

EDUCATORS EXPERIENCING COMPASSION FATIGUE: SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES FOR SUPPORT

Peter J. Dittmar

Dissertation Chair: Tricia J. Stewart, Ph.D.

Dissertation Committee Members: Nicole G. DeRonck, Ph.D., Ed.D., & Sheri Prendergast, Ed.D.



Abstract

This exploratory qualitative case study analyzed educator perceptions and the extent to which educators experienced compassion fatigue during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Core content teachers and administrators were interviewed utilizing semi-structured interview protocols. The participants were located in two urban middle schools in the Northeast and all participants worked during the entirety of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Findings suggest that secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue can have a major role in educators' well-being and effectiveness. The COVID-19 Pandemic compounded the difficulties educators faced with supporting others professionally and personally.

Research Questions

1. What were educators' experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic?
2. To what extent did educators experience compassion fatigue since the most active periods of the COVID-19 Pandemic?
3. What are educators' perceptions of what is needed to support them as professionals based on their COVID-19 Pandemic experiences?

Key Terms

- Burnout** Identified by Herbert Freudenberger in 1974, in which it "occurs following exposure to constant occupational stress over time" (Henson, 2020, p. 77).
- Compassion Fatigue** It is used interchangeably with Secondary Traumatic Stress and it is "associated with the cost of caring for others in emotional pain" (Figley, 1995, p. 9).
- Compassion Satisfaction** The "sense of fulfillment derived from seeing clients suffer less and watching them transform from the role of victim to survivor" (Radey & Figley, 2007, p. 208).
- Secondary Trauma** "Refers to effects in people who care for, or are involved with, those who have been directly traumatized" (Figley, 1995, p. 210).

Benefits of Research

Through enhanced school district policies, compassion fatigue may be mitigated as educators are better supported.

Limitations

- This study was from only one urban district in the Northeast.
- Suburban or rural school districts may need other policies.
- This study took place the first school year after the global pandemic, which could have limited the number of teachers who wanted to revisit their personal pandemic experiences.

Methodology

- Exploratory case study designs are best applied to new events and uncertain times (Butin, 2010).
- Furthermore, a case is defined as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 24).
- For this study, a case is defined by each participant teacher and administrator that was interviewed.
- A data matrix was utilized to bring transparency and clarity to the alignment of research questions with interview questions (Anfara et al., 2002).
- The researcher is the main instrument in qualitative research, and avoided biases through triangulation.

Participants

- Fifteen (n = 15) general education teachers and five (n = 5) administrators; Twenty total (n = 20)
- General education teachers from core content disciplines: English Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, or Math.
- Teachers/Administrators: Must have worked during all three years of the COVID-19 Pandemic—the 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022 academic school years, and still be working now.
- Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Location

- Two middle schools within a large urban school district in the Northeast.

Data Collection/Analysis

- Educator Demographic Questionnaire
- Semi-structured interview protocols specific for teacher and administrator interviews (60-90 minutes)
- Digitally recorded for transcription purposes
- Transcripts analyzed using NVivo software
- First Cycle and Second Cycle Coding (Miles et al., 2020)
- Emotion Coding: For intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences (Miles et al., 2020)
- Researcher Journal: To record thoughts, feelings, and ideas (Krefting, 1991; Ortlipp, 2008)

Preliminary Findings

Technology Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators' felt overwhelmed from changes • Educators' felt stress from expectations of a quick turnaround to learn new technology • Educators' felt there were too many technology options being shared
Educator Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators were free to select content during the remote learning period • Educators' felt pressure to close the achievement gap in transition to in-person learning
School Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators' felt scared by student behaviors • Educators received threats from students • Educators' felt students had to relearn appropriate behaviors
Future Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators' felt there was no student behavioral support • Educators' desired more time off / less duties • Educators' desired specifically tailored Professional Development for their needs

