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Uniting in a Reading Education Course to Support Mental Health Awareness During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Pre-service teacher candidates need success in their reading educational preparatory courses to evolve into highly qualified English language arts teachers. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional, in-person, reading classrooms were easy to describe. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, K-12 classroom instruction quickly shifted from the traditional, face-to-face, in-person setting to online virtual platforms (Bubb and Jones 209). While ELA teachers in classroom positions faced extensive stressors related to COVID-19, many classroom teachers proved that dedication and perseverance to their students' needs would be the key to reaching success.

Higher education, including teacher education programs, were no exception to these challenging shifts. Much like the K-12 schools, many universities and colleges transformed the way they manage teaching and learning tasks during this unprecedented time when traditional, face-to-face, in-person instruction was not possible. Similar to the social distancing challenges seen in the outside world, teacher preparation programs had to somehow adapt and continue to move students forward with their degree plans despite exceptional stressors, since these programs would be preparing teachers for the K-12 classroom positions they would soon be filling. Course professors were expected to deliver the scheduled reading course content, establish field work/practicum opportunities, and

remain cognizant of the health and well-being of the students in the course. This article shares a specific adaptation made in a college reading ELA course to support the pre-service K-12 ELA educators.

Early in the semester it was observed by the professor that all the typical college-related stressors were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Regardless, it was important that the pre-service teachers enrolled in reading courses mastered the course objectives to be prepared for future teaching jobs. The challenge was figuring out how to best address fears and prepare them to be effective reading teachers. The pre-service teachers would benefit from obtaining the skills and strategies to effectively join already active ELA teacher departments attempting to balance changes to reach success during an incredibly difficult time. Since the stress seemed to be creating a barrier between the course content and the pre-service teachers' success, addressing this tension needed priority.

Supporting the K-12 ELA Teacher Community

Three key points shared in this article are important for the K-12 ELA teacher community and the teams of administrators that work to support them. First, attention should be given to supporting teachers' mental health. This should include pre-service teachers because they are training to become ELA educators. Second, research focusing on the positive possibilities of

embedding mindfulness and other similar strategies into teacher preparation courses or professional development is needed. Bringing awareness to mental health needs can possibly enhance the ELA classroom interactions with fellow educators, students, and parents. Last, making classroom connections between the task of monitoring and caring for mental health needs and reaching academic success can benefit teachers and students. Adults, including teachers and teacher candidates, and young children are facing excessive struggles, and more attention to mental health needs can promote overall classroom ELA content success. If educators and future educators have a better understanding of mental health, along with an action plan in place to meet Whole Child needs, reaching ELA content success can be a more manageable task.

Planning for Support During a Pandemic

As mentioned above, the unusual semester revealed the reading course discussed in this article needed to be adapted in more ways than just the delivery method. Before an effective start to the reading course content could be accomplished, it was important to address the copious amounts of stress the pre-service teachers were facing. After careful thought on how to approach the situation, the potential of inviting a stress expert to talk with the class was pitched to the students. The students were receptive and excited; they agreed to attend the course practicum event. The next step taken was to reach out to a therapist for possible collaboration. The therapist, who has extensive experience with helping others manage anxiety/stress, cope with trauma, and identify problem solving strategies during crises, was open to a session that would address mental health needs.

Pre-Session Details

In regard to the reading course content, the professor and therapist discussed the big ideas the class was already scheduled to cover. This meeting involved reviewing the reading course content, which included two weeks focusing on stress, managing teacher and student expectations (especially with COVID-19 and online learning/learning model uncertainties), and understanding the Whole Child model and how each of these concerns relates to developing English language skills. Together, it was decided that there was a need to support pre-service teachers by raising the importance of being aware of students' personal safety, food insecurities, personal belonging, and the overall impacts these conditions have on academic success. Additionally, it was shared with the therapist that, as a whole class, there was a curiosity about ways to manage the abrupt transition to online learning and what, if any, mindfulness strategies could help as the pre-service teachers tackle the new expectations required of teachers during this unprecedented time.

Increased Need for Mental Health Awareness

As a Licensed Certified Social Worker specializing in Clinical Social Work, the therapist and course professor identified parallels in the Whole Child approach in the education field to the Social Systems Theory in social work (Griffiths and Tabery 66). For example, the Whole Child approach maintains that students will have optimal success in the classroom if their social and emotional needs are met—not just through focusing on academics alone. The Whole Child approach focuses on ensuring that the students are healthy, safe, supported, engaged, and challenged. This approach takes into perspective the individual student's needs, such as family life, physical

health, social supports, and community resources to assist the child with optimal functioning, rather than focusing on the classroom alone. This parallels with the needs of the pre-service teachers in the course.

