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# Education on Burnout and Self-Care at the University of Southern Maine School of Social Work: A Case Study

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EDUCATION ON BURNOUT AND SELF-CARE

**Abstract**

Social work practitioners can experience symptoms of burnout at high rates, and sometimes are not able to effectively engage in self-care to combat these symptoms. For social work students, learning the signs of burnout and how to practice self-care are crucial tools. However, there is scant information in the literature on burnout and self-care in social work curricula. This case study looks at the education on burnout and self-care in the University of Southern Maine (USM) School of Social Work. Social work professors were interviewed on how they teach about burnout and self-care, and undergraduate and graduate students were interviewed on their experiences with learning about these topics in their classes. Thematic analysis was used to analyze interviews. A content analysis was done on course syllabi, looking at books ordered and assigned articles to see how burnout and self-care are approached in different classes. The results of this case study will be shared with the USM School of Social Work in the hopes that the information gained will be used to further strengthen the curriculum.

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**CHAPTER ONE: Introduction**

Burnout and self-care are prominent topics in the field of social work as many practitioners work to cope with the high demands of their jobs. While burnout is a well-known problem affecting those in the field of social work, it continues to be a prevalent issue, with reported rates of burnout in practitioners ranging from 39% (Wacek, 2017) to as high as 75% (Kim, Ji, & Kao, 2011). Learning to appropriately identify burnout and engage in self-care to combat its symptoms can take practice, requiring individuals to be self-reflective and attentive to their physical, emotional, and psychological needs (Lee & Miller, 2013; Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002; Denyes, Oren, & SozWiss, 2001). Students of social work who are new to the field may be lacking these crucial skills (Iacono, 2017; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Humphrey, 2013). It is imperative, then, that formal education curricula be designed to include education on symptoms of burnout and self-care strategies to prepare students for entering the field. This case study examines the education on burnout and self-care at the USM School of Social Work using three separate sources of data for comparison: through thematic analysis of professor and student interviews and a content analysis of course syllabi, textbooks, and assigned articles.

## CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

In the literature, there is scant information on burnout and self-care in social work curricula. This literature review will first present previous findings on the prevalence of burnout in social work practitioners, including specific aspects of burnout and personal and professional self-care. It will review the theoretical underpinnings of burnout and self-care that informed the basis for this case study. Finally, a few examples of approaches to incorporating material on self-care into curricula in schools of social work will be explored.

**Stress and the Need for Self-Care**

The field of social work is a helping profession, and thus often requires practitioners to pour themselves into their work. It has been suggested that for many social workers, the need to be helpful is a primary motive for their choice of profession, and this need can easily lead to overinvolvement with clients, thereby contributing to stress (Lloyd et al., 2002). Social work practitioners can feel satisfaction from their direct work with clients, but a deep involvement without using structured boundaries can potentially leave the practitioner feeling distressed and emotionally exhausted (Han, Lee, & Lee, 2012). Social work practitioners face ever increasing pressures as the problems they deal with reflect the societal changes and the increasing stress of everyday life (Lloyd et al. 2002), thereby increasing their own stress.

Stress is a major problem within the field of social work, including stress related to inconsistencies between work aspirations and actual outcomes, vulnerabilities in practitioners who are not prepared to face the challenges that they experience, and role ambiguity (Lloyd et al., 2002). Lloyd et al. (2002) defined role ambiguity as "being exposed to conflicting demands, being expected to do things which were not part of the job, being unable to do things which should be part of the job, and being unclear about what was expected" (p.258).

When practitioners are chronically stressed and overwhelmed, their practice and service delivery abilities may suffer, having a potential negative impact on themselves and their clients (Iacono, 2017). Stressors have been identified in many forms. Some stressors can be related to organizational structures, such as lack of funding, personnel shortages, high worker turnover rates, lack of linkages to other work units, attitudes of other health professionals, and working in a bureaucratic environment (Lloyd et al., 2002). Other stressors include being exposed to conflicting demands, being expected to do tasks that were not originally part of the job, being unable to do things that should be part of the job, and being unclear about work expectations (Lloyd et al., 2002). These stressors can be managed through the use of self-care (Humphrey, 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Lee & Miller, 2013).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has used language specific to self-care, a concept that will be explored more deeply throughout this chapter, stating "each social worker has an ethical responsibility to use self-care as a method to ensure competent client care" (Peterson, 2016, p.15). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mentions elements of self-care in their educational standards, citing the use of "self-reflection, self-regulation, professional demeanor and use of supervision to guide professional judgement and behavior" (Peterson, 2016, p.15). While NASW standards require practices related to self-care, they do not provide guidance for programs on ways schools may implement this, or infuse this content throughout the curriculum. As a result, students of social work may not be adequately prepared to recognize and safeguard against burnout once they enter the profession (Iacono, 2017; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Humphrey, 2013). In fact, Iacono (2017) found that many students who are nearing the end of their social work education feel unprepared to practice self-care, and are also unable to identify signs of burnout. A lack of education on burnout and self-care for students who are newly entering the field may leave them at risk for being unprepared to face the stressors that they are likely to encounter in their work.

