicated that intentional and proactive self-care promoted balance and career longevity directly contributing to resilience and the ability for individuals to reset in the midst of adversity (Lopez, 2017; Newell, 2018; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). Proactive and preventative self-care in the helping professions increased optimism, mitigated occupational stress, promoted accurate self-assessment, and resulted in higher quality care of others (Posluns & Gall, 2020; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). The same was posited for graduate students and professionals-in-training (Santana & Fouad, 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017). Specifically, researchers reviewed found that greater self-care among graduate students or professionals-in-training correlated with a higher sense of individual well-being, better perceived progress academically, and lessened stress effects (Harmsen et al., 2018; Miller and Flint-Stipp, 2019; Zahniser et al., 2017). Additionally, students practiced self-care more proactively and with more success in programs where the culture included and encouraged an emphasis and model for practicing self-care (Dorociak et al., 2017; Harmsen et al., 2018; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Zahniser et al., 2017). Professional resilience, career longevity, social connections, and meaning outside of work strengthened and were upheld through self-care across the various stages of personal and professional development (Dorociak et al., 2017; Newell, 2018; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

### **Barriers to Practicing Self-Care**

Several barriers to practicing self-care emerged in the literature. Barriers included individual internal beliefs or inhibitions along with external organizational or systemic obstacles (Miller and Flint-Stipp, 2019; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Personal barriers to self-care included characteristics related to perfectionism, rigid achievement focus, low help-

seeking behavior, and fear of being seen as unprofessional or lacking competence (Bettney, 2017; Lopez, 2017). A fixed mindset and over identification with the professional role as a helper was viewed as a critical barrier to proactive self-care in that it prevented vulnerability and openness to receiving help (Lopez, 2017; Newell, 2018). Additional blocks to self-care for professionals-in-training in psychology and in education were reported as time constraints, guilt, and shame associated with needing care or assistance rather than providing the care or having immediate solutions (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019; Zahniser et al., 2017).

Professional barriers were seen to arise when work settings had high demands on performance without dedicating time and resources for interpersonal care and connection (Bettney, 2017). Systemic politics, budgetary constraints, and cultures of fear and scarcity pressured practitioners to place their needs second to cultural and societal expectations (Bettney, 2017; Lopez, 2017). Organizational imperatives that relegate self-care solely as an ethical obligation were described as incomplete in terms of shifting toward cultures of self-care (Bettney, 2017; Lopez, 2016). Lastly, organization and system models for self-care that relied on reactive professional actions after chronic fatigue and symptoms of burnout developed had limited effectiveness and did not consistently contribute to personal and professional growth (Dorociak et al., 2017; Santana & Fouad, 2017).

### **Best Practices and Recommendations**

Individual, organizational, and systemic attention to practicing, promoting, and modeling self-care was discussed as being in the best interest of the helping professions (Dorociak et al., 2017; Harmsen et al., 2018; Newell, 2018). Newell (2018) imparted that

multi-faceted self-care served the work of human service practitioners, while self-neglect ethically compromised the profession and limited the workforce through attrition and burnout. Proactive and preventative self-care for psychology and school professionals must be emphasized as a best practice and included in policies, professional documents, and in ethical guidelines within the context of schools (Dorociak et al., 2017; Lopez, 2017; Neimeyer & Taylor, 2019). Normalizing self-care personally, professionally, and systemically were recommended for creating self-care cultures that better addressed and acknowledged the needs and demands facing human service practitioners (Bettney, 2017; O'Neal et al., 2018). Holistic approaches that included self-care habits in each domain were recognized as optimal along with creating self-care cultures and best practices based on role-modeling, mentorship, coaching, and both personal and professional identity development (Posluns & Gall, 2020).

Training programs and organizations were encouraged to create cultures of self-care by being attentive to the topic and addressing it at the preparatory, systemic, and professional development levels (Kuebel, 2019; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Boogren (2018), Kuebel (2018), and Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019) spotlighted the benefits and exercise of developing personalized self-care plans for educators and other practitioners that list concrete practices across multiple dimensions and in the context of developmental needs. A focus on experiential or on-the job support of self-care in addition to proactive self-care policies and codes were also recommended as cultural best practices within the profession (Bettney, 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Regarding future research, longitudinal studies across multiple phases of career formation were recommended along

with continued study and research on self-care scales, self-care conceptualization, and the effects of multidimensional self-care (Dorociak et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020).

Per the literature, it was noted that professional training and graduate programs had a strong influence on student self-care and subsequent professional development in the area of self-care (Santana & Fouad, 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017). Programs of higher education could promote cultures of self-care by encouraging peer and professor support, collaboration, communication, and by explicitly teaching self-care skills to students through self-care coursework (Hydon et al., 2015; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019; Zahniser et al., 2017). Self-care is complex, multi-dimensional, and critical for helping professionals and educators. Care for self while caring for others is a constant reality that must be maneuvered with intention, support, and education (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

### **Educator Stress, Burnout, and Efficacy**

Working in the field of education can be as stressful as it is rewarding (Aguilar, 2018). Educators in the U.S. face challenges in the profession brought on by factors in the classroom, organizational climates, and systemic influences. Occupational stress takes a physical, emotional, social, and professional toll on educators and student teachers (Harmsen et al., 2018). Opportunities exist for researchers and leaders to better understand and meet the self-care needs of educators (Koenig et al., 2018).

### **Challenges of the Education Profession**

In addition to lesson planning and instruction, teachers and educational practitioners must navigate student and parental dynamics, classroom management challenges, learning accommodations, and adjustments for the varied developmental, behavioral, and situational needs of students (Harmsen et al., 2018; Lever et al., 2017).

The literature reviewed emphasized that organizational aspects, leadership changes, budgetary constraints, systemic issues, standardized testing pressures, and sociopolitical tensions also weighed on and impacted teachers, other school staff, and administrators (Lever et al., 2017). The multifaceted context of the education profession was depicted as causing stress beyond the attainment and implementation of traditional teaching competencies like curriculum development and instructional strategies (Aguilar, 2018; Harmsen et al., 2018; Lever et al., 2017).

Although new teaching initiatives are meant to enhance student learning, high stress and a lacking emphasis on teacher self-care and wellness had a secondarily negative impact on students questioning the perceived benefits of certain standards (Harmsen et al., 2018). An emphasis on new teaching initiatives tailored to student needs without offering teachers the autonomy and educational materials to achieve success compounded the stress of the job and exacerbated symptoms of fatigue and lowered efficacy (Koenig et al., 2018; Mankin et al., 2018). Student familial struggles and district politics also intensified the mental and emotional load placed on teachers (Lever et al., 2017). Forces external to the classroom required educators to fulfill a variety of roles that encompassed their student's academic, social, emotional, and basic needs (Koenig et al., 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019).

The relationship between stress, teacher responses, teaching behavior, and attrition was also reviewed in the literature (Aguilar, 2018; Harmsen et al., 2018; Koenig et al., 2018). The principal findings of relevant studies revealed that the psychological and emotional strain of tension with students in addition to coping with and managing student behavior compounded teacher stress and adversely affected teaching behavior in

the classroom (Harmsen et al., 2018; Koenig et al., 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Another consequence of experiencing the heavy burden of teacher stress and fatigue was that educators reporting high levels of discontent left teaching more than those with lower levels impacting the profession (Harmsen et al., 2018).

Advancements in the understanding of student social emotional needs and the effects of adverse childhood experiences have called on educators to implement trauma-informed teaching and evidence-based interventions to address high needs students in the classroom (Hydon et al., 2015; Ouellette et al., 2018). Studies indicated that a gap in knowledge existed about how these expectations would affect teacher stress and satisfaction (Ouellette et al., 2018). Research conducted with pre-service teachers offered insight into the field experiences of educators-in-training (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019), in particular, used a Grounded Theory methodology and collected data from participant written self-reflections, self-care plans, and researcher-instructor field notes. Four predominant themes emerged from Miller and Flint-Stipp's (2019) data. The first theme was the profound effect the student's stories had on the pre-service teacher participants. Next, was the realization that participants were exposed to various forms of trauma experienced by students. A third theme was the reality that even pre-service teachers developed burnout, and lastly, over half of participants experienced significant barriers to self-care even though the majority appreciated learning about the topic in the class (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). The main barrier identified in the study above was difficulty integrating self-care into both the professional and personal spheres, echoing the findings of other research focused on human service professional and educator-specific self-care (Bettney, 2017; Dorociak et al., 2017; Lopez, 2016; Miller &

Flint-Stipp, 2019). Proactive self-care was described as underutilized in both the mental health and education professions resulting in stress, burnout, and impairment (Bettney, 2017; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019).

Regarding trauma-informed teaching, Hydon (2015) stated that supportive, safe relationships with teachers were important for student success and wellness. Trauma-sensitive relationships with students that were interpersonally and academically thoughtful about the challenges and suffering that youth and their families navigate greatly enhanced psychological safety and learning in the classroom (Hydon, 2015; Lever et al., 2017; Ouellette et al., 2018). These bonds with students also exposed teachers to secondary trauma and risked leaving educators in a double bind of being a trauma-informed caregiver without clinical training or added supports for their own mental health and wellness (Hydon, 2015; Kempf, 2018). Miller and Flint-Stipp's (2019) data similarly concluded that students feeling bonded with teachers also increased the likelihood that student details of trauma would be shared and impact the teacher or teacher-in-training. Self-care and wellness resources played an important role in mitigating the fatigue caused in educators (Cardinal & Thomas, 2016; Newell, 2018).

### **Occupational Stress Effects**

Teaching is rated as one of the most stressful professions with levels of stress similar to social workers, police, and first responders (Koenig et al., 2018; Lomas et al., 2017; O'Neal et al., 2018). A Gallup Health poll specific for educators revealed that nearly 50% of teachers experience high levels of stress daily due to the challenges inherent in the teaching profession (Lever et al., 2017). Lever et al. (2017) presented findings from a survey conducted by the American Federation of Teachers indicating that

almost 80% of respondents acknowledged feeling emotional and physical symptoms of depletion at the end of their workday. In terms of attrition, approximately 10% of teachers left after their first year, and in urban districts, this rate rises to nearly 70% turnover after one year in the field (Lever et al., 2017). Teachers exiting the classroom cited poor leadership, low salaries, and high stress as top reasons for leaving the profession (Aguilar, 2018; Lomas, et al., 2017).

Burnout and compassion fatigue negatively impacted the physical and emotional well-being of teachers (Koenig et al., 2018; Lomas, et al., 2017). Indicators of burnout encompassed low work satisfaction, reduced compassion for students and peers, caused somatic symptoms like headaches and digestive issues, compromised mental health, and, again, contributed to teacher attrition (Koenig et al., 2018; Lever et al., 2017). Teacher attrition was related to low self-efficacy and low commitment to the profession while burned-out teachers who did not leave the profession rated higher in emotional exhaustion and numbness toward self and others (Harmsen et al., 2018; Koenig et al., 2018). Kuebel (2019) asserted that subject specific educators, namely music teachers, reported increasing levels of anxiety, depression, and occupational stress. Investigations conducted in the UK revealed teacher workload stress, anxiety, pressure, and sleep disturbances resulting in exhaustion, crying, and headaches were the most adversely impacting aspects of working in schools and were a leading cause for missed days at work (A Teach Well Alliance, 2020; Lomas et al., 2017). While rare, four respondents of the Teach Well Alliance (2020) survey admitted to considering suicide due to teacher stress reinforcing the high toll of occupational stress (A Teach Well Alliance, 2020).

Ouellette et al. (2018) highlighted that teacher efficacy and well-being are reduced by high stress and low satisfaction which negatively impacted teaching and learning in the classroom. The effects of secondary trauma, the development of burnout, and a lack of holistic and preventative self-care affected teacher resiliency (Hydon et al., 2015; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Secondary traumatic stress (STS) in teachers resulting from exposure to the trauma of others was characterized by symptoms similar to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and were often not detected by educators as a trauma response (Hydon et al., 2015; Lever et al., 2017; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Symptoms of STS included intrusive thoughts about students, nightmares, avoidance of triggers, and anxiety or irritability (Hydon et al., 2015; Lever et al., 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). The areas of teacher well-being affected by fatigue and depletion encompassed physical, behavioral, cognitive, relational, emotional, and spiritual domains (Hydon et al., 2015). The dimensions affected by burnout and STS in the lives of teachers were also domains included in a holistic approach to self-care (Bettney, 2017; International Self-Care Foundation, 2020; Posluns & Gall, 2020).

### **Educator Needs and Recommendations**

Many of the needs and recommendations for improving conditions for educators in the literature focused on systemic and organizational changes, as well as increased teacher preparation and ongoing professional development (Kempf, 2018). Lever et al. (2017) stated traditional workplace wellness programs, including those found in many school settings, often centered on physical or medical health-related programs and did not cover other forms of well-being and self-care. Professional development also tended to be reactive rather than preventative (Koenig et al., 2018). The findings and research

presented in the research reviewed also supported the development of organizational cultures and interventions that fostered emotional and physical teacher well-functioning (O'Neal et al., 2018; Ouellette et al., 2018). Correspondingly, the strongest predictor of teacher satisfaction and healthy stress levels was the health and culture of an educator's school or organization (Aguilar, 2018; Kempf, 2018; Ouellette et al., 2018).

Professional development regarding stress reduction and mindfulness were useful but did not remain effective if the organizational climate was not supportive or the practices did not align with school leadership priorities (Ouellette et al., 2018). Hydon et al. (2015) also advised that school districts and leadership teams played a critical role in creating supportive cultures and offering professional development that mitigated and addressed secondary stress for teachers. It was also recommended that schools implement psychological first aid training and peer support programs to enhance connection and reduce isolation while promoting and practicing holistic self-care (Hydon et al., 2015; Kidger et al., 2016; O'Neal et al., 2018).

Miller and Flint-Stipp's (2019) study revealed a need to integrate self-care and resiliency-building competencies into the curriculum and standards of teacher education programs. Likewise, Koenig et al. (2018) emphasized the need for additional training and on-the-job support like coaching and mentorship for educators to understand better the effects of compassion fatigue and to care for themselves preventatively. Extending the integration of self-care and resiliency building into school districts would further develop protective factors that mitigate the effect of secondary trauma, burnout, and teacher stress while offering valuable education on these topics (Koenig et al., 2018; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Student-staff-school well-being were framed as interconnected and

inseparable due to overlapping factors and variables impacting success and wellness meriting schoolwide well-being strategies that did not overlook educator self-care and support services (Kempf, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019).

### **Educator Resilience and Well-Being**

In its simplest terms, resilience is the ability to effectively navigate and rebound from challenges and adversity (Aguilar, 2018). Scholars in education asserted that cultivating resilience was a developmental imperative for career longevity in education that involved intentional self-care, self-awareness, organizational support, and systemic investment (Aguilar, 2018; Newell, 2018). Resilience skills and techniques were viewed as teachable and associated with a growth mindset emphasizing learning over fixed mindsets that limit adaptability (Dweck, 2016; Grant et al., 2015). Optimal teacher functioning was framed as strengthening resilience, caring holistically for oneself, and navigating stress with intentionality and flexibility (Aguilar, 2018; Newell, 2018). Proactive and continual self-care served as a valuable protective factor supporting educator well-being and balance (Hydon et al., 2015; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

### **Programs Promoting Teacher Well-Functioning**

Resilience was associated with using and transforming challenges to grow more authentically into one's professional and individual self (Aguilar, 2018; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). The literature conveyed that the field of education has begun to invest resources and focus on programs and initiatives to support resilience, mindfulness, and well-being (Grant et al., 2015; Lomas et al., 2017; Schussler et al., 2019). Teacher well-functioning depended on fortifying resilience skills and awareness on individual,

interpersonal, professional, and organizational fronts (Aguilar, 2018; Cardinal & Thomas, 2016; Newell, 2018).

Teacher well-being programs studied for efficacy sought to increase resiliency skills, reduce stress and burnout, and increase mental and behavioral health (Braeunig et al., 2018; Kidger et al., 2016; Koenig et al., 2018; Schussler et al., 2019). Schussler et al. (2019) researched the Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) program's effects on building resilience through mindfulness and teachers' self-awareness. The researchers found that teachers who completed the CARE program reported less emotional reactivity in the classroom and increased somatic awareness regarding their stress responses and needs (Schussler et al., 2019). Other studies showed similar results in that professional development programs focused on teacher well-functioning increased participant awareness regarding self-care and the relationship of stress and burnout to lowered teacher satisfaction (Koenig et al., 2018; Schussler et al., 2019). Additional findings indicated that resiliency and self-care centered programs led educator participants to feel a greater sense of community connection regarding self-care and well-being (Koenig et al., 2018; O'Neal et al., 2018; Parveen & Bano, 2019; Schussler et al., 2019). In terms of increased efficacy in the classroom, the results were mixed as O'Neal et al.'s (2018) study found a positive relationship between program participation and increased confidence in the classroom, and Schussler et al.'s (2019) research found no association between classroom efficacy and completion of a resilience-focused professional development program.

Studies focused on implementing mental health awareness and stigma reduction were also present in the literature. The stress of teaching contributed to mental health

conditions in teachers like depression, anxiety, and secondary traumatic stress substantiating the need to offer additional support and resources for educators (Braeunig et al., 2018; Kidger et al., 2016; Lever et al., 2017; Teach Well Alliance, 2020). According to the literature, these studies measured the effects of mental health literacy training programs like Mental Health First Aid and other comparable international workshops on educators' mental and behavioral health (Braeunig et al., 2018; Kidger et al., 2016). Programs aimed to increase teachers' knowledge and helping competencies regarding peer and youth mental health resulted in stigma and shame reduction, more positive outlooks on mental health, and concrete strategies to assist and support those coping with a mental health condition or crisis (Braeunig et al., 2018; Kidger et al., 2016; Lever et al., 2017; Lomas et al., 2017). Braeunig et al. (2018) added that prevention and mental health literacy programs that educated teachers in the physiology of stress, mental attitudes, relational competence with students and class parents, and increased connection with peers found mental health improvements and attitude shifts among participants.

Teacher well-functioning was also examined through a stress reduction lens (Boogren, 2018; Lucas, 2017). The field of epigenetics views a person's stress response as a biological safety and survival mechanism, offering insights relevant to educator well-being (Lucas, 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Lucas (2017) estimated that, in a typical day, teachers responded to over fifty stressors, exceeding typical number stressors experienced by typical individuals. The author advocated that educators better understand the mechanisms of stress while normalizing that much of the perceived stress in today's world does not always involve life or death stakes (Lever et al., 2017; Lucas, 2017).

The physiological impacts of unmitigated stress decreased the immune system, lowered energy levels, impacted sleep, and compromised the body's organ systems (Lucas, 2017; Newell, 2018). Interventions designed to improve stress levels through self-awareness and mindfulness taught teachers to work with their responses to stress through mindfulness and reflective practices (Lomas et al., 2017; Lucas, 2017). Teachers also gained increased awareness regarding the importance of self-care by practicing mindfulness skills (Lomas et al., 2017; Schussler et al., 2019). Finally, mindfulness programs incorporating breathing, journaling, and meditation for teachers like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) resulted in less emotionally reactive decision-making, assisted teachers in mitigating the effects of toxic stress, and were most beneficial when school leaders and cultures were supportive and aligned with teacher self-care and wellness cultures (Aguilar, 2018; Lomas et al., 2017; Ouellette et al., 2018; Schussler et al., 2019).

### **Self-Care Competencies for Teachers**

Authors in this literature review argued that self-care and coping with stress as an educator and promoter of human potential was often viewed as an all or nothing endeavor instead of a collection of skills and practices that could be learned and refined (Aguilar, 2018; Braeunig et al., 2018; Cardinal & Thomas, 2016; Grant et al., 2015; Kuebel, 2019; Schussler et al., 2019; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Intentional and concrete self-care planning reinforced self-care strategies and competencies in educators and teachers-in-training (Boogren, 2018; Kuebel, 2019; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Engaging in self-reflection, introspection, and awareness development practices centered on personal and professional self-care strengthened resilience (Aguilar, 2018; Lucas, 2017; Skovholt &

Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Lastly, strengthening connections and support among peers improved teacher functioning, reinforced self-care aptitudes, and promoted supportive and relationally engaged school cultures (Aguilar, 2018; Hydon et al., 2015; Lucas, 2017; O'Neal, 2018; Schussler et al., 2019).

### ***Personalized Self-Care Planning***

Developing and implementing personalized self-care plans for educators was a useful tool for maintaining balance and cultivating resilience (Hydon et al., 2015; Kuebel, 2019; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). The literature reviewed framed the exercise of self-care formulation inclusive of specific activities and tools across multiple dimensions as a valuable standard practice in the fields of education and psychology (Aguilar, 2018; Barnett et al., 2007; Kuebel, 2019; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019; Newell, 2018; Zahniser et al., 2017). Personalized self-care plans were developed using worksheets, guided workbooks, journaling, and facilitated group processes (Aguilar, 2018; Boogren, 2018; Cardinal & Thomas, 2016; Lopez, 2017). Boogren (2018) and Lucas (2017) also pointed out the benefits of self-care planning that was adaptable to teacher career development and transitions. Teachers were advised to employ self-care tailored to each stage of career development, acknowledging first-year teachers' needs as different from the priorities and necessities of mid-career professionals or seasoned longtime educators (Aguilar; Boogren, 2018; Lucas, 2018; ). From this perspective, self-care was conveyed as a practical skill and adaptable mindset (Boogren, 2018; Cardinal & Thomas, 2016; Lopez, 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Responsive self-care planning promoted well-functioning (Aguilar, 2018; Boogren, 2018; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

### *Self-Awareness and Self-Reflection*

Self-awareness and self-reflection were identified as crucial competencies regarding self-care and career longevity in education and other human service fields (Aguilar, 2018; Lucas, 2017, Newell, 2018; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019). Caring for oneself proficiently while caring for students required increased self-recognition and insight into individual needs, responses, motivations, and compassion levels (Aguilar, 2018; Koenig et al., 2018; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). The Cycle of Caring developed by Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) characterized specific stages of caring inherent to working in the best interest of others: meeting/joining with students, empathic attachment to students and families, and separating when the work or school year concluded. Within the Cycle of Caring, the authors added a fourth phase dedicated to integrating teacher self-care appraisal, personal renewal, and self-reflection as an essential sphere of attention (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Self-reflection within a cycle or process of caring for oneself and others promoted self-renewal and allowed educators to proactively make meaning of their experiences and find enjoyment and gratitude amid other emotions related to caring for and teaching others (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Lucas, 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

Daily practices of self-reflection and professional development options in mindfulness and self-awareness skill-building directly influenced educators' self-care competencies (Lever et al., 2017; Lucas, 2017; Schussler et al., 2019). Mindfulness, self-awareness, and dedicating time each day to self-connection and self-reflection were essential for mental, emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual resilience (Lucas, 2017;

Newell, 2018; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019). Self-assessment and integrated self-knowledge were also highlighted as crucial for developing and practicing self-care (Lucas, 2017; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019). Findings from professional development programs centered on mindfulness and self-awareness indicated the most useful practices taught to teacher participants were those associated with breathing exercises, non-reactivity, and tuning-in to needs and experiences with self-awareness (Braeunig et al., 2018; Schussler et al., 2019). In one study by Schussler et al. (2019), physical and emotional health also improved, and maladaptive coping strategies reduced with increased mindfulness and self-awareness.

### ***Connection and Peer Support***

Lever et al. (2017) pointed out that implementing teacher wellness programs centered on stress reduction and resilience served as a gateway to supportive connections among educators and school staff. Studies by other researchers supported Lever's (2017) assertion, also citing that peers reinforced self-care strategies learned in the various programs reviewed and the relationships forged were based on stress reduction, increasing mental health, and practicing mindfulness (Braeunig et al., 2018; Hydon et al., 2015; Lever et al., 2017; Schussler et al., 2019). Well-functioning effects related to group participation and peer support included decreased perfectionistic behavior, reduced isolation, lowered willingness to overwork, and higher empathy levels (Braeunig et al., 2018; Hydon et al., 2015; Lever et al., 2017). According to Braeunig et al. (2018), educators also experienced an increased ability to distance themselves from stress while gaining skills in calming and equanimity (Braeunig et al., 2018). Moreover, trusting partnerships and established peer support programs enhanced help-seeking behavior and

self-care promotion (Kidger et al., 2016; O’Neal et al., 2018). Kidger et al. (2016) noted one critical caveat – educators who served as mental health peer supporters felt more drained after assisting colleagues, which intensified their need for support and self-care. Lucas (2017) specifically recommended facilitating cognitive-based practices like shifting negatively biased mindsets, and exercises aimed at improving collegial relationships claiming these activities enhanced teacher well-functioning.