Systems Theory in social work seeks to understand individuals in relation to their environments—micro (individual, family, and peers/friends), mezzo (community, occupational, and local government), and macro systems (cultural, society, and national/international government policies) (Friedman and Allen). When an individual faces challenges or difficulties, the social worker evaluates possible stressors or deficits in the individual's various system levels. Also, to assist the individual, the social worker seeks to understand the strengths in the individual's social system to assist with improving functioning. This theory is often lightly covered in earlier courses in a teacher education program.

Both theories are similar in that they each view the individual or student holistically. The college students discussed awareness that the student in the ELA classroom will not be able to focus on academics if the student is hungry and without food or utilities in the home. The student whose parents are divorcing or experiencing family problems may demonstrate difficulties with concentration or appear anxious while in the classroom. Both approaches focus on awareness of emotional and social needs of the individual, providing support and a safe environment, and assisting with overall healthy functioning.

This sparked a discussion of the need for and benefits of identifying the overall essentials of the young students while they are learning from home, many of whom are without access to basic needs and resources that the schools typically provide. In addition, the therapist and professor shared

thoughts on the new challenges that educators are experiencing as they work to educate their students during the COVID-19 pandemic and the emotional and psychological needs of the educators as they work to provide distance learning. In essence, it was evident that the educators' needs and awareness of increased stressors while working to care for their students' educational needs should be identified and validated. The professor used this opportunity to remind the pre-service teachers that this was what she was doing for them. She also reminded each class member that this is important to pass on to the K-12 ELA classrooms they would soon be serving.

The parents and students are looking to the educational system for guidance during this unprecedented time of social distancing and disease prevention. It is essential that the active educators and pre-service educators are provided with the opportunity to ensure their individual psychological and emotional needs are met so they can continue their roles in providing leadership for their students and families.

Session Details

Five session goals for the pre-service teachers enrolled in the reading education course were decided upon in the meeting with the course professor and therapist:

1. Discuss mental health awareness and ways to promote self-care;
2. Consider new ways to manage personal stressors using mindfulness strategies;
3. Brainstorm ways to better lead classrooms with young students who are dealing with stress;
4. Gain knowledge about the Whole Child Model (Lewallen et. Al 730) and connect to other theories and K-12 ELA content;

5. Discuss the connection between mental health and stress as it relates to academic performance in the ELA classroom.

Session in Action

Using Zoom as the meeting platform, the session began with an introduction from the therapist who provided her professional background information as well as encouraging feedback for the students working toward their degree requirements. She used rapport-building strategies to engage the students, such as a Likert scale using video responses and chat feedback to assess the level of emotional stress and validation to encourage open expression of feelings and needs during the session. Next, the therapist used her prepared outline to guide the session, while offering flexibility for students to ask questions at any time to encourage “buy in” toward addressing the perceived needs of their future students that might impact their ELA success. This included discussing Cognitive Behavioral Theory (Beck 195) and the ways that thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are connected. The students reported various levels of anxiety/stress related to the abrupt change to COVID-19 restrictions and the need to rely on video-based instruction during their training. The therapist identified how thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are interrelated. The therapist provided an example of how multiple stressors can trigger feelings of being overwhelmed, fears about uncertainties of the future, and concerns about failure in their own classes or as a future educator. The therapist encouraged feedback about various negative thoughts or beliefs that college students may experience as a result of increased stressors. The therapist discussed how negative thoughts and feelings tend to promote negative behaviors such as avoidance,

procrastination, anger/frustration, and low academic performance.

This promoted discussion of the importance of self-awareness and insight into thoughts and personal responses to changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The therapist then discussed the Reframing technique as part of Cognitive Restructuring to promote flexibility while approaching reading instruction distance learning objectives. While these terms were not typically used in the reading course, they were connected with more common vocabulary that is used, such as scaffolding, metacognition, and building schema. The therapist discussed strategies to promote self-care, such as practicing mindfulness and meditation, identifying priorities while engaging in behaviors that honor those priorities, and calming, positive self-talk while addressing high-stress situations. She discussed the importance of setting psychological and emotional boundaries to allow educators to recover after their workday is finished. There was encouragement with the class feedback by participating in healthy, calming/soothing activities that promote relaxation, stress relief, and resilience including deep breathing, body relaxation, and chat discussion.

After discussing the interconnection among thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, the therapist discussed positive coping strategies to assist with proactively and positively managing the abrupt changes and stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The therapist guided the class through a Reframing exercise. The therapist provided examples of possible anxious or negative thoughts and discussed with the students ways to identify the emotion(s) prompted by the original negative thought. She also solicited feedback from the students re: a negative thought that many of the students present reported experiencing to utilize in

rehearsing the Reframing technique. The group identified the thought, “I cannot do this today,” with regard to facing the abrupt changes in the classroom related to COVID-19 restrictions. The therapist encouraged the students to evaluate intensity of the emotion 0-100%. Several students provided examples of emotions of feeling “anxious,” “overwhelmed,” and “exhausted.” Many students reported the intensity of these emotions between 60-80%. Then, the therapist discussed the process of searching for “evidence” that validates the thought, “I cannot do this today.” The therapist shared that anxious or negative thoughts tend to “feel real,” however, generally do not provide evidence of being true. The therapist encouraged student feedback on things they have accomplished to this point that negate true evidence of not being able to get through their education requirements.

