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# Working with trauma-affected young people in secondary schools: Exploring ‘self-care’ with pre-service physical education teachers

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## Abstract

Working with trauma-affected youth in physical education (PE) can be a challenging and, at times, stressful and emotionally demanding process. Whilst little is known about how student trauma affects in-service teachers, even less is known about how it might impact pre-service PE teachers. The aims of this paper are therefore to (1) explore pre-service PE teachers' experiences of working with students affected by trauma, and (2) consider the potential implications of this for their well-being. Through an online professional learning programme, we worked with three distinct groups of pre-service PE teachers ( $n = 22$ ). The workshops generated data through individual activities and group tasks that allowed participants to reflect on their experiences. Findings revealed that pre-service teachers had several encounters during their school-based placements with young people who may have experienced trauma. These experiences were felt by the pre-service PE teachers – both emotionally and physically. Pre-service PE teachers were encouraged to develop self-care strategies; however, our participants indicated that this was not always easy to do. That said, pre-service PE teachers were able to describe some of the strategies they engaged with to take care of themselves and safeguard their own well-being. Many of these strategies were relational and involved spending time with others – such as school colleagues (teachers and/or mentors) – who were available to offer both practical and emotional guidance and support. Thus, our findings reinforce the importance of pre-service teachers learning about self-care and emotional regulation as part of initial teacher education courses.

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**Keywords**

Teacher well-being, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, teacher education, collective care

**Introduction**

There has been much focus recently on the impact of trauma on young people, particularly considering various global challenges such as political conflict, forced migration and the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2019; WHO, 2020). Yet, even prior to this, childhood trauma was recognised as a global health epidemic (Department of Health and Department of Education, 2017). Trauma can result from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which refer to a range of stressful events (e.g. exposure to abuse or neglect, poverty, racism, or domestic/community violence) that children and young people have been exposed to while growing up (Felitti et al., 1998; Smith, 2018). An individual's response to these ACEs – influenced, in part, by the context in which they find themselves and the support networks (or lack thereof) around them – determines whether they are considered traumatic or not. Where trauma is experienced, the impacts – neurologically, physiologically, and psychologically – can have lasting, negative effects (Dye, 2018; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Indeed trauma, defined in various ways, occurs when an individual is exposed to an experience that engulfs both the internal and external coping resources available to them, creating a sense of extreme threat that has a detrimental effect on their functioning and well-being (SAMHSA, 2014). Fundamentally, trauma can be understood as being ‘an exceptional experience in which powerful and dangerous events overwhelm a person's capacity to cope’ (Rice and Groves, 2005: 3).

It has been noted that ‘students who have experiences of trauma exist in every school and community’ (Honsinger and Brown, 2019: 130), and so it is perhaps to be expected that, in educational contexts, trauma is a topic of increasing relevance (Brown et al., 2022). The impacts of trauma can often ‘play out’ in young people's behaviour within a school (e.g. via disengagement, disruption, and conflict with others), which is not surprising given that educational institutions are consistently identified as key spaces in young people's social landscapes (e.g. McClain, 2021; Thomas et al., 2019). However, if teachers are unaware of the reasons underlying potentially challenging presentations, then such behaviours can often be misinterpreted as wilful disobedience (Quarmby et al., 2022). Understanding the impact of trauma, and the responses it might evoke, can therefore be seen to be beneficial for teachers working with/for young people. Indeed, it has been suggested previously that there is a need for practitioners to be more ‘trauma-aware’ (Brown et al., 2022; Brunzell et al., 2016).

While being trauma-aware is important for all teachers, it could be argued that it is especially relevant for physical education (PE) teachers. PE arguably occupies a unique position within the school curriculum, one in which an overt emphasis is placed on the body, where actions and interactions are less bounded by structured spaces, and where participation in activities is public (Aartun et al., 2022; Hooper et al., 2020). It differs from other classroom environments in that young people are more exposed to loud noises and have to navigate their own bodies, around others, in group activities (Altieri et al., 2021). In many respects, this unique context provides a platform to teach skills that are difficult to develop in other areas of the curriculum/school. For example, PE can support the development of a range of life skills (e.g. listening, negotiating, problem solving, and conflict resolution), offering an outlet for stress and emotions, emotional regulation and impulse control, opportunities to work with others, and a sense of safety and belonging (Altieri

et al., 2021). That said, while PE can be a site for positive development, it can also result in negative experiences such as bullying and, thus, potential (re)traumatisation (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020; Tischler and McCaughy, 2011). Importantly, bullying may also be a behaviour that young people who have experienced trauma exhibit in PE (Ellison et al., 2019). Arguably, the nature of interactions that occur (both between student–student and student–teacher) in the PE space may increase the chance of teachers witnessing behaviour that results from trauma (e.g. behavioural outbursts with peers in team situations).