**Definitions**

The terms 'burnout' and 'self-care' have specific definitions within the field of social work. There are several areas of practitioners' lives that burnout affects, and many aspects of the working environment that can lead to symptoms of burnout. Similarly, self-

care targets specific areas of both personal and professional life, and requires active participation to combat symptoms of burnout. Both of these terms and their components will be explored in-depth.

   **Burnout.** Burnout is defined as "a syndrome with dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced feelings of accomplishment" (Lloyd et al., 2002, p.256), and is "a process that begins slowly and becomes progressively worse, rather than being a fixed state" (Han et al., 2012, p.256). Burnout is a psychological syndrome that is the result of prolonged, chronic exposure to stressors at work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being "worn out, loss of energy, depletion, debilitation and fatigue" (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p.103), and happens when a practitioner's emotional resources get worn down by the constant needs of their clients, supervisors, and organizations (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Depersonalization, also called cynicism, is described as "negative or inappropriate attitudes towards clients, irritability, loss of idealism, and withdrawal" (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p.103). Reduced feelings of accomplishment, also called inefficacy, describes "reduced productivity or capability, low morale, and an inability to cope" (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p.103), and can result for practitioners when clients do not reach their goals despite practitioner efforts to help them (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014).

It is important to note that although similar, burnout is distinctly different from compassion fatigue, which is "the gradual lessening of compassion among care-giving professionals who work with traumatized individuals" (Decker, Brown, Ong, & Stiney-Ziskind, 2015, p.30). Symptoms of compassion fatigue include "emotional and physical exhaustion, a tendency to withdraw, high levels of stress…irritability, helplessness, a sense of isolation, depression, and confusion" (Decker, Brown, Ong, & Stiney-Ziskind, 2015, p.30).

There is a wide range of negative consequences that individuals in the field face when experiencing burnout, both personally and professionally. The personal effects include anxiety, depression, anger, irritation, prolonged health issues and troubled relationships (Jackson, 2014; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Banko, 2013; Lloyd et al., 2002; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Professionally, a person may have absenteeism in the workplace, difficulty with colleagues, and poor productivity and job performance (Jackson, 2014; Sofology, Efstratopoulou, & Dunn, 2019), as well as chronic tardiness, chronic fatigue, evidence of poor client care, and low completion rates of clinical and administrative duties (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Chiller & Crisp, 2012). Practitioners' personal attributes can lead to a higher risk of burnout, such as high levels of anxiety and worrying, and low levels of hardiness (Han et al., 2012).

Structural and organizational factors can contribute to an individual's feelings of burnout, such as a lack of supervision, role conflict, perceived unfairness in rewards,

limited autonomy at work, and interactions with clients (Han et al., 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Trying to balance too much work, long hours, chronic staff shortages, demanding clients, and aggressive administrative environments are other contributing factors (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Additional factors include unmanageably large caseloads, unfairness within the organizational structure, and inadequate agency and on-the-job training (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014).

Despite the broad risks and impacts of burnout, there are many strategies that an individual can employ, both on a personal and a professional level, to protect themselves and combat these effects. In the field, these strategies are referred to as self-care. Examples may include changing work patterns such as taking more breaks and avoiding overtime, building and maintaining coping skills, gaining social support from family and co-workers, practicing relaxation methods, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and developing better self-understanding through self-reflection and counseling (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Approaches to and the impacts of self-care will be explored below.

**Self-Care.** There is not one widely recognized definition of self-care, but there is consensus that it is "a process, an ability, but most often an engagement in particular behaviors that are suggested to promote specific outcomes such as a sense of subjective well-being, a healthy lifestyle, stress relief, and resiliency for the prevention" of burnout (Lee & Miller, 2013, p.97; Banko, 2013; Denyes et al., 2001; Jackson, 2014). Practicing self-care

"requires that a person be attuned to the physical, mental, and emotional functions that are essential for their own optimal life functioning and attend to these needs deliberately" (Banko, 2013, p.3). As a person's needs are constantly changing as their life evolves, self-care must also be a continuously changing process (Banko, 2013). Self-care has the biggest impact when practiced regularly, proactively, and with intention (Lee & Miller, 2013).

