

Chapter 13

Self-Care is Not Selfish: The Impact of Self-Care and Renewal on School Climate

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ABSTRACT

This chapter defines and outlines many aspects of self-care and renewal and how various practices have tremendous benefits to both teachers and students. Furthermore, self-care and renewal practices when promoted consistently can have a great impact on the school climate as a whole, but especially for students impacted by trauma. Both authors provide personal anecdotes pertaining to self-care and renewal to dive deeper into the topic. The role of the school leader as well as the teacher/leader relationship is explored including aspects of leadership that promote self-care and renewal. To round out the chapter, controversies and opposing viewpoints to self-care and renewal practices in schools are examined. The overall purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the importance of self-care and renewal and the dramatic impact promoting it can have on the school and all those in the school environment.

INTRODUCTION

“Glorified babysitters who get summers off” make teaching sound like the easiest job in the world. Those who can’t teach, right? Talk to any dedicated teacher in the United States, and the story will likely paint a different picture. The COVID-19 crisis has only exacerbated the challenging issues teachers face as part of the profession. Arriving early, staying late, working on weekends and school vacations are just a few of the sacrifices teachers make to do their job well, and that’s if they are lucky enough not to have to work a second job. Summers “off” typically entails writing lesson plans, setting up a classroom, buying

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school supplies with their own money, and attending professional development workshops and courses. All too often, teaching can be a thankless job. On the whole, teachers are inspirational, highly educated, hard-working, passionate, driven professionals, yet they are under-respected, overly stressed, underpaid, and quite simply, they are tired.

When news stations and research studies constantly report how students can learn more in schools and perform better on standardized assessments, the focus is typically on curriculum and instruction. There have even been discussions about tying student test scores on standardized assessment to teacher evaluations. With stakes like these, teacher stress is arguably higher than ever, making self-care vital to teacher performance, especially with the obstacles that the pandemic and post-pandemic times pose. It is widely understood that a good night's sleep aids in performance. Rather than using that knowledge by focusing strictly on students' sleep, what if the focus shifted to look more seriously at teachers' sleep? Or better yet, teacher well-being in general. Rest is just the beginning of a larger conversation around the incredible impact of teacher self-care and renewal on the entire school climate and student achievement (Melito-Conners, 2019). In recent years, many schools and districts have made great strides in incorporating mindfulness, meditation, and other social-emotional learning coping skills in the classrooms for students, but what about the teachers? Why are they left out of the conversation? When we talk about well-being and self-care in schools, it is often solely aimed at the students, and while this is also critical, the teachers are suffering, and it is time we turn our attention to their well-being.

This chapter investigates how teachers' self-care and renewal practices can improve their well-being and performance, which in turn positively impacts the well-being and performance of their students, especially those impacted by trauma. The first section of this chapter is dedicated to defining and explaining the main ideas around self-care, renewal, trauma, and resilience. The second section focuses on how these practices specifically benefit teachers, and as a result, students. The third section describes the impact that teacher self-care and renewal can have on school climate. The fourth section discusses the role of the school leader in fostering teacher self-care and renewal within schools. Each section supplies a thorough review of the literature on each topic, supplemented by anecdotes to contextualize the scholarly ideas.

THE INTERSECTION OF SELF-CARE, RENEWAL, TRAUMA, AND RESILIENCE

To understand the importance of self-care and renewal in improving school climate, it is essential to define these terms clearly. Self-care is defined as the “daily, foundational practice of attending to and shaping one’s emotional, physical, spiritual and mental needs including their daily routines, relationships, and environments as necessary” (Cook-Cottone, 2017, p. 297). It is also best practiced proactively and not practiced when one is already feeling overly stressed or at risk for burnout. Self-care can be thought of as one’s foundation and the basis for how we live our lives. Similarly, renewal refers to the concept of teachers participating in activities geared towards reinvigorating them. Furthermore, renewal speaks to teachers continuously adapting to change, monitoring their effectiveness, and adjusting their practice when necessary (Goodlad et al., 2004). The terms renewal, reform, and restructuring sometimes get confused with one another; however, they are different. The subtle nuances are necessary to understand when bringing self-care practices into schools. “The language and the ethos of renewal have to do with the people in and around schools improving their practice and developing the collaborative mechanisms necessary to better their schools” (Goodlad, 1999, p. 575). Contrary, “the language of reform carries

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