



## **Supporting New Teacher Wellness & Mitigating Burnout: An Exploration of the Self-Care Strategies of New Teachers**

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study centers the lived experiences of 14 new teachers through the collection and analysis of weekly reflection data for the duration of their first year of teaching. Specifically, this study investigates the self-care strategies the new teachers employed to mitigate feelings of burnout during their first year. Findings reveal four primary self-care strategies implemented by the new teachers including drawing on support systems; setting boundaries; engaging in hobbies; and prioritizing physical, emotional, and mental wellness through self-compassion. Recommendations provided include how teacher preparation programs and PK-12 districts can support the self-care of their new teachers. By more fully understanding the demands of the profession and the impact on the wellbeing of its teachers, researchers and educators may be able to identify systemic changes to how we support and retain new teachers.

**Keywords:** new teachers, teacher retention, self-care, teacher wellness

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## Supporting New Teacher Wellness & Mitigating Burnout: An Exploration of the Self-Care Strategies of New Teachers

Research and statistics show that hiring and retaining teachers is a problem. The Learning Policy Institute, which tracks teacher shortages, reported in June 2025 a total of 411,549 positions in the United States that were either unfilled or filled by teachers not fully certified, equating to 1 in 8 national teacher positions. Furthermore, 90% of annual teacher demand is attributed to teacher attrition with dissatisfaction with teaching being one reason teachers are leaving their positions (Learning Policy Institute, 2025). In addition to teacher shortages and teacher attrition, statistics show that there is a decline in enrollment in teacher preparation programs (TPPs) with the number of teachers earning credentials not fulfilling the demand of teachers needed in California (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). In 2002, there were nearly 75,000 teachers enrolled in California State and University of California TPPs, and in 2016, there were around 22,000 teachers enrolled (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). The National Commission on Teaching America's Future (NCTAF) identified the associated high cost of teacher turnover, including money to recruit and train new teachers (NTs) as well as the negative impact on student learning (Barnes et al., 2007).

Recognizing that teacher attrition is an area of concern, researchers continue to explore causes of teacher attrition, reporting low levels of job satisfaction as one reason for teachers leaving within the first five years (Cobb, 2022; Gu & Day, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2016; Matthews, 2022). A recent study conducted by Hart Research Associates on behalf of the California Teachers Association and the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools identified several factors as contributors of the teacher retention crisis in California (Matthews, 2022). Many of these identified factors not only are responsible for teacher attrition in California, but also nationally, and include burnout, political attacks on teachers, workload, staff shortages, low salary, lack of respect from parents, no work-home life balance, among others (Bowles & Arnup, 2016; Mansfield et al., 2016; Matthews, 2022). We view teacher attrition as a human capital issue – one that requires careful study of the new teacher experience to better understand the underlying causes.

We believe that an important first step in addressing the underlying causes of new teacher attrition is to continue to investigate the experiences of a NT, understanding deeply the successes and challenges of the first few years from the perspective of NTs themselves. Inspired by *Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation* (Safir & Dugan, 2021), we designed the research study described in this article to capture “qualitative and experiential data that emerges at eye level” (p. 2) and is “a next-generation paradigm that roots equity, pedagogy, and school transformation in what matters most: human experience” (p. 12).

Our research centers the NTs' lived experiences through our collection of weekly reflection data for the duration of the first year of teaching for 14 of our secondary TPP graduates. Specifically, we wanted to learn more about the self-care strategies NTs employed to mitigate feelings of burnout their first year. We centered self-care strategies in this work for we posit that by more fully understanding the demands of the profession and the impact on the wellbeing of its teachers, researchers and educators can identify systemic changes to how we support and retain NTs.

Our article begins with a theoretical framework and literature review on self-care broadly and teacher self-care specifically, its importance, and its relationship to job satisfaction and burnout. We then describe our research design and yearlong data collection and analysis. In the findings section, we identify four primary self-care strategies (support systems; setting boundaries; hobbies; and physical, emotional, and mental wellness through self-compassion) that the 14 NTs employed

throughout their first year. We conclude with implications for TPPs and PK-12 districts and provide suggestions on what supporting the self-care of NTs might look like.

## **Theoretical Foundations & Literature Review**

### **Theories & Definitions of Self-Care**

Often theories of self-care are proposed and explored in professions where caring for others is at the center of their work (e.g., social work, healthcare, education) because there often is an associated feeling of stress and burnout of caregivers (Bressi & Vaden, 2017; DeMarchis et al., 2022). As more attention is paid to self-care and its role in individual wellness and in mitigating stress and burnout, theories of self-care may be helpful in informing self-care practices and supports.

In the healthcare profession, Orem's self-care theory posits that individuals have agency to maintain health and wellness, and when a self-care deficit occurs, healthcare professionals intervene and support individuals by educating them on self-care practices so that they can regain autonomy. Orem defines self-care "as the practice of activities that individuals initiate and develop within specific time frames, and whose objectives are to maintain life and personal well-being" (quoted in Queirós et al., 2014, p. 159).

As seen in Orem's definition and echoed by the World Health Organization (2009), self-care includes deliberate action. Scholars DeFriese et al. (1982) explain that self-care involves balanced tactics, strategies, and decisions that prioritize physical and mental health. Similarly, Richard and Shea (2011) explain that "self-care involves both the ability to care for oneself and the performance of activities necessary to achieve, maintain, or promote optimal health" (p. 256). Several conceptualizations of self-care position self-care as proactive/preventative action (Levin & Idler, 1983) rather than self-care as a reactionary response to stressors (Kearney & Weininger, 2011). Bressi and Vaden (2017) explain that self-care "is presumed to be care that is by the self and for the self" (p. 34).