### **Building Organizational Capacity**

According to the literature, schools and education systems had a unique role and responsibility in building capacity regarding self-care and teacher resilience (Lever et al., 2017; O’Neal et al., 2018; Posluns & Gall, 2020). The implementation of self-care and resilience-building programs within schools was beneficial as it communicated organizational investment in teacher well-being and healthy functioning while teaching useful skills that could be applied in the classroom as well (Harmsen et al., 2018; Hydon et al., 2015; Lever et al., 2017; O’Neal et al., 2018). Because there are a variety of programs available, school leaders and decision-makers were advised to consider pertinent program elements, research information on efficacy, and establish intended outcomes before implementing new initiatives (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Ouellette et al., 2018; Schussler et al., 2019). Creating time within the school day for peer relationships and collaboration as self-care and resilience measures along with establishing spaces within schools for educators to take breaks and re-connect with co-workers were mentioned as constructive capacity-building actions (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Lucas, 2017; O’Neal et al., 2018; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

Professional development and continuing education courses were also highlighted as effective capacity-builders. Classes and workshops integrating stress management, self-care, mindfulness, and self-efficacy into organizational practices were recommended and found to enhance school community well-being (Lever et al., 2017; Lomas et al., 2017; O'Neal et al., 2018; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Additional recommendations included promoting wellness and self-care technology applications, coaching and mentorship approaches, role-modeling empathy and stigma reduction by school leaders, offering added support to teachers during high-stress times, establishing regular self-care and resilience support groups, and scheduling these opportunities during paid work time (Aguilar, 2018; Braeunig et al., 2018; Grant et al., 2015; Lever et al., 2017; O'Neal et al., 2018). Lastly, O'Neal et al. (2018) and Parveen and Bano (2019) emphasized the vital need for diversity-centered, equitable, and culturally-informed self-care development in organizations. The above strategies and actions aided in establishing self-care cultures within educational organizations and programs (Barnett et al., 2007; Lever et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020).

### **Impacts of COVID-19**

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational systems globally and in the U.S. beginning in Winter 2020 were, and continue to be, far-reaching (Gates et al., 2020; Panisoara et al., 2020). Regional and state lockdowns and shelter-in-place orders went into effect causing education systems to halt (Dorn et al., 2020; Matiz et al., 2020). Educational equity, student access to basic needs like meals, safety, structure, and technological devices and online teaching delivery were factors that challenged school communities across the U. S. in particular (Dorn et al., 2020). The critical importance of

functioning schools to the U.S. economy also became apparent (Kaden, 2020). Rural communities and those with lower income levels experienced limited internet service and lower bandwidth making online or hybrid learning and teaching difficult (Dorn et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; United States Census Bureau, 2019). Although health and safety adjustments were necessary given the risks posed by COVID-19, the changes required of K-12 educators were unprecedented and jarring (Dorn et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020).

The emotional, relational, and psychological stress on teachers was evident (Kaden, 2020; Panisoara et al., 2020). Grief and loss, namely disenfranchised grief, associated with losing access to brick-and-mortar classrooms, losing students without gaining closure, and having to learn new teaching methods and techniques weighed heavily on educators (Dorn et al., 2020; Panisoara et al., 2020). Mental health effects for teachers included increased anxiety, feelings of depression, social isolation, and shame associated with not feeling competent or valued by administrators and lawmakers (Dorn et al., 2020; Panisoara et al., 2020). Technostress associated with teaching online, shifting workload priorities, and changes to teacher family responsibilities presented significant challenges to educator self-care, efficacy, and motivation (Kaden, 2020; Panisoara et al., 2020). Strategies for optimizing self-care and promoting resilience in the context of COVID-19 evolved in real-time verifying the significance of multidimensional self-care and wellness practices (Lesh, 2020). Self-care dimensions pertinent to teaching during the pandemic centered on physical health, mental well-being, connection with loved ones, stress management, self-reflection, mindfulness meditation, and meaning-making (Lesh, 2020; Matiz et al., 2020).

### Summary

Self-care is a personal and professional necessity for educators and human service practitioners (Lopez, 2017; Neimeyer & Taylor, 2019; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). The concept of self-care and associated practices were framed in the literature as ethically imperative and critical needs for those working in education and other human service professions (Barnett et al., 2007; Lopez, 2016; Newell, 2018). The importance of self-care is understood, yet a gap exists between common knowledge about self-care practices and the holistic conceptualization and professional applications of the subject (Dorociak et al., 2017; Santana & Fouad, 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016; Zahniser et al., 2017).

The field of psychology has made strides in operationalizing and quantifying self-care domains along with ways of validly and reliably measuring the most pertinent aspects as they relate to ethical functioning and addressing practitioner impairment (Dorociak et al., 2017; Santana & Fouad, 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017). The field of education has recently gained momentum in studying the concept of self-care in relation to the issues of secondary traumatic stress, burnout, attrition, efficacy, and job satisfaction (Harmsen, et al., 2018; Hydon et al., 2015; Kempf, 2018; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Another trend in educational research focused on studying teacher resilience along with assessing and exploring the implementation of wellness programs that address occupational challenges in education (Braeunig et al., 2018; Kidger et al., 2016; Lever et al., 2017; Schussler et al., 2019; Teach Well Alliance, 2020).

Self-care was defined as a construct of attitudes, behaviors, and intentional practices aimed at promoting health and well-being across multiple dimensions of human

functioning (Bettney, 2017; Dorociak et al., 2017; Newell, 2018; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019). Personal and professional elements of self-care were intertwined and mutually supportive (Dorociak et al., 2017; Grant et al., 2015; Zahniser et al., 2017). Self-awareness, social-professional connections, and organizational cultures of care were paramount in practicing self-care in the helping professions (Barnett et al., 2007; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019).

Education is a stressful profession with many competing demands (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Lucas, 2017). The consequences of prolonged occupational stress and a lack of self-care and professional support included burnout, chronic fatigue, and teacher attrition (Harmsen et al., 2018; Koenig et al., 2018; Teach Well Alliance, 2020). Schools, districts, and governing systems were called to do more to promote multidimensional self-care and well-being for educators (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Lucas, 2017; O'Neal et al., 2018). The current backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic compounded teacher stress and magnified the need for educator self-care and resiliency (Dorn et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Matiz et al., 2020; Panisoara et al., 2020). Resilience and well-being depended on intentional and mindful self-care (Lesh, 2020; Lucas, 2017; Newell, 2018; Matiz et al., 2020; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019). To create educational cultures of self-care, address challenges amplified by COVID-19, and to establish program initiatives that support holistic educator well-being, more must be understood regarding what helps and what hinders teacher self-care in the U.S. (Aguilar, 2018; Dorn et al., 2020; Gates et al., 2020; Lever et al., 2017). The following chapter details the research study implemented that further explored educators' lived experiences regarding self-care.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore educators' lived experiences related to practicing self-care. A qualitative method of inquiry was employed utilizing a phenomenological design. Interviews with K-12 educators in the United States were conducted virtually per the current COVID-19 guidelines and served as the primary method of data collection. Data was gathered and organized using qualitative software, and findings were documented and presented following thematic analysis (Babbie, 2017). By giving voice to educators' self-care experiences, this dissertation in practice aids in raising awareness around the needs of educators while making organizational and systemic recommendations for actively promoting educator self-care and resilience.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study of educator self-care:

**RQ1.** What are the lived experiences of K-12 educators in the United States regarding self-care?

**RQ2.** What barriers to self-care do K-12 educators in the United States experience?

#### **Method**

An integral part of the research process is to thoughtfully choose a research methodology well-suited to a study's topic and questions (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). A qualitative method, congruent with studying individual and group realities, was used for examining educator associations, experiences, and barriers related to self-care (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research examines real world needs and situations in a methodical, transparent, and evidence-based manner (Yin, 2016). Qualitative

methodologies include clear study designs and systematic planning, data-gathering, and reporting standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2016). Moreover, qualitative research seeks to understand a problem or subject matter within participants' day-to-day contexts and through various non-numerical sources of data to provide evidence-based explanations. The specifics of this study aligned with the qualitative objectives of exploring human life experiences, attending to contextual influences regarding the topic of study, and representing a variety of insights and personal interpretations (Yin, 2016). The following qualitative study integrated specific design elements, research tools, population factors, procedural steps, data collection and analysis procedures, and integrity measures.

### **Research Design Overview**

A phenomenological study design was employed to explore teachers' lived experiences regarding how being in the education profession shapes self-care habits and how the current COVID-19 pandemic impacts teacher resilience and self-care practices (Babbie, 2017). A phenomenological design of inquiry is congruent with studying the lived experiences of people as they relate to a particular phenomenon offering a deeper understanding and exploration of various trends, issues, and behaviors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The phenomenon of self-care was studied in relation to K-12 educators. The phenomenological design utilizing semi-structured and open-ended interviews was suitable to answering the research questions for this study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that a phenomenological exploration must include a discussion of assumptions. Peoples (2020) expands on this assertion by advising researchers to also specify the phenomenological theory or philosophical

underpinnings that inform their research design. This study applied a hermeneutic phenomenological approach as a way to reflect on the experiences and meaning made by study participants regarding their self-care and the challenges they have faced as teachers.

### **Participant Demographics**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), over three million public school teachers actively teach either full or part-time in the United States. Statistics reported at the onset of this study indicated that over 75% of teachers were female and almost 25% were male. Racially, nearly 80% of public school teachers identified as White, 9% as Hispanic, 7% as Black, 2% as Asian, and the remaining 3% as biracial, Indigenous, or Pacific Islander (National Center for Education Studies, 2020).

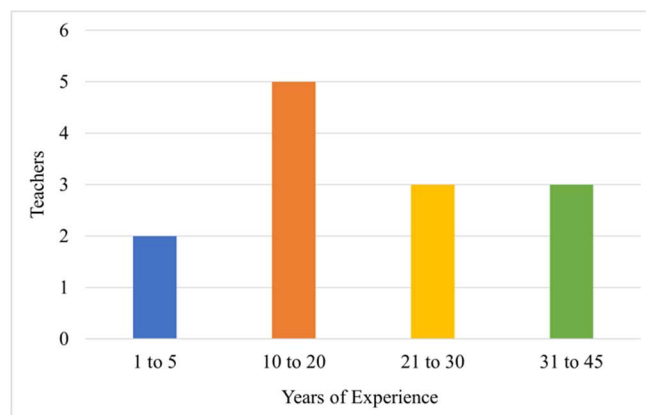
Demographic data were gathered from study participants at the beginning of each interview and were compared to National statistics to gauge the level of racial, cultural, and gender representation in this study (Babbie, 2017). All but one of the participants identified as female with one identifying as male equating to a calculated breakdown of 92% female and 8% male participants. Racially, all participants identified as white, and one identified as white and ethnically Jewish. The gender representation of this study is close to national averages, and the racial representation of this study is dissimilar to the National percentages as this sample was homogenously white with one participant identifying as being part of an ethnic minority group.

Of the participants interviewed, 46% taught in an elementary school, 8% in both elementary and middle school, 15% taught exclusively middle school students, 23% taught both middle and high school students, and 8% in a K-12 setting. The teachers in this study had career experience teaching in schools ranging from the private urban

school setting, to public large inner-city schools, suburban districts, rural schools, and even a small schoolhouse style setting. In this study, the states of Montana, Florida, Wisconsin, and Idaho were represented. 8% of the educators taught in a suburban school, 31% in an urban city setting, and 62% were teachers in small rural schools. The years of teaching experience among the educators interviewed ranged from less than five years to over 40 years in the teaching profession. See Figure 1 for teaching experience data.

**Figure 1**

*Participant Years of Teaching Experience*



### ***Recruitment and Sampling***

Before recruiting participants for this study, approval for research was obtained from the Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The sample consisted of 13 K-12 educators. A qualitative sampling frame of this size allowed for this researcher to explore and examine participants' subjective experiences and inductively discern themes, patterns, and classifications of significance regarding the phenomenon of educator self-care (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data were collected through interviews from the full frame of participants, reaching saturation at the conclusion of the 13

interviews as indicated by participants' consistent repetition of certain thematic categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Babbie (2017) emphasized the value of setting purposeful inclusion and exclusion standards for study participants. Educator, for the purpose of this study, was defined as a full or part-time teacher who had obtained a degree in Education or was completing student teaching requirements at the time of data collection. Defining educator in the above way established criteria aimed at researching a sample population that has similar educational and career paths while allowing for the inclusion of a variety of ages and levels of teaching experience. Excluded from this study were already retired educators or those currently on leave and not teaching.

All of the study participants met the inclusion and exclusion criteria at the time the study interviews were conducted (Babbie, 2017). Two of the study participants stated that they were retiring at the end of the 2020-2021 contracted year, shortly after they completed their study interviews. Because this research aimed to explore the experiences and impressions of current educators or educators-in-training, this researcher concluded that the soon-to-be-retired educators met the inclusion criteria even though they did not plan to return for 2021-2022 school year.

A nonprobability sampling approach was used for this qualitative study. Nonprobability sampling allowed this researcher to subjectively recruit and select participants rather than rely on probability odds (Babbie, 2017). The specific nonprobability sampling method employed was snowball sampling, also referred to as chain referral sampling. Snowball or chain sampling generally involves identifying individuals or cases through people within the population to be studied (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Participants for this phenomenological study of educator self-care were recruited through specific social media groups, online platforms for educators, and the researcher's social media networks. The snowball strategy for the study purposefully requested educators and leaders in the field to share the recruitment request for research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Involving educators and friends of educators from the research population during the recruitment stage extended the recruitment announcement's reach and allowed trusted personal and professional social media connections to amplify this participation opportunity and enhance interest in the study (Yin, 2016).

A standardized participant recruitment announcement containing details and specifics pertinent to ethical and transparent human subject research was created and posted on this researcher's social media accounts and in various social media groups dedicated to teacher interaction and resource sharing (Babbie, 2017; Yin, 2016). Details in the invitation post included researcher name and contact information, project summary, verification of IRB approval, dissertation chairperson contact information, and general expectations of participants like time commitments and registration processes (see Appendix A). Potential participants contacted the researcher directly through email or Facebook messenger to schedule interviews. The vast majority of coordination following the initial contact was conducted via secured email.

Two waves of recruitment were conducted. The first wave concentrated on this researcher's social media accounts and posting in teacher groups via Facebook including "Teachers Helping Teachers," "Class Dojo Teacher Community," and "We are Teachers." The researcher obtained permission from the group administrator of "Teachers Helping Teachers," to become part of the group and post the recruitment

announcement. The other groups in the first wave either declined or did not respond. The second wave of recruitment posts included the intentional addition of teacher groups for educators identifying as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) including “BTC-Badass Teachers of Color” and “Indigenous Teachers Unite”. I also reposted the announcement and asked contacts to repost the recruitment welcoming BIPOC teacher participation as all of the participants from the first wave identified as white. The two added Facebook groups approved this researcher’s recruitment post. One participant was recruited from a Facebook teacher group, the rest resulted from friend posts or social capital already earned by the researcher through being in community with others, both in-person or online.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection is a critical element of qualitative research (Yin, 2016). Data for the study was collected from human participants through one-on-one semi-structured interviews to provide depth and texture to the study through language, stories, and experiential narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews took place virtually. Data was collected, transcribed, stored, analyzed, and reported according to high ethical standards, and best practices in social science research (Babbie, 2017). The following subsections describe the procedures and protocols applied for this phenomenological study.

#### ***Data Collection Procedures***

Devising and implementing systematic data collection procedures were critical to implementing a sound research design for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Recruitment, as previously mentioned, relied on social media posts and resulted in 13 K-12 educator participants representing four states. Study participation was based on

volunteer interest though each participant received a self-care infographic with curated resources, and a raffle for an Amazon gift card was held. Creswell and Poth (2018) advised that qualitative studies must allow flexibility for researchers regarding procedural decision-making. Registrants who expressed interest and met inclusion criteria were chosen for the study and contacted via the email provided. This researcher scheduled the interviews and sent each registered participant their unique Zoom link for the interview along with the welcome information regarding what to expect. I also attached information and consent documents asking them to review the forms prior to their scheduled interview. Per IRB recommendation, the Participant Information Form was combined with the Research Participant's Bill of Rights and was verbally acknowledged by participants at the beginning of each interview (see Appendix B) along with the Self-Care Primer offering information related to the interview question areas (see Appendix C).

Per Creswell and Poth's (2018) qualitative interview sample, the researcher developed an Interview Protocol for this study (see Appendix D). A field test of the interview questions was conducted with a teacher consultant prior to data collection. The same protocol was followed with each participant to ensure a uniform process of collecting interview data. As a measure of research reflexivity, following with first two scheduled participant interviews, the order of the questions was changed to enhance the flow of the conversation though the content of the questions remained the same (Babbie, 2017). Interviews were virtual using the Zoom video meeting platform and recorded with verbal agreement from each participant. Zoom recordings were stored through the Creighton University account and each interview was password protected and saved to the encrypted Cloud and transcribed through the Zoom application (Zoom Video

Communications, Inc., 2019). Cloud encryption involves added digital security protections that only allow authorized users to access data saved to the Cloud (Lord, 2018). Once data were analyzed and reported, interview recordings were deleted to limit breaches of confidentiality. Data from the interview was also collected through researcher notes and field journaling (Yin, 2016).

### ***Data Verification and Validation***

The qualitative methodology of this study incorporated the researcher as a critical data collection and analysis instrument (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) contended that the researcher's impressions, professional judgment, and personal lens can be significant factors in how a study is advanced. Because this is the nature of qualitative inquiry, safeguards were in place to ensure integrity and trustworthiness through data verification and validation strategies (Babbie, 2017). This study incorporated the verification and validation strategies of bracketing, peer/consultant examination, and member-checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative researchers must practice reflexivity by continuously considering their role in the study and any biases they may be interjecting into the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Bracketing allows the researcher to bracket out or separate assumptions, biases, and personal views throughout a study and is integral to employing reflexivity. Per Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers can perform phenomenological reflection to remove their views from the process of inquiry. Although bracketing is traditionally a hallmark of transcendental phenomenology, Fischer (2009) argued that bracketing can be applied hermeneutically. The integration of bracketing within this hermeneutic study along with the use of the hermeneutic circle technique is discussed

further in the data analysis section. Peer/consultant examination of the purpose statement, guiding research questions, and qualitative interview questions by experts and leaders in K-12 education was utilized to ensure study relevance and alignment (Babbie, 2017). Lastly, I incorporated the technique of member-checking as a research procedure by sending interview transcripts to each respective participant for review, feedback, and to uphold transparency and credibility (Statistics Solutions, 2020). Participants were given a window of time for responding with any revisions or questions and notified that the study would proceed after the stated deadline. One person responded with transcript corrections focused on grammar and word use errors. I updated the transcript before data analysis.

### ***Data Collection Tools***

Specifying the tools used for data collection is an important part of the research process (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The predominant data collection tools for this study were the qualitative interview protocol, researcher notes, the Zoom virtual meeting platform along with Zoom's Cloud storage and transcription service, the researcher's password-protected Creighton University email account, and password protected laptop and Google account with Google Drive and Microsoft Word for storing protocol documents, files, interview transcripts, and field journal documentation. Zoom, the now popular teleconferencing and online meeting platform, was used to maximize face-to-face virtual interactions during the participant interviews. The Zoom platform features were examined and vetted to ensure compatibility with the goals and integrity of this study (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2019).

To enhance the interview protocol's reliability and trustworthiness, I utilized peer examination and conducted a field test of the interview questions to garner expert input

for the document. Once interviews were scheduled, participants reviewed the Participant Information form in lieu of a signed consent prior to the interview and gave verbal acknowledgement of understanding and consenting to the study parameters provided. Participants were sent their interview transcripts and given the opportunity for member checking and revision following their interviews to support the integrity of the data collected and before data analysis (Yin, 2016).

Demographic information was collected as part of the interview process. I asked each participant which state they teach in, their current position, years of experience as a teacher, school setting (rural, urban, suburban, private, public), the grade they teach, and optional race and gender questions. Participants were open and forthcoming in answering these questions. Following this initial information gathering and a brief overview of the research questions and study goals, I concentrated on moving through the Interview Protocol. The Interview Protocol was conducted using open-ended, subjectively-focused, and conversational questions consistent with upholding the humanistic nature of phenomenological interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I opened each meeting, greeted the participants, obtained verbal permission to record, and began the interview process. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), building rapport is a crucial part of qualitative interviews. I attended to rapport-building through eye contact, non-verbal skills, and creating an open, nonjudgmental environment. The completed recordings were stored on the Cloud and labeled utilizing a unique participant code for each teacher (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2019). Participant codes were then used to organize, file, store, and report data following the member-checking period (Babbie, 2017).

### **Data Analysis**

Creswell and Poth (2018) identified five steps or considerations when analyzing and representing phenomenological research data that were applied for this study. The analysis steps used included managing, reviewing, classifying, interpreting, and representing the data and were the basis for this study's data analysis plan (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data management consisted of using participant ID codes to link multiple pieces of data, as well as Microsoft Word, Google Drive, Zoom, and the Cloud for storage and retrieval. The step of data review consisted of the researcher reading through all the interview transcripts while reviewing each recording, taking notes during, and following each interview regarding thoughts, questions, or initial coding impressions in the margins of transcripts and in the field journal (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2016). Classification involved journaling about my personal experiences and bias realizations through bracketing, along with the hermeneutic circle technique of documenting my progressive understanding of the themes and components of data gathered while also capturing emerging themes and representations of the phenomenon of self-care (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fischer, 2009; Peoples, 2020).

Data analysis was methodical and purposefully conducted during the classification step utilizing a six-phase process of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Utilizing qualitative data analysis software was also a critical component of classifying and coding the data (Babbie, 2017). Interview transcripts were saved into individual Word documents and uploaded, along with researcher field notes, to the established qualitative software program Quirkos for organization and analysis. This researcher conducted three coding cycles beginning with

margin coding each transcript by hand and highlighting salient quotes, then by utilizing Quirkos for the second and third coding cycles (Babbie, 2017). The second coding cycle centered on categorizing quotes or data segments into initial themes or quirks and nesting relevant data into each corresponding quirk. The third and most extensive coding cycle entailed refining the thematic categories that developed creating a mind map to assist with finalizing the themes and sub-themes (Clarke & Braun, 2014).

Quirkos reports and queries were generated augmenting the final coding cycle and aiding in the interpretation stage of analysis (Peoples, 2020). The reports and queries displayed collated themes, participant endorsements, and coded segments that were integral to the Thematic Analysis process and to discerning the significance and arrangement of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2020). Lastly, data representation involved developing textural, structural, and meaningful descriptions to convey participant lived experiences and perceptions related to the phenomenon of educator self-care and by incorporating my reflective and reporting process as the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2020; Yin, 2016).

### ***Methodological Integrity***

Ensuring methodological integrity throughout each phase of research is paramount as a social scientist (Babbie, 2017). As mentioned in previous subsections, I employed integrity strategies like member-checking, expert and peer examination/consultation, bracketing, hermeneutic journaling, vetting technological platforms, using password-protected filing systems, and applying systematic documentation practices. A field test of the interview protocol was conducted before the IRB application was submitted. This researcher actively sought and participated in

consultation and debriefing with dissertation committee members and trusted advisors while regularly practicing self-reflection to identify and address researcher bias (Peoples, 2020; Yin, 2016). Following the American Psychological Association's (2020b) standards, specific methodological integrity features were prioritized as the research began, data was collected, and findings were interpreted. The ultimate goal was to conduct high-quality research grounded in evidence, transparency, coherence, assessed for bias, and replicable by other scholarly researchers (American Psychological Association, 2020; Peoples, 2020).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles articulated by the American Psychological Association (2020) were considered by this researcher to meet the criteria of beneficence or doing good, and nonmaleficence or doing no harm. Five ethical practices congruent with these principles are characterized by (a) gaining informed consent from study participants; (b) mitigating the risk of harm to human subjects; (c) protecting privacy and confidentiality; (d) avoiding deception, and (e) honoring the right of participants to withdraw from the study at any time (American Psychological Association, 2020b). The ethical considerations above were followed and accounted for throughout this study.