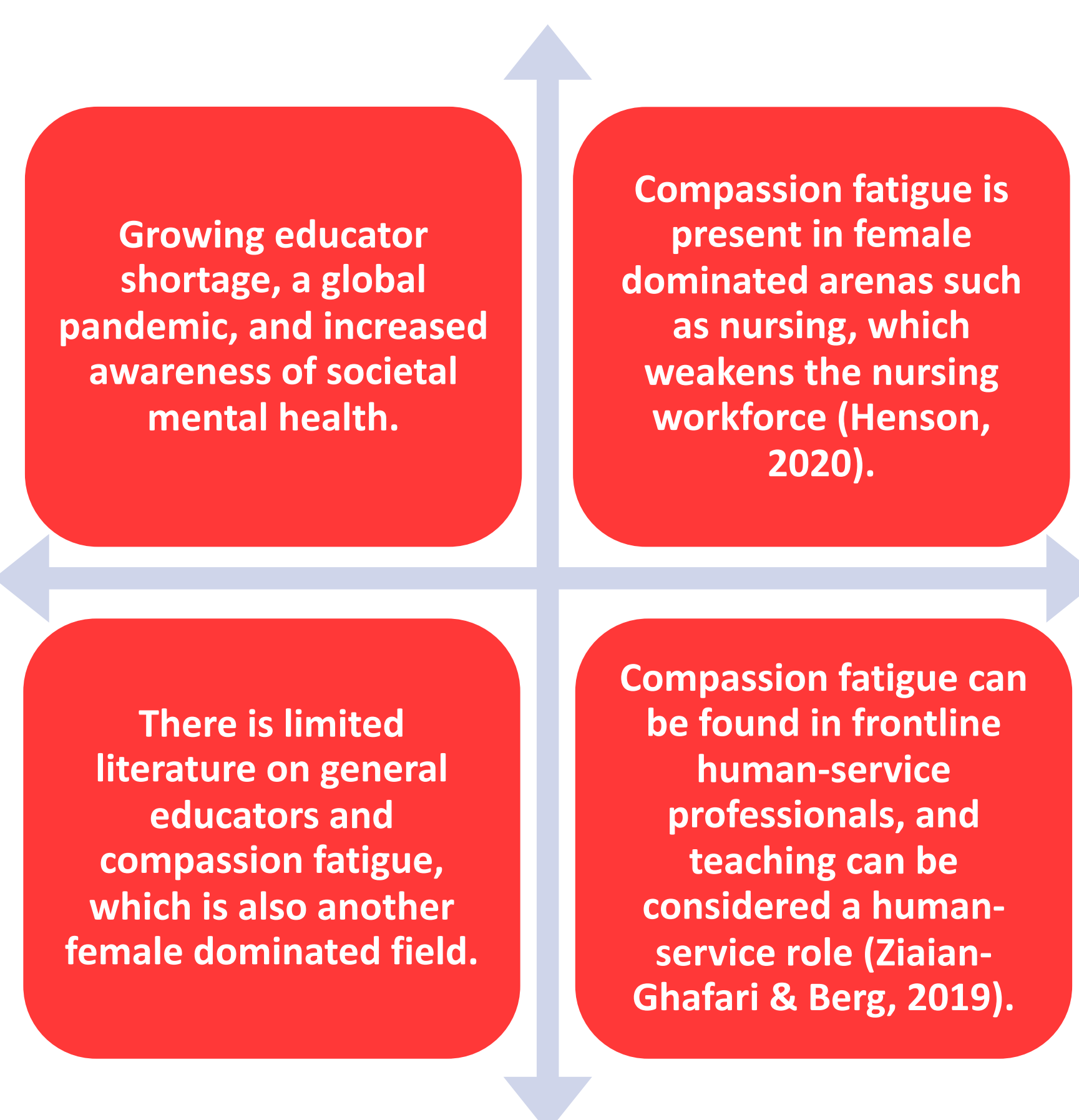
Discussion

- School districts should provide Professional Development on specific technology platforms.
- School districts can create policies for teachers to choose from curricular options to increase teacher autonomy.
- Emphasis on relationships and student well-being with less pressure on closing the achievement gap to avoid educator turnover.
- Update student behavioral policies to protect teachers.
- School districts should be consistent with behavioral and social policies, and strategies to build communities of care.

Future Research

- Explore how the pandemic affected affluent school districts and the extent to which educators in those districts experienced compassion fatigue.

Rationale



Statement of the Problem

It is known that "more than 10 million American children annually experience trauma" (Hupe & Stevenson, 2019, p. 367).

The global pandemic created more trauma as "the economic pressures of the pandemic also increase risk for interpersonal violence, neglect, food insecurities, and distress for children and caregivers" (NCTSN, 2021, p. 1).

In fact, "teachers are at risk for experiencing secondary traumatic stress when they are exposed to traumatized children" (Hupe & Stevenson, 2019, p. 367).

Theoretical Framework

Burnout vs. Compassion Fatigue

- *Antecedents of Burnout*: A person with a goal-oriented mindset, intense workload, and a poor work environment (Henson, 2020).
- *Antecedents of Compassion Fatigue*: Exposure to secondary trauma, having a relationship with a person who experienced trauma, and a feeling of ineffectiveness (Henson, 2020).

Empathy

- "Teaching is inherently relational and student distress can evoke an innate desire to comfort and care for children, which can lead to secondary trauma" (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019, p. 40)
- Among higher education professors, caring for distressed students was a major reason for faculty stress that was heightened during the pandemic (Cordaro, 2020).

Ethic of Care Theory

- The one-caring supports the well-being of the cared-for (Noddings, 1984).
- Teaching can be emotionally exhausting, teachers are invested in their students' lives.
- **Engrossment**: Taking pleasure or pain in what the cared-for says (Noddings, 1984).
- **Motivational Displacement**: The one-caring places their energy in the service of someone else where their vulnerability is increased (Noddings, 1984).
- **Acknowledgement**: The cared-for finalizes a caring connection between the one-caring and the cared-for (Noddings, 1984).

Human-Service Providers and Relationships

- "Teachers are often the first outside of family members to learn about student trauma and feel its effects" (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019, p. 30).
- Educators support school and community crisis situations, and students who are bringing their trauma experiences to school (Hydon et al., 2015).

Loss of Control and Job Performance

- Hupe and Stevenson (2019) found that "teachers' compassion fatigue predicted negative attitudes toward reporting suspected child abuse" (p. 378).