In addition to these theories and definitions of self-care from the healthcare and social work professions, Noddings (2005) from the field of education puts forth the theory of "ethic of care." Although Noddings' ethic of care focuses on the care teachers provide to PK-12 students, we see connections between ethic of care and self-care, specifically, teachers caring for themselves to achieve longevity in the field. Noddings (2005) states, "An ethic of care embodies a relational view of caring; that is, when I speak of caring, my emphasis is on the relation containing carer and cared-for" (p. 14). Noddings elaborates on her ethic of care and identifies six "lives" related to the self: (a) physical life, (b) spiritual life, (c) occupational life, (d) recreational life, (e) emotional life, and (f) intellectual life. These "lives" provide nuance to Orem's definition of self-care by unpacking aspects of life – both professional and personal – where self-care strategies may be directed.

What these theories and definitions of self-care have in common is that the individual who employs self-care has agency over when and how self-care is implemented. These theories of self-care also posit that self-care is deliberate and include an awareness of self and strategic decision making to ensure that the self-care has a positive effect on wellbeing. Where these conceptualizations of self-care differ is the extent to which the focus of self-care is for the individual or someone being cared for (whether a patient, PK-12 student, client, etc.).

### **Self-Care as an Individual vs. Institutional Responsibility**

Much has been said about the importance of self-care in high-stress professions (e.g., healthcare, social work, education), with an attention to self-care possibly reducing employee absenteeism and chronic fatigue (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014) and leading to the prevention of

burnout in high-stress professions (Barnett et al., 2007). Research shows, however, that self-care is often viewed as an individual responsibility (Callahan & Watkins, 2018) with little attention paid in formal professional training programs. Mills (2021) explains, “Traditionally, self-care has not featured in education curricula for health professionals in training, so it is perhaps not surprising then that some clinicians may find it challenging to balance care of others with care for self” (p. 184).

What happens when self-care is not a priority in the training of care professionals? Mills (2021) explains, “Just like patients, healthcare professionals are people first and foremost; ultimately, any deficit in-care diminishes the capacity of healthcare professionals to bear witness to and relieve the suffering of patients and their families” (p. 184). Similarly in the field of social work, consistent attention to self-care leads to quality care for clients (Peterson, 2016). In the field of teaching, “Prolonged teacher stress negatively correlates with job satisfaction and positively correlates with intending to leave the teaching profession” (Agyapong et al., 2022, Conclusions section, para 2).

### **Teacher Burnout & Self-Care Practices**

Examining job satisfaction and burnout specific to the education profession, research focuses on the self-care practices and wellness of teachers, with some studies examining pre-service teacher self-care when enrolled in a TPP (Lemon, 2021; Miller & Flint-Stripp, 2019; Thomas & Howell, 2021) and other studies investigating the self-care strategies of in-service teachers (Brasfield et al., 2019), including beginning teachers (Watson et al., 2010). Review of these studies reveals the relationship among teacher stress and burnout and self-care practices as well as the limited attention that self-care receives when preparing future teachers and supporting practicing teachers.

Exploring the relationship among teacher stress, burnout, and self-care, Miller and Flint-Stripp (2019) identified that secondary trauma – which is a part of the profession of teaching – can lead to diminished teacher self-care, with approximately half of the pre-service teachers in their study identifying that they failed at self-care. Also examining the self-care practices of pre-service teachers, Thomas and Howell (2021) remarked on how high the pre-service teachers’ burnout scores were even though they had not started teaching yet. Watson et al. (2010), researching whether there was a relationship among stress and job satisfaction, found that perceived stress was a predictor of job satisfaction but that beginning teachers’ level of holistic wellness also was a predictor of job satisfaction. Studies like these illustrate a need to address stress and burnout of pre-service teachers and NTs, looking to self-care as a potential way to mitigate burnout associated with the job.

Previous research has shown that the development of self-care strategies can help teachers manage the demands of the profession and mitigate the impact of secondary trauma (Jennings et al., 2011) and burnout (Brasfield et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2018; Klingbeil & Renshaw, 2018; Pascual et al., 2003). Watson et al. (2010) posit, “When teachers lack the coping skills to handle these stressors, or when adequate institutional support is not in place, attrition becomes more likely” (p. 33). Similarly, Lemon (2021) argues, “If attention hasn’t been paid to these areas [well-being and self-care routines], stress levels, exhaustion, physical and mental illness can often be exhibited” (p. 933).

Research also shows that TPPs and PK-12 districts often provide little support to teachers in identifying, developing, and implementing self-care strategies that may have a positive effect on their job satisfaction; therefore, these strategies are often underdeveloped (Lemon, 2021; Mansfield et al., 2016; Sutton, 2007). The structure of schools themselves creates barriers to implementing self-care, for teachers may be aware of self-care strategies that can help, “but many teachers...can barely find time to use the bathroom or get a breath of fresh air” (Benson, 2017, p. 3). Benson (2017) argues that the field of education needs to critically reflect on the expectations it has for its teachers:

“Our baseline expectation for teachers to make time and space on their own to find support and develop coping mechanics is troubling” (p. 3). Agyappon et al. (2022) urge schools to prioritize teachers’ wellbeing by promoting interventions that reduce burnout, anxiety, and depression.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research was used for the mode of inquiry for this research study. The main goal of qualitative research is to examine a specific topic in its context, looking to better understand the behavior of participants from their point of view (Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002). Not seeking to make broad generalizations across contexts, qualitative research includes rich descriptions of people to achieve a complex understanding of what happens in this context and the process of participants' meaning making (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Validation processes included using multiple forms of data for purposes of triangulation (Green et al., 2002) and member checking (Emerson et al., 1995) during semi-structured interviews.

### **Research Context & Participants**

This yearlong qualitative research study investigated the first-year teaching experiences of spring 2022 graduates of a one-year post baccalaureate secondary education credential program in the western United States. When enrolled in the TPP, the pre-service teachers completed four quarters of coursework and a yearlong clinical practice experience grounded in coteaching. In September 2023, all secondary education graduates who were teaching full-time as a first-year teacher during the 22/23 academic year were invited to participate in this research study.

Twenty-one NTs expressed interest in participating in the research study and were accepted into the study. The 21 participants consisted of four agriculture, six English, two mathematics, one social studies, and eight science teachers. Research participants received three stipends for participating in the study, distributed in December, March, and June. They also received a stipend for participating in two semi-structured interviews in January and May/June (15 new teachers out of the 21 participated in the two interviews).