I sent the Participant Information Letter including the Participant Bill of Rights (see Appendix B) to prospective participants for review before proceeding in lieu of a signed consent form, per IRB recommendation. Participant verbal acknowledgment was also requested at the time of the interview and participant questions were answered at various points during the interview (American Psychological Association, 2020). I assessed the risk of adverse reactions to the interview questions as low to moderate, not

exceeding the risks found in everyday conversation. Emotions did arise for participants when discussing personal and professional areas of difficulty, needed self-care, and COVID-19 impacts related to grief, stress, and trauma for participants. I provided verbal and relational support, validation, and normalization for the teachers interviewed to assist with difficult emotions or recollections. No reports of overwhelming distress or extenuating mental or emotional health needs were reported during or following the interviews. Lastly, as a token of gratitude and encouragement, I created and provided a comprehensive self-care resource infographic to participants (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Researchers must protect the confidentiality and privacy of all participants. Participant names were removed from participant data and replaced by a participant ID number to protect the identity of each teacher (Yin, 2016). Password protection and file encryption was integrated into data collection and storage through Zoom, Cloud, and Google to safeguard participant data from hacking and information breaches. Interview video recordings were deleted once data was analyzed and reported. Although deception can be ethically used in research, deception or purposeful lack of clarity was not part of this study's design. I was committed to engaging honestly and transparently with participants, in analyzing data, and reporting findings (Yin, 2016).

### **Summary**

The Care and Keeping of Teachers was a phenomenological study that explored educators' lived experiences concerning the phenomenon of self-care. Hermeneutic phenomenology informed this study's design. This qualitative inquiry's principal aim was to give voice to the practices, barriers, and realities educators face regarding self-

care, especially during COVID-19 restrictions and pandemic teaching. Virtual interviews with K-12 educators across four states were conducted as the primary method of data collection (Babbie, 2017). Prior to the interview, participants received a handout entitled, “Self-Care Primer”, created to set a baseline of understanding and shared language in reference to the phenomenon of self-care. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions and was semi-structured to allow for deeper participant sharing and expression (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A combination of qualitative data analysis software, researcher note-taking, and Thematic Analysis were employed to examine and interpret data (Babbie, 2027; Peoples, 2020). Methodological integrity was ensured by incorporating validation and verification strategies and by adhering to the ethical principles guiding human research (Yin, 2016). Conducting qualitative research holds great privilege and responsibility requiring high ethical standards and processes from social science researchers (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). In the next chapter, I report the results and findings with attention given to the research values of ethics, integrity, and honesty (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore educator self-care among K-12 teachers residing in the United States and to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of educators, the barriers faced in practicing self-care, and also to explore how teaching during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic affected educator self-care. A qualitative phenomenological study was designed and implemented to further investigate the phenomenon of educator self-care. Individual Zoom interviews with the 13 study participants and interview recording transcripts were the data collection tools for this research. A thematic analysis was conducted over the course of three coding cycles and using the qualitative software program, Quirkos. In this chapter, I report the results of this study including six major themes and two sub-themes that emerged from participant interviews, quotes, and summaries using *in vivo* language when applicable. The findings are also discussed including key insights and connections to the literature, while the discussion focuses on the relevance of the results and findings regarding educators' lived experiences of self-care.

**Results**

In this study, six major themes and three sub-themes emerged from the coding and data analysis process. The themes included contextual experiences related to care and stress for teachers, teacher multidimensional self-care practices, relationships as self-care, COVID-19 impacts on educator self-care, barriers to practicing self-care, and creating cultures of self-care in schools. Each of the data-generated thematic areas offer rich and personal descriptions of how educators experience the phenomenon of self-care and the significant barriers that stand in the way. The research questions driving this study were:

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of K-12 educators in the U. S. regarding self-care?

RQ2. What barriers to self-care do K-12 educators in the U. S. experience?

The following sections describe with detail and through participant quotes, the major themes and sub-themes, along with how the data was successful in answering the research questions guiding this study.

### **Study Participants**

As discussed in Chapter Three, the 13 participants in this study represented K-12 educators in the United States teaching in Montana, Idaho, Florida, and Wisconsin at the time of the study. Although 62% of participants were teaching in small rural schools when this study was conducted, the teachers interviewed also described past and recent experiences teaching in large inner-city schools as well as holding larger or medium sized urban and suburban teaching positions. All but one of the participants identified as female, and all identified as Caucasian. Six of the participants were teaching in the elementary school setting, one teacher worked in a K-12 setting, another taught elementary and middle school combined, two educators worked exclusively with middle schoolers, and three taught both middle and high schoolers.

The educators interviewed ranged in experience from three years to 41 years in the teaching profession (see Figure 1). Two participants with the most years of experience transparently acknowledged that the stress and challenges of the 2020-2021 school year were critical factors in their decision to retire at the end of their 2020-2021 teaching contract, shortly after the time of their interview for this study. Each of the 13 participants demonstrated candor and a willingness to share their lived experiences as teachers and in practicing self-care. Data analysis and interpretation resulted in the major

themes and sub-themes represented by direct participant quotes and experiential explanations.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Within Creswell and Poth's (2018) five-step data analysis plan, I analyzed the data using Clarke and Braun's (2014) six-phase thematic analysis approach. In phase one, I became closely familiar with the data by watching each interview in tandem with reviewing each corresponding transcript. I then re-read the transcripts underlining notable statements while margin coding and note-taking. In phase two, I used Quirkos qualitative software and uploaded transcripts including the highlighted participant quotes. I began generating codes that were both semantic based on participant descriptions, and latent based on my interpretations of participant accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I organized the data into quirks or clusters based on patterns in the frequency and sequence of certain experiences while noting similar and divergent data across the various interview sections and areas relevant to the guiding research questions. Initially, 2198 coded segments were analyzed from the uploaded transcripts and classified resulting in a total 84 quirks or code clusters that were then arranged into various thematic categories and sub-components during phase three (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

During phase four of the thematic analysis, I reviewed the data to move beyond categories to more defined themes, assessing whether a theme was full-bodied or lean, and rearranging quirks accordingly. The fifth phase focused on naming and characterizing the themes to build on each other without duplication (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Six major themes resulted with three sub-themes (See Table 1 in the Appendix). The sixth and final phase centered on writing up the findings and results. The themes

aligned with and were informed by salient points and relevant assertions found in the literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The data comprising the themes and sub-themes reflected in this study are reported descriptively and interpretively in the following sections.

### **Major Theme 1: Complex Contextual Factors Impact Teacher Stress and Self-Care**

To answer the two research questions driving this study, it was critical to include the contextual experiences and realities shared by study participants that influenced their self-care. Within this theme, systemic, sociopolitical, and personal contextual experiences related unequivocally to educator stress and offered insight into the needs and struggles faced by teachers in practicing self-care. Data representing this major theme was robust with a total of 665 coded segments and endorsements from all of the study participants. The interview data described the occupational stressors caused by the education system and by societal factors, experiences of burnout, compassion fatigue, trauma exposure, grief and loss, genuine care for students, and love of the profession. The contextual lens that solidified in the data provided unique perspectives into the lived experiences of the teacher participants in relation to maintaining well-functioning.

#### **Education System and Societal Factors**

Systemic and societally-influenced occupational stressors data were represented by 350 of 665 coded data segments. Teachers attributed extensive occupational stress to being expected to fulfill multiple roles with students beyond academics, not having breaks throughout the day, increasing work demands, and lost autonomy due to teaching mandates, experiences of poor leadership, and testing policies. Sociopolitical stressors

included poverty, student welfare concerns, exposure to student trauma, the Presidential election of 2020, and mandates or safety measures related to COVID-19 health concerns.

Each of the participants interviewed attributed the education system and institutional structures as being one of their main sources of occupational stress. The participant quotes representing this theme paint a textured and genuine picture of the complex pressures faced by the teachers interviewed. Participant 202106, a teacher who has navigated the changing requirements of the education system, described the high stress and teaching impacts of scripted instruction mandates:

And the hardest part was learning the workshop [teaching] model and being told, okay here's your script, you have to read from this script, and you can only spend five minutes on this part and 10 minutes on that part and... That's just not how I was taught. That's not why I went into teaching, and it just really seemed to take a lot away from the fun that you should be able to include in your teaching.

Participant 202110 had a similar outlook on the occupational stress of teaching mandates adding that mandates were often out of touch with teacher and student needs:

[When] something changes in the overall education system...if they [decision-makers] make a change like, okay, you need to start doing this in a classroom...and it's like, there's no possible way that's going to happen. I don't know if the people that make these rules have never been in the classroom?

In addition to the pressures of teaching mandates and system standards, the teachers interviewed for this study also cited the substantial stressor of fulfilling multiple roles beyond preparing and teaching academic content. Participants repeatedly used the *in vivo* language of “wearing many hats” to describe the other roles they fulfill for students and

families that add mental and emotional labor to the profession of teaching. All but one participant shared examples of additional roles they fulfill throughout a day or school year and the compounded needs that students have in order to be able to learn and succeed in school. Teacher interviewee 202101 illustrated this view stating:

I think the job has gotten harder. Our roles have, our hats, the number of hats that a teacher wears these days has multiplied exponentially. Especially in lower socioeconomic schools...And I think teachers these days are not just standing in front of a classroom teaching, but we're constantly monitoring individuals [students]...have they had breakfast...do they have a coat...who dropped them off at school... but it's the feeling, it's the responsibility, I think that any teacher feels or most teachers feel about meeting all of their students' needs and not just students but parents' [needs] and you know, it's so all-encompassing.

The teachers interviewed articulated that as student and familial pressures have intensified, teachers' spheres of responsibility beyond teaching have grown. Moreover, participants described various informal and formal roles filled by teachers through the course of a school year.

In addition to teaching, one participant also fulfills the role of the school's emergency responder as a trained EMT when there are injuries or traumas throughout the school day. Others shared accounts of taking on the role of a social worker when their students had unmet basic needs or were in unsafe home situations, and some discussed acting as coordinators and resources for the parent and families in their school communities to cope with struggles in their everyday lives. Additionally, serving multiple

roles as an educator with the added component of being a parent was significant to nearly half of the teacher participants.

The weight of these multiple, and at times competing, responsibilities was characterized throughout the interviews and often overlapped with feeling a sense of care and concern for students. Participant 202104, who articulated connection as an important personal value, described assisting struggling students and wanting to understand the cognitive or emotional needs of students as part of teaching:

I think that probably the biggest stressor for me is...how am I going to [help struggling students] ...it's definitely not the educational part. It is more of just their well-being and their “why” as far as how to help them.

Participant 202108 shares a comparable outlook, “For me, [the most stressful part is] taking on the social worker piece of caring for the kids, their emotional well-being... And just the heartache of those kids who don't get a fair shake. Not the teaching.” Competencies related to pedagogy and academics were not prominent stressors mentioned by teachers; social-emotional-behavioral student needs and system pressures present in the classroom were at the root of educator uncertainty and worry. The participants clearly highlighted ways they were required to stretch beyond teaching to meet the complex needs and challenges faced by students, parents, and society as a whole.

Teacher participants also cited the contextual backdrop of current societal and political issues as a significant contributor to occupational stress. Teacher 202112 discussed the negative effects caused by political division on teachers and students around the time of the U.S. presidential transition:

If you were in our [school] hallway in January [2021], it was sad. After the election before the inauguration, there was a lot of animosity between groups of kids about, well I'm a Trump supporter and I'm a Biden supporter and I'm whatever, and all the crap that was going on in Washington. There was no happy silliness [at school]. There was no, let's talk about this.

Throughout the interviews, teachers articulated how political divisions in communities and in the U.S. as a country showed up in schools, shaped administrative politics, and influenced the climate in the classroom. Teaching during tumultuous sociopolitical times has compounded occupational stress and further stretched the capacity of many of the educators interviewed.

### **Experiences of Burnout, Fatigue, Chronic Stress, and Grief**

Burnout or compassion fatigue, specific stress symptom manifestations, and grief and loss were also described as realities that influence teacher stress and require educators to practice self-care and, in some case, seek professional assistance. All but one of the teacher participants interviewed described times throughout their careers when they acknowledged feeling compassion fatigue or occupational burnout. Participant 202101 described the ongoing responsibility of being a teacher that contributes to fatigue:

You're handed a group of kids and you have a job to do with each and every one of them. You want each and every one of them to be successful and so throughout the course of nine months, you're constantly trying to manage 20 to 30 students who are little individual people and that's a lot of individuals to take care of.

Teacher interviewee 202103 named the experience of teacher burnout and how summer break was a necessary time of renewal, "I got to the point of burnout several times

throughout the years, but I was able to recoup over the summer...I didn't do anything, talk to anybody, just kind of crashed, and then you slowly start building back your life.”

Although the teachers interviewed diligently carried the weight of their jobs, they described how occupational stress took a toll on their well-being and required time and space to reset and recover following each school year.

Nine interviewees described experiencing specific stress symptoms like chronic headaches and migraines, mental and behavioral health symptoms like anxiety and depression, as well as panic, sleep issues, eating fluctuations, and increased alcohol use. Participant 202113 shared the impact stress and worry had on their sleep and rest, “...Sometimes when you lay down thinking about something, you just can't stop thinking about it, I feel like you've just tossed and turned and just don't get a good night's sleep. Then the next day doesn't start off so good.” Teacher 202109 also shared about prolonged stress as an educator, “I mean from the get-go. That's when my whole life became stressful when I'd step back into that building [school]... That non-stop worry and pressure.” Many teachers conveyed similar messages about how difficult it was to leave occupational pressures and concerns behind at the end of the workday.

Several educators also shared stories in which they had been exposed secondarily to trauma experienced by their students including illness, death of a student or in the lives of students, child services involvement, and drug affected parents. Two teachers in particular expressed feeling alone and isolated in their classrooms or schools. Teacher 202112 poignantly described balancing emotional regulation, trauma exposure, and the constraints of the classroom:

I might go into the restroom, and I cry, you know, I fall apart, and I try to do it away from people...there are some situations that kids tell you about that are traumatic. And I just have to take 10 minutes and get my life back together...I'll just say I'll be right back...Or I put it on the back burner for later.

Participant 202111, who confided some of the difficulties they faced this past year related to loss, lack of administrative support, limited time for self-care, and COVID-19 disruptions, convergently concluded:

It feels lonely. You don't have anyone to go to right at that moment when things are in crisis mode...so I either have to just bottle things up and put on my game face, or I'm going to cry in front of everyone and look a little chaotic...until I get it together.

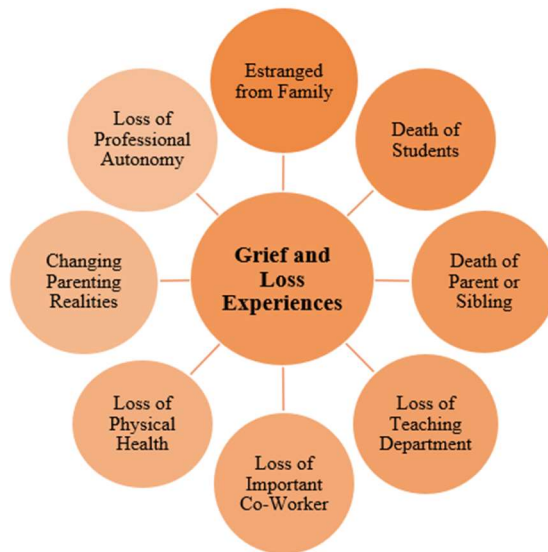
Educators interviewed described numerous solitary responsibilities and challenges that must be navigated throughout each day leading to a sense of loneliness. The participant examples highlighted the fact that teaching requires more intentional self-care yet the time and resources available throughout the school day are not part of education profession norms.

Nine of the 13 interviewees shared specific examples of grief and loss resulting from significant events in their lives as part of this contextual sub-theme. Educator experiences included the death of students, the death of loved ones, losses of identity and reality involving parenting, losing co-workers or teaching teams, lost health, and a lost sense of professional autonomy or personal agency. Experiences of personal and professional grief and loss offered poignant examples of what teacher participants have

moved through and coped with as they provide high quality teaching and foster genuine relationships with students. Figure 2 depicts the losses reported by participants.

**Figure 2**

*Participant Experiences of Grief and Loss*



**Care and Concern for Students**

Regarding care for students, each of the 13 educators interviewed shared various examples and stories about their students that embodied genuine care and concern beyond simply performing the tasks of a job. Teacher accounts in this arena represented the challenging scenarios, triumphs, and the day-to-day presence of the interviewees in the lives of those they taught. Teachers described playing pivotal roles in providing for families in need during holidays and breaks, and well as small moments of supporting and encouraging students through personal difficulties throughout the school day. Interviewee 202113, who teaches teens, expanded on the relationships forged with students, “I think when you coach kids and you're around kids all day, they start to confide in you. And you become invested...in them, in their home life, in whatever

they're doing. I feel like that part's hard to shut off.” Interviewees agreed that they have genuine relationships with their students based on care and concern beyond academics.

Educator 202101 echoed the connection and concern they feel for their students and the challenges youth face as an extension of teaching, “...you add on the social, the emotional piece, the attachment to the kids. And all those pieces and the parents and all the things you can't do...the homeless, and you know the poverty.” Lastly, interviewee 202106, after receiving feedback from a supervisor that they were too caring, concluded, “I've never been good at closing the door on those kids' needs.” The educator participants continuously described how they genuinely care for their students as individuals, feel concern and worry for the struggles of their students and their families. Several teachers also added that they could not fully compartmentalize or close themselves off from this aspect of being a teacher and to do so would feel inauthentic.

### **Love of Teaching**

Along with accounts of the stressors of education and examples of care for students, nine of the study participants also articulated their love for the teaching profession as rationale for staying in education and growing in their profession. Participant 202103 stated, “For me [teaching] it's my passion, I think that's what's kept me going, is knowing it's who I was, and it's what I was meant to do.” Participant 202112 emphasized the importance of enjoying being a teacher, “I get a lot of energy from the kids...they come up with great ideas...they can see different types of problems...and they see a whole different set of solutions...an important aspect of teaching is if it's not fun, you shouldn't be there.” Consequently, interviewee 202101 described a sense of optimism toward the profession when discussing their love of

teaching, “It's getting better in a lot of ways, because we're learning a lot...a lot of teachers are refining their craft.” Many of the teachers interviewed identified with enjoying and valuing their profession as a teacher. Participants articulated a belief that education was vital work and that their love of teaching justified continuing to teach and learn more about educator self-care.

### **Major Theme 1 Conclusions**

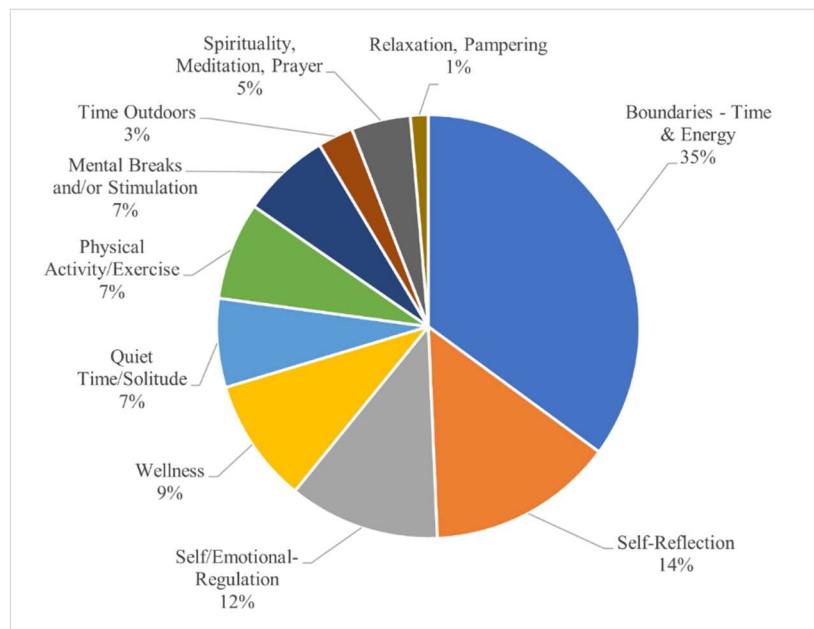
The data supporting this major theme effectively provided answers to RQ1 and RQ2 by shedding light on what it is like for educators to function as a teacher in the midst of compelling systemic and sociopolitical factors, and with respect to their love for the profession, and their distinct care for the well-being of their students. The study participants' narratives provide a striking and more nuanced picture of the lived experiences of educators that call for practicing self-care as a teacher. The interview data also elucidated the external factors and systemic constraints that hinder or delay teachers from practicing self-care in the moment or when they determine care is needed.

The extent of what is asked of teachers beyond academic instruction, the undeniable mental and emotional weight carried by teachers daily, the physical and functional impacts of chronic stress, and sociopolitical realities impact educator well-being. The educators in this study agreed that there are impacts experienced and managed as a teacher that those outside of the profession or removed from the classroom may not consider. To encourage educators to take good care of themselves or to emphasize the need for teachers to practice proactive self-care means to also acknowledge the arduous challenges educators experience working within the U.S. education system.

**Major Theme 2: Teachers Practice Uniquely-Defined, Multi-Dimensional Self-Care**

The second major theme that developed from the data centered on teachers practicing self-care across various dimensions and incorporated 545 coded segments of data. Within this theme, the interview data conveyed the most practiced forms of participant self-care and the most impactful educator practices. Each teacher interviewed practiced more than one form of self-care across multiple dimensions, and uniquely defined their most impactful practices. Each participant had a personalized view of what practices were of the most benefit. Before the interview, participants received a Self-Care Primer created for this study that defined self-care and its various dimensions. The purpose of the Primer was to establish a frame of reference for the interview and offer a common language for discussing the phenomenon. All 13 teachers acknowledged receiving the primer and several referenced it as they discussed their self-care habits.

The dimensions most regularly practiced by the teachers entailed maintaining boundaries around their time and energy, engaging in self-reflection, regulating their emotions and mindsets, fostering wellness, carving out quiet time and solitude, exercising or physical activity, spending time outdoors, having mental breaks or mental stimulation, practicing spirituality/prayer/meditation, and pampering. The combinations of dimensions or activities practiced by educators were as unique as each teacher in that a pattern related to a specific optimal combination was not present. While several educators used the Self-Care Primer to answer the interview questions, the dimensions developed differently from the data than categorized in the Primer. Figure 3 offers a breakdown of the most practiced and mentioned dimensions of self-care described by study participants.

**Figure 3***Most Practiced Dimensions of Self-Care***Maintaining Boundaries Around Time and Energy**

Every teacher interviewed for this study indicated that developing boundaries around their time and energy was fundamental to caring for themselves. Three areas of decision-making regarding boundaries in this area crystallized in the data. Setting boundaries to protect educator time and energy resources included developing efficiencies, limiting work hours, and developing self-care routines.

In reference to developing efficiencies, ten teachers acknowledged this as relevant in their lives as a teacher. For example, participant 202110 discussed limiting homework assignments, an idea presented during a state conference following their first year of teaching, as a time-saving efficiency, “Especially [switching to] optional homework. That [efficiency] saved probably an hour or two of grading every single night.” Nine educators interviewed described the need to better define when they would and would not work as

many described a propensity toward working beyond their contracted school day. Participant 202103 shared, “I stopped bringing [schoolwork] into the house. I had to; whatever I finished, I had to finish at work...I had to separate those two. I’m fortunate I was able to do that.” Developing regular routines was also cited as essential to self-care by seven teachers. Participant 202113 described their nighttime routine as being an important self-care:

I think the night [is important] because if I don't get my head cleared out and things out of my mind, I don't sleep well. And so, I noticed when I have a lot on my mind and I don't try to have a night routine where I shower and take care of...I sometimes even write a list of things I’m worrying about...And sometimes if I just put it down [on paper] then, I don't think about it while I’m sleeping.

The teachers who endorsed boundaries as a critical self-care practice admitted that the endless tasks and all-consuming nature of their work required conscious decision-making. Setting and upholding boundaries by becoming more efficient at school, curtailing work hours, and maintaining regular self-care routines assisted the teachers interviewed in creating greater balance and best using their internal and external resources as educators.

Educator boundaries related to distinguishing personal versus professional self-care were also explored in the interviews. When discussing the delineation between professional and personal self-care as separate spheres, some educators believed they were separate, and others believed they were inseparable. For example, participant 202111 viewed professional and personal self-care to be inextricable:

It is really hard for me to draw the line between those two things [personal and professional self-care]...because it's something that I love to do, teaching is part who I am, how I identify as a person. So, it's really hard for me to draw that line in the sand and [say] this is a home thing and then this is a work thing and those two need to be separate.

