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Helping the helpers: Tending to Kansas educators' social-emotional needs and self-care during a pandemic

Jessica J. Lane Dr.
Kansas State University, jelkinlane@gmail.com

Leah McKeeman Dr.
Kansas State University

Laura Bonella
Kansas State University

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Abstract

On a typical day, pre-COVID 19, educators are pulled in many directions, making hundreds, if not thousands, of quick decisions. Today those dynamics are heightened with varied and additional competing needs. However, what has not changed is the essential role of an educator. Caring for students in a time of such uncertainty seems critical. However, while there is serious and necessary demand for caring for the students and families, one population that is gravely being overlooked are the helpers. The educators. Less emphasis is being placed on the wellness and self-care of those who are offering those needed social-emotional supports. For a myriad of reasons, it is clear that emphasis must be placed on tending to the needs of Kansas educators' well-being. In an effort to maintain educator passion and performance, messages around self-care, building social-emotionally competent classrooms and school climates are addressed.

Keywords

social-emotional, self-care, help, connecting, educators, passion, teachers, school counselors, administrators, COVID-19

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Dr. Jessica J. Lane, Kansas State University

Dr. Leah McKeeman, Kansas State University

Laura Bonella, MA, MLS, Kansas State University

Jessica Lane is an assistant professor in counselor education and supervision at Kansas State University. Prior to serving as a counselor educator, she was an elementary teacher and school counselor in Kansas. She also served as faculty for nine years in preparing P-12 preservice teachers at Kansas State. Dr. Lane's research interests include: collaboration between school counselors and administrators; social-emotional advocacy and support; rural counseling and mental health; elementary school counseling; and kindergarten transition.

Leah McKeeman is an assistant professor in curriculum and instruction at Kansas State University. She holds a Kansas teaching license in French, ESOL, and as a reading specialist. She has taught all ages within public and private schools working with dense urban environments, suburban neighborhoods, and in rural settings. Dr. McKeeman is passionate about education, and is driven to foster a love of learning in all students.

Laura Bonella is an academic services librarian at K-State Libraries. She supports information literacy and faculty and student research in education and social sciences.

Some see education as a profession, others refer to it as a calling; either way, education requires passion. "Passion is seeking for the new, and experiencing new ideas. Passion is the basis of effective teaching," (Serin, 2017, p. 60). The passion for teaching and learning, and the passion for connecting with, helping, and having a positive impact on others is often what brings people into the profession. Today's educators are facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities during these extraordinary times, and their passion for the profession must be protected and sustained.

During the spring of 2020, many Kansas teachers wished their students a safe and fun spring break to later find out that school would not resume as they knew it for the remainder of the academic year. Students and educators began continuous learning efforts while facing changing dynamics and stressors such as isolation, limited support, insecurity and tension. This quick shift impacted more than just teaching and learning, it spread to home and family, impacting all aspects of life.

Sudden Shifts

In March 2020, Kansas was the first state to close due to the pandemic and move to continuous learning from home. As a result, Kansas educators had ten days to change delivery models. Educators all across the state were propelled into a new way of teaching, and students were thrust into a new way of learning. In an effort to examine the changing landscape for their

students and alumni, Kansas State University College of Education professors created a research team. This diverse group of educators had representation from curriculum and instruction, special education, counseling and student affairs, K-State Libraries, and the dean for research. The multidisciplinary team sought to capture the collective response of educators in the field and elevate teacher, counselor, and administrator voices on their experiences. A survey was conducted in May 2020 as the academic year drew to a close. Questions surrounded the topics of access, engagement, educator resiliency and self-care, and social-emotional well-being. As a land grant institution, Kansas State University's mission is to improve the quality of life for all through education, research, and outreach. A push to review the responses and provide meaningful data to support decisions and stakeholders in the future seemed critical.

As the summer months continued, the increase in COVID cases caused an ever-changing climate around school reopening. While many were weighing in, an educator voice seemed critical in the discussion. The team produced a white paper to share important information to Kansas stakeholders highlighting emerging themes and recommendations. This white paper was shared with professional organizations: Kansas Association of School Boards (KASB); United School Administrators of Kansas (USA-K); and Kansas Department of Education (KSDE).