For the purpose of this article, we share findings from the weekly reflections and interviews of 14 of the 21 NTs. For this analysis, we chose to focus on the NTs that had a complete data set – defined as having completed the majority of weekly reflections (90% or more equating to no more than two missing reflections for the entire academic year) and having been interviewed on two occasions. This selection criteria allowed us to capture longitudinal and experiential data, crucial for a qualitative study. One of the 15 NTs was excluded from this analysis because she was enrolled in the same graduate program as Meghan and Nicole (co-authors of this article), and we thought it was a potential conflict of interest to have her data analyzed by her peers/classmates. Table 1 provides self-reported demographic information from each of the research participants.

**Table 1***Demographics and School Assignments of Research Participants*

<b>NT<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Subject(s) Taught</b>	<b>Grade(s) Taught</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Do You Identify as a Teacher of Color?</b>
Leah	Public High School	Agriculture	9-11	22	Female	No
Matthew	Private Middle & High School	Agriculture	7-12	23	Male	Yes
Abigail	Public High School	Agriculture	9-10	23	Female	No
Melissa	Public Middle School	English Language Development & Writing Electives	6-8	23	Female	No
Sam	Public High School	English Language Arts	9 & 12	37	Female	No
Monica	Public High School	English Language Arts	10	23	Female	Yes
Martha	Public High School	English Language Arts	9	27	Female	Yes
Harper	Public Middle School	Mathematics	7 & 8	22	Female	No
Heidi	Public High School	Mathematics	10 & 11	24	Female	No
Daphne	Public High School	Physics, Chemistry, Human Anatomy	10-12	23	Female	No
Lauren	Charter Middle School	Science	6	23	Female	No
Margaret	Public Middle School	Science	6 & 8	25	Female	No
Lexie	Public Middle School	Science & English Language Development	7 & 8	22	Female	No
Helen	College Prep Middle School	History	8	22	Female	No

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms  
*Current Issues in Education*, 27(2)

## Research Questions

Our research questions include the following:

- What self-care strategies did the NTs employ?
- How did these self-care strategies help to decrease NTs' feelings of stress and burnout?

## Data Collection

The primary data source was an open-ended weekly reflection. At the conclusion of each week of teaching, the NTs completed a weekly reflection. The reflection contained both open-ended questions (e.g., What was your most memorable moment this week?) and a Likert-scale question (e.g., statement about work-home life balance). The first reflection was collected in mid-September and the final reflection was collected in mid-June, totaling approximately 35 weekly reflections for each of the NTs. Some NTs had one or two fewer reflections if their school year ended earlier than other districts or if they had missed a reflection.

There was no formal intervention involved in this study. At the end of each week, the faculty lead (Megan, a co-author of this article) sent a reminder email to participants to complete the online reflection. Included in this reminder email was a brief description of "This Week's Resource" and a link to a resource. Often this resource connected to a challenge that a NT may have been facing the previous week, but other times, it was just a resource that the faculty lead thought might be useful. The faculty lead also reached out with an individualized email for any NT who shared a challenge that was a cause for concern. Although this contact with the NTs may have impacted the data collected, the research team felt it was important to support the teachers in this way.

Semi-structured interviews were the second primary data source. The NTs were interviewed in January (when they returned from their district's winter break) and in May/June. The January interview contained questions pertaining to the overall experience of the first year of teaching including how supported they felt by their school community, their experience in their induction program, their interactions with families, why they chose to participate in the research study, and three adjectives to describe their experience so far as a first-year teacher. The May/June interview contained questions pertaining to emotions they experienced during their first year of teaching, self-care strategies they utilized during their first year, their professional plans for the following academic year and whether they were retained, and thoughts on how the TPP had prepared them for their first year and how the TPP could better prepare future teachers. Participant-specific interview questions were also included for the purpose of member checking (Emerson et al., 1995).

## Data Analysis

Our research team composition was diverse, consisting of two graduate students teaching at the elementary level (Meghan & Nicole), one TPP faculty member (Megan) who taught within the secondary TPP and the master's in curriculum and instruction program, and a grants manager (Sarah). Megan and Sarah both had previous experience researching and supporting NTs. Data collection and analysis were ongoing throughout the academic year of the study, and below we describe what analysis looked like for both the qualitative and quantitative data.

## Qualitative Data

To analyze the qualitative data for the open-ended responses in the reflections that the NTs completed each week, the research team engaged in first and second cycle coding, using analytic

memoing and synthesis memos to inform additional data collection and analysis (Miles et al., 2014). First cycle coding included weekly reading of each submitted reflection and open coding. The TPP faculty member (Megan) read and coded reflections for all participants, while each remaining member of the research team read and coded a subset of the reflections. During this analysis phase, the team met monthly to discuss reflections, examine the open coding, and begin to co-develop a codebook that would be used for second cycle coding.

After engaging in first cycle coding, the research team conducted a purposive second cycle coding, coding specifically for self-care. For this analysis, the research team co-created a codebook aligned with the research questions on self-care and used Noddings' (2005) six categories of self-care (e.g., physical life, recreational life, etc.) to inform our secondary codes. The codebook development was iterative, and revisions were made as reflections were coded for the focus on self-care and new codes emerged beyond Noddings' six categories of self-care. A primary code was self-care, and secondary codes identified the domain of the self-care strategy itself (e.g., physical wellness, emotional and mental wellness, hobbies, support systems). For self-care, tertiary codes included the type of self-care practice under the broader secondary code (e.g., for the secondary code of *physical wellness*, *exercise* was a specific practice within this larger code and was coded as a tertiary code). Table 2 provides an excerpt from the codebook including the identification of Noddings' (2005) categories of self-care for each secondary code and an example of each code provided in the final column.