Participant 202112 also believed they were interrelated while offering a different perspective, “I think they're pretty intertwined [personal and professional self-care]. I think you have to take care of yourself throughout the day at work.” Other teachers described greater clarity between personal and professional self-care. Participant 202105, for instance, articulated a difference between the spheres while admitting the goal of self-care is the same for both personal and professional spheres:

I think they're pretty separate, but then again, I think for me, self-care for both is just some time in my day where I get a little break. Maybe it's to go the bathroom and get a cup of coffee and get a moment to breathe.

The teachers interviewed described multiple viewpoints when defining boundaries between professional versus personal self-care. Reflecting on the differences and overlap between personal and professional self-care offered insights that may assist teachers in establishing and practicing more genuine and intentional boundaries.

### **Engaging in Self-Reflection**

All 13 participants described practicing self-reflection as a way to care for themselves and do well in the different areas of their lives. Educators in this study described various self-reflection practices including employing a growth mindset, practicing gratitude, journaling, and verbal processing. Participant 202107 imparted, “I

like to do a lot of reflecting. Especially as a teacher, I think you sometimes reflect on your day, not every day...especially when it's a hard day, I reflect on how I could have done that differently.” The majority of interviewees gave examples of self-reflection indicative of cultivating a growth mindset through intentionally working to better understand themselves and to develop skills in support of their well-functioning (Dweck, 2016). For example, participant 202101 spoke of reflecting with a growth mindset during our interview:

Even in having this conversation with you, I'm thinking about how I can think about it [self-care] differently, like oh, I get to give myself a treat when I get home. I worked all day, now I run or get my workout in, or meet a friend maybe later in an hour...because I'm protective of this [time/activity].

Self-reflection was described by teacher participants as a way to gain self-understanding, grow professionally, and makes sense of the different areas of their lives.

In terms of journaling regularly as a form of self-reflection, participant 202105 stated, “I always try to journal. I like to at the end of my school day, depending on school, it doesn't always happen, but normally I sit there before I go home and reflect upon the day.” Participant 202113 journaled to reflect on tasks and areas of need, “That's [journaling], a lot of times, where I get my ideas...for school, ideas for home, maybe even ideas on things I need to work on. Things will come to mind if I am really questioning or needing help in something.” Verbal processing or debriefing by talking to oneself or others was also mentioned as self-reflection. Participant 202102 was the first to describe this by acknowledging, “Well, I talk to myself - I work out all my problems that way...” Likewise, when talking to oneself was suggested as a possible self-reflection

tool, participant 202108 stated, “I talk to myself a lot. I thought that was just kind of nutty [laughs] but I guess that is a reflection! ...I sit and think, and then I just let it go.” Self-reflection in different forms was a way for educators to care for themselves by gaining clarity, identifying solutions to problems, and allowing space for their own thoughts.

### **Emotional and Self-Regulation**

Emotional/self-regulation strategies were described by twelve teachers and involved positive self-talk, focusing on one activity at a time, re-setting after difficult days or moments, adjusting expectations, and accessing resources. Participant 202101 described self-regulation in the context of their school day and work culture, “I have to constantly recalibrate because I can get upset or not trusting [co-workers] or just wanting to be in my room with my students, you know, instead of giving good energy away so that I can get it back.” Self-regulation examples also overlapped with physical activity, time outdoors, reaching out to trusted people, and developing healthy habits. Participant 202110 described the interconnection of physical activity, prioritizing self-care, and emotional/mood regulation:

I’ve noticed that if I don’t run or I don’t bike, like if I just if I go home and sit in front of TV and like don’t do anything, my mood gets a lot worse. And then, when I go out and run...the more days I run in a row, my mood and attitude and everything just gets better and better and better.

Participant 202103 described additional self/emotional regulation practices as a self-care: “When I feel myself starting to get...like this is too overwhelming, I’ll just put some music on in my office or listen to something...take a deep breath and I also use essential oils, diffuse oils and stress away.” Emotional and self-regulation responses described the

various ways the educators interviewed worked with their emotions, physiology, and mindsets to better care for themselves and cope with their stress.

### **Health and Wellness**

Wellness emerged as a distinct dimension of self-care for each of the 13 teachers interviewed. Participants endorsed specific activities like attending mental health counseling, healthy eating and nutrition, rest or sleep, and reaching out for help and assistance from a health professional including seeking and taking medication. Several teachers discussed participating in counseling and taking medication to treat anxiety or depression to support their mental health and cope with the occupational stress of teaching. Educators connected with counselors from their districts' Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or were referred to a clinician by their primary health providers.

Participant 202103 went to counseling through an Employee Assistance Program and echoed participant 202110's previous sentiments related to the interconnection of exercise and other activities to care for oneself emotionally:

For three years...I would go on the beach. I would walk that beach until I wasn't so upset anymore...Positive self-talk and that emotional, psychological part was really important...that's where the counselor comes in... I went and saw a counselor through the EAP for at least three years, to deal with [work] stresses, and both those [life events] issues and that really helped.

Participant 202107 described their spouse, principal, and health provider as being instrumental in encouraging and connecting them with a counselor during a difficult time, "They [spouse and principal] suggested that I get it [help/support], and then I ended up reaching out to my [medical provider], I believe, and then they referred me to somebody

[for counseling].” The educators utilized the expertise and support of others to maintain their wellness and viewed the options of counseling or medication as a valuable health option and without stigma.

Nearly half of participants endorsed healthy nutrition as a specific self-care activity practiced in relation to wellness. Several teacher participants referenced resting and getting enough sleep as integral self-care activities. Participant 202101 shared, “[I do] everyday things, taking care of myself, you know, like eating well and trying to get enough sleep and things like that.” Interviewee 202104 also echoed, “For the physical [dimension] I get good sleep and rest.” Lastly, Participant 202113 shared about participating in a school-sponsored wellness program that provided them with critical health information and helped them improve their sleep, “They're the ones [wellness specialists] who got me on...a nighttime routine for sleep. They said it sounds like you're getting your physical exercise, but they pinpointed that I wasn't getting enough sleep...for my organs to even recoup and rejuvenate.” Wellness measures taken by the teachers interviewed spanned the categories of physical, emotional, and mental well-being providing insight into the interconnectedness of these realms with regard to educator self-care lived experiences.

### **Solitude**

Of the educators interviewed, eleven expressed that carving out quiet time or solitude was part of their regular self-care. Participant 202102 described how they seek solitude while at school, “I have this little bitty office that sits inside of a classroom where I can hide out...and I can just take the time that I need to do what I need to do...I'm just taking a breather.” As an example of solitude in the form of time away,

participant 202106 spoke about time taken off from school with their spouse during the 2020-2021 school year and following a particularly difficult period of time during the pandemic, “And my [spouse] and I went fishing away for the weekend up to [the family] cabin and just you know...we needed to get away.” The teachers interviewed also described needing time to themselves in which they did not have to care for others, especially those participants who were parenting younger children. For example, participant 202107 described trying to strike a balance between care for self, being a teacher, and caring for a young family, “My [spouse] will come home and I’ll say...tag, you're it. I gotta go for a walk and I’ll come back [saying] I’m okay now...but sometimes even that's not enough. Sometimes I have to be completely by myself [a while longer].” The teachers interviewed expressed needing time away in significant doses to re-charge.

As with other dimensions of self-care, quiet time or solitude overlapped in the data with time outdoors, exercise, spirituality, and setting healthy boundaries around time and energy. Teacher participant 202101 discussed the value of solitude in allowing for greater connection in other areas of life:

If I am getting the exercise that I want and crave and need but it's also my alone time... I almost need that [alone time] in order to connect with other people. I think I need to pull away so that I can come back and be present with anyone, whether it's my colleagues and my friends and my partner.

Likewise, participant 202109 stated, “Alone time energizes me. I do love to be alone.”

Solitude and quiet time was present in the data as a vital component of educator self-care and renewal. The data in this dimension depicts another facet of educator self-care that

highlights the lived experiences of teachers as working in a person-oriented profession yet needing time alone and away to function optimally.

### **Exercise and Physical Activity**

Eleven study participants described various forms of exercise or physical activity as a regular part of their self-care. Physical activities included walking, running, biking, tennis, yoga, and gym workouts. Physical activity as self-care also overlapped with solitude, spirituality, connection with others, pursuing hobbies, healthy nutrition, emotional/self-regulation, and time outdoors. Participant 202108, without hesitation, named exercise as their go-to activity along with a centering morning routine, caring for their mental health, and connecting with close relationships:

Definitely exercise. I run as often as I can. I wake up before my kids to have my coffee and do my sudoku in the morning and just have quiet in the house. I do take an anti-anxiety medicine, I don't know if that counts as healthcare, but it seems to help. I talk with both my [spouse] and girlfriends about stressful things.

Teacher participant 202109 also cited exercise in combination with the added dimensions of time outside, nutrition, and the mental break of reading for enjoyment, “I love to exercise. And I love to be outdoors so those are self-care for sure. I love to read, I eat healthy foods, I do some yoga.” Exercise in concert with other dimensions of self-care was described as a valuable and powerful form of self-care benefitting multiple areas of well-being for the participants who endorsed this area.

Not all teachers, however, endorsed exercise as a primary form of self-care.

Diverging from the teachers who exercised as a constant, participant 202104 described:

Exercise has come and gone...sometimes it's better than other times. I've been consistent at different points in my career, so I can't say it's been a regular thing...sometimes I'm really motivated, and it will stick for a year. Other times I get busy and stressed at work and go home and want to rest my body.

While exercise is a popularly promoted form of self-care by school wellness programs, it was not the most favored or sustainable choice for some educators.

### **Time Outdoors**

Additionally, time outdoors in the forms of walking or outdoor hobbies like gardening were also relayed as beneficial to educator self-care. Participant 202103 asserted, "I go outside, work in the garden, or sit outside and be quiet." Walking was mentioned repeatedly as a replenishing outdoor self-care strategy. Participant 202107 shared, "I also really like to just go for a walk by myself" and participant 202108 echoed the value of walking outside with the addition of reading and walking with others as self-care, "Mostly [for self-care] it's reading, taking the dog for a walk, or walking with my [spouse]." Lastly, teacher 202110 emphasized outdoor activities in providing a balance to the workday, "The biggest thing [for self-care] is outside hobbies so either running or [outdoor sports] are probably the...things that I will do after school." Exercise, physical activity, and time outdoors all provided nourishing self-care for the many of the educators in this study. The physical and outdoor activities named were diverse with walking being the most accessible and regenerative for the teachers who endorsed these dimensions.

### **Mental Breaks or Mentally Stimulating Activities**

Of the 13 participants interviewed, 10 endorsed activities that provided either a mental break or mental stimulation as self-care. The activities mentioned included

watching shows or movies, reading for enjoyment, playing a game or sport, and pursuing a creative hobby or passion. Participant 202102, a self-described voracious reader stated, “I read for enjoyment. I mean I obviously read professionally too, but I read every day what I call a non-thinking, non-stress, hallmark-type book...In fact, I’ve finished 41 books since the first of the year already.” In accordance with this facet of mental breaks as beneficial self-care, participant 202104 said, “Another thing I do is I watch a fun TV show or something to get my mind off things or read a book.” Creative hobbies and personal passions were also noted as offering vital self-care. As an avid quilt maker, participant 202112 described this dimension as their primary form of self-care in conjunction with their passion for being a teacher, “I sew, which people think is crazy but that's my stress reliever...I also enjoy sharing that with students so I’m doing self-care all day long at school, because the things I do at school are the things that I enjoy.” Other hobbies mentioned by the teachers interviewed included linguistics, playing a musical instrument, golfing, baking, artwork, and crafts.

### **Spirituality**

Spirituality practices emerged as critically relevant for five of 13 teachers. The teachers discussed participating and leading in their churches, praying, and turning to Christian scriptures as well as meditating and studying ancient Eastern spiritual texts and practices. Participant 202102 discussed spirituality and their sense of faith as a main form of self-care:

I also go to church. And with the luxury of Zoom and my church just went back into session three weeks ago because of COVID, I’ve been able to go by my mom and still worship with my hometown [in] my home church...I have a leadership

position there and I'm currently working on planning a vacation Bible school for the kids. Oh, and the Christian education so, spiritually, that is my [self-care] outlet. I do have a deep belief in God and that there's a purpose, that everything happens for a reason and that we're not necessarily in control of that reason.

Participant 202109 described spiritual self-care as connecting to and seeking insight from both Eastern and Western traditions:

I read, I throw the I Ching [ancient Chinese text and practice] about four times a week. And I have like five or six journals now. I always write down what I got and what the message was... And it always speaks to me. Sometimes so directly you think, oh my goodness... And the Dao book, I read its daily meditation. I've [also] been reading a lot of Christian stuff [lately]. I find it powerful.

Spiritual self-care was articulated as fostering a connection to a higher power and as a meditative guide that regulated stress and emotions by teacher participant 202113:

I try to read my scriptures every day. I really try to make sure I'm in a quiet place and as I'm reading, I try to write down my thoughts...I've really noticed that if God needs me to do something, He brings someone to mind or...I find when I focus on those kinds of things and follow through with them, I usually get a really good feeling from that.

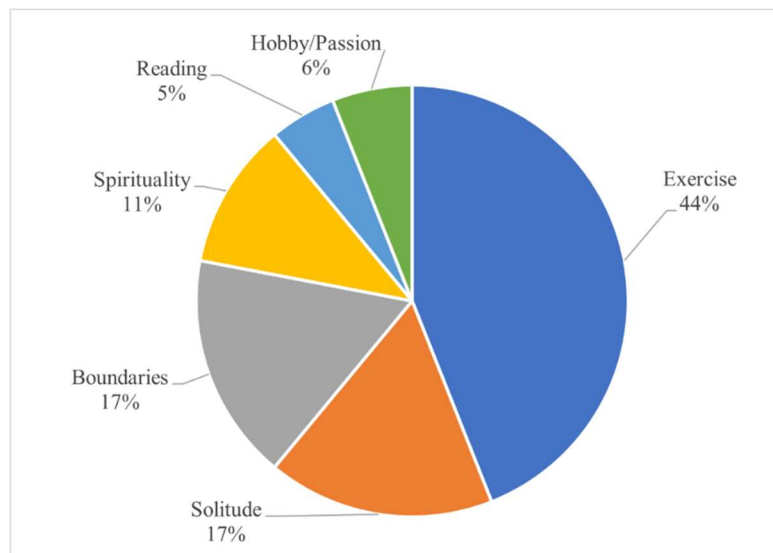
Spirituality and prayer encompassed multiple faith perspectives and went beyond meditation from a mindfulness perspective. While spirituality as self-care was not one of the most endorsed dimensions of self-care, the spiritual and religious practices described by participants were considered sacred and integral to their well-being and sense of meaning personally and professionally.

### **Pampering**

Although pampering is often viewed as synonymous with self-care in popular culture, study participants described caring for themselves through pampering only occasionally. Participant 202107, who discussed prioritizing exercise and solitude as self-care, shared about pampering activities as well, “I also do get my nails done every so often, my hair done. I love bubble baths!” The forms of pampering described included bubble baths, beauty treatments, aromatherapy, and treats like indulgent snacks or a favorite soda.

### **Most Impactful Practices**

When asked about what forms of self-care were the most impactful and irreplaceable in their lives, the study participants replied with one predominant form of self-care or a combination of practices that were of the utmost value in terms of well-being. More notable was the fact that each of the participants had their own unique characterization of self-care activities that felt most beneficial. Although exercise was ranked as the most impactful, there was not one specific combination of dimensions or activities replicated among the majority of participants. Figure 4 provides a breakdown of the most impactful self-care activities reported by the educators.

**Figure 4***Most Impactful Self-Care Practices*

Exercising, setting healthy boundaries, guarding their personal time, and reconnecting with themselves were all elements considered irreplaceable for many of the teachers interviewed. Spirituality, pursuing passions or hobbies, and reading for enjoyment were also non-negotiable as vital practices for some of the teacher participants. Again, the most impactful practices identified by participants were practiced either independently or in conjunction with another activity. The participant quotes in Table 2 of Appendix G offer additional insight into the rankings and combinations of self-care considered most important. Through enjoyment, staying active, connecting with themselves and others, and finding meaning in life, the educator participants' lived experiences were expressed through this multidimensional data.

**Major Theme 2 Conclusions**

The data constituting major theme 2 is at the heart of successfully answering RQ1 by illustrating, in detail, the lived experiences and concrete practices that educators integrate into their daily lives. The data encompassed an array of self-care practices

described by study participants across various dimensions, along with the most impactful activities. The data relayed in this major theme provides answers to RQ1 by offering a genuine view into how making balanced boundary choices is a vital aspect of self-care for educators in protecting themselves against burn-out, fatigue, and overworking behaviors. The participant accounts continued to shed light on educator lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon of self-care and the unique choices teachers make in practicing self-care in their everyday lives. The detailed and genuine educator responses representing this theme provide knowledge sought by social science researchers in better understanding how the phenomenon of self-care fits for teachers in the U.S., and how leaders can better support educator self-care.

### **Major Theme 3: Educator Self-Care is Relational**

A third major theme that emerged for participants was that teacher self-care relationships in multiple forms were integral to teacher self-care. Self-care was described throughout the interviews as not separate from but intertwined with the teachers' valued relationships and communal ties. Each of the 13 participants described self-care as relationally centered and the relationships in their lives as an essential component of their self-care support system. Major theme 3 was comprised of 413 coded segments of data. The teachers described ways that caring for others felt like self-care. Study participants also imparted how close relational bonds with others as well as professional support from other education professionals supported and provided important self-care. The data in sub-theme 3a represented experiences of urgency and pivotal life events that surfaced in connection with relationships and to developing needed self-care. During critical points in the participants' lives and careers, poignant experiences were shared about times the

interviewees received needed care and support from others and also reached critical junctures where self-care in service of their personal well-functioning was indisputable.

### **Caring for Others as Self-Care**

Within major theme 3, one of the most noteworthy patterns reported by participants was that caring for others contributed to a sense of self-care as opposed to being something that was depleting. Ten of the 13 teacher participants named caring for others as self-care. For instance, teacher 202108 pondered this nuance:

I don't know why that [taking care of others] feels like self-care, but it does. I think it feels like I'm part of something bigger and that in itself, maybe feels like I'm taken care of... I don't know why taking care of people feels like I'm taking care of myself. I don't know why that is, but to me it does.

Self-care in the form of caring for others in participant 202108's example above related to a sense of meaning and purpose. Participant 202112 expanded on the mutual benefits of care for students and among teacher peers in describing a school community project spearheaded during the 2020-2021 school year:

A couple of us [teachers] got together and we came up with some silliness [a student project] which naturally took the focus off what was going on in the world [pandemic and politics] and put the focus back on just being a teenager.

The...kids actually won an award...for what they did for health and well-being for the kids in our [school]. I think it really did a lot for my mental health.

In reference to serving as a self-care trainer in their school, participant 202103 described self-fulfillment and reinforcement of self-care as a valuable part of that role:

And I felt that leadership role [as a self-care trainer] in helping other people to get through their struggles, I think that I really made sure that I took care of myself.

Knowing that I made an impact that way was really satisfying. And that was self-care to me to be able to share that.

While self-care is often couched as something more independently focused, a majority of the teachers interviewed described in assorted ways how caring for others is a form of self-care when balanced with boundaries.

### **Close Relational Bonds**

In addition to the mutuality described in caring for others as self-care by many of the educators interviewed, every participant described relationships and close bonds with others as a valuable part of caring for themselves. The participants discussed ways close relationships with their spouse, family, or closest friends nurtured them in a way that they considered self-care. Eleven of the 13 teachers specified that having close relationships with their co-workers contributed to them caring for themselves. The data indicated that forming their closest friendships with fellow teachers was not uncommon among those interviewed. Moreover, relationships to varying degrees of closeness that felt energizing and provided a sense of community were cherished by study participants.

In describing the strong connection with their spouse and the value of their friends and school community, Participant 202101 articulated:

He's [spouse] like my self-care; he self-care's me...[additional] relationships, other than my old trusted, tried and true relationships and colleagues at school, I get energized by new teachers and new relationships and, of course, just being

able to come home and have somebody [spouse] who is supportive is energizing and who allows me to be who I am... that is really comforting.

Teacher 202105 echoed similar sentiments about their relationships emphasizing the importance of connections with fellow teachers:

Like a lot [of relationships] in different ways - family and friends and my [spouse] and even my coworkers [support and energize me]. Especially at small rural schools, we work very closely with one another, so I think that's very important, energizing. Having someone relate to you and how you're feeling. It means a lot.

Participant 202106 echoed the value of school relationships, namely having close friends as colleagues, "I have wonderful friends, obviously, and co-teachers that have been through similar things and are not afraid to reach out and make sure you're okay."

Relational interdependence was a source of care for teacher participants.

The identity of being a teacher, caring for others, and forming relationships as an integral part of work underpinned the lived experience that self-care is relational for teachers. Relationship as a cornerstone of care for oneself and others was described by participant 202103 who stated that their school community of teachers was a regular form of social self-care for them throughout their long career:

School was my family and my lifestyle [before COVID-19]...As a group we had somebody help organize...once a month, we tried to go out to dinner together...get a group together [to go to] the movies, you know we really tried to support each other with things like that.

Regarding the social self-care inherent in teaching in the small town where they live, participant 202104 said, "Being a part of the community in which I teach is just so

important...” The bonds and social outlets in community with others described by teachers continuously connected relationships with self-care. The accounts by participants elevated the relational aspects of self-care and emphasized the reality that teachers’ close relationships and communal ties with others were intertwined with their self-care lived experiences.

### **Professional Support**

Relational aspects of self-care specifically referencing professional support were endorsed by all 13 of the teachers participating in this study. The teachers interviewed described receiving professional support in benefit of their well-functioning as self-care. The participants discussed receiving valuable support from paraprofessionals, partner teachers, school counselors, subject departments, administrators, family members, or trusted mentors in education. The professional support discussed included receiving advice, assistance, collaboration, and back-up from fellow education professionals.

In terms of fellow teachers, participant 202110 attributed their ability to cope with and navigate the first year of teaching to the support of co-workers:

My first year, I had a lot of other teachers help me. I’d be, by far, the last teacher to leave and so usually whoever was left or whoever was last right before me would...see my light on, so they’d come in and see if I needed anything.

Participant 202106 also spoke highly of the support of colleagues, “Our school building as a whole, [has] excellent, excellent co-teachers and supportive colleagues.” In recognizing the value of fellow teacher support during the COVID-19 pandemic, participant 202105 expressed, “[My colleagues] they understand and know what you’re going through, [they’ve] been through it and they can help, a direction to point you in.”

Knowing that they were not alone within their school ecosystem was a crucial protective factor for the educators interviewed.

Feeling a sense of connection to trusted mentors who had been in long-time educator also supported participants in self-care decision-making. For example, teacher 202111 stated, “My mom's a former teacher...She retired the year that I went into teaching and my aunt is also a former teacher...So, I go to them a lot when I have questions.” Likewise, teacher 202104 described lessons learned about self-care from both of their parents who worked as educators:

My parents were both in education. My dad was a [principal]...he would be at work a lot, and so I think that was a positive and a negative because I know how it felt when he wasn't home very much but then I also got the work ethic too...And my mom was a teacher and she put a lot of her heart into it as well...it made her happy...and I think that helped me see an outlet for [myself]...not just in the classroom as a teacher, but creatively and...in seeking out relationships as well.

The development and understanding of the phenomenon of educator self-care described by participants hinged on their relationships with others in the field.

With regard to the vital professional support provided by administrators, one participant [number withheld for confidentiality] described how a past administrator supported them during a difficult time involving an act of racism:

[My past principal] doesn't have any other ethnic background at all, and so, for [principal] to say, I'm going to handle this [racist incident], and I will be the one to make sure that things get resolved and this doesn't happen again - it was next level stuff for me.

Participant 202104 described appreciation for their school leadership as well, “I feel supported [by my principal and administrators] with how to teach. And so that makes a big difference to feel that way.” Likewise, teacher 202103 said their administrators supported them often with gestures of care, “I would say that [I’ve] had compassionate leadership, so I think that’s something. They [administrators] knew to do self-care things with us, have little surprises for us and water, some healthy snacks.” Professional support that was practical and relational was described as impactful in supporting the practice and acceptability of educator self-care.

