

Balancing the Heart and the Classroom: Do Student Teachers Show Signs of Compassion Fatigue?

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Abstract: Compassion fatigue is often associated with the caregiving profession and is shown to be a concern as seasoned teachers navigate the classroom's emotional demands and heavy workload. Research has shown that teachers are partly leaving the field due to these demands. However, while student teachers enter the field with enthusiasm and a desire to make a difference, does this emotional toll of working with students (particularly those facing adversity) lead to compassion fatigue at this early stage? This manuscript explores whether compassion fatigue shows up during the student teaching semester and, if so, what are the causes, symptoms, and consequences of this compassion fatigue. This manuscript also highlights the unique challenges these student teachers face as learners and educators. Programs in teacher preparation need to recognize and address this issue critical to fostering resilience, having long-term success in teaching and keeping those excellent teachers in the field.

Keywords: teacher training, student teaching, compassion fatigue, burnout

I. Introduction

Teachers are leaving the field in alarming numbers, which demands our immediate attention. According to U. S. Statistics, in the 2022-2023 school year, 23% of teachers left the classroom (Education Resource Strategies, 2024). Research has shown that there are many reasons for this exit. These include pay, lack of support, and stress in the classroom (Education Resource Strategies, 2024; Irwin Wang, Jung, Kessler et al., 2024). A recent survey through Research and Development and the American Teaching Panel revealed that three out of four teachers (75%) found their work frequently stressful (Steiner & Woo, 2021). United States educators teaching in today's classrooms will have students with vast ranges of needs: some with high levels of academics, some with behavioral issues, and some with emotional needs. After several years, this balancing can begin to take its toll on the educators' mental and physical well-being (Mota, Lopes & Oliveria, 2023)

What could be causing this teacher stress? Previous research shows that it could be students' behaviors due to background trauma (Paul, 2022). It's important to note that a significant number of students are exposed to trauma,

which can manifest in academic and behavioral struggles (Souers & Hall, 2018). These children have witnessed and/or been involved in one or more of a broad range of traumatic experiences in their young lives. Such experiences affect children in many different ways. Some children suffer negative long-term effects from trauma exposure, often resulting in symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD (Frieze, 2015; McCormack & Lantry, 2024). In an average classroom of 25 kids, statistically, 11 of these students have experienced some degree of trauma in their lives (Souers and Hall, 2018.) Research shows that in any given classroom, almost 45% of the students sitting at the desks have had at least one Adverse Life Experience (ACES), and 8% have had three or more in their lifetime. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, an average of 15% of students across the United States are served through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA--meaning they have some form of exceptionality that needs support to reach academic success (Irwin, et al., 2024).

An accumulation of stress causes burnout. These stressors can be from work, home, or a mixture. Burnout may feel like only stress, making it challenging to identify. Unlike signs of stress, signs of burnout can be exhaustion, apathy, negativity towards one's job, or even the inability to perform the job (Breener, Collie, & Hofer, 2015). Burnout can happen to anyone when they feel overwhelmed by their work and life responsibilities for an extended period (Figley, 2002; Hillel-Lavian, 2015)

Compassion Fatigue is related to burnout in many ways. Compassion Fatigue is made up of burnout and is often combined with secondary traumatic stress that someone could acquire after hearing difficult stories from others or helping individuals through their own traumatic situations (SMHSA, 2014). Compassion Fatigue is traditionally identified in healthcare workers, first responders, or individuals working in disaster relief fields as they interact with people who need help and compassion constantly daily. These fields can be very rewarding, but often, they drain the people who work in them emotionally and physically as they take a big toll physically and emotionally (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010).

Educators are at high risk for experiencing compassion fatigue due to the job's high demands and students' constant demands. Students with disabilities or trauma often have additional needs that the teacher needs to address and support throughout the school day. It is easy for the teacher to become fatigued when in that environment for an extended period (Souers & Hall, 2018).