**Table 2***Self-Care Codebook: Secondary & Tertiary Codes with Examples*

<b>Alignment with Noddings' Six Categories of Self-Care</b>	<b>Secondary Code</b>	<b>Tertiary Code</b>	<b>Data Example</b>
Physical Life	Physical Wellness	Exercise, rest	"One thing I did for self-care this week is go to bed at 7 pm on Thursday night to prepare to come to school for the full day on Friday."
Emotional Life Spiritual Life	Emotional & Mental Wellness	Therapy, meditation	"I took Monday off as a personal mental health day because last week was so stressful."
Recreational Life Intellectual Life	Hobbies/Interests	Baking, cooking, gardening, music	"Stuck to my routines and made time for things I enjoy, like playing my video game, reading, writing, working out, etc."
Relational View of Caring	Support Systems	Spending time with partner, friend, family, colleague	"I went wine-tasting with my coworkers and my dog. It was a beautiful evening. I go to spend quality time with other teachers who I would now consider friends. It feels good to know I belong here!"
Occupational Life	Setting Boundaries	Not working past 4pm, not working on weekend day	"I managed to practice good work-life balance by not bringing prep home with me most days."
N/A	Practical	Cleaning, meal planning, organizing	"This week I went to get much-needed maintenance done on my car. I have been putting off an oil change and tire balancing and rotation for a while now since I simply could not fit it into my schedule."
N/A	Life Events/Celebrations	Wedding, college homecoming, holiday	"I went to a [holiday light show.] They had an early event for vendors (my boyfriend bakes bread for them)."

When coding the reflections, Meghan, Nicole, and Megan were assigned to the same NT, with each team member coding approximately three months of that NT's experience. In addition, 15% of all data were double coded, and inter-rater reliability was above 85%, calculated by determining simple agreement – the number of agreements divided by the total number of coding decisions (Saldaña, 2016). Any coding disagreements were discussed and resolved by the research

team. Agreed-upon codes were then inputted into a spreadsheet for quantification, and this frequency data was then examined for patterns and trends for individual NTs and across NTs rather than to attain statistical significance.

In addition to first and second cycle coding, Megan engaged in analytic memoing, consisting of “brief or extended narrative that documents the researcher’s reflections and thinking processes about the data” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 95). Given that data collection and analysis were concurrent, the analytic memos allowed the research team to “collect new data to fill in gaps” and to “test new hypotheses that emerged[ed] during analysis” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 70). For example, a few participant-specific questions were posed during the May/June interview that were grounded in the research team’s reading of their reflections. This also provided an opportunity for member checking (Emerson et al., 1995) with the research team bringing preliminary findings to interviewees to validate the accuracy of interpretations.

The research team also wrote a synthesis memo for each month of the NT’s weekly reflections for the months they were assigned to code. This synthesis memo included the following prompts to guide the memo writing so that it aligned directly with the research questions:

- What, if any, patterns are you noticing related to self-care strategies?
- What new insight did you gain about self-care by reading this month’s reflections? Are there any changes in this data based on your previous synthesis of other months?
- Copy and paste compelling quotes from this month’s reflections related to self-care
- Identify any notable primary, secondary, or tertiary code counts

For the interview data, we compiled the responses to the interview question pertaining directly to self-care. This question included the following:

- Reflecting on your first year of teaching, what self-care strategy was most helpful to supporting your overall wellness and/or avoiding teacher burnout?

Data analysis for the interview data included coding for general themes across the 14 NTs interviewed.

### ***Quantitative Data***

When the focus on self-care emerged from our first cycle coding of the qualitative data, we decided to analyze the Likert-scale question pertaining to work-home life balance reported in the weekly reflection: To what extent were you able to balance work- and home-life responsibilities? NTs were asked to provide a rating on a scale from 1-5, with 1 equaling not at all and 5 equaling very well. Weekly responses to this question were tabulated for all 14 NTs across the 35 weeks and grouped according to rating. For analysis and reporting, we grouped scores of 1 and 2 as a low rating, a score of 3 as a neutral rating, and scores of 4 and 5 as a high rating. Grouping the NT responses in this way highlighted a few trends for the whole group.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study pertains to the quantitative data analysis and the small sample size. To mitigate this limitation, quantitative data was used to reveal trends and patterns and provide

context to the qualitative data rather than to attain statistical significance. Another limitation of this study is the reliance on self-reported data.

## Findings

In the sections that follow, we begin by presenting the quantitative data from the weekly reflections, providing an overview of the NTs' self-reported data on how well they were able to balance work-home life responsibilities. We then present the qualitative data from the weekly reflections specific to self-care strategies implemented, organizing these data into the four primary and most beneficial self-care strategies employed by the NTs.

### Work-Home Life Balance

Data collected on the NTs' work-home life balance were tabulated for all 14 NTs across the 35 weeks (displayed in Figures 1-3) and grouped according to rating. Figures 1-3 include only the data from the weekly reflections submitted. On average, there were one or two reflections missing in any given week with most weeks having all 14 reflections submitted.

As seen in Table 3, the majority of weeks NTs reported a score of 4 or 5 for their ability to balance work- and home-life responsibilities. However, 21% of the time they reported a 1 or a 2 for work-home life balance. In weeks when NTs reported a 1 or 2 for work-home life balance, their reflections also included narrative responses to the question "Name one thing you did this week for self-care" that affirmed a lack of self-care that week. For example, one participant explained, "I honestly have not done much self-care this week." This alignment between self-care narratives to work-home life balance self-reported ratings occurred 22% of the time when scores were 1 or 2, representative of 12 of the 14 NTs. When scores for work-home life balance were a 5, there was never a corresponding comment in that reflection that denoted a lack of self-care for any of the NTs.