### **Sub-Theme 3a: Urgency and Pivotal Life Events Contribute to Self-Care**

#### **Development**

Sub-theme 3a data relate to teacher participants developing self-care practices and competencies as a result of feeling a sense of urgency in association with a pivotal life experience and their relationships with others. Each of the participants contributed data representative of this sub-theme. While the data described experiences and events that could be seen as barriers to self-care, the stories represented resilience and how their relationships assisted them in navigating challenges and milestones. Relationship and urgency reinforced the significance of self-care for the interview participants while transforming the barriers they faced into opportunities for growth. Table 3 in Appendix H contains participant quotes representing this sub-theme.

The teachers interviewed shared about the vital support they received from a fellow teachers and health professionals during a difficult life experience and communicated what led to the realizations that self-care was critical to their well-being. Participants also described that identifying and caring for their needs strengthened their

relationship with themselves. Gaining awareness in the midst of struggle was conveyed as formative in developing effective self-care.

Participants' specific experiences during pivotal life events illustrated teacher self-care by emphasizing relationship and highlighting the urgency for the educators interviewed to care for themselves while receiving care and support from others. Sparked by the interview question, "Please tell me about a time you felt most cared for, either personally or professionally," the data in this sub-theme emerged through various stories describing a combination of positive and negative experiences throughout the years. Most notably, the specific life events recounted did not adhere to a binary of being labeled as either "good" or "bad" by the teachers interviewed. The times described by participants represented change, challenge, and examples of teachers feeling most cared for by others in their lives as well as times when they felt particularly motivated to practice or learn new strategies for self-care. Figure 5 offers a snapshot of the significant life events described and emphasized by educators as saliently tied to self-care.

### Figure 5

#### *Significant Events in the Lives of Participants*



Moreover, tragedies in the lives of some of the teacher participants served as life-changing experiences related to receiving care from others as a component of self-care. Participant 202102, who experienced the traumatic death of a loved one, described the presence of an extended community as vital to caring for themselves in the aftermath of their loss:

Teachers from a whole other [school] building came in and helped wrap my Christmas presents for my kids. And the church sent over meals to the house and then...the school gave me off as much time as I wanted, which was the week before Christmas. ...A lot of friends from my childhood showed up, but it was just incredibly impactful, I mean because you don't realize [how many people care], it wasn't necessarily people that I talked to the last many years.

The data provided by study participants who experienced personal pain also depicted a sense of greater clarity related to prioritizing their needs and identifying new support systems during critical points of their healing process.

In relation to the disruption and stress caused during the 2020-2021 school year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, participant 202105 reflected on how much peer support and care matters during times of upheaval, "I don't think we realized it until this year [with COVID-19] you know, when we didn't have each other, how much we relied on that [support as self-care]." Participant 202107 additionally shared that this past 2020-2021 year has been difficult regarding concerns about their child, stress with extended family members, and navigating the impacts on COVID-19 on teaching which has motivated greater self-care, "I felt like this year I was more aware of how important it [self-care] was." Interviewee 202103 described being driven by purpose and meaning

during challenging times including teacher during the pandemic, “I knew it [being a teacher] was what I was supposed to be doing. So, I rose above and handled those challenges.” Through coping and resilience in the face of difficulty, the teacher participants described continued striving for wellness and healing. In addition to caring for and teaching their students, the educators in this study also grew their families, lost loved ones, recovered from illness, surmounted limited mobility, survived first-year teaching, adjusted to new schools and towns, and traversed the uncertainty of crisis-teaching during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Urgency and relationship motivated each teacher in various ways to practice self-care and accept support.

### **Major Theme 3 and Sub-Theme 3a Conclusions**

The data in major theme 3 and sub-theme 3a answered both RQ1 and RQ2. The major theme data related to caring for others, close relationships, community, professional support, and mentorship as forms of self-care answered RQ1 by providing a better understanding of how teachers view self-care and the value of their relationships. Sub-theme 3a data depicted the rich and varied lived experiences and milestones that teacher participants navigated in tandem with maintaining their careers and work in education, answering both RQ1 and RQ2. The data successfully answering RQ1 evident in major theme 3, along with the accounts in sub-theme 3a, provided an intimate window into the lived experiences of the teachers interviewed. The relational experiences noted directly motivated participants to practice self-care. Relationships provided participants the training grounds for adopting and developing intentional and lasting self-care habits. The data related to answering RQ2 through depictions of the disruptions caused by

unforeseen life challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic, though the overarching conclusion was that these barriers served as springboards for self-care growth.

#### **Major Theme 4: COVID-19 Significantly Impacted Teacher Self-Care and Stress**

The major theme of the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020-2021 school year having a significant impact on K-12 educators in the U.S. distinctly developed from the data represented by 209 coded segments of narrative. Each of the educators interviewed described concrete ways teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic through the 2020 – 2021 school year affected their work and self-care. Participants reported increased demands related to workloads, pandemic safety measures, the learning curve of teaching remotely, and technology gaps. The teachers interviewed also described a combination of expressly adverse effects and silver lining or advantageous experiences resulting from the pandemic.

Sub-theme 4a developed from participant accounts related specifically to school shutdowns in March of 2020. Teacher participants expressed how self-care was dramatically derailed for a period of time and acute stress effects were experienced. At the time of the study interviews, the educators had either returned to teaching in-person only or were teaching in hybrid models of both in-person and online instruction; there were no study participants who were strictly remote teaching. Incidentally, COVID-19 vaccines were in the early stages of approval during the time of the interviews.

#### **Increased Occupational Demands**

The teachers interviewed described how they managed the increased demands of the education, health, and sociopolitical realities through self-care and coping with

stressors. Participant 202101 described self-regulation, boundary-setting, and seeking professional support as the primary self-care strategies they employed during this time:

I think trying to readjust our expectations [during the pandemic]. A lot of just talking it out again with colleagues and trying to figure out how to best monitor so that we weren't so worked up about the children being so far behind. And just keep recalibrating and, you know, a lot of self-talk, reminding myself that we're in COVID, everything's a little bit different...making sure I don't stay at work too late, and then I get home and I can be in my safe spot and regenerate at home.

Participant 202102 also acknowledged the differences since the onset of the pandemic, and described navigating increased responsibilities due to COVID-19 health guidelines compounding their role as a teacher:

It's just teachers wear so many hats...COVID wasn't friendly to that. I mean our rules haven't changed much since the beginning of this year so, we're masked every day, we have to clean every time kids come in or go out of the room...and wash hands. Every surface has to be cleaned...like every hour or less. Every time a kid sat at a table and gets up, the surface has to be clean....we can't use the nurse's office anymore...we have to take temperatures and record all that. If a child needs to go home sick, the teacher has to stop teaching and make the phone call to the parent because...well that all became part of the responsibility.

Interviewee 202107 discussed the challenge and value of practicing self-care during the 2020-2021 school year:

Especially coming out of last year, where you were hunkered down in your house and it was really hard to do self-care...I like to be by myself when I'm doing self-

care, and I found it really hard to do that. But with this school year and COVID-19, it was more important than anything that I made sure I make that time because...with everything I was just telling you about with this year [life events], it was a lot. Self-care was what got me through.

With the additional duties and variables that teachers were managing, both personally and professionally, self-care served as a lifeline for many participants.

### **Expressly Adverse Effects**

Stories relayed by participants included accounts of dismay, increased stress, uncertainty, frustration, and even the death of a loved one due to COVID-19 illness. Teacher participant 202109 expressed having difficulty with added teaching requirements and poorly chosen technology mediums diminishing time for self-care, “It was awful [teaching during 2020-2021]...That blended model that we did. It was the most stressful thing I had ever done in my life. And there was no time for self-care... It was horrific for me.” In convergence with teacher 202109, participant 202111 similarly described time scarcity as negatively affecting self-care and impacting sleep, “I was running on about three to four hours of sleep every night for pretty much the whole year...So, it just made it a lot harder for me to find the time to do any kind of self-care at all.” The majority of the expressly negative experiences articulated by teachers framed COVID-19 as a significant barrier to participant self-care, providing data in response to RQ2.

Additionally, the teachers reported the negative impacts of quarantine periods and other disruptions to their school communities causing added stress and a sense of loss. Participant 202105, who taught at a small rural school, described the losses due to COVID-19 that caused difficulties at school:

I think just everything being so different, such a big change for everyone and we're a pretty family-oriented school. We couldn't have any of the, or didn't have, any of the functions that we normally did. We would do a lot of potlucks and things like that and, of course, most people weren't happy about [losing] that. And we had to deal with angry parents all year. ...In general, the whole school climate was pretty negative all year.

In accordance with participant 202105, teacher 202103 spoke about disruptions to the school year due to COVID-19 while also citing concerns about health and exposure:

[My student] had to be sent home and the next day I got a phone call that [they] tested positive...And it was like oh my gosh, every child in my classroom...they all had to go home and quarantine. And we had to wait out the number of days and take our temperature, enter your oxygen level every day, and pray that we hadn't been exposed, and that was very stressful.

Educator participants shared that many everyday factors at school like attendance, health monitoring, and social-relational interactions within school communities were significantly shaped by factors related to COVID-19.

Some of the educators specifically highlighted the value of routines and self-care practices in mitigating the negative affects during the 2020 – 2021 school year. Teacher participant 202107 cited meditation as a vital self-care practice, “Things were really overwhelming...it was a tough year [visible emotion]. So, the meditation has really helped. It was hard. It was hard to not focus on everything.” Interviewee 202113 described the contrast between their ability to weather the stress because of the coping

skills they already had in place versus the impacts on their family member who was a new teacher:

I think about [family member], who is a brand new teacher, I feel like [they were] super stressed. [Family member] doesn't have the same routines that I already have and carry to make things not so crazy...and I got crazy. And so, teachers that don't have that [established self-care] or don't have that grounding or any of those routines in place, and no one's telling you that those are some of the things you should do...It would be very stressful.

Teacher 202113 emphasized the value of self-care guidance and the provision of tangible coping options for teachers who are new to teaching and navigating post-COVID-19 educational impacts. The combination of a lack of self-care resources and increased stressors served as a distinct situational barrier faced by teachers, providing substantiation toward answering RQ2.

### **Silver Lining Experiences**

In addition to negative impacts, eleven of the educators in this study also shared positive outcomes related to teaching and self-care during the first year of the pandemic that constituted silver lining sentiments about what they had experienced. Interviewees described having a greater appreciation for the health of loved ones, gratitude for time with family during the lockdown period, and feeling a sense of camaraderie with fellow teachers. Some of the teachers interviewed also acknowledged that the pandemic caused their schools to invest in needed technology and teaching tools to the benefit of students that did not previously have access to certain devices or Wi-Fi.

Participant 202104 spoke about gratitude for connections with loved ones:

I've always valued it [time with family], but I guess everything became a little more special [during COVID-19]. Even staying home and doing puzzles during that time was special. And then we could do more and more. Those regular things became more special. Seeing family and friends and spending time with them.

Participant 202110 talked about a sense of connection with fellow teachers as well as the bonus of their school receiving Chromebook devices for each student to use for classes if they needed to stay home, "Everyone was in the same boat [fellow teachers]. For me, basically everybody was... That made it better. There's definitely some good that came out of that... like all the kids getting their own Chromebook. That was nice..." Although the onset of the pandemic upended how the participants' schools typically operated, some technological advancements were ushered in as a result providing teachers with additional supports, which lowered stress levels for some participants.

Additional interviewees described the formation of online professional or social groups as a silver lining to the pandemic. Teacher 202112 explained how a long-standing professional network pivoted to offering beneficial online support:

The [professional] group again stepped forward and they started a monthly Zoom meeting for all of us and you could zoom in and we'd have cocktails or whatever, and you'd be in your dining room and laughing and doing what you would normally do if you were at a teacher meeting. I guess maybe that helped me pull myself back, but the uncertainty [was hard].

Participant 202105 had a similar experience of participating in an online social support and exercise group that formed during the pandemic, "It's a group of moms, we started to get together at 5:30 am a couple mornings a week during COVID. We've been on Zoom,

but we've kept it up. I guess it's a form of self-care for all of us..." Teacher participants' descriptions of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education depicted added responsibilities, increased stress effects, enhanced appreciation, and unanticipated benefits.

#### **Sub-Theme 4a: Educator Self-Care was Derailed in March 2020**

All but two participants spoke about pronounced impacts on their functioning and self-care during the initial weeks of the school shutdowns mandated by shelter-in-place orders throughout the United States in March of 2020. The experiences described lasted anywhere from two weeks to three months following the shutdown and included a sense of paralysis about how to proceed with teaching remotely, mental health effects including anxiety or depression, blurred boundaries regarding worktime and preparation, fear and worry about the home lives of certain students, and destabilization of self-care habits and routines. Table 4 in Appendix I captures participant quotes describing the acute stress effects of the March 2020 school shutdowns.

School shutdowns were described as a period of acute stress and disorientation for the majority of teachers interviewed. Study participants described up-ended routines, markedly reduced self-care, heightened concern for students, and blurred boundaries affecting their functioning levels. The educators also discussed moments and ways they pulled out of the acute stress zone and re-established self-care and healthy boundaries. For the two teachers that did not endorse this sub-theme, one was on family leave during the initial shutdown and the other identified a more chronic stress experience at their school that did not subside after a few weeks or months.

### **Major Theme 4 and Sub-Theme 4a Conclusions**

The data incorporated in major theme 4 and sub-theme 4a were successful in answering both RQ1 and RQ2. The data revealed that adaptability and self-care, in new forms for some of the interviewees, became a mainstay of pandemic teaching and provided insights into educator lived experiences regarding the phenomenon of self-care, providing answers to RQ1. The data answering RQ2 discussed the self-care barriers faced by teachers in relation to COVID-19 pandemic teaching. The educators in this study dealt with added job duties, health concerns, losses, and fatigue. Study participants also strengthened their investment in practicing self-care, experienced gratitude, and navigated technological learning curves with demonstrated resilience and dedication.

### **Major Theme 5: The Greatest Barriers of Teacher Self-Care**

Theme 5 centered on barriers experienced by teachers in practicing self-care and included 158 coded segments of interview data. The data pointed to the reality that the teachers interviewed experienced three overlapping barriers regarding educator self-care. The barriers that developed from the data were time, choosing to prioritize self-care, and competing demands related to teacher workload, education system norms, and family responsibilities for those who identified as parents.

#### **Time and Prioritization**

During the interviews, 12 of the 13 participants in this study immediately cited time as being their greatest barrier in practicing self-care. Ten of 13 teacher participants spoke about making the choice to prioritize self-care as being a dominant barrier. For those who identified time as their chief barrier, many responded simply stating time and others expanded on the context of their time limitations. For example, teacher interviewee

202102 concisely explained, “Time [is the greatest barrier]. I mean there's just so much to do.” This was echoed by teacher 202105, who has young children, along with the element of limited means or supports, “I think just time in the day. Not enough time in the day. And I think being in a smaller area, there's not always the support or resources you might need [for self-care].” In addition to time being limited, participant 202109 expressed having difficulty making choices regarding time and how it is used illuminating the overlapping nature of the barriers named, “I’m not very good at protecting my time. I mean so, prioritizing. I’m not good at it. But it’s definitely time.” While having enough time to practice self-care was easily identified, many alluded to or articulated other elements related to this area.

In addition to the overlap between time and choice communicated by teacher 202109, participant 202110 labeled time and limited energy influencing their choice to prioritize self-care as the greatest challenge, “Time and energy. If it's been a long day, sometimes when I go home, the last thing I want to do is go out and [exercise]. That’s a very easy excuse to make to not do any of those things.” Teacher 202104 toggled between choosing time or prioritization before landing on the latter described as mindset, “I want to say time [is the biggest barrier], but I don't I think it is. Mostly my mindset, I think. So no, it's not time because I choose [what to do for self-care].” Time limitations and both making or having choices regarding practicing self-care served as roadblocks to readily practicing self-care for the teachers interviewed.

Educator 202108 also discussed time with the overlapping mention of external demands, but ultimately endorsed choice and prioritization as their primary challenge:

Taking care of others first, I guess would be [a barrier]. So, I mean finding the time, and I do know that it's so important to find the time, but really if you've got xyz to do, you're getting that stuff done, you often will move yourself to the bottom of the list, and so.

Participant 202107, who parents early school-aged children, explained that prioritization of self-care is a point of needed growth, “Sometimes I get too busy, into my schedule and what's going on, that I don't take the time. Sometimes I forget to take the time for self-care.” Participant 202101 spoke about their process of granting self-permission to choose and make time for self-care, “So I think giving myself permission to [engage in self-care]. To give myself permission to do that without the guilt [is a challenge].” Moreover, participant 202109 concisely admitted, in relation to choosing self-care over other responsibilities, “It feels selfish.” The above teacher examples clarify how time along with not always identifying that self-care is as important as completing other tasks and caring for others were significant barriers for educator participants.

### **Competing Responsibilities**

In the realm of the competing responsibilities described by study participants, workload along with demands associated with the education system or family responsibilities were identified by 12 educators as significantly impacting educator self-care. The participants' examples presented a dynamic picture of the barriers teachers must navigate in terms of caring for their needs. Participant 202103 described the struggle present in a teacher's day-to-day activities:

Some teachers don't even have time to go the bathroom. You know, we have a 30-minute lunch break, by the time you walk [students] up and pick them up it's like

22 minutes or something. You've got to eat really fast - the rest of the world can take an hour lunch - but teachers are just hurry up and eat, and then phone calls, and parent conferences, and the extra meetings, and it's like the pressures on your time are just incredible.

Teacher interviewee 202111 responded with similar examples of teacher workloads conflicting with caring for basic needs:

The workload that we have at school [is the biggest challenge]. It's always something, it seems. We think we're caught up and then we'll get an email, I need everyone to do this by tomorrow before the end of school, and I'm thinking, there is no other time that I can do that. So, I have to cut [time] out of my sleep schedule.

Likewise, teacher 202107 described teacher downtime as being filled with tasks, "And even when you do have the time to yourself, you're not really by yourself, you know you're answering emails, you're making copies; you're just always, something's always going on, you know." Professional duties and education system expectations impacted how participants budgeted their time and when they chose self-care in addition to complying with workload pressures.

Education system demands as a significant barrier was represented in the data by various teachers describing the internal struggle they felt when faced with the decision to take personal or sick time. Because of the way the system is constructed, taking time off to care for teacher health or other needs created more mental and professional labor for educator participants than choosing to delay self-care. Participant 202101, a seasoned educator, articulated this problem stating:

I just need a day off, but that means more stress so it's less stressful to go to work and maybe not feel well. And that is true for every teacher I know and have ever known. There is nobody that just walks out the door. It's not even, we're not allowed to do that, we have to have plans...we have emergency plans that you hope nobody really has to use...that somebody could do in a pinch...sub plans...I mean you can't plan being sick, so if you're saying you can't go in, you're still writing some plans while you're sick... That's hard. I mean any teacher will tell you that being sick is really, really, really awful.

Interviewee 202109, another long-time teacher, echoed this perspective on systemic pressures regarding time off:

And the thing about teaching...you can take a day off, but you pay for it before, when you make all those lesson plans, and then pay for it after when you come back to the room that looks like a bomb went off. None of the papers are graded right. I would throw the papers away and just chalk it up to a useless day. So, you can't take a day off.

The education system and the structures in place of requiring sub-plans and extensive preparation when absent coupled with the lack of updated norms co-created by teachers and administrators that would allow a more supportive process for teachers who are ill or needing time-off have resulted in teachers neglecting their health and wellness needs. Moreover, it is worth noting that the one teacher who did not endorse workload or education system demands as a significant barrier to practicing self-care indicated feeling very cared for by their superintendent and that school leaders valued their time.

### **Major Theme 5 Conclusions**

The data comprising major theme 5 is at the heart of successfully and directly answering RQ2. The data provided by study participants within this major theme revealed three interconnected barriers faced by teachers in practicing self-care. Time, choosing to prioritize self-care, and experiencing external responsibilities or educational system demands were the major barriers faced by the educators interviewed for this study. The examples offered in substantiation of these major challenges also answered RQ1 by supplying details and educator thought-processes in relation to teacher lived experiences regarding practicing self-care. Educators navigated dynamic obstacles and considered multiple responsibilities when deciding on and engaging in self-care. The major theme 5 barriers discussed offered greater insight into the complexities faced by teachers in maintaining wellness.

### **Major Theme 6: Creating Cultures of Self-Care in Schools Means Respecting Teachers' Time, Energy, and Input**

Interview questions seeking teacher input about how schools could create cultures of self-care were driven by the conceptual framework guiding this study. The three-pronged conceptual framework of this study, incorporating a social work regarding the concept of self-care, a teacher resilience perspective, and humanistic leadership philosophy, was the impetus for further exploring what a culture of self-care in schools would look like and what school decision-makers or administrators may need to better address and support educator self-care (Aguilar, 2018; Lee & Miller, 2013; Northouse, 2016). One major theme developed from the data along with minor theme 6a. Major theme 6 depicts that demonstrating respect for teachers' time and energy, fostering self-

care awareness, and incorporating teacher input to rethink programs and initiatives would be integral to creating cultures of self-care in schools. Each of the 13 participants either spoke to the importance of this major theme or offered ideas that would embody this theme in relation to self-care initiatives, events, and programs for teachers. Teacher narratives in support of sub-theme 6a centered on the value of humanistic leadership in promoting holistic educator self-care and well-functioning in schools.

### **Demonstrating Respect for Teachers' Time and Energy**

Demonstrating respect for the time and energy of teachers emerged as a significant determinant to communicating care and supporting educator self-care according to twelve of the participants interviewed. Acts of respect toward teachers were described as compensating teachers for the extra time they spend fulfilling their responsibilities. Protecting teachers' time was experienced by interviewees when administrators were willing to take on tasks that were taxing to teachers and outside of the contracted teaching workday. Teacher interviewees also described acts of respect as reducing the number of meetings they must attend, shortening the length of meetings, offering alternate mediums like Zoom for teachers with young children, and making meetings more engaging and connecting.

Participant 202106 agreed that less meetings and requests of educators that encroached on teacher preparation time was a distinct way to promote teacher self-care:

You know, extra committees are not always the answer. More meetings, not always the answer, meetings about meetings. [School decision-makers] have to stop sometimes and just let us teach, let us plan so we can teach... We would need more time... have help guarding our time, advocating for our needs. So that we

can be the best teachers we can be, and we can serve our students as they deserve to be and need to be served.

Teacher 202102 described the idea of guarding teachers' time in discussing intentional planning by administrators and keeping school promoted self-care options within a teachers' workday, "It [self-care programming] needs to be planned out and laid out...I also think that if administration is listening and supporting and giving you what you need, they're asking you to do things that are within your contracted day." Teacher 202105 also saw intentional planning with the added component of curating resources as crucial in establishing a culture of self-care, "I think promoting it [self-care] and providing resources and taking the time to set up programs. I don't think most of us will go out and do it on our own." The above examples portray compensated and accessible teacher self-care and connection opportunities as crucial to promoting self-care as a school norm.

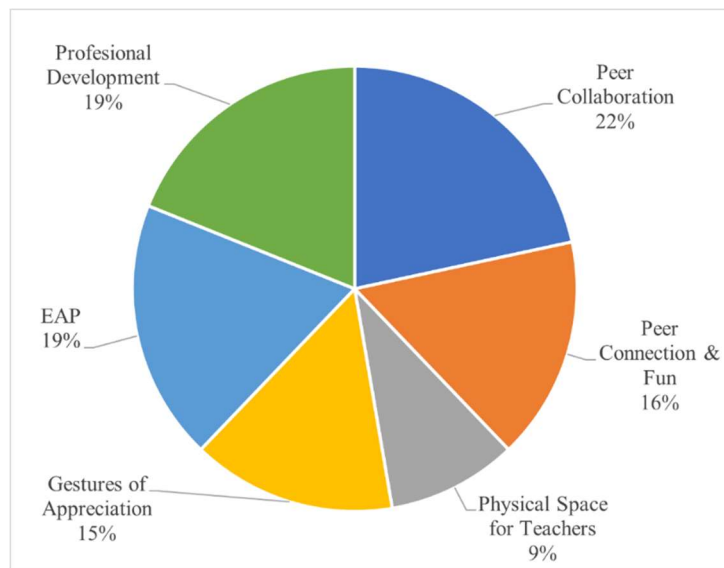
### **Self-Care Awareness**

Self-care awareness on the part of administrators and leaders in addition to honoring and encouraging teachers' choices regarding their self-care practices were discussed by participants as contributing to a culture of self-care for educators. In relation to encouragement as a gesture that supported cultures focused on self-care, teacher interviewee 202107 explained that administrator awareness is an essential factor, "I think that principals need to talk about it [self-care] more. I put that actually in our principal's evaluation, to check on teachers more. I think for administrators being more aware of self-care [creates a culture of care]." Participant 202109 reinforced this point describing their current and past principal's efforts to encourage self-care by discouraging overworking, "Our principal actually, and the one before too, they were very good about

telling you to take [care]. [Principal] would say, don't tell me that you were leaving at 7:30 on a Friday night... You shouldn't be doing that.” Lastly, teacher interviewee 202103, the self-care mentor and trainer at their school, described respecting teachers’ time and energy in promotion of self-care awareness by offering a variety of self-care development activities in smaller, more regular increments, “I'd rather have ideas and options and have a toolbox [for self-care] rather than have something mandated to me or pushed out that’s the same for everybody. It has to be more individualized because there's different circumstances for different people.” Teacher participants, by and large, spoke of cultures of self-care gestures that were practical, relational, and reliant on their school leaders becoming more self-care aware and attending more to teacher basic needs and work conditions.