Key themes that arose in the survey centered on access, resiliency and engagement. More specifically, the areas of teacher resiliency, student resiliency, broadband access, social-emotional learning, and student engagement emerged. While a lot of information was gleaned from this initial survey, what was striking was the social-emotional concern for students and their well-being, as well as the need for educator resiliency and self-care.

Social-emotional needs

Addressing the social-emotional needs of students has been a growing necessity in Kansas schools, and Kansas has been shifting its idea of student success into a more holistic approach (Lane, 2017-2018). Today's educators recognize the diverse needs of today's P-12 students and acknowledge that "if they want to truly impact lives, they must also be attending to the personal, social, emotional, and developmental needs of the student," (Bonella et al., 2020, p.12). The Kansas State College of Education survey illustrated educators' current concerns and gave voice to current needs around the state. In fact, four out of five survey respondents, or 82% educators surveyed, listed social-emotional well-being as their highest concern; this concern superseded such items as academic concerns, student engagement, and financial considerations. This finding held constant across rural, urban, and suburban school settings. Interestingly, regardless of school classification (1A-6A), 18.7-22.3% stated they felt ill prepared or extremely ill prepared in providing social-emotional support to students. While this means that the majority of educators felt they had these skills, it's concerning that one in five educators do not have adequate training to support students in this way. The findings draw out the needs of students, but also acknowledge that educators themselves feel they need more skills, training and capacity to develop connections and relationships with students who are experiencing a host of circumstances.

Caring for students in a time of such uncertainty seems critical. However, while there is serious and necessary demand for caring for the students and families, one population that is gravely

being overlooked are the helpers. The educators. Less emphasis is being placed on the wellness and self-care of those who are offering those needed social-emotional supports- those who interact with students, who are shouldering the demands of a changed school environment and altered educational delivery modes, atop of bearing the various social-emotional needs of students, families, etc. Thus, two clear concerns ascend: 1) educators feel ill prepared in providing social-emotional support to students, and 2) educators are shouldering the social-emotional needs of students and others, with little to know training on how to care for themselves or others during this challenging time. Their self-care and mental health must be a priority. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2020) states:

In the same way that students need support to effectively return to school and to be prepared to be ready to process the information they are being taught, teachers cannot be expected to be successful at teaching children without having their mental health needs supported.

Likewise, Doran (2014) notes that “all our work will be better if we are psychologically and physically healthy,” (p. 48). Having mentally healthy, well supported educators is important for the safety, well-being and longevity of educators. Additionally, healthy educators are necessary to build a safe, healthy, and consistent environment for students. Such efforts also further the development of positive school culture, climate, and morale (Bonella et al., 2020), and help educators feel valued and engaged, while drawing from their passion and purpose.

It starts with our educators

Levels of emotional exhaustion, feelings about workload, and job satisfaction impact teachers’ well-being and longevity (Showell & Brown, 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Today’s educators are in a highly demanding and impactful position. While the need for strengthening connections among students and staff is irrefutable, such work must first begin with supporting educators’ social-emotional supports and self-care efforts. For years, those in education have long been masters of “doing more with less”. They have exemplified and personified this saying often with limited time and minimal resources. In essence, educators have become astute at pulling the proverbial “rabbit out of a hat”.

Currently, teachers are being tasked not only with the traditional pre-COVID needs of a classroom, but with new safety protocols, and providing instruction and engagement simultaneously through multiple modes of delivery. Many teachers are taxed with addressing student needs of those in their classroom combined with the synchronized demands of remote learners. Furthermore, today’s teachers are under additional scrutiny where parents are critiquing and analyzing delivery, content, engagement, etc. of hybrid and remote learning opportunities. Each day teachers are putting on a brave face and concurrently serving as teachers, IT support, parents, counselors, and the like. This takes tremendous mental and emotional bandwidth. Today’s school counselors are trained in providing career, academic and social-emotional support. Prior to the pandemic, school counselors in Kansas were often serving one and a half to two times the recommended ratio of students (American School Counselor Association, 2020) on a whole host of issues. Real or perceived, rising pressure is placed upon school counselors in providing interventions and support to a population who is increasingly fraught with elements of fear, isolation, loneliness, and elevated levels of anxiety, depression,

and suicidal ideations (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020). Administrators are attempting to navigate logistics and protocols, where one decision leads to 100 more, and every answer seems imperfect. They often find themselves caught between the demands of health guidelines, district leadership, and community demands and perceptions, while balancing the practical challenges of making education in a pandemic work, while leading and supporting educators within their building.