**Table 3**

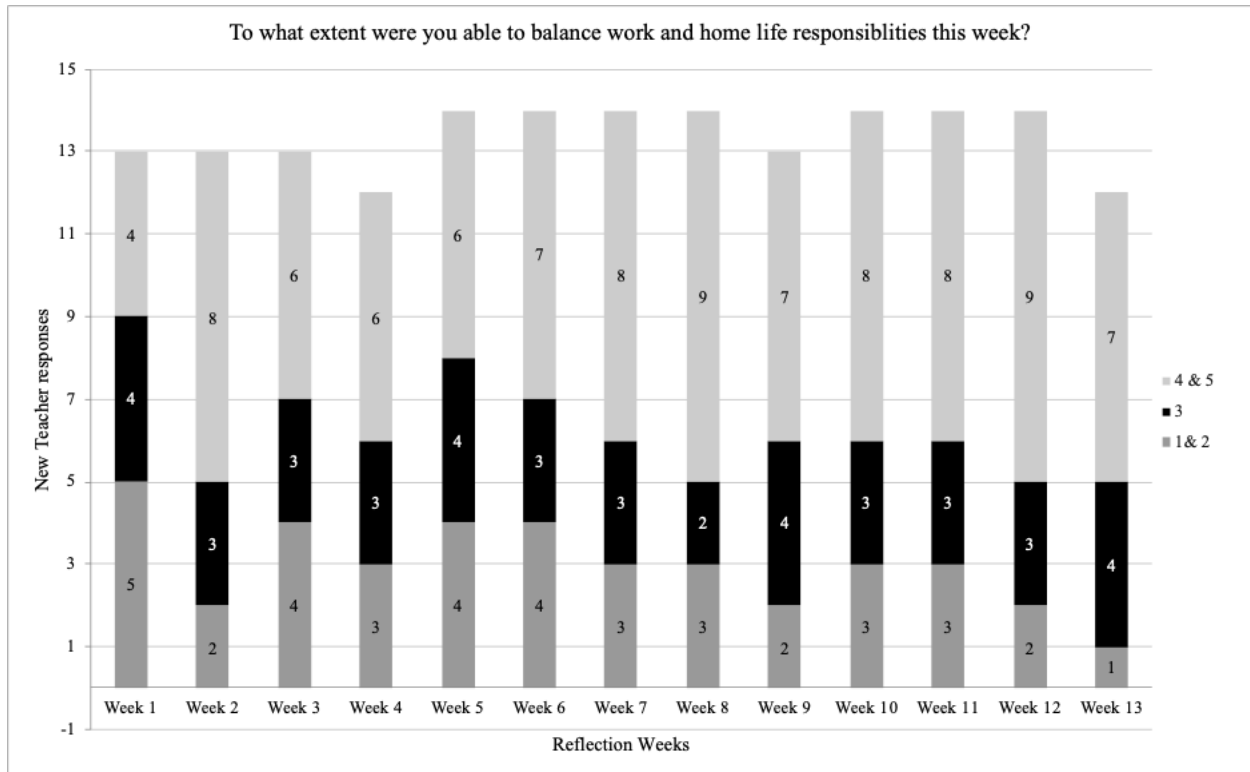
*Distribution of New Teacher Ratings for Work-Home Life Balance*

<b>To what extent were you able to balance work- and home-life responsibilities this week?</b> (Scale: 1-5, where 1= not at all, 5= very well)					
Rating	1 (not at all)	2	3	4	5 (very well)
Number of Reflections	24	71	103	156	98
Percentage of Total Reflections	5.3%	15.7%	22.8%	34.5%	21.7%
Combined Percentage	21%		22.8%	56.2%	

Figures 1-3 depict what the work-home life balance looked like across all 35 weeks of the study. The data show variation in managing the workload across the 14 NTs within weeks, across weeks, and across quarters of the academic year. The data also reveal some weeks in the academic year when a similar pattern in work-home life balance was reported, perhaps showing NTs establishing a rhythm with managing the workload (e.g., Weeks 33-35). The data also show certain

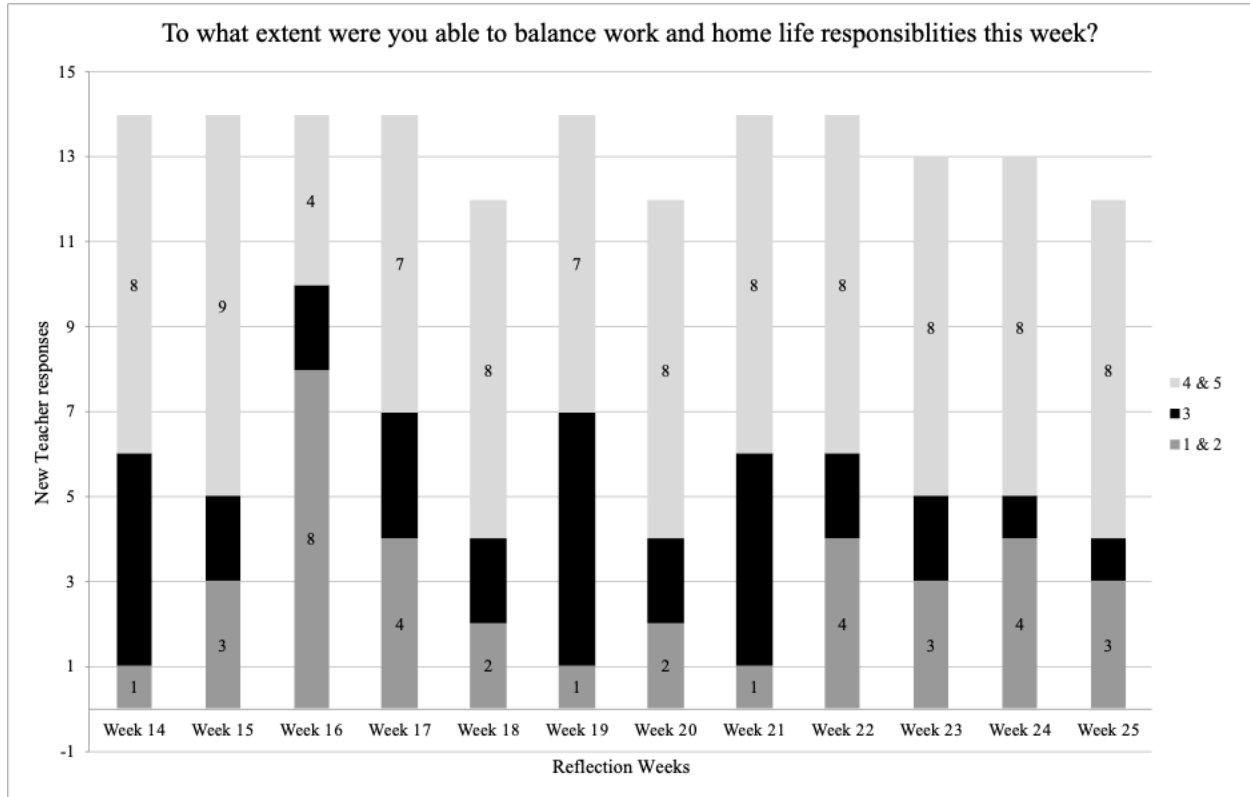
weeks being more challenging than others in establishing a work-home life balance; for example, Week 16 saw 8 NTs reporting a rating of 1 or 2, the highest number of 1s/2s across the 35 weeks. Week 16 corresponded to a week when many NTs commented on the grading load.