### **Rethinking Initiatives, Programs, and Events**

Nearly all of the teachers in this study articulated ways administrators and district leaders could rethink what and how they deliver programs, initiatives, teacher appreciation events, and professional development. The educators interviewed offered unique and thoughtful ideas for promoting cultures of self-care in schools and increasing the value of initiatives, programs, or events. Figure 6 illustrates respondent ideas.

**Figure 6***Teacher Ideas for Rethinking Programs, Initiatives, and Events*

Nearly all of the educators interviewed conveyed specific ideas regarding teacher appreciation events, establishing spaces in schools designated for professional self-care, and incorporating more time into meetings or the school day for teachers to collaborate or connect with each other. Throughout the ideas and examples of activities that had been successful at their various schools, the teacher participants continuously highlighted the value of respecting and incorporating teacher input into decisions meant to support educators. For example, teacher 202102 asserted that if compensation for participating in programs or events is not possible, then teacher choice and enjoyment must be critical elements, “Because teachers give so many hours to begin with...in my opinion, [initiatives or programs] should be things that you want to do, things that you're doing that are *your* initiatives not things that are *other people's* initiatives.” Participant 202103 added that programs or initiatives must be meaningful and tailored critiquing programs that are not customized or relevant to the needs of teachers in specific settings, “It's a one

size fits all thing [some programs] that they think they found the solution...I think sometimes that culture needs to be a school-based decision.” Participants emphasized that teacher input must be sought and applied in order to create cultures of care in schools.

### **Sub-Theme 6a: Humanistic Leadership Matters**

Humanistic leadership, the guiding leadership lens for this study entails caring and leading others holistically and wanting all organization members to thrive in the work they do and in their lives as a whole. A humanistic approach emphasizes belonging, compassion, and placing people over bureaucratic processes (Hammel & Zanini, 2020; Northouse, 2016). Twelve educators interviewed shared stories of past and present administrators who embodied humanistic leadership principles in upholding teacher self-care and a culture of well-being in their schools. Participant 202102 spoke of the humanistic dynamics with their principal when stating, “Relationship is everything.” Additionally, participant 202104 detailed impactful humanistic practices instituted centered on communicating care in their district:

This year [during COVID-19] I just felt like I could breathe. It just felt so different and I’m sure one of the reasons is the less [students], 20 kids [smaller class size]...I just felt...I would call myself spoiled. And then I also was a mentor to another teacher and that made me feel good as well and I got paid to be a mentor. It’s not all about the money but for someone to value it, I mean that’s what they [school administrators] do here...But it made me feel cared for, because someone's valuing my extra time that I’m putting in.

Again, practices that were considerate and compensatory of teachers' time and efforts were described as making a difference in upholding staff morale and in optimizing mental and emotional well-being for teachers.

Additional qualities of humanistic leadership discussed by participants included school leaders being adaptable, approachable, and reliable. Participant 202107 highlighted how administrator accessibility and dependability shaped a school culture of care, "[My principal] has an open-door policy for sure. And is the kind of [person] that you can sit down with, and you can cry...you can be real...Or it could be even the celebrations...That relationship is definitely important." Many examples also emerged about humanistic leadership related to care gestures during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples included superintendents putting together student grab-and-go lunches, principals responding to requests for time off promptly and without questions, and school district policies becoming more flexible about allowing teachers to attend meetings either in-person or remotely.

In contrast, educators also relayed examples of school leaders who were not humanistic. Teacher 202102 described a continuous experience of their district leaders using "sneak attacks" by changing collaborative decisions made with teachers without transparency or further discussion. Interviewee 202106 shared about a former principal who was not forthcoming or constructive with them when deciding to issue a reprimand about something outside their duties as a teacher. Participant 202111 gave an example of leadership that diverged from humanistic principles related to their administrators intending to improve the school's culture and then not following through:

Our...admin [emailed] about [saying] these are the things that we want to do to help create a better culture in our school...And it was amazing. I was looking forward to it and, and they didn't actually do them. So, I feel that following through with those things would be really important [for a culture of care]. If you say these are the things that we want to do for you... If we give feedback, to not just be heard, to actually put that into practice, actually do something about it.

While humanistic practices can be exponentially beneficial in fostering healthy cultures and promoting teacher self-care, non-humanistic and poor leadership can be detrimental to the well-being of educators and inhibit teacher self-care.

### **Major Theme 6 and Sub-Theme 6a Conclusions**

Major theme 6 and sub-theme 6a were composed of data that reinforced ways school leaders and decision-makers can cultivate and uphold cultures that encourage and facilitate educator self-care. The teacher participants interviewed emphasized that cultures of self-care in schools would honor teachers' energy, time, and feedback. The educators also generously described ideas and programmatic possibilities in service of teacher self-care. Lastly, study participants described how humanistic leadership practices promoted teacher self-care and poor leadership detracted from well-functioning.

The major theme data related to school cultures of self-care successfully provided answers to RQ1 by illuminating teacher lived experiences of wanting and benefitting from more respectful approaches regarding teacher's needs and time and energy constraints. The data supporting sub-theme 6a effectively answered both RQ1 and RQ2 by describing teacher lived experiences of self-care within their school environments related to humanistic leadership and pointing out inadequate leadership as an implicit

barrier to educator self-care. Humanistic leadership practices were framed by participants as powerful promoters of teacher well-being.

### **Findings**

The results of this study offered rich and textured accounts of what educators must navigate at any given moment, day, or year as a teaching professional and individual. Each of the major themes and sub-themes offered key findings in the form of insights into the lived experiences of educators in relation to self-care and the top barriers faced by teachers in practicing self-care. Each key insight below aligns with the six major themes and corresponding sub-themes presented in the results and connects to the literature in significant ways.

#### **Key Insight 1: Educator Self-Care and Well-Being Do Not Occur in a Vacuum**

The major theme of contextual influences demonstrated that educator self-care is not a simple or linear undertaking. Occupational stressors created by the education system were described by study participants as impacting their well-being, pulling them away from the reasons they became teachers, and compounding their need for self-care (Kempf, 2018; Koenig et al., 2018). The competing roles of teacher, social worker, community member, parent, coach, and spouse limited and elevated the need for self-care among teacher participants. Moreover, study participants portrayed the grand effort it takes to navigate contextual challenges while also functioning well as an educator and trusted adult for their students. Lastly, the love and commitment the educators interviewed held toward the teaching profession and the kids or youth they taught was evident. Educator self-care decisions and wellness routines occur in tandem with and are affected by professional and personal contexts.

The key insight findings align with the literature and existing studies conducted on educator resilience, burnout, and career longevity framing occupational stress and changing demands as outpacing teacher resources (Koenig et al., 2018; Lever et al., 2017). The educators interviewed reinforced that teachers, in general, regularly feel taxed and that system requirements or challenging school cultures cause added stressors that can outweigh teacher capacity resulting in fatigue and burnout (Lever et al., 2017; A Teach Well Alliance, 2020). In order to support educator self-care, it is essential to acknowledge how systemic factors interact with and shape educator well-functioning.

### **Key Insight 2: Educator Self-Care is Uniquely Relative**

Each educator interviewed had a unique approach to the self-care habits they employed reinforcing the assertion that self-care is not “one size fits all” and that a variety of options support a best-fit approach for teachers in meeting their self-care needs (Kuebel, 2019; Neimeyer & Taylor, 2019). Multiple teachers, at the end of their interview, communicated to me that our time spent talking about self-care helped them to see how much they were doing to cope with stress and maintain well-being in their lives. The realizations gained by educators following one conversation indicate that continuing to talk about and demystify self-care is vital to self-care promotion and development (Kuebel, 2019; Newell, 2018).

The results showed that teacher participants practiced unique combinations of self-care across multiple dimensions. In terms of personal versus professional self-care, the data gathered revealed that practicing personal self-care independent from school duties, establishing healthy boundaries around work, and having supportive professional relationships and routines were beneficially interrelated. The data gathered from this

study and the current available literature convey teachers may be best served by school-based provision of options incorporating mind, body, social, and emotional wellness beyond physical exercise or one-dimensional definitions of health (Dorociak et al., 2017; Lever et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2017).

### **Key Insight 3: Self-Care for Educators is a Relational and Dynamic Venture**

One of the most striking findings from this study is that teacher relationships are integral to maintaining their self-care rather than in opposition of care for oneself (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2019). A paradox exists in this finding: in the contextual and barrier themes, caring for others before self-care was identified as an obstacle at times, yet in this theme, relationships were described as cornerstones to personal and professional well-functioning. In fact, all of the teachers interviewed described close bonds with others that nurtured and energized them, and all had teachers in their schools that they could turn to for support and ideas. Moreover, most rated a sense of community as vital to their wellness and many cited that their best or closest friends were also select fellow teachers.

The findings in this key insight were the most surprising as a bias was illuminated for me as the principal researcher. My bias was related to a fixed mindset I developed as a mental health clinician. I viewed all helping professionals' self-care as a solo venture separate from other people with the exception of the social dimension. I assumed this would be true for teachers. The study participants described a multitude of ways their relationships, communities, and mutually supportive bonds fueled multidimensional self-care and contributed to holistic well-being (Aguilar, 2018; Santana & Fouad, 2017). Educator self-care as it was depicted in the data of this study is a dynamic and adaptive process of developing routines and practices over time in relation to personal and

professional relationships, needs, and experiences (Boogren, 2018; Lucas, 2017). Challenges and pivotal life events related to self-care emerged as developmental steppingstones rather than undisputable deficits; a perspective supported by the growth mindset literature (Dweck, 2016).

#### **Key Insight 4: The COVID-19 Pandemic Challenged Teacher Self-Care Efforts**

Teaching during the onset and subsequent first year of the COVID-19 pandemic irrefutably impacted teacher self-care and well-being regardless of the size, type, or location of the schools where the participants taught. The first two weeks to three months of the mandated shutdown that resulted in schools pivoting to crisis remote teaching was described as a shock to the physical, mental, and emotional systems of the majority of teachers interviewed (Gates et al., 2020). The teachers' descriptions of this acute stress phase included low energy, a sense of paralysis, disorientation, sadness, worry for students, and the temporary derailment of exercise and other self-care practices. Some teachers also described a decrease in healthy nutrition or an increase in alcohol consumption. The examples were akin to the signs and symptoms of an acute stress response similar to what is experienced shortly following a traumatic event (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

Because the teachers in this study related on a deeply personal level to loving their profession and to genuinely caring for their students, it is understandable the shutdown was viscerally unsettling to teachers (Dorn et al., 2020; Hydon et al., 2015; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Beyond the initial period of disorientation, participants described continued stress and pressures on their time and energy along with the tumult caused in school communities by quarantine and social distance guidelines (Dorn et al.,

2020; Kaden, 2020). The teachers interviewed also conveyed silver linings, or positives that resulted from the pandemic, including the provision of needed technology to students, enhanced remote teaching resources, accessibility to meetings and connections beyond in-person, renewed in-person connections with students, and, for some, a sense of greater resilience (Aguilar, 2018; Kaden, 2020).

#### **Key Insight 5: Time, Choice, and Competing Responsibilities Limit Self-Care**

The data revealed that the greatest barriers faced by teachers in practicing self-care were time, choosing to prioritize self-care, and competing responsibilities. Nearly all of the participants endorsed time as their greatest challenge. Consistent with the literature, nearly all of the teachers identified external demands regarding the system, workload, and also managing parenting and household responsibilities as influencing the amount of time they can care for themselves (Grant et al., 2015; Lomas et al., 2017; Schussler et al., 2019). A majority of the participants in this study were also cognizant that choice plays a role in the barrier of prioritizing self-care. Furthermore, nearly half of the educators interviewed admitted to feeling guilty practicing self-care if it meant placing their needs before something or someone else (Lever et al., 2017; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Because the demands of schools and the potential of carrying internalized beliefs or messages about self-care being selfish, I posit that integrating mindfulness, reduced workloads, and positive self-care messages would enhance well-functioning and bolster teachers' self-care (Lever et al., 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

#### **Key Insight 6: Cultures of Self-Care are Teacher-Centered**

Data in support of creating cultures of self-care in schools indicated that school practices and initiatives must center the needs of educators by respecting their time,

energy, and input (Kempf, 2018; Lever et al., 2017). The vast majority of teachers interviewed wanted more collaboration and peer support time built into school hours. The teachers interviewed offered a wealth of ideas and information sharing about potential actions schools could take, examples of supportive cultures, and recollections of experiences that hindered their self-care or psychological safety (Aguilar, 2018; Kuebel, 2019). The enthusiasm and creativity expressed by the educators interviewed suggested that teachers would be willing to help shape culture shifts in the service of self-care (Lever et al., 2017; Kempf, 2018; Neimeyer & Taylor, 2019). Lastly, participants consistently endorsed humanistic leadership qualities as effective for promoting self-care and thriving among educators (Aguilar, 2018; Tsao, 2018). Conversely, study participants revealed that leaders who do not demonstrate compassion, open communication, dependability, or seek and follow-through on teacher feedback eroded trust and confidence negatively affecting school culture (Northouse, 2016; Hamel & Zanini, 2020).

### **Discussion**

The results and findings of this study successfully answered the two guiding research questions. The first research question, RQ1, “What are the lived experiences of K-12 educators in the United States regarding self-care?” was answered through the textural descriptions and real life examples provided by the research participants. Educators in this study voiced what it was like to practice self-care as an educator in the U.S. and also what experiences have been pivotal to the development and learning processes involved in self-care and well-functioning. The major themes, sub-themes, and key insights served in answering RQ1 by offering a layered view of teacher’s lived experiences. The experiences discussed by teachers highlighted aspects of

multidimensional self-care, the relation between self-care and setting essential boundaries, and the contextual and systemic factors that impact teacher well-being. Additionally, the data exalted the value of cultivating a growth mindset and nurturing supportive relationships as self-care for teachers (Aguilar, 2018; Dweck, 2016).

Furthermore, this study illuminated complexity and overlap among the different themes. Study data and interview narratives shed light on the complex relationship between critical and often difficult life events, the power of relational support systems, and how the urgency or care from others spurred learning and greater development of the individual's self-care and wellness across dimensions. The binary of being either good or bad at self-care was dispelled by the data offering a nuanced and intimate view of how self-care habits can grow and strengthen as an individual progresses through life or career development (Boogren, 2018; Kuebel, 2019; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019).

The second research question, RQ2, "What barriers to self-care do K-12 educators in the United States experience?", was answered by the thematic data representing contextual experiences, COVID-19 impacts, barriers, and creating cultures of care in schools. The greatest barriers faced by the educators interviewed in practicing self-care were time, prioritization, and external demands. Moreover, the data about barriers displayed the interrelatedness between the teacher-identified barriers of time and prioritization with the competing professional and familial demands teachers face in daily life (Tantillo Philibert et al., 2020). The findings related to this research question mirrored the literature regarding educator stress and occupational burnout (Kempf, 2018; Lever et al., 2017, Tantillo Philibert et al., 2020). Lastly, the data that crystallized regarding the initial impacts of COVID-19 and creating cultures of self-care for teachers

described the current gaps in schools and on the part of school leaders to proactively discuss, promote, and provide tangible pathways toward holistic self-care and wellbeing for teachers (Aguilar, 2018; Barnett et al., 2007).

A strength of this study was the validation that teacher self-care does not occur separately from other aspects of an educator's life, it is a constant need that must shift and adapt according to the context, interests, and opportunities available to the person (Tantillo Philibert et al., 2020). The direct quotes, textural descriptions, and thematic representations saliently captured some of the intricacies of practicing self-care as a teacher in the U.S. The data also punctuated how crisis teaching during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic deeply affected teachers' self-care and wellness efforts.

A limitation of this study was that the population was representative of only four of the 50 United States and was more demographically homogenous than the nationally reported racial, cultural, and gender statistics. Another limitation was that COVID-19 impacts on teachers may have intensified the responses and views of some participants and been an impediment to participation for others. Lastly, the subjectivity of this qualitative study was another limitation (Babbie, 2017).

The results of this dissertation study reinforced what other literature and education or social work practitioners have asserted about the importance of educator self-care (Lee & Miller, 2013). The data contributes to existing research by providing an intimate view into why teachers, school communities, and system leaders must invest in learning about and promoting self-care as a vital human need, teaching competency, and cultural imperative. This study contributes new understanding and data to the current literature related to COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic is an inflection point in

education and the need for school leaders to become more skilled and proficient in leading humanistically through uncertainty and the changing U.S. education system was emphasized throughout the interviews (Lehr & Vaughan, 2021).

### **Summary**

The goals of this phenomenological study were to answer the two guiding research questions, amplify the voices of educators in relation to self-care, and to examine the impact of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the construction of a qualitative interview questionnaire aimed at understanding the lived experiences of educators in relation to their self-care practices and the barriers they faced, data was gathered, and six major themes and three sub-themes developed. The participants' interview transcripts rendered a tapestry of quotes providing rich descriptions and textured accounts of the lived experiences of the teachers participating in this study. The themes and sub-themes included contextual influences, multidimensional self-care, educator self-care as relational, the COVID-19 impacts on teacher self-care, predominant barriers, and ways to create cultures of self-care in schools. The findings gleaned key insights reinforcing that educator self-care is impacted by contextual factors, as well as enhanced by relationships and community. The key insights also conveyed that COVID-19 impacts drastically affected educator self-care and that supporting self-care for teachers involves school leaders and communities caring for the whole teacher humanistically. The qualitative and subjective nature of this study was a strength and limitation in that it amplified the voices and intimate lived experiences of a small population of teachers during a challenging point in time for the education profession. All in all, I assert that both guiding research questions were answered, and the associated

goals for this study were successfully met. In Chapter 5, I utilize the results and key findings of this study as the foundation for proposed solutions and research implications.

## CHAPTER FIVE: PROPOSED SOLUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

The educators who participated in this phenomenological study reported the myriad ways the education system stymied autonomy, limited teachers' ability to uniquely integrate the art and science of teaching in their classrooms, and perpetuated high workloads and demands on teachers' time and roles beyond their compensated school days. Many participants asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic compounded pre-existing issues for teachers. Participant accounts echoed the data found in the literature regarding the occupational stress, and limited support teachers have in intentionally developing their self-care. The study also contributed novel data representative of how the onset of the pandemic affected educators. Furthermore, this study's findings substantiated the recommendations of other researchers and scholars, purporting that changes must be made at the school community and system levels to best impact and serve the needs of teachers in the long term.

The following chapter proposes a solution centered on providing a best practices roadmap of guidepost strategies to promote educator self-care while remaining proactive regarding how the ripple effects from the COVID-19 pandemic continue to strain teachers' capacity to maintain well-being. Evidence in support of the proposed solution along with potential challenges are presented offering readers multiple perspectives. Implementation steps are also discussed including stakeholder considerations, timelines, resource investment estimates, and evaluation methods. Finally, study implications are identified along with concluding statements.

### **Aim Statement**

The aim of this study was three-fold. The first objective was to intentionally give voice to the experiences and self-care needs of educators. The second was to explore how the current context of COVID-19 has impacted the self-care and well-functioning of teachers. Lastly, this study aimed to provide transformative best practices for creating self-care cultures within learning communities (Aguilar, 2018; Lopez, 2016).

### **Proposed Solution**

Through the proposed solution for the real-world challenges teachers face in practicing self-care, I seek to amplify the lived experiences and wishes of educators. Positioning the teachers in this study as the trusted experts of what will be of greatest benefit regarding self-care is paramount. Likewise, the finding in this study that school systems and leadership decisions compound teacher stress coupled with scholarly literature emphasizing that a healthy and supportive school culture is the strongest predictor of educator satisfaction and optimal functioning indicates that districts and school communities hold distinct power in easing teacher stress and advancing teacher self-care awareness (Aguilar, 2018; Kempf, 2018; Ouellette et al., 2018).

The proposed solution is a practice-based Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap to promote educator self-care and multidimensional wellness in schools. Raising awareness regarding the holistic self-care needs of educators and offering an array of practical applications and action strategies to assist school leaders in creating and promoting humanistic cultures of care is an essential goal. A roadmap with guideposts detailing a variety of options and approaches also provides a mechanism for gaining and honoring

teacher feedback. A roadmap approach also offers a common language for education professionals to discuss and discern a school's teacher self-care needs.

Caring for the whole teacher while remaining mindful and aware of how teaching during the protracted COVID-19 pandemic is affecting educator self-care and career trajectories are also critical for schools. The narratives and endorsements by study participants provided clear evidence of these priorities. Grief, loss, increased stress, occupational burnout, and persistent concern for student well-being continue to weigh on teachers in the U.S. and globally (Panisoara et al., 2020). The proposed roadmap includes ways to support teachers and monitor the adapting needs of a school culture. By integrating the ideas and data provided by teacher participants; articulating best practices and a variety of educator self-care options; and continuing to acknowledge the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the teaching profession, this researcher's proposed solution actively addresses the three-fold aims of this Dissertation in Practice.

### **Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap Guideposts**

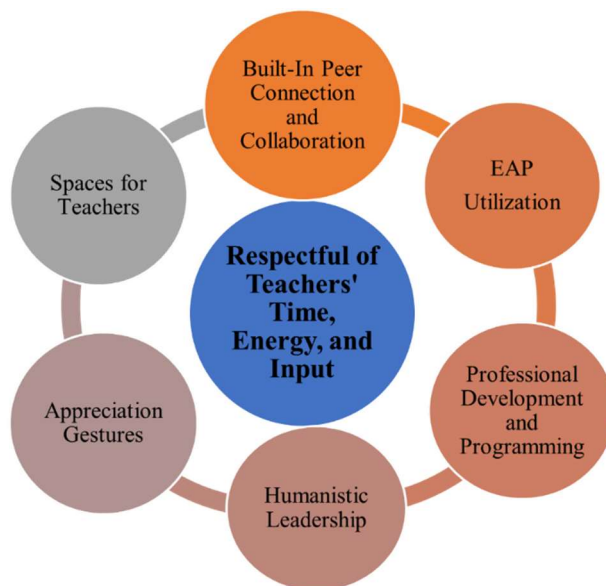
The participants interviewed shared a variety of ideas and examples of what would be beneficial in creating cultures of self-care for teachers in schools. At the core of each of the suggestions offered was the communicated belief that a culture valuing self-care for teachers consists of administrative decisions that respect the time, energy, and input of teachers. The examples in the results included not asking teachers to work beyond their contracted time, making reasonable requests and allowing enough notice for requests to be fulfilled by teachers, and streamlining meetings and schedules to allow more time for preparation and peer collaboration. Compensation for teacher mentorship and other activities was also appreciated by the participants. In addition to valuing

teacher time and energy, several participants vocalized the positive effect of seeking out teacher input and basing school wellness decisions on the feedback given.

Beyond the core principle of respecting teachers' time, energy, and input, several guideposts surfaced from participant endorsements and stories. The Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap as the proposed solution presents these guideposts along with tips and practical applications. The guideposts center on time with peers, utilizing Employee Assistance Program benefits, designating school spaces for teacher renewal and connection, making appreciation gestures more meaningful, offering purposeful professional development, and incorporating humanistic leadership practices. Figure 7 represents the core principle of respect along with the self-care guideposts.