While looking at teachers exiting our schools, we wondered when compassion fatigue starts. In greater depth, do individuals who are learning how to become teachers (or preservice teachers) experience compassion fatigue during their preparation during field placements at the undergraduate level? This new area of study should be explored due to the drastic need for teachers and the number of teachers leaving the field yearly.

II Method

2.1 Instrument

The standardized test entitled the *Professional Quality of Life Scale* (ProQOL) was given to teacher candidates during their student teaching semester. The ProQOL is one of the most widely used instruments to demonstrate compassion fatigue and possible burnout and is used as a measure for individuals in many helping fields, such as nurses, social workers, teachers, and police officers (Hammel, 2022). The ProQOL is a reliable and valid instrument with a reported reliability of .88 and a validity of .80 (Geoffrion, Lamothe, Morizot, Giguère, 2019).

This revised ProQOL contains a 28-item self-report questionnaire using a Likert scale. The participants read the ProQOL statements and then ranked how often they have experienced each statement during student teaching

using the ratings of "never," "rarely," "sometimes," "often," or "very often." Some of the ProQOL statements expose positive work emotions, while other statements reveal negative consequences of exposure to trauma while at work, thus showing possible burnout and compassion fatigue. Table 4 shows each question and whether the question shows Satisfaction (positive work emotions), negative statement, or Compassion Fatigue (CF). In the ProQOL instrument, 15 questions show Satisfaction (S) within the work environment, and 13 indicate compassion fatigue.

2.2 Participants

For this study, teacher candidates were asked to answer the ProQOL statements based on the previous 30 days in their student teaching placement and respond to each statement with how frequently they experience this particular statement. After the Human Subjects Review approved this study, an electronic version of the ProQOL was given to the student teacher in a once-a-week night class. Before the student teachers took the ProQOL, the researchers reported that these results would not affect them in any way (either with grades or academic performance). Also, names were not placed on the survey or any other identifier. After explaining the procedures to the teacher candidates, 96 (68%) agreed to participate.

Of those individuals who chose to participate, 18% were males, while 82% were females. Most (92%) were in the public school setting, while 4% were in charter schools and 4% were in private schools. A wide variety of teaching endorsement areas of the student teachers is also noted (see Table 1)

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of Teacher Candidates for all Three Semesters by Endorsement Area

Endorsement Area	Frequency	Percentage
Elementary	19	20
Secondary	19	20
Middle	21	22
SPED	11	12
Early Childhood	21	22
K-12 (Music, PE, or Art)	5	5

2.3 Data and Measures

These questions were then analyzed using the following measurements:

"never" was given a rating of 1, "

rarely" was given a rating of 2,

"sometimes" was given a rating of 3,

"often" was given a rating of 4

"Very often" was given a rating of 5.

To compare if there were differences in setting, a 3 x 1 one-way ANOVA was completed to determine the difference between (1) public schools, (2) Charter schools, and (3) Private schools. Due to the small sample size of the Charter and Private school placements, a bootstrapped test was performed based on 1000 bootstraps. Also, a 6 X 1 ANOVA and a bootstrapped based on 1000 bootstrap were completed to see if there were differences between endorsement areas. A 3 x 1 ANOVA was performed to see if there were any differences between the three different semesters of this study.

Finally, the Likert ratings were analyzed differently, with each subscore two or lower suggesting a low level for the question, scores averaging above 3 suggesting an average score, and questions averaging 4 to 5 showing a high level of perceived rating (Patton, 2014). Rounding up or down (.5 or above round-up, .4 or below rounds down) rules applied to this score.

III. Results

The results were found using the ProQOL instrument with 96 teacher candidates completing their final year at the university and, at the same time, student teaching in an area classroom. We compared the scores by professional setting, time, gender, and endorsement area. In addition, we used the range of high, average, or low scores of the mean for each ProQOL question.

3.1 Comparison by Setting

A one-way ANOVA was performed to see if there was any significant difference between settings. This ANOVA showed no significant differences between these three types of teaching settings by question (Table 4). Multiple comparisons with a Tukey HSD showed no significant differences with types of schools.