Thus, it has been suggested that supporting practitioners to have a trauma-aware lens in this context can facilitate an appreciation of why some individuals have difficulties with learning, building relationships and managing behaviour, and can enable reflection around how best to support young people through effective pedagogical practice (Altieri et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2022; Ellison et al., 2019; Honsinger and Brown, 2019; Quarmby et al., 2022). However, it is also acknowledged that working with trauma-affected youth in education, broadly, can be a challenging and, at times, stressful, and emotionally demanding process for teachers (Avery et al., 2022; Kinman et al., 2011; Miller and Flint-Stipp, 2019). For instance, Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019) suggest that student trauma will at least indirectly impact teachers and that any teacher who cares for a traumatised student is thus susceptible to the burdens of trauma. While little is known about how student trauma affects in-service teachers, even less is known about how it might impact pre-service teachers – who are already juggling a host of competing demands and professional stresses and at a time when many young adults are experiencing developmental changes that might influence how they respond emotionally to challenging situations (Brown et al., 2022; Semper et al., 2016). The aims of this paper are therefore to (1) explore pre-service PE teachers' experiences of working with students affected by trauma, and (2) consider the potential implications of this for their well-being. To achieve this, however, it is first important to consider the effects on teacher well-being in general, when working with trauma-affected youth.

### *Teacher burnout, compassion fatigue and self-care*

Research has demonstrated that high attrition rates in teaching (and especially among early career teachers) occur when teachers do not have the tools to cope with the emotional stressors of the work (Sikma, 2021). In PE specifically, emotional exhaustion – something that is potentially exacerbated by working with trauma-affected students – is considered a key contributor to burnout of teachers (Simonton et al., 2021). Importantly, McMakin et al. (2023) suggest that burnout is a component of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, which can affect teachers and students alike. Brown et al. (2022) suggest that teachers act as the primary support for traumatised students in schools and as such, are at risk of the effects of student trauma. Indeed, Kearns and Hart (2017) liken teachers to parents, given that they commit energy and effort to supporting pupils who are unable or perhaps struggle to navigate the school system due to trauma and social–emotional challenges. Compassion fatigue therefore refers to the negative though predictable and treatable psychological consequences of working with, and in proximity to, suffering people (Ashley-Binge and Cousins, 2020). It relates to the deep emotional exhaustion experienced after repeated exposure to traumatic stories. Similarly, vicarious trauma – sometimes known as secondary traumatic stress – refers to the effects on an individual that result from being exposed to someone else's stories of trauma (Pearlman and Caringi, 2009). For example, teachers working with students who have been exposed to traumatic events can experience vicarious trauma through learning about students' trauma exposure and empathising with their suffering (Thomas et al., 2019). Indeed, Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019) argue that teachers are often the first

people outside of the family to learn about student trauma and, importantly, to feel its effects. This may be particularly true for PE teachers who, in many curriculum contexts around the world – for example, Scotland and New Zealand – have an explicit responsibility to support the social and emotional needs of their learners (Wright et al., 2020).

With teachers (and pre-service teachers) juggling ever-increasing responsibilities focused on student outcomes – such as pressures related to school performance, professional development, and student well-being (particularly following the pandemic) – they perhaps rarely stop to consider their own well-being (Luthar and Mendes, 2020). Moreover, the emotional burden of working with trauma-affected students is often carried home, which further compromises their own well-being when not supplemented with strategies to ameliorate the effects of vicarious trauma, including engaging in acts of self-care (Alisic, 2012).

Working with students who have experienced trauma can clearly affect teachers, but it is important to note that this can also affect pre-service teachers. Moreover, research suggests there is a gap in the literature regarding how pre-service teachers learn about trauma-affected young people and trauma-aware practices in general (Brown et al., 2022). Importantly, a lack of learning opportunities in this area can have a negative impact on pre-service teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards trauma and trauma-informed practice, as well as their confidence in working with young people who have experienced trauma (Brown et al., 2022). Pre-service teachers are in a unique position whereby they are encouraged to reflect on their actions and learning from different school placements. However, they require support and knowledge about trauma to ensure that such reflections do not impact negatively on how they perceive their learning/progress or their overall well-being.