At the time of this writing, the day-to-day logistics and the social-emotional needs are great. This chronic sustained level of stress becomes tiresome and draining on even the healthiest and resilient of individuals. Educators themselves are currently dealing with all of the multifaceted challenges of the pandemic in addition to navigating new forms of teaching, delivery, and engagement. While teachers, school counselors, and administrators have many skills and strengths to draw from in the direst of circumstances, they are still human and many of the current demands seem unsustainable. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to support the social-emotional needs of our teachers, school counselors, and administrators. Educators' well-being, physical and psychological safety, and mental health must be a priority. For a myriad of reasons, it is clear that emphasis must be placed on tending to the needs of Kansas educators' well-being. While professional development is helpful, the recommended support must be simple, ongoing, self-sustaining, and meaningful. In an effort to maintain educator passion and performance, the following messages around self-care, building social-emotionally competent classrooms and school climates must be considered.

Self-care

First and foremost, educators must participate and practice ongoing self-care. The old adage, "you can't help others if you don't help yourself" holds true. Teachers, school counselors, and administrators have the important role of tending to the academic, social, and emotional demands of many, but that success is predicated on the well-being of the educator. As educators consider their own self-care, four levels of focus must be present.

Four levels of focus: At different phases in your life you may place more emphasis on different levels, but plan to tend to all four areas throughout the week. If components become unbalanced, it makes it more difficult to function at optimal levels, and fatigue and burnout can set in.

Private. Private time is time spent focusing on yourself, or "alone time". It is time spent recharging, reflecting, recalibrating, and enjoying time on your own. This allows the chance to process, prepare, and reengage. For many of us, private time patterns have been altered during the pandemic. You may be experiencing far less private time or far more. Neither extreme is good, and both can impact social-emotional health.

Personal. Personal time is time spent focusing on your closest others. This could be a dear friend, immediate family, and/or a romantic partner. This allows for more intimate, meaningful, trust-filled conversations and experiences.

Social. Social time is time spent interacting with others outside of your closest circle - friends, groups, and organizations. Social gatherings have been impacted by the

pandemic. Being socially connected while remaining socially distant remains an important and necessary balance during the pandemic. Such interactions have recently called for creativity with drive-by celebrations, outdoor events, window visits, virtual meetings, parties and get-togethers.

Professional. Professional time is time focused on a purpose such as work or school. For many people in the education profession, the professional self is occupying a large portion of time and energy.

Currently with the additional demands and strain of COVID-19, educators may be imbalanced in focus. Reviewing use of time is an easy way to recalibrate and intentionally provide self-care in areas of deficit. For most educators, the professional self is currently occupying a lot of time and energy. A weekly check-in on how you're tending to your private, personal, and social selves is important for social-emotional well-being.

Give permission and reminders for self-care

While educators might believe otherwise, it isn't heroic to neglect ourselves for the sake of others. If you are struggling to identify one of these parts of self in your self-care, the authors challenge you to revisit your current demands, or ask others for help. The nature of educators is to be helpful to others; however, this should not come at the expense of one's self. It is true, we cannot pour from an empty cup. Setting reasonable boundaries around professional work is essential. Those boundaries help protect and sustain relationships and help to mitigate burnout. In example, holding a healthy boundary of "I will not do school related work on Saturdays" or "I will not respond to emails after 6 p.m. until the following day" helps one to compartmentalize, refocus, and recharge. In addition to setting reasonable boundaries, self-care comes from applying the tenets of compassion and grace to yourself and to those around you. Compassion is defined as "a deep awareness of and sympathy for another's suffering" and grace is "a polite and thoughtful way of behaving (vocabulary.com, n.d.). We are often our worst critics, and as educators know, there is always more work that can be done. Remember that the most important relationship you have is with yourself.

Classroom connections

Along with taking care of one's self, teachers need to get back to the basics of teaching by focusing on forging and cultivating student relationships. Arguably, it is the personal connections that teachers foster with students that are what ignite and sustain passion, purpose, and learning for students and teachers alike.