**Figure 1**  
*New Teacher Ratings for Work-Home Life Balance: Week 1-Week 13 (Winter Break)*



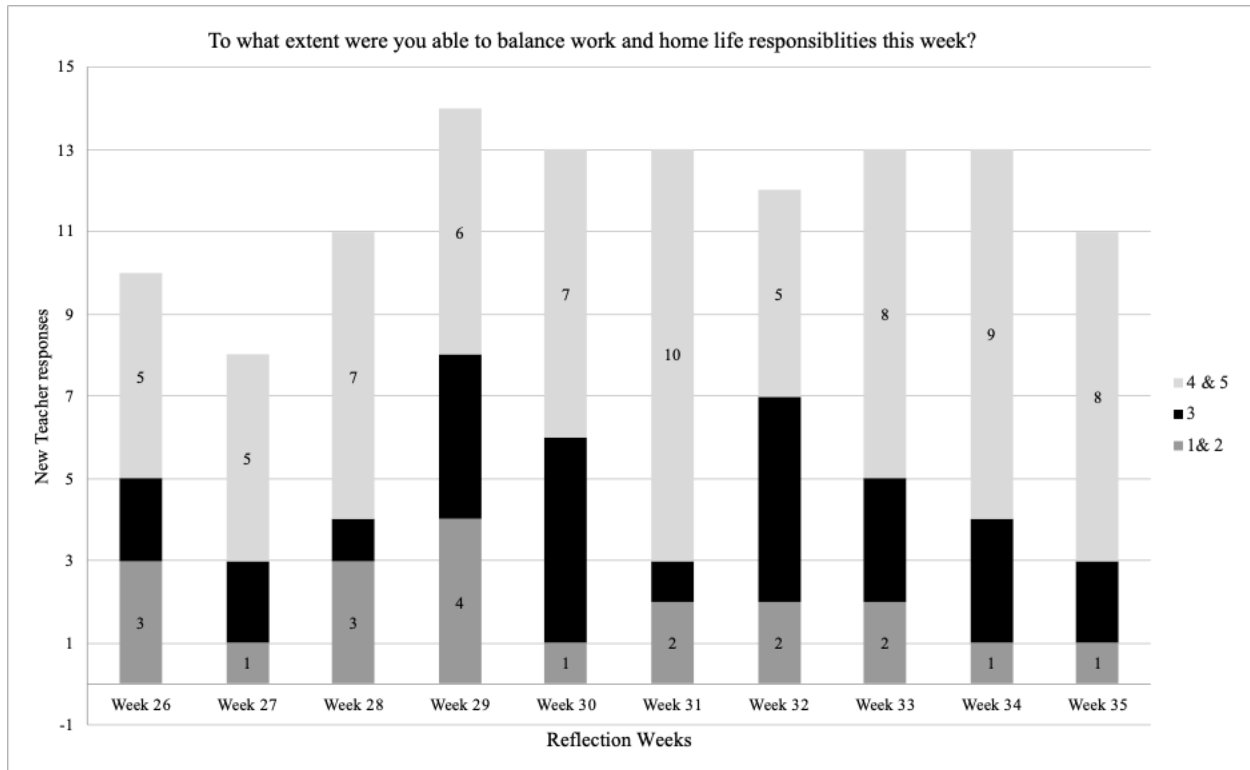
**Figure 2**

*New Teacher Ratings for Work-Home Life Balance: Week 14-Week 25 (Spring Break)*



**Figure 3**

*New Teacher Ratings for Work-Home Life Balance: Week 26-Week 35 (End of Academic Year)*



### Self-Care Strategies

In coding the weekly reflections and interview data of the NTs, a variety of self-care strategies were employed throughout the year. In the sections that follow, we identify the four most frequently occurring self-care strategies and those that the NTs thought were most helpful in their first year: Support systems; setting boundaries; hobbies; and physical, emotional, and mental wellness. For each of these strategies, we provide illustrative quotes from the NTs in which they reveal how these strategies positively impacted their feelings of burnout.

#### *Support Systems*

When looking at the weekly reflections of the NTs, it is apparent that having a support system of friends, family, and colleagues was crucial in helping these NTs decrease feelings of stress and burnout. In some instances, having others to spend time with would simply provide the NTs with joyful and stress-reducing experiences. For example, when asked what she did for self-care during the seventh week of the study Monica answered, “This week for self-care I had friends over on Saturday night. It was amazing getting to see everyone and to host such a wonderful event.”

For some NTs, having people to discuss and converse about their teaching experiences was important. For example, Margaret stated during her second interview, “I needed to lean on my loved ones a lot more...I also needed a lot of, ‘Let me talk to you about this.’”

For other NTs, having a support system of others who could relate to their experiences provided comfort and reduced feelings of stress. For example, Leah shared in her second interview the importance of having a support system of other NTs:

I have three people – or two people – that graduated [from] the credential program with me....About once a week we would get together and have dinner. And it was kind of nice to see that they were going through the same kind of stuff I was going through. It wasn't just me on my islands....And that was just a really nice way to kind of debrief from the week but also validate what was happening.