Supporting pre-service teacher learning and well-being in this way is extremely important and aligns well with a more holistic or ecological understanding of self-care (Shannon et al., 2014). Indeed, research suggests that self-care strategies should not focus solely on the practices of the individual, but that they should be considered at various levels – organisational, professional, and personal (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995; Shannon et al., 2014). For example, at an organisational level, schools might provide teachers with space and time out of the classroom as a means to limit their exposure to emotionally challenging contexts. Relatedly, schools might support teachers by providing them with opportunities for professional learning around trauma. At a more personal level, teachers can engage in, for example, mindfulness or physical activity, creating opportunities to build personal resources to cope with stress, as well as to create boundaries between their work life and their personal life. Self-care, therefore, is not only the responsibility of the teacher, but also the responsibility of all of those who work within the education system; it can take a variety of different forms and can take place in different contexts. Indeed, several researchers have previously demonstrated the positive impact that social support can have on teacher stress (Fiorilli et al., 2019), well-being (Kidger et al., 2016) and vicarious trauma (Schussler et al., 2018).

This broader, multi-contextual and relational perspective on self-care aligns well with both whole-school approaches to working with trauma (Brunzell et al., 2021) and to the socioecological framework for health promotion (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From these perspectives, teachers do not operate in isolation, but within a social ecosystem, with various components of the system connected and contributing either directly or indirectly to their well-being. This perspective is important because it highlights the contextual factors that impact teachers, which can be negative, but can also be positive and supportive. For example, while working with young people who have experienced trauma might cause feelings of anxiety or stress, teachers might also be able to access social support within the school, facilitated by an organisation that provides teachers with time and space for supportive and professional dialogue and learning (Brunzell et al., 2021).

Much has been written about the potential of education (and increasingly PE) to play a role in addressing the impact of childhood trauma, but there is less recognition – certainly in PE – of the readiness of teachers to do this and the potential challenges for them in doing so. Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019) suggest even less consideration is given to pre-service teachers. This paper speaks to the latter point and explores pre-service PE teachers' experiences of working with students affected by trauma and the potential implications of this for their well-being. As such, this novel paper is the first to consider the impact of student trauma on pre-service teachers – specifically within PE – and what they might do to mitigate any adverse effects.

## Methodology

In seeking to understand pre-service PE teachers' experiences of working with trauma-affected students, we draw from a broader programme of work designed to support pre-service PE teachers in becoming trauma-aware within their practice. More specifically, we engaged pre-service PE teachers in a series of online, interactive workshops that were centred on enacting trauma-aware pedagogies within PE. In so doing, we worked with three distinct groups of pre-service PE teachers from a range of different institutions, delivering a total of 12 hours of online workshops (2 × 2-hour sessions per group). This work was informed by an interpretivist perspective, which allows for participants to be viewed as both individuals and as part of a larger social organisation (the school). This perspective is helpful when linking participants' actions and meanings to a particular time and space (Macdonald et al., 2002). Further details of the sample and workshop content are provided below.

### *Participants and sampling*

In total, 22 pre-service PE teachers participated across the three sets of workshops. They were recruited via personal networks, by engaging with existing PE teacher education programmes, and through social media (e.g. Twitter). The workshops were accessible to anyone who was defined as a 'pre-service PE teacher' – that is, those enrolled on either a four-year undergraduate teacher education programme that led to qualified teacher status, or a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme. As a result, three distinct groups were involved in the programme – two from initial teacher education (ITE) programmes of the authors' institutions (Workshop 1 = 10 participants; Workshop 2 = five participants) and one recruited from social media, including pre-service teachers from a range of UK universities (Workshop 3 = seven participants). Most of the individuals who attended were female ( $n = 18$ ), self-identified as white ( $n = 20$ ), and were aged under 25 ( $n = 19$ ). The majority were pre-service PE teachers from England and Scotland, though one group included a participant from Australia who was undertaking a Masters of Education by Research at the time. This was made possible since the workshops were designed to run online to accommodate the challenges of lockdown. Importantly, those enrolled on a one-year PGCE would have engaged in three distinct school placements lasting a minimum of 10 weeks. Those enrolled on the four-year undergraduate programme would have spent a total of 30 weeks across three different schools (one primary and two secondary) by the time they completed their studies, with the bulk of those (20 weeks) coming in the final two years of study.