3.2 Comparison by Semester/Time

A 3 x 1 ANOVA was conducted to see if there were any significant differences by semester. Results show that there were no significant differences by semester (see Table 2)

Table 2

Frequency and Percentage of Number of Participants by Semester

Semester	Frequency	Percentage
1st	56	58
2nd	19	20
3rd	21	22

3.3 Comparison by Gender

A one-way ANOVA was completed to compare male vs female responses. Here, there were significant differences in some of the ProQOL questions. *I am preoccupied with more than one person I help* show significance between males and females ($F(1)=7.4, p=.008$). When a post-hoc was completed, a Tukey HSD post-hoc test revealed significant pairwise differences between males with an average of 3.4 and females with an average of 4.1 ($p=.008$) with a difference of .7.

Another significant difference between males and females was the question about feeling depressed. Specifically, the question *I feel depressed thinking about the traumatic experience of the student I help/teach*

($F(1)=4.0, p=.04$) When a post hoc was completed, a Tukey HSD post hoc test revealed significant pairwise differences between males and females, with an average difference of 2.2 for the males and 2.7 for the females.

3.4 Comparison by Endorsement Area

Finally, when conducting a one-way ANOVA comparing endorsement areas, the significant question was: *I have beliefs that sustain me* ($F(1)=2.9, p=.017$). When a post hoc was completed, a Tukey HSD revealed significant pairwise differences between all shows a significant difference between Secondary majors and Early Childhood majors with a mean difference of .83 ($p=.005$). Table 3 shows the Sum or Squares, *F* and *p* scores between setting, endorsement area, gender, and semester/time.

3.5 Comparison with High, Average, or Low Areas

The ProQOL results were streamlined into either "high" (4 and 5 scores), "average" (3 score), or "low" (1 to 2 on the Likert Scale). While featuring the mean, a high score would be anything from 3.5 and above, an average score would be between 2.5 to 3.4, and a low score between 2.4 and 1. Table 3 shows the question number, the ProQOL question, the mean on the question from all participants, the standard deviation of the question, whether the mean score was high, average, or low, and whether this question indicates compassion fatigue.

Results show that the student teachers feel satisfied and excited about their upcoming new careers. The scores were very high on some of these ProQOL questions. Some of the higher scores include *I get satisfaction from being able to help people* ($M=4.7$), *I am happy* ($M=4.1$), *I feel connected to others* ($M=4.1$), *I like my work as a beginning helper/teacher* ($M=4.4$) *I have beliefs that sustain me* ($M=4.4$), *I have happy thoughts and feelings about those I teach and how I could help them* ($M=4.3$), *I believe that I can make a difference through this type of work* ($M=4.6$) and *I am a caring person* ($M=4.7$). These results are encouraging that these individuals picked the right career.

There were three ProQOL questions that the student teachers scored low. The first one was *I avoid certain situations because they remind me of the frightening experiences of the students that I help and teach*. This question indicates the beginning of compassion fatigue and it had a mean score of 1.9. Another compassion fatigue indicator question is: *As a result of my teaching and helping, I have intrusive and frightening thoughts*

Table 3

Question number, Sum of Squares, F, and p score between settings, endorsement areas, gender, and semester/times

Question Number	Between School Settings			By Endorsement Area			By Gender			By Semester/Time		
	SS	F	p score	SS	F	p score	SS	F	p score	SS	F	p score
1	45.32	1.01	.37	45.32	.80	.55	45.32	.41	.52	45.32	.47	.62