The NTs also recognized early on in the first year how important a support system would be. For example, Lauren during the second week of the study when asked what she did for self-care responded, “Lots of talking with friends and parents over Facetime. This helped me feel close to people and remind myself that I am surrounded by love and support.” Having a social system outside of work became especially important for Lauren’s mental health as she made the decision to move during the school year. In the second round of interviews when asked about the most important self-care strategies she used throughout the year Lauren stated:

So I moved...and it’s made probably the biggest difference in my emotional wellbeing, because I’ve made friends. So that means I get to hang out with people my age at the end of each day...and I don’t have to go home and wallow in something that I said to a student that I wish I hadn’t said, and I could just go and hang out with my friends. There are things happening on the weekends, so I don’t feel isolated and trapped. I can go out to a coffee shop; I can go to the library. That’s made the biggest difference in my emotional health...being able to have an in-person support system.

### ***Setting Boundaries***

Setting boundaries with the intention of achieving work-home life balance was an important strategy for many NTs to decrease feelings of stress and burnout. Harper quickly realized how important this would be for her. During the second week of the study when asked about what she did for self-care she answered, “I went to bed early and did not take schoolwork home! Setting boundaries at work has been really good for recharge and mental health.” During the fifteenth week she similarly answered, “I left at contract time every day! The best thing I can do for self-care!” Harper’s answers were similar to this for most weeks. Similar to Harper, when asked what was the most important self-care strategy used throughout the year Daphne stated, “My best self-care strategy is I do not bring any of my work home with me for the weekend...”

Many NTs realized how easy it was to take work home and wanted to prevent this to make time for personal interests outside of work. When asked in her second interview about her most important self-care strategy used throughout the year Lauren shared:

...I don’t work past 4:00 o’clock. And I don’t work over the weekends....That has made a huge difference because I could work forever....But if I don’t force myself to stop, then I

don't get to do things that make me happy, like hanging out with friends, or writing, or drawing, or reading or any of those things.

### ***Hobbies***

**Having a Third Place.** Hobbies and other passions or obligations outside of teaching duties provided many NTs with a third place that allowed them to get their mind off of the pressures and stress of their teaching duties. For Helen this third space was found in various places and activities. When asked about which self-care strategies were most helpful throughout the year in her second interview she explained:

I also think I really would try to leave my house when I got home – dinner with people, working out. Anything that it wasn't just going to work, going to my house type of routine that I was getting into. I feel like those three things were really important for me....people always talk about the third place and that we're losing that now. It's now being replaced by our phones. I'm trying to actually have a third place.

For Monica coaching softball and reading provided a third space where she could 'escape,' as she described in her second interview:

I don't know if it's some sort of escapism or it's just relaxing, but I've been really into reading, and I would absolutely count that as self-care without a doubt. I would also count coaching softball as self-care...and there's no better feeling than being on the field with the sun out, with girls that want to be there.

Lauren found a third space through writing as she stated during her second interview:

I wrote a lot. I love writing fiction and am currently working on a novel. This has become my happy place, more so now than ever before. It really gets me out of my head because I'm forced to really focus in order to produce writing that I am proud of. It also gives me a sense of accomplishment that being a teacher sometimes doesn't give me if I have a particularly rough day/week.

**Self-Care in the Workplace.** In some instances, stress and burnout were reduced through the NTs' hobbies happening *within* the workplace. Matthew, an agriculture teacher and Future Farmers of America (FFA) program lead, found a third space and self-care strategy he could utilize while at work. In his second interview when asked what self-care strategy was most helpful throughout the year he explained:

...whenever I did find myself needing a break, I would go out to the farm and I would just spend time taking care of the plants and making improvements....It's my passion....When I did notice myself needing a break from staring at a computer and grading..., I would just go out to the farm and I would tell my principal, 'Hey, I'm going to go out to the farm. If you

need me, I'll be there.' And she loved when I went out there because she knew that I'd come back refreshed being out there.

Heidi also found ways to implement self-care in her workspace by bringing craft projects to work. In her second interview she stated:

I started bringing craft projects to work... The things I was doing just brought me joy, rather than just sitting there at lunch thinking about, 'Oh, what do I have to teach after lunch?' That helped me kind of reset so I didn't get so exhausted throughout the day.

During the tenth week of the study, Monica practiced self-care in the workplace through an in-class activity. In her weekly reflection when asked what she did for self-care that week she stated, "One thing I did was watch a movie in my classes on Friday. The students were checked out, and I was too. We were able to watch the 60's version of *Lord of the Flies* and my students really enjoyed it."

### ***Physical, Emotional, & Mental Health Wellness Through Self-Compassion***

Showing self-compassion and giving oneself grace when not meeting personal standards or high expectations was an important self-care strategy for some NTs to decrease feelings of stress and burnout and retain job satisfaction. During the seventh week of the study when asked about what he did for self-care Matthew responded, "...I didn't finish my grading for the week, and that is okay. I am realizing it is okay to show yourself grace. I can catch up next week after a restful weekend." Similarly, Lexie shared during her second interview: "But I think in terms of self-care practices, I really just had to give myself grace and be like, 'It's okay if I mess up' ...just giving myself grace of like, 'Oh, that lesson did not go well. Okay, not the end of the world, just try again tomorrow.'"

For Lauren, she was able to show herself some self-compassion by putting less pressure on herself when creating lessons. She shared this during the thirteenth week of the study when asked about what she did for self-care and stated, "Enjoyed 'Christmassy' things after school (making hot chocolate, watching a Christmas movie, etc.) and put less pressure on myself to create awesome lessons. My lessons this week were pretty simple, but I think that was the best thing I could have done."

## **Discussion & Implications**

The data reveal that the NTs used a variety of self-care strategies to reduce stress and burnout and prioritize their personal/emotional needs. One such self-care strategy came from having a support system of friends, family, and colleagues, which was crucial not only in helping the NTs decrease feelings of stress and burnout but also in providing moments of joy and connection. Lemon (2021) explains, "Although self-care is a personal responsibility, it is also relational" (p. 946), which we see in the experiences of the 14 NTs and in Noddings' (2005) ethic of care. NTs expressed the importance of having people to do fun activities with and to converse with about their workplace experiences. Leah was fortunate to have managed on her own to keep in touch with other NTs from her TPP and benefitted from this. However, other NTs, such as Lauren, struggled trying to build their own in-person support system while simultaneously managing the workload of a first-year teacher.