### *Interactive online workshops*

The interactive online workshops were delivered using Microsoft Teams between May and August 2021 in two parts, each two hours in duration. The overarching aim of the workshops was to support

pre-service PE teachers in becoming trauma-aware and so workshops were grounded in our five principles of trauma-aware pedagogies: (i) ensuring safety and well-being; (ii) establishing routines and structures; (iii) developing and sustaining positive relationships; (iv) facilitating and responding to youth voice; and (v) promoting strengths and self-belief (Quarmby et al., 2022). Specifically, the first workshop sought to: (1) provide a background to key concepts (e.g. ACEs, toxic stress, and trauma); (2) consider how trauma may manifest in PE and outline the relevance of the subject as a context in which to support development; and (3) introduce the five principles of trauma-aware pedagogies. In so doing, it aimed to explore pre-service PE teachers' understanding and experience of (student) trauma.

The second workshop (conducted one week after the first) then sought to: (1) examine the conceptual relevance of the five principles; (2) consider how the five principles might be enacted in the participants' own contexts; and (3) explore the importance of teacher well-being and self-care within trauma-aware practice. In relation to the third point, specifically, participants were invited to discuss, in conversation with us (as workshop leaders) and with each other, how they had experienced student trauma, the impact it had on them, and whether they engaged in any acts of self-care to help mitigate the risks of being exposed to the students' stories. In being responsive to the needs of pre-service PE teachers, the focus on self-care was added at the request of participants following the first workshop with the first group, perhaps indicating the perceived importance of this.

Given the sensitive nature of the topics being discussed, we made a conscious effort to ensure the online workshops were a 'safe space' whereby participants could contribute and share their experiences and reactions without fear of judgement. We attempted to do this by: (i) offering regular breaks and frequent 'check-ins'; (ii) providing opportunities to 'opt-out' at any time; and (iii) being available before and after each workshop for participants to discuss any issues or raise concerns. Each workshop included a combination of academic content, individual reflection tasks and group discussions that facilitated the collection of a rich body of data in the form of speech, text, and visual materials (e.g. GIFs<sup>1</sup> and drawings) (see also Sandford et al., 2023).

### *Data collection and analysis*

Ethical approval was granted by the lead author's host institution. To support data collection, key questions and discussion points/tasks were built into the workshops to generate conversation/dialogue between the researchers and pre-service PE teachers. These conversations allowed for the exploration of relevant topics as they emerged – like a semi-structured interview (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). The conversation/dialogue generated by the questions/discussion points in each of the workshops was recorded using the Microsoft Teams record function, and subsequently converted into an audio file for transcription. Text from the Microsoft Teams 'chat' function was also transferred to a Microsoft Word file, along with screenshots of Padlets and any GIFs used within them. All audio file transcripts and copies of the 'chats' were made anonymous to protect the identity of the participants. The resulting data were then analysed using inductive and deductive procedures (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). To begin, each author independently read through each transcript across the whole dataset, to become familiar with the data. As part of this process, simultaneous notes and memos were created as they arose. Following this, a deductive approach was initially taken whereby we specifically sought to identify pre-service PE teachers' experiences of engaging with trauma-affected youth. The authors then came together to apply an inductive approach to explore those specific experiences. This subsequently led to the creation of additional themes and sub-themes that broadly explored the impact working with trauma-affected youth may

have had on participants' well-being, and the self-care practices that they engaged in (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). To protect anonymity, we were careful here not to name or identify individuals by the contextual information they provided about schools or students.

## Findings

In total, four overarching themes were identified following the analysis of the data. The first theme identifies pre-service teachers' experiences of working with trauma-affected youth in the context of PE, while the second theme explores the impact that student trauma might have on pre-service PE teachers. The third theme subsequently considers pre-service PE teachers' reflections on self-care and finally, the fourth theme identifies the different self-care strategies pre-service PE teachers reported engaging in. Each theme is explored below, supported by direct quotations (with pseudonyms) from participants.