2	84.73	.46	.64	84.73	1.23	.30	84.73	7.40	.01	84.73	11.24	<.001
3	27.23	1.79	.17	27.23	.64	.67	27.23	.34	.56	27.23	.79	.46
4	61.62	.33	.72	61.62	.70	.62	61.62	.46	.50	61.62	.65	.52
5	110.99	1.05	.36	110.99	1.65	.16	110.99	1.10	.30	110.99	1.05	.36
6	83.42	1.76	.18	83.42	.38	.86	83.42	1.10	.30	83.42	1.40	.25
7	109.25	.17	.85	109.25	1.39	.24	109.25	3.81	.05	109.25	.80	.46
8	93.66	.16	.21	93.66	.14	.98	93.66	3.52	.06	93.66	.26	.77
9	107.66	.22	.80	107.66	.53	.75	107.66	.04	.85	107.66	.20	.82
10	125.32	.69	.51	125.32	.89	.49	125.32	.31	.58	125.32	.22	.80
11	45.25	.92	.40	45.25	1.16	.33	45.25	1.81	.18	45.25	1.73	.18
12	72.82	.32	.73	72.82	.37	.87	72.82	4.02	.05	72.82	1.32	.27
13	52.81	1.05	.36	52.81	2.92	.02	52.81	1.71	.20	52.81	1.05	.36
14	57.87	.20	.82	57.87	.26	.93	57.87	.10	.75	57.87	1.34	.27
15	49.46	.20	.82	49.46	.70	.63	49.46	.06	.81	49.46	.27	.77
16	50.99	1.13	.33	50.99	1.82	.12	50.99	.65	.42	50.99	.83	.44
17	74.55	.51	.60	74.55	.08	1.00	74.55	.00	.99	74.55	3.60	.70
18	45.28	.06	.95	45.28	1.33	.26	45.28	3.55	.06	45.28	2.60	.08
19	104.81	.52	.60	104.81	.42	.83	104.81	.85	.36	104.81	.09	.91

20	37.49	1.56	.22	37.49	1.97	.09	37.49	.88	.35	37.49	2.69	.07
21	70.31	.80	.45	70.31	.45	.81	70.31	.20	.66	70.31	.07	.93
22	45.25	.52	.60	45.25	1.47	.21	45.25	.03	.88	45.25	2.43	.09
23	82.55	.02	.98	82.55	1.12	.35	82.55	.10	.76	82.55	.77	.47
24	126.91	.15	.86	126.91	1.24	.30	126.91	.01	.91	126.91	.09	.92
25	59.23	.41	.67	59.23	.22	.95	59.23	2.06	.16	59.23	1.78	.18
26	90.48	.07	.93	90.48	.76	.58	90.48	.37	.55	90.48	.40	.67
27	33.33	.72	.49	33.33	1.12	.36	33.33	2.91	.09	33.33	.10	.91
28	60.81	.92	.40	60.81	1.91	.10	60.81	1.48	.23	60.81	.59	.56

with a mean score of 2.0. The final question (M= 2.2) indicates compassion fatigue: *I can't recall important parts of my work with those trauma students.*

In conclusion, when comparing settings, gender endorsement areas, and time there were some differences in gender and endorsement areas. The mean data shows that some ProQOL questions showed the beginning of possible compassion fatigue in these student teachers.

Table 4

Question number, Question, M, SD, High (H) Average (A) or Low (L) score, and if the Question indicates signs of Compassion Fatigue

Question Number	Question	M	SD	High Avg or Low	Question shows signs of compassion fatigue
1	I am happy.	4.1	0.80	H	No
2	I am preoccupied with more than one person I help.	4.1	1.07	H	Yes
3	I get satisfaction from being able to help people.	4.7	0.60	H	No
4	I feel connected to others.	4.1	0.90	H	No