Lee and Miller (2013) identified five distinct areas of personal self-care to focus on: physical, psychological/emotional, social, spiritual, and the use of leisure time. Physical self-care involves maintaining good physical condition, such as getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet, and exercising intimacy. Maintaining psychological/ emotional self-care involves practicing stress management and self-compassion while focusing on personal strengths. Practicing social self-care requires an individual to sustain their support systems, be present in social situations, and engage in community activities. Leisure is a major component of self-care that involves engaging in hobbies that you enjoy and find restful and revitalizing. This can be exercising, doing crafts or handwork, writing, playing sports, reading, cooking, and so on. The last area of self-care is spiritual, which can vary for each person but can involve meditation, praying, going to religious services, self-reflection, and being in nature.

Just as important as personal self-care is professional self-care, which is the "process of purposeful engagement in practices that promote effective and appropriate

use of the self in the professional role within the context of sustaining holistic health and well-being" (Lee & Miller, 2013, p.98), and using these skills and strategies to address "personal, familial, emotional, and spiritual needs while attending to the needs and demands of clients" (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014, p.431). Professional self-care is rooted in practicing and maintaining healthy work norms, such as setting healthy boundaries with clients and co-workers, leaving work on time, not using overtime, and putting one's own needs before the needs of others (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Like personal self-care, professional self-care can be practiced to suit the individual. Examples include setting realistic goals for both workloads and clients, setting aside time to take coffee and lunch breaks, and promoting sufficient rest and relaxation (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Areas of professional self-care that are important to focus on are workload and time management, attention to professional role, attention to reactions to one's work, professional social support and self-advocacy, professional development, and revitalization and generation of energy (Lee & Miller, 2013).

Personal and professional self-care are connected in that when one form of self-care suffers, the likelihood the other will suffer is higher (Lee & Miller, 2013). Lack of self-care is a recurring issue for social work practitioners as they try to balance their own needs with those of their clients (Lee & Miller, 2013). Some obstacles to engaging in self-care that practitioners may face include having a lack of energy, having too many

responsibilities, being fearful of appearing weak or vulnerable if they seek support, and facing difficulty in putting oneself first (Jackson, 2014).

**Theoretical Frameworks**

There are two theoretical frameworks that form the foundation of this study: Job Demands-Resources Theory and Self-Care Theory. Job Demands-Resources Theory describes one piece of how burnout can develop in a work setting and how it can be combatted. Self-Care Theory informed both the understanding of the practice of self-care and the process of its practice.

**Job Demands-Resources Theory.** Job Demands-Resources Theory is based on the idea that there are two elements of the working environment: job demands and work control (Karasek, 1979; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). These elements impact an individual's level of well-being and the quality of their working life (Sargent & Terry, 2000). Job demands are "the amount of work required from the employee, and the extent to which [they are required] to work under time pressure" (Sargent & Terry, 2000, p.245). Karasek (1979) refers to these demands as "instigators of action" (p.287), causing an individual to become stressed. Work control is "the extent to which the employee can exert influence over tasks and conduct during a normal working day" (Sargent & Terry, 2000, p.246). Job strains occur when there are high levels of job demands but low levels of control over how these demands are met (Karasek, 1979; Sargent & Terry, 2000).

According to Bakker and Demerouti (2017), when a person has high job demands but lacks the resources to handle these demands, this can result in a negative cycle. As they describe it, this leads to job strain, which can manifest in exhaustion and job-related anxiety, potentially leading to self-undermining and a decrease in job performance. They go on to further discuss the effects of job demands and strain, stating that "employees who experience job strain also perceive and create more job demands over time" (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, p.276), which can cause burnout to gradually worsen. A lack of social support has been shown to lessen job satisfaction in high demand jobs with high levels of control (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Karasek, 1979).