### *It happens more than you think: Experiences of working with trauma-affected students*

Most of the pre-service PE teachers noted that – on reflection – they were aware of and able to recognise the signs of trauma evident in children and young people's behaviour within their (and their colleagues') classes. This stemmed from observing student behaviours, interacting with students, and observing teachers' responses. For instance, both Erica and Alice recalled the behaviour that they could link to student trauma:

... on my third year placement I had a boy in one of my classes who never ... I know both of his parents had passed away and he was living with an older sister, so obviously it's quite traumatic and I know there was kind of a lot of other, of like narcotic issues and alcohol issues in the home as well, so when he did turn up to PE, yeah it was kind of guaranteed that he wasn't necessarily going to behave the way that you wanted him to, it wasn't going to be perfect, but there was one day where we were outside doing athletics and around the athletics track we had a big ... 10 foot fence, and I turned my back for like 30 seconds and he was at the top of the fence. (Erica, Workshop A1)

I've had a child move from a different country and then accuse another student of calling him the n-word and then physically punching him in my lesson, I don't know what that was about, but that was an awful experience that was physical, that was in my lesson, I just didn't know what to even do in that situation and, I'd look at my other teacher, host teacher to be like ... what do I do like, because I didn't hear anything, I don't know this kid though like he obviously came from a different country ... and he had accused the most innocent student in the lesson of this, so it didn't really add up. (Alice, Workshop B1)

As noted elsewhere (see Gray et al., 2023), students' use of abusive language, conflict, and issues with social interaction were key in pre-service teachers identifying behaviour that they felt stemmed from trauma. Moreover, Marie also noted how one student would display disruptive behaviour, use poor language, and lash out:

... so I was working with one wee guy and I just remember it was like after a while and it was really tough you know because of his behaviour and the language that he used, and you know he would show like slight bits of affection, and then immediately just hit me ... (Marie, Workshop A1)



For two other pre-service PE teachers, signs of adversity were evident in the actions of the students and subsequent reactions of staff, which led to them learning about the trauma some students had experienced – particularly as it related to family members who had died by suicide:

... this boy was sitting in the games hall and there was ropes in the games hall, and he was putting them around his neck, in front of other kids, he was putting them, not tightly at all, but just kind of like loosely around his neck and ... the teacher instantly jumped on it and sent him out straight away and spoke to him ... I didn't understand why it was so urgent and why it was so serious, but I got told after that he was the one that found his mum who had committed suicide and had hung herself in their garage. (Lana, Workshop A1)

I had a student today and he was ... he got a detention within the first 10 minutes of the lesson for being disruptive, again it's the low-level behaviour stuff, but it's disrespectful behaviour, but this particular student had been through a traumatic incident where he had lost his sister to suicide, so it had impacted him a fair bit. (Alice, Workshop B1)

In addition, Rosie below noted how physical abuse within the family led to one student 'acting out' and abusing staff:

So, one of the boys admitted to the fact that their dad was beating up their mum and their mum just stood there and essentially took it. So, when a female teacher comes to teach them, he says that he doesn't have the same level of respect as he does for a man, because they just accept, he just expects as a woman I'm going to sit and take whatever he's willing to shout or say to me, in an abusive manner ... (Rosie, Workshop A1)

It was therefore evident that encounters with trauma-affected students happened more often than we might tend to think, especially for the pre-service teachers involved in the workshops. These encounters were both direct and indirect, as they taught, observed, and interacted with others within the school context (Gray et al., 2023). As such, they were able to articulate a general awareness of their students' difficult circumstances and how this might 'play out' in their actions and behaviours in PE.

### *It's tough: The impact of student trauma on pre-service PE teachers*

Pre-service PE teachers could evidently recognise signs of trauma in the behaviours of students and, when asked how they felt when initially learning of students' past trauma, they spoke about recognising the need to be empathetic but also being deeply impacted by this knowledge. Indeed, some expressed that they reflected on this continually for days after and often felt 'sad' and 'upset'. As Kinman et al. (2011) and Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019) have pointed out, working with trauma-affected youth can be stressful and emotionally demanding. Pre-service PE teachers here explicitly noted how stressful it was teaching young people who have been impacted by trauma:

It's stressful because I think as a trainee you're obviously wanting to develop your teaching, but you're spending half of your time dealing with behaviour, so then you can't actually like get into trying new teaching strategies or pedagogies because you might spend like 20 minutes of your lesson disciplining students for talking when you're talking, so then it's just dealing with that before you've even got into

your content of your lesson first before, before that ... some days are better than others ... (Alice, Workshop B1)

It's just quite emotionally stressful ... (and) sometimes it is just tough day after tough day and then I think that just affects you know your mindset. You can keep going, but yeah, it's just that sort of thing where you end up taking a lot of it home and you know getting upset or you know stressed about it. (Chloe, Workshop A1)