5	I jump or am startled by unexpected sounds.	3.2	1.20	A	Yes
6	I feel invigorated after working with those I help and teach.	3.8	0.95	H	No
7	I find it difficult to separate my personal life as a student teacher/ helper.	3.5	1.20	H	Yes
8	I am not as productive at work because I am losing sleep over thinking about traumatic experiences of a child I help/teach.	2.5	1.14	A	Yes
9	I feel trapped by my job as a helper/teacher.	2.5	1.24	A	Yes
10	Because of my helping/teaching, I have felt "on edge" about various things in my life.	3.2	1.29	A	Yes
11	I like my work as a beginning helper /teacher.	4.4	0.77	H	No
12	I feel depressed thinking about the traumatic experiences of the students I help/ teach.	2.8	0.98	A	Yes
13	I have beliefs that sustain me.	4.4	0.85	H	No
14	I am pleased with how I am able to keep up with my teaching.	3.9	0.88	H	No
15	I am the person I always wanted to be.	3.7	0.82	H	No
16	My work makes me feel satisfied.	4.1	0.86	H	No
17	I feel worn out because of my work as a teacher/helper.	4.0	0.98	H	Yes
18	I have happy thoughts and feelings about those I teach and how I could help them.	4.3	0.86	H	No
19	I feel overwhelmed because my class (work) load seems endless.	3.9	1.19	H	Yes

20	I believe I can make a difference through this type of work.	4.6	0.71	H	No
21	I avoid certain situations because they remind me of the frightening experiences of the students that I help and teach.	1.9	0.97	L	Yes
22	I am proud of what I can do to help some students.	4.4	0.76	H	No
23	As a result of my teaching and helping, I have intrusive and frightening thoughts.	2.0	1.10	L	Yes
24	I feel “bogged down” by the system.	3.2	1.28	A	Yes
25	I have thoughts that I am a “success” as a teacher/helper.	3.7	0.94	H	No
26	I can’t recall important parts of my work with those trauma students.	2.2	1.11	L	Yes
27	I am a very caring person.	4.7	0.67	H	No
28	I am happy that I chose to do this work.	4.2	0.96	H	No

IV. Discussion

Our research sought to see if burnout and compassion fatigue can start as early as the student teaching semester, and if so, what indicators and situations are reported during this time. This study is timely. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), approximately eight percent of teachers are leaving the field (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024; Taie & Lewis, 2023). Seven percent of teachers with less than three years of teaching experience leave the field (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2024; Taie & Lewis, 2023).

According to our study, settings, whether in public, private, or charter schools, show no significant difference with the beginning of burnout and compassion fatigue. This finding conflicts with other studies. For example, The National and Teacher and Principal Survey (Taie & Lewis, 2022) compared public and private school teachers and their levels of burnout. It was found that while both groups in the sample felt stressed about similar issues, private school teachers rated the stress less than public school teachers (Taie & Lewis, 2022). The public teachers reported a higher workload and a more difficult caseload than the private schools, contributing to this stress.

Female teachers are more likely to exhibit signs of compassion fatigue than their male counterparts. According to the National Education Association (NEA), female educators are also more likely to report feeling less resilient and more likely to experience burnout than male teachers (Walker, 2022). These findings correlate

with our research, as female teacher candidates were more likely to feel depressed and were more likely to be preoccupied with particular students than their male counterparts. Chronic stress leads to depression, and the teaching field can be highly stressful (Agyapong, Obuobi-Donkor, Burbach, Wei, 2022). This burnout leads to problems with poor physical and mental well-being problems, thus causing many individuals to quit teaching (Taie & Lewis, 2023).