Setting boundaries was another important self-care strategy utilized by the NTs to protect their *physical, emotional, and recreational lives* (Noddings, 2005). In this self-care strategy of setting boundaries, NTs revealed the deliberate action of self-care (World Health Organization,

2009) and the importance of the *occupational life* (Noddings, 2005). Furthermore, this self-care strategy of setting boundaries highlights the interwovenness of Noddings' six categories of care; the NTs' self-care strategy grounded in the *occupational life* also supported their *physical, emotional, and recreational* lives. Although setting boundaries proved useful, the NTs shared that this was difficult to achieve for many faced ongoing challenges of finding time for self-care due to their overwhelming workload, supporting previous findings from Miller and Flint-Stripp (2019) and Navy et al. (2024).

Finally, many of the NTs found success in reducing stress and burnout by having a third space where they could get their mind off of work stressors and re-energize, aligning with Noddings' (2005) *recreational life* and the importance of "creating anew, refreshing" (p. 120). For Matthew and Heidi, they found this third space within their school site, showing that self-care can happen in the workplace. NTs like Matthew and Heidi also showed that they had agency over their self-care practices (Queirós et al., 2014) and created space for self-care even if their school site did not.

### **Implications for TPPs & Induction Programs**

It is vital that TPPs and induction programs assist their NTs in creating and maintaining a support system. TPPs might consider finding ways to keep their graduates connected, such as through digital platforms where they can collaborate (Olsen, 2024), make plans to meet up, and support one another by sharing and listening to each other's experiences (Flushman et al., 2021). Induction programs might establish a support committee for NTs with veteran teachers serving as members. Members of this committee could support NTs in ways that extend beyond the traditional roles of an induction mentor, such as helping to decorate and organize the NT's classroom space, being immediately available to provide advice when challenging situations arise, sharing information about school culture and events, and collaborating with the NT to support them as they navigate milestones during their first year (e.g., report cards, conferences, school events). An additional goal of the committee could be to give advice and reassurance to NTs that things are not always going to be perfect and showing that self-compassion/grace is essential.

In addition to focusing on sense of belonging and support systems for NTs, TPPs and induction programs could intentionally embed self-care frameworks into their programs. This focus on self-care could begin in the curriculum of a TPP program where self-care and social and emotional wellbeing are emphasized and explored through online modules and texts, discussions, and application activities. This focus on self-care could then extend into induction programs supporting NTs to identify and develop effective self-care strategies, such as the ones found useful by the NTs in this study. Researchers and educators have advocated for establishing teacher wellness programs (Brasfield et al., 2019) as one way to positively impact teacher burnout. TPPs and induction programs establishing a wellness program communicates that self-care includes proactive/preventative action (Levin & Idler, 1983). These wellness programs could look like well-being days built into the work schedule (Navy et al., 2024) and school psychologists with expertise in cognitive behavioral therapy facilitating sessions where the NTs learn strategies that help them to navigate the emotional toll that comes along with teaching.

TPPs and induction programs could also carefully consider how they are supporting NTs to set goals and engage in professional reflection, possibly utilizing a weekly reflection survey similar to the one in this study. By asking NTs what they did for self-care each week, NTs are required to reflect on how they are taking care of themselves, which they may not take the time to think about on their own. The recommendation to embed reflection on self-care echoes the suggestions of Navy

et al. (2024) who underscore that “...teachers need to self-assess the alignment of their own self-care needs and practices” (p. 19).

### **Implications for Institutional Responsibility**

Like many other service-oriented professionals where care is at the center of their work (Bressi & Vaden, 2017; DeMarchis et al., 2002), NTs not only care for their PK-12 students but also engage in deliberate and balanced action to care for themselves (DeFrieze et al., 1982; World Health Organization, 2009). It is more important than ever that the very institutions in which these NTs work reflect on how they are showing the same care and compassion to their NTs. Webb and Shoffner argue, “As a professor, as educators, as individuals, we cannot claim to care for K-12 students if we do not also care for their teachers” (p. 4).

Institutional care for NTs could look like PK-12 leadership examining the working conditions of teachers and making structural changes (Benson, 2017; Yoder et al., 2024) as ways to positively impact teacher burnout. Institutional care could look like school sites supporting NTs in finding a third space on campus where they can go to decompress and re-energize when work gets challenging. This care might also look like PK-12 administrators reconfiguring school spaces and faculty meetings to include a focus on teacher wellbeing (Muhammad, 2023; Yoder et al., 2024).

### **Conclusion**

Based on these findings, we recommend that TPPs, PK-12 districts, and others involved in the broader field of education strive to more fully understand the demands of the profession and the impact on the wellbeing of its teachers. In the NT experiences presented in this article, we see 14 NTs who reflected on their self-care practices and what constituted self-care, intentionally making shifts in their practices for the betterment of their wellbeing. In her second interview, Sam articulated her new understanding of self-care: “I always was kind of like, ‘Self-care is bubble baths and getting my nails done’ or whatever, but I really saw how you have to do it. You have to do those things in a more real way. Going to sleep on time, getting enough sleep, making sure I have food to eat, basic care for myself, in order to have the fortitude to do this job.” By being asked to reflect on her self-care practices each week, Sam – along with the other NTs – arrived at a new understanding of the meaning and importance of self-care.

Although self-care practices are ultimately up to the individual teacher, TPPs and districts play a pivotal role in establishing systems that not only educate and encourage teacher self-care but also proactively create more humane learning and working environments. Webb and Shoffner offer a call to action for the field of education to prioritize NT wellbeing: “Those being inducted into teaching deserve responsive and supportive care in order to thrive in the profession they chose” (p. 4). We recommend that TPPs and districts bring a critical eye to the workload demands of the profession and reimagine the institutional systems within which teachers work with the goal of proactively reducing teacher burnout in support and retainment of new teachers.

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