As evidenced here and also below, participants spoke of being 'wiped out' and 'taking a lot of it home', reinforcing the notion that educators face physical and emotional exhaustion, and are at risk of both compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. In addition, while the behaviours that Alice referred to below may not be caused by trauma, it still highlights the fact that dealing with disruptive behaviour is emotionally and physically exhausting. Arguably, the 'new' knowledge that Alice acquired in the workshops may have enabled her to reflect and think differently about these behaviours:

I have like experienced a few difficult times. I have a challenging lesson on a Wednesday, last period with year 7s ... and I find I spend that whole lesson just constantly dealing with behaviour and I've come out of that lesson, and I'm just wiped out. (Alice, Workshop B1)

In addition, some of the GIFs that pre-service PE teachers used as a means of depicting their feelings reflected ideas of being too busy (e.g. an image of a cartoon character doing multiple jobs at the same time), getting overwhelmed (e.g. an image of a person screaming) and feeling discouraged (e.g. an image of a balloon deflating). Such views remind us of the emotional impact of working with trauma-affected students, and the challenges of dealing with behaviour as a pre-service teacher given all the other demands placed upon them during this time (and for some, who are not quite ready 'developmentally' to cope with emotionally challenging situations – Semper et al., 2016):

You feel like you are on a high all week and then you come down on the weekend because you're like 'oh right, I can actually sit still', but I still struggle to switch off and not be thinking right, what do I need to do, what do I need to do next, how do I set myself up to be, planned and prepped and prepared ... it's that constant worry sometimes. (Alice, Workshop B1)

While none of the pre-service PE teachers used terms such as vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue explicitly, it was evident in their accounts that they were – or had at some point been – stressed and exhausted due to working with trauma-affected students and having to manage some of the behaviours that presented within the school context.

### *It's vital to help you be the best teacher: The value of self-care*

As noted earlier, interactions with trauma-affected students in PE were common for participants in our study and clearly formed part of the day-to-day landscape for these pre-service teachers, despite them having limited exposure to teaching PE within school contexts. As such, recognising that students' trauma was having an impact on these pre-service PE teachers, they were asked explicitly during the workshops about the value of self-care. Importantly, all participants could see the

value of self-care, with several noting the importance of looking after themselves, so they can best look after the students they teach:

If we don't care for ourselves, we can't properly care for our students. (Nick, Workshop C2)

Looking after yourself is hugely important as an educator. If you aren't your best in yourself then you can't be the best teacher that the students need/deserve. (Connor, Workshop B2)

There was also discussion of self-care being important to help pre-service teachers be in the best 'shape' emotionally to have the strength to support young people and act as role models – something they noted may not always be evident in the family environment (especially for those impacted by trauma and who have experienced abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction):

[I] definitely think it's important to care for ourselves because we need to set an example to students, as sometimes they may not have those role models at home and [it's important] to be able to think anything is possible. (Alice, Workshop B2)

However, while there was consensus amongst participants that self-care was important to help mitigate the effects of vicarious trauma, it was to some extent easier in theory than in practice. For instance, Iris (Workshop C2) noted that: 'Taking care of myself is my biggest weakness' – a sentiment shared by many participants across the workshops. Importantly, this reflects not only the challenges of working with trauma-affected youth, but also the pressures of being a pre-service PE teacher trying to juggle competing demands. This is reflective of broader literature, which identifies that the difficulty of 'doing' self-care is often attributed to a lack of time, lack of motivation, and a lack of support for understanding what 'self-care' actually is (Miller and Flint-Stipp, 2019; Shannon et al., 2014). Hence, part of the challenge in practising self-care is that there is a lack of clarity on what it 'looks like' and how well-informed pre-service teachers are about this (Ashley-Binge and Cousins, 2020).

### *I try to just focus on me and switch off: The different self-care strategies*

Shannon et al. (2014) suggest that there are three distinct types of self-care strategies – physical strategies, cognitive strategies, and relational strategies. Each of these strategies is quite individualised and personalised. For instance, in relation to the former two, physical strategies include exercise, physical activity or sport, engaging in relaxation techniques, getting the required amount of sleep, and eating healthily (Shannon et al., 2014). Similarly, cognitive strategies involve using deliberate distractions (e.g. browsing the internet or watching television) as well as mindfulness and meditation (Shannon et al., 2014). Both of these types of self-care strategies were evident in some of the examples provided by the pre-service PE teachers. For instance:

Staying active myself ... Yeah having that like space to just switch off, like I find going to the gym, putting my music on, switching off, I'm not on my phone, I'm not on my teacher Twitter, I'm not like looking at what everyone else is doing, I'm not looking at the news or whatever is on social media, I'm solely focusing on myself and how I feel, because it's so important ... (Alice, Workshop B2)

Altieri et al. (2021) have noted the importance of self-regulation as a cognitive self-care strategy, suggesting that teachers need to find moments throughout the day when they can check in with

themselves and regain a sense of calm and control. However, this is only possible if they have been given the tools to do this.