**Figure 7**

*Roadmap Guideposts for Creating Cultures of Self-Care in Schools*



### **Guidepost Recommendations**

The proposed roadmap guideposts offer related suggestions and considerations. The guidepost suggestions are meant to spark school investment in self-care for teachers,

reaffirm what leaders may already know or do, and offer novel ideas that can serve as a springboard for manageable cultural shifts. The guidepost recommendations described below can be applied proactively and allow for school-based customization.

***Guidepost 1: Built-in Time with Peers***

Two categories emerged in this study's data related to creating self-care cultures by establishing more time with peers that constructively supports self-care. The two uses of time described in the data were peer collaboration and peer connection. Peer collaboration referred to having time built-in during the school day or workweek to discuss mutual students or families with other teachers. The purpose of this time would be to problem-solve, and share ideas regarding efficiencies, routines, or professional and personal self-care resources (Aguilar, 2018; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Peer connection was voiced in relation to having time to interact socially and interpersonally with fellow teachers to strengthen community and camaraderie. Both in the literature and throughout this study, relationships ranked as instrumental to bolstering teacher self-care, facilitating well-functioning, and diffusing negative systemic stressors (Aguilar, 2018; Hydon et al., 2015; Lucas, 2017; O'Neal, 2018; Schussler et al., 2019). The roadmap suggestions and considerations for this guidepost promote time with peers that is beneficial, compensated, and related to educator well-being.

- Allocate time during regular school staff meetings for teachers to collaborate and share ideas or challenges with one another. This can be done by streamlining meeting agendas so that the first half of the meeting is related to school business requiring in-person interaction and the second half is focused on peer collaboration time.

Alternating weeks to incorporate collaboration time into meeting configurations can also be impactful.

- Encourage teachers to use peer collaboration and preparation time to discuss self-care, determine useful boundaries, and to apply a team approach to supporting certain students and families or finding solutions for problematic situations.
- Identify proactive ways teachers are caring for themselves and find time to showcase successes and resources with peers.
- Support educator formal and informal efforts to connect with each other by allotting paid time for outings, covering class time for teachers, or offering a tangible contribution toward their time together. For example, school administrators can purchase books for a teacher-initiated book club.
- Be creative when incorporating time for teachers to collaborate and connect. Seek input from teachers regarding ways administrators can best protect and maximize teacher time and connection efforts.
- Applications like Google Jamboard and Survey Monkey can assist in gathering and collating teacher input and idea sharing. The anonymity of these applications allows for more informative and unfiltered feedback.

### ***Guidepost 2: Employee Assistance Program Utilization***

Multiple educators in this study referenced the help they received from their district's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) in support of their self-care. The EAP's mentioned supported teacher participants by providing free confidential counseling and psychoeducational support groups or workshops for educators in their districts. Other teachers reported that they were not sure their school offered an EAP and that it may be

information that is not regularly highlighted. The literature reviewed emphasized that difficulties developing optimal self-care habits resulted in mental health, behavioral health, and relational issues over time (Bettney, 2017; Dorociak et al., 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Transparently and positively providing EAP assistance or access to comparable program services can remove barriers for teachers while normalizing help-seeking behavior and the acceptability of utilizing of outside resources (Kidger et al., 2016). Benefits offered by a district's EAP can provide vital assistance for teachers that are struggling or in need of proactive guidance to address or mitigate the detrimental effects of occupational burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary trauma (Bettney, 2017; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019).

- Regularly share about existing EAP's and remind school staff of the counseling and support services available in their district. Post and make the contact and benefit specifics readily available so that educators can preserve their privacy when reaching out for assistance.
- Consider establishing an EAP as an employee benefit or contracting with a local mental health or wellness provider to offer free or low-cost employee assistance in districts that do not have accessible support or counseling for educators.
- Contact district EAP or local mental health and wellness providers regarding customizable self-care offerings and programs. Integrate access to external support into your school culture while reducing mental health stigma.
- In the event of a trauma, loss, or critical incident, work with an EAP or equivalent to offer immediate support and guidance to assist staff.

***Guidepost 3: School Spaces Conducive to Self-Care***

Many teachers interviewed spoke favorably about having physical school spaces - typically the staff lunchroom - that contributed to teacher renewal and connection throughout the school day. Conversely, one of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic cited by several teachers in this study was the restriction of lunchroom or breakroom use during the first year of returning to in-person instruction. The profession of teaching and the confines of the classroom can feel isolating and restrict teachers in caring for some of their most basic needs like restroom breaks, privacy during hard days, and time for eating lunch (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Teachers who return from family leave can benefit from private comfortable space if they are balancing nursing an infant while returning to work. Educators who maintain prayer, meditation, or mindfulness practices can also utilize space where brief moments of solitude are possible (Hughes, 2010). Schools can make a substantial investment in educator self-care by mindfully creating places for teachers to meet their connection, health, and privacy needs during the school day (Friedman, 2014).

- Designate a space like a faculty lunchroom or breakroom for staff that is conducive to renewal and conversation. Attention to furnishings like tables, comfortable chairs, benches, artwork, lighting, and plants can benefit mental health and foster feelings of well-being (Friedman, 2014). Even if space is limited, small but thoughtful changes can make a noticeable difference.
- If the faculty breakroom is a shared workspace, consider arranging or partitioning the room so that work related materials like copiers and paper cutters are separate from

lunch tables and seating to offer delineation between work tasks and break time (Friedman, 2014; Hughes, 2010).

- Offer a private nook for quiet time or de-stressing that is soothing and free of distractions. Diffusers, accent lighting, and comfortable seating or mats can offer a sensory break from the stimulation of teaching. Be mindful of the different privacy and comfort needs school staff may have.
- Parent-teacher groups and area businesses may be willing to donate furniture or goods to assist in creating comfortable teacher spaces and will likely appreciate contributing to a local school in such a tangible way (Epstein, 2011).
- Form partnerships with local colleges or trade schools to utilize the knowledge and efforts of construction, design, architecture, or leadership students in exchange for real world experience or community project credit (Epstein, 2011).

#### ***Guidepost 4: Meaningful Appreciation Gestures***

The participants interviewed reported that gestures of appreciation or rewards that were thoughtful and personal made a greater impression than food-based appreciation or rewards programs like “teacher bucks.” To this point, some participants indicated that gifts of food are not always inclusive of teachers who have specific nutritional needs or goals. Likewise, reward systems require mental tracking and planning on the part of the teacher to “cash in” tickets. One teacher participant specifically described their own efforts to provide gifts and recognition to peers because regular monthly efforts in this arena do not occur. The literature touches on the value of modeling on-the-job support for and practical applications of self-care as impactful to school cultures (Bettney, 2017; Posluns & Gall, 2020). School leaders can intentionally choose and time appreciation

gestures as a way to operationalize their school community's values related to educator self-care.

- Be mindful of the dietary and allergy needs of school staff when providing food related appreciation events or gifts. A well-intentioned treat can exclude educators who are not able to eat certain foods. Offer a variety of food options including healthy snacks, water, fruit, and vegetables along with sweets or specialty items.
- Offer non-food appreciation like chair massages, wellness services, tax preparation, unique gift cards beyond coffee, or arranging unsolicited breaks and time off. Again, utilizing school-community partnerships can assist in procuring donated or low-cost items or services throughout the school year (Epstein, 2011).
- Provide regular appreciation tokens beyond the holidays or teacher appreciation week. High stress times like testing and less acknowledged transition periods are an optimal time to relieve teacher burden with helpful gestures.
- Communicate everyday gratitude verbally or through notes of acknowledgement that are not tied to competition or awards (Aguilar, 2018).

#### ***Guidepost 5: Purposeful Professional Development and Programs***

Professional development focused on self-care education and social emotional learning components for teachers serve a useful role in promoting teacher development and optimal functioning in these areas (Posluns & Gall, 2020; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019). Multiple teacher participants interviewed indicated either an interest in learning more about self-care and how they could grow in this regard or stated they had attended self-care sessions that increased their competency on the topic. Professional

teacher networks and associations were also described in the data as critical to maximizing self-care continuing education opportunities for teachers.

Of the teachers who had already attended or helped provide a self-care class, high quality content with quick and applicable mindfulness hacks or experiential practices were described as the most meaningful in contributing to well-being without taxing teacher internal or material resources. Integrating established programs like Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, mental health literacy, and resiliency building campaigns for teachers can also serve a beneficial purpose (Koenig et al., 2018; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019; Schussler et al., 2019).

- Consider sponsoring classes and continuing education offerings that assist teachers with personalized self-care planning, self-reflection, mindfulness-based stress reduction, and practical school day applications (Kuebel, 2019).
- Provide self-care offerings that promote multidimensional self-care beyond traditional wellness programs focused only on exercise and nutritional health. Address the varying needs of teachers at different points of career development (Boogren, 2018; Kuebel, 2019; Lever et al., 2017).
- Consider initiating an established social emotional learning program for teacher well-being. Be sure to vet potential programs and seek teacher input beforehand (Koenig et al., 2018; O'Neal et al., 2018).
- Offer incentives and compensation when providing professional development or self-care programming and support. This communicates leader buy-in and respect for the time and energy of teachers.

***Guidepost 6: Incorporating Humanistic Leadership Practices***

Humanistic leadership principles in education place a high value on the well-being and optimal functioning of all school members, including educators and support staff. Humanistic leaders care for and about their people both personally and professionally, viewing wellness as a systemic need and responsibility (Hammel & Zanini, 2020; Tsao, 2019). The teacher responses throughout the study interviews described examples of school administrators who embodied humanistic principles as well as those who exemplified poor leadership that worked against holistic teacher well-functioning. Most strikingly, the vast majority of the educators interviewed conveyed a story of how humanistic leadership had benefitted their respective well-being. During the COVID-19 pandemic, school leadership in the districts where participants taught were portrayed as setting a crucial tone regarding self-care and actively protecting the well-being of staff.

Although not all of the principals and administrators described as being humanistic overtly talked about or endorsed educator self-care during the 2020-2021 school year, their actions and policies communicated respect and care for their school staff (Collie, 2021). Some of the qualities described by teachers that corresponded with humanistic leadership approaches included showing compassion, relationship-building, clear communication, accommodating and flexible attitudes, decisive and transparent decision-making, accessible and approachable demeanor, and a willingness to acknowledge and hold space for emotions, challenges, and successes (Brown, 2018; Collie, 2021). When possible, humanistic leadership prioritizes the well-being of teachers over education system norms that are flawed or outdated. Leading humanistically is

critical to promoting cultures of self-care and weathering the continued impacts of COVID-19 (Hammel & Zanini, 2020; Lehr & Vaughan, 2021).

- Actively become self-care aware as a leader. Seek out information on educator self-care, engage in conversations with staff about well-functioning, and consider how school policies and norms impact holistic educator self-care.
- Leaders who are former educators can reflect regularly on their time in the classroom as an exercise in empathy and emotional awareness regarding the self-care needs of teachers and staff. Consider ways to protect teacher time and energy.
- Cultures of self-care rely on leadership buy-in, modeling, and prioritization. As a leader, continually practice and reflect on personal self-care routines, competencies, and areas of need.
- Use non-stigmatizing and person-first language when discussing mental, behavioral, and emotional health. Non-stigmatizing terms include using phrases like mental health condition, signs, or symptoms, and crisis rather than crazy, unstable, or sick.
- Promote psychological safety by upholding staff and meeting confidentiality, promoting open dialogue, listening to the concerns of educators, requesting and respecting input, and presenting rationale and feedback behind decision-making. Follow through on commitments and repair relational ruptures or misunderstandings.
- Normalize talking about grief and the various emotions and stressors teachers experience, especially as a result of the issues revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Don't assume that educators are ok, and check-in regularly about self-care.
- At the school board and business levels, consider updated and humanistic options regarding teacher health and wellness benefits that are inclusive of preventative care,

coaching and counseling, and time off or personal leave options that support teachers who are experiencing difficult life events.

- Participate in coaching and professional growth programs to continue leadership development and to gain support and a better understanding of how humanistic principles can enrich an individual's leadership identity.

### **Evidence in Support of the Solution**

Both the literature reviewed, and the data collected for this study support the provision of a self-care roadmap providing best practice guideposts for school leaders and educational leadership practitioners centered on the expressed needs of educators. In Chapter Two, best practices for supporting educator self-care were articulated. A common theme was the assertion that leadership buy-in and change at the organizational level were vital for strides to be made in promoting self-care, addressing burn-out and fatigue, and increasing teacher resilience (Dorociak et al., 2017; Harmsen et al., 2018; Newell, 2018). In order to move toward a culture of self-care, the research points to simultaneously moving away from cultures that normalize self-neglect (Bettney, 2017; O'Neal et al., 2018). The proposed Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap assists leaders and school practitioners by providing pathways with practical possibilities for how to tangibly move toward care and away from inattention with respect to this area of teacher well-functioning (Bettney, 2017; O'Neal et al., 2018; Posluns & Gall, 2020).

Aguilar's (2018) model for teacher resilience, an essential component of this dissertation's guiding conceptual framework, posits that building resiliency and addressing the self-care needs of educators requires conversations and actions regarding individual teacher resilience, organizational conditions, and systemic influences. The

solution proposed by this researcher has the potential to affect change and transformation in all three spheres. The first sphere impact encompasses contributing to the self-care and healthy boundary efforts of individual teachers (Aguilar, 2018; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). By encouraging and motivating school organizations to take a more active effort in discussing, encouraging, and rewarding self-care in schools, the organizational sphere is impacted (Aguilar, 2018; Barnett et al., 2007). Lastly, the third sphere of impact, the system, can also utilize and apply the guideposts to shift the education field on a macro level by considering policies, legislation, compensation, and societal changes that can be addressed to augment the self-care and well-functioning of educators and schools alike (Aguilar, 2018).

The interview protocol for this study specifically asked each teacher what practices, activities, or approaches they believed would promote a culture of educator self-care in schools. Each of the 13 participants communicated valuable feedback in this regard. What resulted from the qualitative interview question was crowdsourcing of ideas of what would work well and cautionary tales of what thwarts self-care in a school culture. The guidepost recommendations in the roadmap were directly inspired by participant responses. The ideas were thoughtful and offered a range of activities and choices that could be tailored to the needs of individual schools. The teachers interviewed shaped this proposed solution and each recommendation made. The guideposts embody relevant and applicable practice-based approaches to promoting educator self-care (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). The Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap was born from teacher input and is amenable to the various needs of schools, leaders, and education practitioners like executive coaches and facilitators (Lopez, 2017).

### **Evidence that Challenges the Solution**

In addition to evidence supporting this proposed solution, there is also evidence challenging its success. The barriers to practicing self-care and to the success of any educational program or initiative serve as potential obstacles to the successful implementation of the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap. The greatest barriers to practicing self-care cited in the literature were time constraints, individual inhibitions regarding prioritizing or practicing self-care, and discomfort with asking for or receiving support (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Zahniser et al., 2017). Researchers cited in the literature review also acknowledged that organizational and systemic conditions were impediments to promoting educator self-care or implementing lasting social-emotional learning opportunities for teachers. Roadblocks included a lack of awareness or prioritization of educator self-care, high systemic demands on teachers' energy and time, budgetary issues, leadership reactivity or apathy, and cultures of scarcity and shame (Barnett et al., 2007; Bettney, 2017; Brown, 2018; Lopez, 2016).

The findings of this dissertation study support the data found in the literature. The vast majority of teachers interviewed endorsed time limits compounded by external demands including heavy workloads, and prioritization or choice compounded by guilt as their greatest challenges to practicing optimal levels of self-care. The greatest impediments to the successful implementation of the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap are that stress and time constraints limiting leader and educator bandwidth would prevent schools and individuals from participating or following through on the ideas and considerations provided (Dorociak et al., 2017; Santana & Fouad, 2017). Another challenge is that some schools may have leaders that do not see the relevance of an

organizationally sustained effort to promote holistic educator self-care and well-functioning. Some leaders and district decision-makers may hold the belief that self-care is either a luxury or an individual's isolated responsibility (Koenig et al., 2018; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Lastly, budgetary limitations and urgent strategic priorities may also prevent schools, organizations, or leaders from seeing the feasibility of implementing the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap (O'Neal et al., 2018; Ouellette et al., 2018).

### **Implementation of the Proposed Solution**

I recommend the implementation of this proposed solution in the form of a toolkit. The creation of a Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap toolkit product is a feasible way to disseminate the information and suggestions contained in this roadmap. The toolkit can be produced and marketed for purchase by school districts, state and federal education systems, professional programs, and colleges or universities for teacher preparation (Lopez, 2016). I have conceptualized an aesthetically pleasing set of laminated cards that incorporate storytelling about the roadmap, information about the value of supporting multidimensional teacher self-care in schools, and sections showcasing each of the guideposts with related suggestions and curated resources and tools that promote educator self-care. As a leadership development practitioner, I foresee working with an artist and printer to develop a sample of this practice-based product. The toolkit would be customizable and could be implemented at multiple organizational levels and by a variety of practitioners. Education and leadership conferences or resource publications would provide prime opportunities for marketing and dissemination.

The toolkit could be implemented by school leaders and educators. Schools and organizations could also work with a humanistic transformational leadership coach or

facilitator to assess the needs of the school, solicit input from teachers and other stakeholders through surveys, interviews, or focus groups, and create an implementation proposal based on the Cultures of Care Roadmap recommendations and tips. An array of approaches are possible with the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap, and a skilled educational leadership consultant can be a valuable asset to assist schools in making practical shifts to promote teacher well-being and support career longevity (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). The Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap toolkit can be also used as a practical educator self-care development guide by EAP specialists, wellness and mental health clinicians, or professional teacher organizations to create responsive programming for schools, districts, states, and educator membership groups (Aguilar, 2018, Kuebel, 2019).

With new programs or products, it is important to identify how and if the conceptualization of the idea and proposed solution translates into a usable and applicable tool. As a humanistic leadership consultant and facilitator, I would be responsible for creating the product, licensing the toolkit, and piloting the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap to selected schools, organizations, or school leadership practitioners and consultants (Elliot et al., 2010). I anticipate working with pilot sites to identify implementation partners within the school or organization and facilitate a tailored implementation plan. Facilitating this process would include choosing one or two items from the toolkit guideposts and setting attainable goals and timeframes. Initial pilot program sites would allow for toolkit users or program participants to practice the Cultures of Self-Care proposed solutions, give feedback on their experience and the usability of the Roadmap toolkit, and provide valuable information on needed

adjustments and improvements. Based on pilot program feedback and outcomes, refinements can be made, and a more polished toolkit and implementation guidance can be produced for a larger market (Elliot et al., 2010).

### **Related Factors and Stakeholders**

Integral factors related to the implementation of the proposed solution include financial resources, outsourcing creative and production components, time investment, design efforts, maximization of social capital, networking, and consultation with educators and school leaders. As the creator of this product, I would design a model or mockup of the toolkit cards similar in fashion to the self-care infographic that I created as a token of appreciation for study participants (see Appendix E). As previously mentioned, I anticipate working with an artist and also a printing company to create this product. There will be costs associated with the artwork, materials, and printing processes. Applying for a grant, seeking a private or organizational donor, or making an out-of-pocket investment are potential ways to fund this project depending on the estimated cost.

Once the funding, design, vendor selection, and collaborative aspects are determined, the sample toolkit is brought to fruition. Decisions regarding distribution and pilot sites must then be made. Principals, educators, school counselors, administrators, higher education leaders, and educational leadership coaches are critical stakeholders and allies for the successful implementation of the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap. During the recruitment phase of this study, social capital within my personal and professional networks proved to be more valuable in connecting with interested teacher participants than posting in groups where I did not have established connections. As a result of this

lesson learned, relationships and collaborations with the above key stakeholders are my top priority for implementation.

### ***Timeline for Implementation***

The ideal timeline for the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap toolkit must account for funding cycles, completing the proofs for guidepost sections, artwork rendering, and printing schedules. A reasonable timeframe goal would be to have a certain number of toolkits ready for pilot sites before the beginning of the sites' school or fiscal year. Facilitation of the program implementation can occur in the summer and during non-instructional teacher preparation times. This would allow me to meet with leaders and educators to introduce the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap. I would facilitate opportunities for teachers and administrators to engage with the toolkit and weigh-in on which suggestions and priorities are the most applicable.

Based on the preferences and needs stated by the teachers and the school's unique priorities, I would establish a timeline for implementation into the site. The ideal implementation schedule would entail integrating one or two guidepost recommendations based on identified goals with quarterly status-checks to determine what practices or goals have been successfully launched and which items necessitate a timeline adjustment. The timeline for implementation must be clear, transparent, and complementary of school calendars and educator needs (Aguilar, 2018).

### **Evaluation of Outcomes**

Evaluating impact is a crucial element of this proposed solution. A SWOT analysis is a method used in business and public health settings to determine the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats to the successful implementation of a

product or program (Reichwein, 2020). I recommend employing the SWOT method as an evaluation process before implementation, during implementation, and at the end of the pilot period. I would, in conjunction with pilot site stakeholders and implementation partners, collaboratively identify the strengths (S) and weaknesses (W) associated with the pilot program of the Roadmap guideposts selected from the toolkit. Transparently and honestly discussing the external or contextual opportunities (O) for successful implementation along with factors or realities that may pose a threat (T) to optimizing the use or application of the selected guidepost recommendations and suggestions offers a genuine assessment of the potential gains and challenges inherent in the implementation process (Reichwein, 2020). Pre-implementation analysis will allow stakeholders, including pilot site educators, to identify what successful implementation would look like and what factors would influence the toolkit's benefits. A mid-implementation SWOT evaluation would help determine how the pilot is going and allow for course corrections if needed. The final SWOT process will evaluate if and how the toolkit has been of benefit and provide relevant data to inform program and product adjustments (Elliot et al., 2010).

Educator well-being is at the center of this proposed solution; therefore, evaluations by teachers will be critical to gauging the impact of the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap toolkit. Feedback surveys and evaluations by educators at the pilot sites must also be integrated at the beginning, middle, and end of the program implementation period. An evaluation will be built into the toolkit for school leaders and implementation partners to complete subsequent to Roadmap use, activities, or engagements. Evaluation and feedback data can be compiled and shared with the school staff, reported at relevant

functions like school board meetings, and used to guide toolkit revisions and production (Elliot et al., 2010).

### **Implications of Study**

#### **Practical Implications**

The teaching profession and the well-being of educators have been deeply affected by the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Systemic and instructional challenges and deficits have been revealed, compounding teacher roles, responsibilities, and concerns. This is a critical juncture in the field of education, and school leaders and decision-makers have an instrumental part in heralding needed organizational transformations (Collie, 2021). The teachers in this study openly and genuinely shared their stressors, challenges to caring for themselves, their love of teaching, and their resilience in continuing to develop self-care and strive for well-being.

This study echoes what other researchers have found: autonomy, connection, and healthy school cultures are critical to the well-functioning of educators and to thriving school communities. The results and findings of this study provide a unique view into the lives of educators in relation to self-care. Participant experiences and views offer a pathway to creating and maintaining conditions conducive to optimal functioning in schools. The data presented in this study is centered on teacher feedback and conveys the message that for K-12 teachers to thrive, their energy and time must be respected, and that compensated time for collaboration and for self-care development opportunities must be provided. The proposed Cultures of Care Roadmap toolkit presents multidimensional recommendations, ideas, and best practices to demystify and raise awareness about

educator self-care and what it means to have a culture of care for teachers (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

### **Implications for Future Research**

Several possibilities for future research exist given the findings of this study. The first relates to diverse representation of the lived experiences of educators from different races, ethnicities, cultures, and gender identities. The participants of this study identified as homogenously white and predominately female. I believe conducting studies like this one with participants of varying gender and cultural identities would provide vital insight into the unique self-care needs and challenges of diverse educators (Tantillo Philibert et al., 2020). Another opportunity for future research relates to studying potential differences between the stressors and self-care practices of elementary school teachers as compared to educators in middle or high school. There were some subtle differences described by study participants about teaching in different grade levels that are worth further qualitative exploration or quantitative examination. Lastly, this study's findings and proposed solution present the opportunity to study the effects of multidimensional educator self-care and the promotion of humanistic leadership practices in schools. The impacts of working to promote healthy social emotional environments for teachers and students alike merit further exploration and assessment. More must be understood regarding the power of multidimensional educator self-care, and now is the time to prioritize humanistic approaches to leadership and education (Hammel & Zanini, 2020; Tantillo Philibert et al., 2020).