The therapist discussed ways to “reframe” or change the thought to be more realistic and positive. The therapist discussed the importance of reinforcing the positive thought. She then discussed how to check for intensity of the negative emotion after the statement has been reframed. Most students reported that the intensity of the negative emotions (“anxious,” “overwhelmed,” “exhausted”) had dropped to 20-40% during the exercise. The therapist discussed strategies to promote self-care, such as mindfulness, meditation, and calming, positive self-talk while addressing high-stress situations, such as “I can do this” and “I can reach out for support.” The therapist encouraged students to provide examples of identifying priorities while engaging in behaviors that honor those priorities, such as taking time to prepare for their reading instruction class and making sure they are getting enough rest so that they are able to address the needs of their students in the classroom. She discussed the importance of setting psychological and

emotional boundaries to allow educators to recover after their workday is finished, such as scheduling family time or exercise, or not checking work emails after 5:00 p.m. The therapist discussed deep abdominal breathing and rehearsed this calming technique with the students. The therapist discussed mindfulness techniques, such as using the five senses and focusing on breathing to assist with redirecting full awareness to the present moment. The therapist encouraged the class to provide feedback regarding healthy, calming/soothing activities that promote relaxation, stress relief, and resilience. This was considered in relation to personal situations in the role of a pre-service teacher, teacher, and student needing support in an ELA classroom.

The therapist continued with discussion around basic understandings of the Whole Child Model as it relates to students who are dealing with increased stressors and encouraged discussion of common stressors students may experience while learning during the pandemic. The therapist provided an overview of how this relates to Social Systems Theory and the ways that mental health distress and environmental stressors can manifest and negatively impact academic performance. Further, the therapist encouraged open discussion of ideas and community resources that may assist their students in reaching their full capacity of learning and thriving in this current pandemic. These resources were encouraged to be added to a required course journal for future reference. While the therapist did the majority of the facilitating, the professor helped to connect the reading course content and terminology by referencing the textbook terms and connecting to the class lecture content and literacy material.

Research Discussion

Research tells us so much about pre-service teachers and the stressors they face (Paquette and Rieg 55). This stress is also found in current classroom ELA educators and the students they serve. Young students need to master literacy skills as these skills will serve as the foundation for all others. Understanding that need can increase educator stress, especially with the current challenges. Yet, with the COVID-19 pandemic, there is still so much we are learning regarding the impacts the disease is having on the mental health of the people, including pre-service teachers, teachers, and students, that make up our society.

As two experts, who each focus on different fields of study, the experience of uniting as a team impacted knowledge in the following ways. First, connections with strategies that are used in both counseling and classroom management were made. Second, the session was well-received by the participants who believed that this opportunity will benefit their future ELA classrooms. Success of the meeting was expressed and observed in a variety of ways during and after the session. Due to student privacy, these details must remain non-specific in this article.

Recommendations

It is recommended that future reading college professors and therapists consider the benefits that this type of collaboration can have on pre-service teachers and their future endeavors. It is also recommended that current ELA educators are given opportunities to attend similar sessions in professional development settings as much as possible. By doing so, the future ELA teacher departments will have stronger candidates to enhance their already active departments. This course session was not meant to take the place of one-on-one therapy sessions that may be warranted but was meant to serve as one way to better

understand mental health issues that are faced in the both K-12 and higher education classroom settings. More specific future studies and carefully planned data collection may lead to further understandings of this type of phenomenon and the outcomes observed to ultimately improve mental health in the realm of education. Also, these future studies can help collect student-specific data sharing more from their own voices. While there is a cognizance that the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event, research shows that similar types of stressors are faced daily with pre-service teachers, current K-12 ELA teachers, and students. Therefore, providing pre-service teachers with sessions similar to this one, helping address coping skills, mindfulness strategies, and increased awareness of mental health as it relates to the Whole Child can impact academic success for students in a variety of ways.

It is important to share this adaptation made to a reading ELA course during the COVID-19 pandemic. The attempt can be inspirational to the K-12 ELA educator community. By sharing the details of this innovative attempt to cross over typical discipline barriers, like the professor and the therapist did, a new start of promoting mental health awareness can begin. Learning ways to identify and address stressors that may be impacting pre-service teacher candidates, K-12 ELA educators, and the young students they are so dedicated to serving can be beneficial. This can become a revolution in teaching pedagogy.

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