The most consistent examples of self-care strategies, though, were those relating to relational strategies (e.g. sharing feelings with others including friends, colleagues, partners, supervisors, and mentors) (Shannon et al., 2014). Frequently, the pre-service PE teachers spoke about speaking with others (e.g. friends, colleagues, or mentors) as a means of clarifying their own actions and listening/learning about others' experiences:

... the PE department where I'm, where I've been now, and throughout the year, yeah there have been people who I can turn to and people you can talk to, I think everyone's been there and done it and got the t-shirt, so it's just whether they're open, open enough to discuss it and offer advice. (Kyle, Workshop B1)

Having those conversations with colleagues after a lesson and being like 'this actually did upset me', or 'no this was really tough' ... I think just talking about things just makes it better. Acknowledging that someone else knows about it and that maybe they've experienced something similar. You know, I feel that it was like, say, isolated. I guess, you don't want to be like the only one, you don't want to feel that way. (Eva, Workshop A2)

Altieri et al. (2021) have previously noted that teachers need to find supportive colleagues in order to disperse some of the burden of their stress. However, actively seeking the support of other adults can be more difficult for PE teachers (and pre-service teachers in particular given the limited time they are in schools) because their classes take place in areas that are often isolated from other parts of the school (i.e. gym or field). That said, it was evident here that pre-service PE teachers still found time – outside of lessons – to talk to colleagues:

Staff sports on a Friday, that works well, get the team together, bit of competition, go for a couple of beers after, that's how I think, that's what I've done at my last placement and it's brilliant, we've got a tight group, they're all really comfortable, we are all just like best friends that can just talk about anything and discuss anything ... (Kyle, Workshop B2)

These relational strategies are particularly important in helping pre-service PE teachers develop a sense of self-compassion and learning to become 'ok with not being ok' with a situation (Altieri et al., 2021). As one participant noted:

I think it's just reminding yourself sometimes, no it's not your teaching, it is just the children but definitely, speaking to people about it and knowing you're not alone in that situation as well, that's good. (Alice, Workshop B2)

These physical, cognitive, and relational self-care strategies are, however, very individual in nature, with the onus on the pre-service PE teacher to enact them. One of the key challenges around self-care is that the focus on the 'self' has led to emphasis being placed on the individual in isolation, rather than the individual within a community. As such, self-care rarely considers the organisational structures that may be contributing to stress and exhaustion in the first place (Lewis et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2019). There were, for example, very few instances where pre-service PE teachers spoke of formal strategies that would support their self-care that were either

identified or signposted by their university or placement schools. That said, the relational strategies do have the potential to lead to greater structural support and Avery et al. (2022) have argued that caring interactions between individual staff – and building a shared responsibility for cultures of ‘collective care’ – is a key step in integrating teacher well-being into broader school practices.

Interestingly, when the pre-service PE teachers did discuss what supports were in place from their university or placement schools, these often related to quite trivial things that they could not actually do due to the risk of falling behind with their planning and preparation:

They tell us in half term, oh don't go on your laptop, don't do any work, don't answer emails, but where do we have the time, unless we don't in that free time to do it, I just think particularly being a teacher trainee, the workload it is very immense and I think even I've struggled this year to like maintain a consistent gym routine, but I have pushed myself to do it but then I don't want to let my planning down or anything like that. (Alice, Workshop B2)

Balancing self-care with the demands of teacher education therefore appeared to be an ‘impossible task’ (Miller and Flint-Stipp, 2019: 38), especially when the onus was placed solely on the individual.

## Conclusions

While some research has suggested that adopting a trauma-aware approach can impact positively on the health and well-being of all members of the school community (Hobbs et al., 2019; O'Toole, 2022), working with young people who have experienced trauma remains a challenging task, one that can be felt deeply by teachers, both physically and emotionally. Moreover, these feelings may be particularly intense for pre-service teachers, who as discussed, are only in schools for a relatively short period of time and who have to deal with some of the same pressures as in-service teachers, but with the added challenges that come with being a learner teacher (Gray et al., 2023). Such feelings can impact negatively on their well-being, especially when they do not have the necessary skills, knowledge, or support to cope with the stressors of school life (Miller and Flint-Stipp, 2019).