Get back to the basics of developing relationships. For many, social-emotional connections are forged not during instructional moments, but during the cursory moments within the day such as visits in the hallway between passing periods, attending extracurricular events of students, quick informal check-ins about interests, downtime within classroom instruction, or seeing one another out within the community. An additional challenge during pandemic instructional delivery is forging new relationships and connections in virtual modes, or modified, sterile, in-person classrooms. Again, finding ways to connect is essential. Be intentional implementing and explaining the rationale these simple and brief activities like morning meetings, check-in

activities, ice breakers, etc. Stating, “I’m spending the first 5 minutes of class to check in with each of you” or “it’s important to me to get to know you better” does not take long, but it goes a long way in developing relationships and building rapport. By developing a classroom environment that supports the social-emotional needs of students, teachers will not only strengthen the social-emotional needs of students, but will concurrently enhance social-emotional well-being for themselves.

Helping the helpers

In addition to intentional self-care, and taking time to develop a safe and supportive classroom environment, administrators must establish a healthy and supportive school culture. In an effort to support staff, administrators need to set the tone for the importance of communication, support, and community, to help teachers, school counselors, and staff feel that they are not alone. COVID-19 can feel isolating. The barriers for effective communication can be perceived as greater, while connections with one another can feel minimal. In addition, the evolving nature of our world via politics, social unrest, and financial uncertainty can further feelings of disconnect and divisiveness as well as produce mounting fear and fatigue. It is important to develop a school environment where reaching out to those within their support groups, such as fellow educators, family, friends, etc. is supported. A culture of connection, community and consistency must be re-established (Kaiser Permanente, 2020). Likewise, staff need to be reminded that they are still dynamic educators. While much change has occurred in the world of education over the last six months, some things have remained constant. Teachers still know how to teach, school counselors still know how to support and advocate, and administrators still know how to lead. Teachers are masters in their content area, skilled in delivering academic instruction, taught how to provide modifications and differentiated instruction, and joined the profession for their love of students and learning. While delivery models may have changed, pedagogy, content knowledge, and one’s passion still remain. As the demands on school counselors and administrators have grown exponentially, the expertise and skill sets of leadership, advocacy, relationship building, and developing climate and culture remain as critical areas of expertise for supporting students, staff, and families. Help educators to recognize that their ability to make an impact is not compromised. Students need support and modeling, and teachers, school counselors, and administrators, with proper self-care, are poised and positioned to offer those necessary supports.

Remember your why

During these unprecedented times, and with unique hurdles to overcome, it is vital that educators remember their why. Why they became an educator. The magical moments when learning clicks, the relationships built with and among students, the genuine moments shared as a community of learners. These reasons and many more exist for educators on a daily basis. While it often takes time for these moments to be actualized and recognized; these opportunities must be held onto and sought. It is these moments that make education unique, that allow the scope of impact to stretch much farther than content, classroom, and daily interactions. This daily work impacts the future of our students and allows us to be a part of their transformation as learners, and global citizens. Remember that we as educators can impact, influence, and do. By maintaining this focus, we facilitate an optimistic stance that can empower in the face of

unparalleled challenges. The role of the educator cannot be understated; their significance is paramount. As Hiam Ginott said,

I've come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it's my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or deescalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized, (1972, p. 15).

With the deluge of decisions educators make on a daily basis, as educators we must remember why we entered this noble profession, remain optimistically empowered, and focus on factors we can control.

Closing

On a typical day, pre-COVID-19, educators are pulled in many directions, making hundreds, if not thousands, of quick decisions. Today those dynamics are heightened with varied and additional competing needs. What has not changed is the essential role of the teacher. The teacher is one of the largest influencers of student successful and learning (Jimerson & Haddock, 2015). As exceptional educators, we are passionate about learning, teaching, and connections that are made as a result. Passion helps frame and drive professional work, but passion alone cannot sustain educators in today's world. Daily decisions we can make and can control are ones that enable our efforts toward resilience and promote self-care. We can only bring our best to our students, families, and everyday interactions if we first focus on making sure we are physically and mentally well, grounded, and socially-emotionally connected. This is not superfluous, it is essential. Good pedagogy posits modeling learning for students. During this time of pandemic, we must model healthy interactions and connectedness, if we don't reach out to one another, and take care of ourselves in the process, we don't stand a chance in supporting our students and families in these same areas.

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