### **Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice**

The ultimate goal of researching this subject matter was to serve as a change agent in transforming individual and organizational awareness regarding the promotion and development of educator self-care. The study presented in this Dissertation in Practice successfully answered the guiding research questions of exploring the lived experiences of educators regarding self-care and the challenges faced. The knowledge and rich texture and personal descriptions presented serves to amplify the needs of teachers and assist educational and interdisciplinary leaders to shift the focus away from top-down bureaucracies and toward more humanistic and nourishing work and learning environments (Hammel & Zanini, 2020). Leaders from various sectors can apply the study findings and principles offered in the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap to improve organizational cultures and support optimal self-care practice and development in other professional settings like healthcare, social services, non-profit work, and higher education. Humanistic thought leaders purport that the context of the modern workplace is moving from a knowledge economy toward a relationship economy (Tenney, 2019). The findings and roadmap presented in this dissertation offer a bridge for leaders to better serve and guide their people humanistically and holistically (Hamel & Zanini, 2020).

### **Summary of Dissertation in Practice**

Being an educator in the U.S. can be a challenging and rewarding endeavor. As with any human service profession, being a teacher requires resilience, optimal functioning, professional growth and development, and a healthy support system (Aguilar, 2018; Tantillo Philibert et al., 2020). Educator self-care across multiple dimensions is considered an ethical imperative though common societal representations

frame self-care as a luxury or, in some contexts, an act of selfishness (Barnett et al., 2007; Tantillo Philibert et al., 2020). This dissertation set out to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of self-care as it related to teachers.

Two research questions guided this study: 1. What are the lived experiences of K-12 educators in the U. S. regarding self-care? 2. What barriers to self-care do K-12 educators in the U. S. experience? Using a qualitative methodology and phenomenological study design, this study explored the realities faced by educators regarding self-care, the impacts of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher self-care, and what best practices would better support teachers in maintaining self-care and well-functioning. I utilized snowball sampling to recruit 13 volunteer study participants who were teachers working in Montana, Idaho, Wisconsin, and Florida at the time of this study. Data was collected using a qualitative interview protocol and Zoom interviews with each participant. Ethical guidelines were followed in adherence to my IRB approval and in protection of the participant privacy and confidentiality. Ethics regarding researcher bias, data analysis, and the reporting of results and findings were observed.

Data was organized using the qualitative software program, Quirkos. I utilized Creswell and Creswell's (2018) five-step data analysis plan along with Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-step process for Thematic Analysis. Data analysis was conducted with 2198 coded segments of interview data arranged into 84 quirks or clusters. Following three cycles of coding and data analysis, six coherent themes and three sub-themes developed from the data. The results or themes and related sub-themes encompassed contextual factors related to educator stress and self-care, multidimensional

self-care, self-care as relational, self-care impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, barriers to educator self-care, and creating school cultures of self-care.

One of the key findings of this dissertation study was that educator self-care has been notably impacted by contextual factors including education system stressors, sociopolitical conditions, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Another salient finding was that optimal self-care for the educators interviewed required boundaries around time and energy along with a combination of solitude and personal time as well as relational connections, even if this was time spent caring for others. Self-care for the educators in this study developed and strengthened when there was a sense of urgency and experiences of care from others. Time, prioritization, and external demands including heavy workloads were the predominant barriers described by the teachers interviewed. Lastly, humanistic leadership approaches that value teachers' time, energy, and input were posited as essential for creating cultures of care in schools.

Born from the interview data and the direct input from the teachers in this study, the proposed solution for the problem cited in this dissertation is a Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap that presents tangible and applicable guidepost activities for promoting educator self-care and well-being. I propose creating a toolkit from the Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap that can be piloted in interested schools and organizations. I would be responsible for establishing pilot programs, facilitating implementation at selected sites, and collecting feedback. The implementation of the Roadmap toolkit can follow any timeline deemed appropriate by the pilot school or system. I recommend assessing the toolkit and customized plan before, during, and after implementation including gathering feedback from teachers and those participating in guidepost activities or offerings. An

adapted SWOT analysis will assist in the evaluation process to help pilot site partners identify strengths (S), weaknesses (W), opportunities for optimization (O), and threats (T) to the toolkit's success.

The teachers interviewed emphasized that opportunities to learn about and grow their self-care competencies were welcome as long as they hinged on the holistic needs of teachers. The Cultures of Self-Care Roadmap contributes to the greater good by offering schools multiple pathways of accomplishing this goal of foster educator self-care development. The greater good is ultimately served when teachers feel a greater sense of care, well-being, and respect. Education systems can shift away from bureaucratic practices to more person-centered humanistic approaches to enact vital changes. Care for the whole teacher can lead to teacher retention, more mindful and compassionate classrooms, and optimal teaching and learning (Aguilar, 2018; Lever et al., 2017).

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*Appendix A*

## Recruitment Invitation

Dear Educators,

I am a doctoral candidate in the department of Interdisciplinary Leadership at Creighton University. I am conducting a study to explore educator self-care among K-12 teachers in the United States. The title of this project is *The Care and Keeping of Teachers: A Phenomenological Study of Educator Self-Care*. I am under the supervision of my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Audrey Rabas, PhD, and the present study is approved by the Creighton University Review Board (Protocol #2002068). This research has great potential significance in supporting educator self-care, giving voice to teachers' needs, and assisting leaders and administrators in creating cultures of self-care in their schools and districts.

I invite you to participate in this voluntary study. You are eligible to participate if you are a full-time, part-time, or student teacher completing your field placement. Participant involvement will consist of one individual 45-60 minute confidential virtual interview and a possible follow-up interview or additional communication if needed. As a token of gratitude for participating in this study, you will receive a self-care resource list created for this project and be eligible for a raffle of an Amazon gift card worth \$50.

To participate or request more information, please contact me at **[angelalehr@creighton.edu](mailto:angelalehr@creighton.edu)**.

Thank You!

Angela Lehr, Doctoral Candidate  
Creighton University  
2500 California Plaza  
Omaha, NE 68178

## Social Media Graphic

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Dissertation Study on Teacher Self-Care</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Call for Volunteer Participants</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">To take part in this study or for more information, contact Angela Lehr, EdD Candidate:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><a href="mailto:angelalehr@creighton.edu">angelalehr@creighton.edu</a></p>	
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*Appendix B*

## Study Participant Information Letter &amp; Research Participant Bill of Rights

May 12, 2021

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in this doctoral research study titled *The Care and Keeping of Teachers: A Phenomenological Study of Educator Self-Care*. The purpose of this study is to explore educator self-care among K-12 teachers in the United States. As the principal investigator/researcher, I will be interviewing 12-15 part-time or full-time educators teaching in K-12 school systems. This research has great potential benefit in supporting educator self-care, giving voice to teachers' needs, and assisting leaders and administrators in creating cultures of self-care in their schools and districts.

Study participants will be asked to take part in a confidential, virtual interview via Zoom. The interview will consist of fifteen open-ended questions regarding your experiences of practicing self-care. Before the interview, I will provide each participant with a Self-Care Primer that defines self-care and its various dimensions as a frame of reference and to provide a common language for our interview. There will also be questions asking you to describe how COVID-19 has impacted your self-care needs. **The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes.** If more time is needed, we can schedule a follow-up interview at your convenience.

Your participation in this project is voluntary, and you are allowed to end your participation at any time. This is a minimal risk study meaning no more risk than expected in daily life is associated with participation in this study. As a token of gratitude, every participant will receive a self-care resource list in honor of educator self-care. Likewise, **if you choose to enroll in this study, you will be eligible for a \$50 Amazon gift card which will be raffled at the conclusion of the interview phase. Please note, completion of the study is not necessary for participants to be included in the raffle.** If you decide not to be in this study, you will not be penalized in any way.

Virtual interviews will be recorded and transcribed on Zoom and stored on the encrypted Zoom Cloud. Your data will be saved and stored in the Google Drive on a password protected computer using a participant ID number and will not be stored by participant name. Once the data from your interview is compiled, analyzed, and reported, the video of your interview will be deleted.

Please be assured that your responses will remain anonymous. Primarily, the combined data for the entire group of participants will be shared along with predominant themes that emerge, and you will have an opportunity to verify your interview transcript before data is analyzed and reported. If direct quotes are used in my findings, I will make generic any phrases, key words, or examples included. I may present the research findings at professional meetings or publish the results of this research study in relevant

journals. However, participant names and other identifying information will continue to be kept private.

If you have questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at [angelalehr@creighton.edu](mailto:angelalehr@creighton.edu). My dissertation chair and supervisor for this project, Dr. Audrey Rabas, is also available for questions and/or concerns at [audreyrabas@creighton.edu](mailto:audreyrabas@creighton.edu). If you have questions about the rights of research subjects, please contact the Institutional Research Board Office at Creighton University at (402) 280-2126.

Thank you again for your interest!

Sincerely,

Angela Lehr, LCPC, EdD Candidate, Creighton University

### **Research Participant Bill of Rights**

As a participant in a research study, you have the following rights:

- To have enough time to decide whether to be in the research study and make that decision without any pressure from the person conducting the research.
- To refuse to be in the study at all or stop participating at any time after you begin the study.
- To be told what the study is trying to learn, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.
- To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
- To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
- To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.
- To be told who will have access to the information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.
- To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, research-related injury, and your rights as a research participant.
- If the study involves treatment or therapy: a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have. b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for this treatment.

*Appendix C*

## Self-Care Primer: The Care and Keeping of Teachers

Self-care for this study relates to the things we do and the choices we make to care for ourselves, and to engage in our well-being consistently. Regular habits, daily routines, developing strategies as needed, and unique experiences or occurrences in our best interest all constitute self-care. Multidimensional self-care is linked to educator resilience and plays a vital role in lessening the impacts of toxic stress and teacher burn-out. Dimensions of self-care can be overlapping and include the following areas:

- Physical – regular exercise, sleep and rest, healthy nutrition, drinking water, reducing the intake of substances that affect balance and wellness, mindful breathing, and caring for oneself when sick
- Emotional/Psychological – awareness of mental health and behavioral health needs, using positive self-talk, journaling, practicing self-compassion, mindfulness and meditation, seeking help from a counselor or another trained professional when struggling
- Mental – setting boundaries and disconnecting from social media and devices, hobbies, creative pursuits, learning something new that is not work-related, reading or watching something for enjoyment, listening to music or podcasts, growth mindset
- Professional – Setting boundaries regarding work, time-management, having collegial work relationships, seeking support from mentors or colleagues, problem-solving and discussing stressors and challenges, taking breaks during the day, taking vacation time for renewal, professional development, and working within one’s values and integrity

- Spiritual – practicing gratitude, cultivating a sense of connection to something greater or meaningful, engaging in a religious or spiritual community, prayer, meditative practices, and engaging in self-reflection
- Social/Relational – participating in social activities with family, friends, or community, joining classes or organizations, volunteer for a meaningful cause, communicate with the people you care about through technology when not in-person, tend to supportive friendships, open up to trusted people about your successes and challenges

*Appendix D*

## Interview Protocol

**Project Title:** The Care and Keeping of Teachers: A Phenomenological Study of Self-Care

**Interview Protocol (45-60 minutes)**

Date: Self-Care Primer given?  
 Interviewee: Participant ID Code:  
 Informed Consent reviewed? Verbal consent to begin recording?  
 Time of Interview: U.S. State:  
 Participant years of teaching experience, grade, type of school:  
 Identified gender and race information (optional):

[Briefly describe the project, interview format, and definition of self-care]

**General Experiences**

1. What are some ways you practice self-care?
2. How have you learned about self-care or developed specific self-care habits?

**Dimensions of Self-Care**

3. Describe in detail a time you felt most cared for personally, professionally, or both?
4. What areas or types of self-care seem the most impactful in your life?
5. What do you identify as personal self-care versus professional self-care?

**Occupational Stress**

6. What is the most stressful or challenging part of being an educator?
7. What are some ways you cope with and balance work stress and demands?

**Self-Care Barriers and Challenges**

8. What are the greatest challenges or barriers you experience in practicing self-care?
9. Describe a time when you experienced the effects of stress, fatigue, burnout, or other challenges as an educator? How did self-care factor into this time/experience?

**COVID-19 Impacts**

10. How have the effects of COVID-19 impacted how you care for yourself?
11. How has your school leadership addressed self-care during the pandemic?

**Professional Support**

12. Who do you turn to for professional support or guidance?
13. Professionally, what would a culture of care at work look like? This can include practices, actions, or initiatives related to personal self-care and administrative, collegial/social, professional development, and policy-specific measures or activities.

**Life Balance**

14. What relationships or connections energize or nurture you?
15. What self-reflection or self-renewal practices have been helpful in caring for yourself?

Thank the interviewee for participating. Assure participants of confidentiality and describe next steps for this project. Send self-care resource to each participant the shortly after the interview and enter them into the pool for raffle via participant ID. Have counseling and support resources on hand in case of need during or after.

Appendix E

Educator Self-Care Resource Infographic

### Self-Care for Educators

Curated by Angela Lehr, LCPC, 2021



*Self-care is made up of the various things we do and the choices we make to care for ourselves and to engage intentionally in our well-being. Self-care builds resilience and helps us grow and flourish.*



*Regular habits, daily routines, developing new strategies as needed, and unique experiences or investments in our best interest all constitute self-care.*



*Self care across multiple dimensions is linked to educator longevity and plays a vital role in lessening the impacts of toxic stress and teacher burn-out.*

**Dimensions or areas of self-care include:**

- Physical
- Emotional/Psychological
- Mental
- Professional
- Spiritual
- Social/Relational



*Our self-care needs change as we grow and change personally and professionally.*

### Educator Self-Care Resource Guide


Curated by Angela Lehr, LCPC



#### Helpful Links for Support and Mental Health

*Everyone needs support and even extra help from time to time. Here are some resources to support mental health and emotional wellbeing for educators:*

- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)** - Check with your school, district, or benefits specialist to access this free and confidential service.
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists> - This search engine helps you find a counselor in your area with specific qualifications. Many therapists now offer telehealth options for people in rural communities.
- <https://teach.com/resources/mental-health-resources-teachers-school-staff/> - The webpage, 50 Resources to Support the Mental Health of Teachers and School Staff, offers comprehensive lists and links.
- [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/self\\_compassion\\_for\\_teachers](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/self_compassion_for_teachers) - This self-compassion article offers practices for teachers based on expert Kristen Neff's work and research.



#### Essential Reading

*The following books offer insight, guidance, and wisdom for teachers to deepen self-care through personal awareness and practical activities and knowledge:*

- *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, by Parker J. Palmer
- *Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators*, by Elena Aguilar
- *For All You Do: Self-Care and Encouragement for Teachers*, by Peter Mishler
- *Everyday Self-Care for Educators: Tools and Strategies for Well-Being*, by Carla Tantillo Philibert, Christopher Soto & Lara Veon
- *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students*, by Daniel Rechtschaffen

### Educator Self-Care Resource Guide

Curated by Angela Lehr, LCPC



#### Apps with Benefits

*Apps for smartphones offer platforms for building and practicing self-care. The apps below foster intentional habits, provide useful nudges, and center on being goal-directed:*

- **Calm** - The Calm app provides guided meditations, sleep stories, and breath breaks. It also has a program specifically for educators: <https://www.calm.com/schools>
- **Headspace** - Headspace is one of the most popular meditation, mindfulness, and sleep apps, and is aimed at stress reduction and well-functioning for all skill levels.
- **Fabulous Daily** - Fabulous, created at Duke University's Behavioral Science Lab, promotes holistic health and self-care through infographics, coaching, and community.
- **Aloe Bud** - Aloe Bud is described as a self-care pocket companion. This app is gentle, motivating, and allows you to prioritize the areas of self-care you would like to strengthen.



#### Reflect & Renew

*Self-reflection helps us to grow authentically. Reflection as a daily practice also aids in cultivating a self-care mindset. Take a few breaths and regularly ask yourself the following:*

**What am I feeling?** Listen to your body and let your emotions serve as signals for self-understanding.

**What am I thinking?** Tune in to your thoughts and what they are communicating about your internal state of mind.

**What am I needing?** Notice your met and unmet needs in terms of connection, nutrition, action, rest, hydration, quiet, creativity, gentleness, or enjoyment.

*Keep returning to who you are and prioritizing what you need to be whole and healthy as an individual and educator!*



*Appendix F***Table 1***Major Themes Related to Educator Self-Care Practices and Barriers*

Themes	Participant Endorsements (n = 13)	Coded Segments
<b>Theme 1:</b> Complex Contextual Factors Impact Teacher Stress and Self-Care - “Teachers wear so many hats.”	13	665
<b>Theme 2:</b> Teachers Practice Uniquely-Defined, Multi-Dimensional Self-Care - “To me, that’s self-care.”	13	545
<b>Theme 3:</b> Educator Self-Care is Relational - “Connection feeds me as much as being by myself.”	13	413
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Sub-Theme 3a:</b> Urgency and Pivotal Life Events Contribute to Self-Care Development - “It was just too much.”</li> </ul>	13	30
<b>Theme 4:</b> The Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic Significantly Impacted Teacher Self-Care - “How do you pull yourself together?”	13	209
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Sub-Theme 4a:</b> Educator Self-Care was Derailed in March 2020 - “I felt frozen...I just didn’t know what to do.”</li> </ul>	11	31
<b>Theme 5:</b> The Greatest Barriers of Teacher Self-Care are Time, Choice, and Competing Demands - “The thing about teaching...you can’t really take a day off.”	13	158
<b>Theme 6:</b> Creating Cultures of Self-Care in Schools Means Respecting Teachers’ Time, Energy, and Input - “Take care of the whole teacher.”	13	208
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Sub-Theme 6a:</b> Humanistic Leadership Matters - “It really has made a difference for staff morale.”</li> </ul>	12	52

*Appendix G***Table 2***Participant Quotes Related to the Most Impactful Self-Care Practices*

<b>Educator</b>	<b>Most Impactful Forms of Self-Care</b>
Participant 202101	“I think the most vital to me are having time every day to get out and get exercise, that serotonin, that quiet time, it's all wrapped up...I know that if I can get out and go for a run...or whatever that might be, it's a double whammy. If I am getting the exercise that I want and crave and need but it's also my alone time, so.”
Participant 202105	“Probably exercise [is most impactful]...some sort of exercise. Running or I do some morning workouts with a group of friends.”
Participant 202106	“I don't know that it even sounds like this should be the right choice but, to me, it's been the promise to myself that I'm going to leave school no later than five o'clock each evening, and I'm going to go home and have separate time with my family. That has been really, really big.”
Participant 202113	“I would say, spiritual is probably most impactful but, yet, if you talked to my [spouse], [they] would say that I have to have physical exercise in order to be in the right groove. When I'm not exercising, I get grouchy and, I don't know, I just feel better when I do it. So...I don't know if I can put one in front of the other... I definitely do need my spiritual [self-care], but you do need your physical as well, but I would put physical maybe just right behind [spiritual].”
Participant 202107	“The working out for sure. And then the walks [alone]. Those are definitely the things that I can come back to.”
Participant 202112	“My [creative hobby] group [is most impactful] and we have a great time, we laugh when we do things together...you can share that joy with other people...it's another family that you kind of build as your own.”
Participant 202102	“The two things would be reading [and spirituality]. I just have to take myself away from everything every night or else I don't sleep. I wake up solving school problems...So, for me to function, I need to take myself into somebody else's life in a book and just leave my stuff behind before I can sleep and take care of myself to get a good night's rest. And then I'm praying and turning things over to God would be the other, I mean...I wouldn't be around if it wasn't for that.”

*Appendix H***Table 3***Participant Quotes Related to a Sense of Urgency*

<b>Educator</b>	<b>Teachers' Sense of Urgency Examples</b>
Participant 202103	“After that [major life event] I had to balance things because physically I couldn't do as much, I didn't have mobility [because of injuries]... I realized if I don't take care of myself, I'm not going to get through this.”
Participant 202106	“Because that teacher schedule is not eight to five or eight to four, seven to three, as you know, it's unending so, I really had to find my balance. And I didn't do well with that my first three years. It did take a toll on me mentally emotionally, health wise in just about every way. I started losing sleep, started gaining weight, I had to go on anxiety medication, depression medication, go through counseling... You know, even not really knowing what it [the Employee Assistance Program] was, I just called one day when I was really having a bad day and probably one of the best phone calls I ever made. They allowed me to work with them through, okay, what do I need, what are my basic needs, and are they being met and no they weren't. Okay, so let's make those boundaries and let's set up a new plan to take better care of yourself.”
Participant 202111	“I went to counseling for like 15 plus years...and so I learned a lot about that [self-care], and how important that is. I was not good at it really, until I started teaching and then I realized how burned out you get just the first couple days of school even...And so, trying to remind myself that hey it's time to just shut things down and do something for myself...It's been hard to do that, but I'm trying to work on that for sure. I'm getting better at it.”

*Appendix I***Table 4***Participant Quotes Describing the Impacts of March 2020 School Closures*

<b>Educator</b>	<b>Pandemic School Closure Stress Effects</b>
Participant 202113	<p>“I didn't get up and work-out early like I normally would. But then I felt like I was getting up early to prepare videos and lessons for my kids to shoot out to them, we weren't teaching online or anything we didn't have the capacity, the kids didn't have the capacity to do that yet...and then I was worrying about kids. They haven't checked in, they haven't watched the videos, they're not doing anything. So, I started worrying about them. I wasn't eating super healthy. I was grabbing stuff and just eating not very good. And it was not good. And then I wasn't getting very good sleep either. And I think it's because I was not in a routine and then I would stay up late making videos and I'd be groggy in the morning when I woke up and it just kind of avalanched.”</p>
Participant 202108	<p>“I could have set better limits [during the COVID-19 shutdown]. I don't know that I did a lot of good limit-setting for myself, especially at the beginning, because I was just trying to make sure all the kids were accounted for and knew what was happening. And so, I would answer emails, I would get on at like 10:30 pm at night... My self-care honestly kind of fell apart for a while...my exercise just dropped, and I drank way too much. Then, at one point I was like I need to get my stuff together and I just figured it out. I must have figured out a way to make it happen, but no, there was not a lot of self-care for a while.”</p>
Participant 202112	<p>“I can't imagine how some of our kids felt. You know, they said anxiety and depression was increasing with teens because of social media and then it skyrocketed because that was their only form of communication. And I was like, that was me. I'm normally busy, and then all of a sudden, I'm not and I don't have people. And I'm doing the whole depression, anxiety, [stress effects] what's...going to happen?”</p>
Participant 202104	<p>“For the first several months I just kind of felt frozen. Like I couldn't do anything. I didn't know what to do so, I did nothing...Just frozen, it was the weirdest thing.”</p>

*Appendix J***Office of the Provost**

Research Compliance

DETERMINATION DATE:	May 14, 2021
TO:	Angela Lehr
FROM:	Social Behavioral IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	The Care and Keeping of Teachers: A Phenomenological Study of Educator Self-Care
REVIEW CATEGORY:	Expedited
RISK LEVEL:	Minimal
SUBMISSION #:	2002068-01
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Initial Application
REVIEW METHOD:	Administrative
DETERMINATION:	Approved
EXPIRATION DATE:	May 11, 2022

Thank you for your Response to the Modifications Requested by the Board Members after their review of this project. The following items were reviewed in this submission:

- Creighton University HSE
  - Study Protocol
  - Recruitment Invitation and Social Media Graphic
  - DIP Participant Information Letter + Bill of Rights (Revised per Board Request)
  - DIP Self-Care Primer for Study Participants to be emailed before interview
  - DIP Data Collection Points

The Boards requested changes satisfies the concerns of the Board as expressed in the IRB letter dated May 12, 2021. This project is fully approved. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The documentation of informed consent has also been waived using the criteria established under 45 CFR 46.117(c). The research involves no more than minimal risk to the participants. Minimal risk means the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort

anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.

1. Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant.
2. Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.
3. All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.
4. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.
5. This project has been determined to be a minimal risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this Board on an annual basis. The 'Annual, Continuing, or Project Termination' form must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 402-280-2126 or [irb@creighton.edu](mailto:irb@creighton.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this Board.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Creighton University IRB records.

**Institutional Review Board**

☎ 402.280.2126 | ☎ 402.280.3200  
Dr. C.C. and Mabel L. Criss Health Sciences Complex I  
2500 California Plaza Omaha, NE 68178

[creighton.edu](http://creighton.edu)  
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