Building on the limited work in this area (e.g. Kearns and Hart, 2017; Walsh et al., 2011), our findings revealed that pre-service teachers had several encounters during their school-based placements with young people who may have experienced trauma. These experiences were both observed and experienced directly through their interactions with young people. Importantly, these experiences were felt by the pre-service PE teachers – both emotionally and physically. Teaching, and more specifically learning how to teach, is an extremely complex and cognitive endeavour. Yet, learning how to teach is also relational, and thus, inherently emotional (Hemphill, 2022). Developing empathy with and for students, particularly those who have experienced trauma, can open teachers up to the impact of vicarious trauma (Miller and Flint-Stipp, 2019), negatively impacting their well-being, and potentially their capacity to teach. Thus, it is extremely important for pre-service teachers to develop self-care strategies, so that they have the capacity not only to teach, but also to *learn how to teach* effectively. However, the pre-service PE teachers we spoke to indicated that this was not always easy to do, highlighting the ‘immense’ workload and responsibilities required to meet the demands of becoming a newly qualified teacher. That said, the pre-service PE teachers were able to describe some of the strategies they engaged with to take care of themselves and safeguard their own well-being. While some of these involved physical and cognitive strategies, many of the activities were relational and involved being with others.

Notably, these ‘others’ were often school colleagues (teachers and/or mentors), who were available to offer both practical and emotional guidance and support (Altieri et al., 2021). While developing positive and supportive relationships with other teachers was understood to support their well-being, this may not always be the case – especially when school cultures and mentors’ values/beliefs ‘clash’ with those of the student (Gray et al., 2023).

Identifying and informing pre-service teachers of clear self-care strategies might be particularly beneficial during their ITE – especially developing supportive relationships with colleagues and seeking out activities that act as ‘outlets’ or engaging in further learning opportunities, given the prominence of these within the research outlined here. It is important to also note that while some self-care strategies can be positive (e.g. sharing experiences), others can also be negative (e.g. consuming junk food and engaging in risky behaviour). Our work here reinforces the importance of pre-service teachers learning about self-care and emotional regulation as part of ITE courses. ITE programmes should therefore work with school placement providers to provide pre-service teachers with the tools to recognise the effects of student trauma and support them in engaging in self-care practices to mitigate any potentially detrimental effects. Indeed, Mérida-López et al. (2020) have argued that a lack of emotional awareness of self and others contributes to negative attitudes towards the teaching profession and can lead to drop-out of pre-service teachers from ITE. Our research suggests that ITE might consider embedding the development of emotional abilities within their programmes to help pre-service teachers develop a more positive attitude towards teaching.

We would argue, however, that while self-care is particularly important, the term itself is somewhat paradoxical. While self-care is intended to be a positive term (focusing attention on looking after yourself), it also lays the responsibility (and perhaps blame) on the individual. Echoing Avery et al. (2022), we would therefore emphasise the value of ‘collective care’ and the need to understand the conditions that support this. Collective care is therefore extremely important for all teachers, but we argue that more attention needs to be paid to what this looks like for pre-service teachers given their unique circumstances and demands. Hence, collective care should be recognised as a key feature of a (whole-school) trauma-aware approach, so that teachers can develop meaningful practices that they have the time and resources to engage in – within the contexts of their professional and personal lives. Given the extent and significance of the experiences that pre-service PE teachers recalled during the workshops, we suggest that this focus on collective care is imperative and that currently, not enough attention is paid to this.

Finally, this study highlights the need for further research examining the (ongoing) impacts that working with trauma-affected students can have for both pre- and in-service teachers. Future research might consider how to work with pre- and in-service teachers regarding student trauma but, importantly, this work should also consider more carefully the (potentially traumatic) experiences of those teachers and the impact that this has on their learning, practice and well-being. Ultimately, this may help to elucidate further opportunities to support educators in mitigating the impacts of vicarious trauma. Indeed, with teacher recruitment and retention being a particular concern – both within the UK and other contexts internationally – ensuring that teachers are supported as effectively as possible will be key moving forward, particularly if the number of children and young people being affected by trauma continues to grow.


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## Note

1. A graphical interchange format (GIF) is an image or soundless video that continuously plays on a loop.

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