On the positive side, Baker & Demerouti (2017) have found that when an individual has high job demands but has the resources to meet these demands, this leads to "job crafting" which refers to the "proactive changes employees make in their work tasks" and "the type of relationships engaged in at work" (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, p. 276); this can result in an increase in job resources, work engagement, and personal resources such as self-efficacy, optimism, and self-esteem. When professional self-care is practiced, individuals are able to prevent burnout, and stay motivated and engaged to create their own resources (e.g. autonomy, feedback, support). High levels of work control allow for an individual to be protected from the harmful effects of a demanding job, as well as enable job crafting, which involves making proactive changes in job demands and resources to make work more meaningful (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Support within the organization or agency has been linked to a positive impact on employee productivity. Bakker and Demerouti (2017) explored these positive effects and found that "employees that built a resourceful and challenging work environment for themselves, increased their own psychological capital (hope, resilience, self-efficacy, and optimism) and work engagement" (p.276). High levels of social support can lead to higher levels of adjustment for the employee, and a decrease in the amount of energy that is needed to cope with high job demands when there is little control over the demands (Sargent & Terry, 2000).

Job Demands-Resources Theory forms one piece of the foundation of the focus of this study. Specifically, while social workers face demanding jobs, this does not have to lead to burnout. Social work can be a demanding profession, often requiring practitioners to carry many responsibilities. Developing the resources necessary to handle those responsibilities, as well as being able to identify signs of burnout, is crucial. When a practitioner is able to identify their own personal symptoms of burnout, they are more likely to work to counteract them. This involves using resources to meet their job demands, potentially creating a more positive and productive work environment. Job Demands-Resources Theory helped shape the direction the researcher went in formulating interview questions. The interview questions in this study are aimed at exploring how professors are teaching about burnout in their courses, what information

students have gained, and how they have been able to apply that information in their field work.

   **Self-Care Theory.** Self-Care Theory was developed by Dorothea Orem in 1956 to explain the challenges  of nursing and how to address them (Denyes et al., 2001). At the foundation of this theory is the idea that individuals, especially those in helping professions, need to cater to their own individual needs. "Both the concept and theory of self-care express the view of human beings as attending to and dealing with themselves" (Denyes et al., 2001, p.48). Here, the individual is both the one who acts and who is acted upon, which was different from other theories that focused on one person acting upon another (Denyes et al., 2001).

   According to Denyes et al. (2001), there are three elements to Self-Care Theory: self-care, self-care agency, and self-care requisites. The first, self-care, is defined as engaging in activities that "promote specific outcomes such as a sense of subjective well-being, a healthy lifestyle, stress relief, and resiliency for the prevention" of burnout (Lee & Miller, 2013, p.97). The second element, self-care agency, is a person's perceived and acknowledged ability to actively engage in the practice of self-care. The third, self-care requisites, are the aspects of a person that need to be tended to in order to maintain, regulate, and optimize human functioning and development. Requisites must be known in order to be attended to, which requires individuals to pay attention and notice signs of

when those regulations are not functioning normally. There are two types of self-care

requisites: essential enduring and situation specific. Essential enduring requisites are life

sustaining and developmentally crucial, such as eating and sleeping (Banko, 2013).

Situation specific requisites are those that come up either unexpectedly or expectedly,

such as falling ill or getting injured (Banko, 2013).

The process of engaging in self-care requires work on the part of the individual,

and exemplifies the need for education on the subject. First, an individual must

"investigate, formulate, and express [their] regulatory requirements", which are their self-

care requisites (Denyes et al., 2001, p.49). Then, they have to "make judgements about

what can and should be done to effect required regulations, followed by decisions about

what will be done" (Denyes et al., 2001, p.49). The individual must then perform self-

care actions in order to bring about their desired outcome, whether that be gaining back a

positive regulation or getting rid of a negative one (Denyes et al., 2001). In order for self-

care to be practiced effectively and make an impact, a person must continue to be

attentive to their needs and be sure to address them in a timely manner when they arise.

This frame of Self-Care Theory informed the definition and understanding of self-

care for this study in several ways. Self-Care Theory shaped the researcher's

understanding of self-care in social work, providing a better knowledge base for

formulating interview questions. Professors in this case study were asked how they

address the topic of self-care in their courses, and if they differentiate between personal

and professional self-care. Students were asked what they have learned about personal

and professional self-care from their courses, and how they have been able to use this

information to effectively engage in self-care practices.

**Prevalence of Issue in Social Work**

The prevalence of burnout in the field of social work is well-known to affect

practitioners in a variety of settings. Social work practitioners may experience

overwhelmingly high caseloads, coupled with increasing agency demands such as

paperwork and billing expectations (Peterson, 2016; Lee & Miller, 2013). Most jobs in

the field require long hours, work with difficult and challenging clients, and the ability to

navigate different environmental stressors (Peterson, 2016; Lloyd et al., 2002; Maslach &

Leiter, 2016; Lee & Miller, 2013). Research by Peterson (2016) has suggested that

practitioners may not be aware of the demands that are required of them in their daily

interactions with clients. This may have negative effects on their mental and physical

well-being, on their ability to continue providing ethical care to clients, and/or on their

ability to identify and address signs of burnout (Peterson, 2016). Jackson (2014) explored

why social work practitioners may not practice self-care and found that "they become

wrapped up in a state of mind that suggests that they need to work nonstop. They view

self-care as an activity they don't have time for" (p.15).