Our research comparing semester and time did not show significance. However, what did show a difference is the setting in which the student teacher taught and Secondary majors showed a significant difference with Early Childhood majors when looking at beliefs that sustain their teaching. Research from Saloviita and Pakarinen (2021) found that secondary school teachers experience a higher average level of burnout than elementary school teachers. These Secondary School teachers tend to experience higher levels of depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment than elementary school teachers' counterparts (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). This research is consistent with our findings, as a smaller proportion of secondary school teachers felt they had sustaining beliefs over elementary school teachers. Interestingly, many other studies did not differentiate early childhood from elementary or did not include early childhood educators in their studies. In this study, early childhood educators had similar levels of educators who felt they had sustaining beliefs as secondary teachers. Special education teachers showed similar levels of sustaining beliefs to elementary teachers in our study. This finding differs from other studies done in the past. For example, Ziaian-Grafari and Berg's (2019) research shows that teachers working with individuals with disabilities tend to show compassion fatigue and burnout faster than other teachers. These findings are similar to other studies in the field, including Connelly & Graham (2009) and Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler (2005), which also correlate with burnout and compassion fatigue hitting special education teachers sooner than their counterparts. In addition, additional research from Antonious, Efthymious, Ploychroni, and Kofa (2023) and Emery and Vandenberg (2010) noted that special education teachers are prone to low job satisfaction, low self-efficacy, and increased burnout. Everhart (2009) also brings up additional research discussing general education teachers working more closely with students with disabilities and additional behavioral issues in their general education classroom, which increases the general education teachers' anxiety. Focusing on behavioral issues and trauma, Brooks's research (2024), as well as Kilgore-Cameron's (2024) research, found that general education teachers, administrators, and other school personnel are experiencing more secondary trauma or compassion fatigue. Individuals in helping professions (such as education or healthcare) are seen to have lower levels of burnout symptoms. These individuals are less likely to experience burnout from their profession if they have some form of spiritual belief that they feel connected to (Harris & Tao, 2021). It is important to state that spiritual beliefs are not strictly religious beliefs; they could be any belief where an individual feels connected to a being or more significant than themselves. In this current study, fewer secondary and early childhood educators reported having sustaining spiritual beliefs. These differences could be correlated with higher levels of burnout in these areas. Schools need to have practices in place with more supportive working conditions and sustaining beliefs with reflective models to integrate faith reflection (Sharp & Garrett-Wright, 2017; Sipper-Denlinger, 2022; Gilmour, Sandilos, Pilny, Schwartz, & Wehby, 2021; Newman & Antonelli (2022) discuss the importance of the six dimensions of wellness, including occupational, physical, social, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. More research is needed in spirituality as well as meditation with teaching stress. When looking at the Likert scales of the ProQol, many student teachers reported feeling satisfied and excited about their new careers as professional teachers. This phase occurs very early in many teaching careers. These teachers want to make a difference in their profession and engage rapidly and energetically with students

(Ormiston, Nygaard, & Apgar, 2022; Ziao, Binghai & Yu, 2024). This ambition is incredible, but research shows that it is unsustainable. The daily stress of engaging may produce symptoms of compassion fatigue, such as sleeplessness or disproportionate focus on a particular student's needs (Ziao, Binghai, & Yu, 2024).

On the other hand, our research showed that the student teacher scored low in avoiding certain experiences because of the remainder of frightening experiences of the students that they teach, having intrusive and frightening thoughts, and not being able to recall important parts of the job due overwhelming thoughts and concerns about students who are in trauma. These feelings of frightening thoughts, forgetting parts of the day, and avoiding certain aspects of the job are the beginning of compassion fatigue (Castro Schepers, 2023; Ziao, Binghai, Yu, 2024). Brooks's (2024) research explores how teachers describe their experiences and coping strategies that can be used to manage their well-being. Other studies have shown that for teachers to manage their well-being, they need support from administrators, prioritize self-care, and seek support when necessary (Brooks, 2024)

V. Conclusion

The teachers report that they have compassion fatigue and other reasons that they are leaving, such as personal reasons of balance of personal and professional life, needing a higher salary, trouble with discipline and students, and a high workload (Irwin, Wang, Jung, Kessler, Tezil, Alhassani, Filbey, Dilig, & Bullock Mann, 2024). All these things will lead to compassion fatigue and burnout. As new teachers enter this important field, according to our study, they do not overall show compassion fatigue and burnout as teachers. However, throughout the years, multiple research studies have shown that teachers are experiencing burnout at a quicker and more steady pace (Castro Schepers, 2023; Ziao, Binghai, Yu, 2024; Kilgore-Cameron, 2024). To combat this compassion fatigue in the future, the college and university need to put multiple trainings in place during this induction time to help future teachers avoid burnout and work on well-being, physical wellness, and self-efficiency.

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