Since social work is a helping profession, practitioners tend to be "sensitive and

feeling oriented" (Han et al., 2012, p.441), which can make them more vulnerable to

burnout (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Emotional contagion, which is "one's susceptibility to synchronize with others' emotional states and expressions" (Han et al., 2012, p.441), can also have an effect on practitioners and contribute to emotional anguish. The process of burnout begins with initial over-involvement and emotional exhaustion, which can then lead to depersonalization of clients and poor service delivery (Han et al., 2012). Newell & Nelson-Gardell (2014) have suggested that the widespread experience of burnout in social work is due to an unspoken constant requirement to either express or repress emotions, combined with the chronic need to show empathy and compassion towards clients.

Burnout can be seen as the result of "a conflict in meeting demands of differing roles and the perception of being overwhelmed by too much to do in too little time" (Benner & Curl, 2018, p.300). This idea ties back to the various demanding roles that social work practitioners hold, combined with potential emotional investment in their clients' lives. The effects of burnout can take on different forms, including practitioners becoming rigid and closed off to input, experiencing increased irritability, becoming angry more easily, and in some cases, choosing to leave the profession permanently (Smullens, 2012).

The reported rates at which social work practitioners experience burnout varies. In one group of 751 social work practitioners, nearly 75% said they had experienced burnout during their careers (Kim et al., 2011). In another cohort of practitioners, the rate

of burnout was 59.9% (Poulin & Walter, 1993). Out of 1,000 practitioners in the North

Carolina chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, 39% reported they were

currently burnt out and 75% had experienced burnout at some point in their careers

(Wacek, 2017). One study looked at the persistence of burnout over time and found that

burnout tends to be chronic, with 40% of the sample remaining in the same stage of

burnout, 30% becoming more burnt out, and 30% becoming less burnt out (Morse,

Salyers, Rollins, Monroe-DeVita, & Pfahler, 2012).

Rates of burnout among practitioners have been explored specific to certain roles

or jobs. A study of 1,196 gerontological social workers found that 60% of them had

experienced emotional exhaustion (Kim et al., 2011). Within a group of 151 mental

health practitioners in Northern California, 54% were experiencing emotional exhaustion,

and 38% were experiencing depersonalization (Morse et al., 2012). A study of 29

community mental health center directors found that two-thirds had high levels of

emotional exhaustion and low levels of personal accomplishment, while almost 50% had

high levels of depersonalization (Morse et al., 2012).

Individuals in the field often neglect self-care practices or ignore the signs and

symptoms of burnout associated with their work (Jackson, 2014). As social work

practitioners are at an increased risk of experiencing the negative physical and emotional

effects of professional stressors, it is imperative that they practice self-care (Banko,

2013). Active engagement in self-care may both increase retention of qualified

practitioners in the field (Smith, 2015; Smullens, 2012), and allow them to prosper and better handle the stress that comes with the job (Humphrey, 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Lee & Miller, 2013). Jackson (2014) suggests that practitioners have "a moral and ethical obligation to stay healthy and fit to better serve the world" (p.16), their clients, and themselves.

Some authors have identified important practices in self-care. Jackson (2014) describes the essential tasks as: create and maintain healthy habits, develop clear boundaries with clients and colleagues, ask for help and accept it when needed, engage in activities that give peace, and practice mindfulness regarding one's capabilities and limits. Practicing self-awareness, one aspect of mindfulness, has been highlighted as well, as a solid sense of self-awareness enables practitioners to recognize when they start to feel emotionally taxed (Han et al., 2012).

With burnout and self-care being such important topics in social work, it would make sense to include education on these topics in formal social work curricula. Currently, there is no consistent standard for including these topics within a curriculum. As a result, student preparation in these areas can vary widely. In fact, Newell & Nelson-Gardell (2014) found that "many students go into the field of social work unaware that the effects of the chronic day-to-day exposure to clients and the distresses they experience (and subsequently describe) may become emotionally taxing" (p.427). Another set of authors (Han et al., 2012) found that MSW students with experience in the

field prior to entering their graduate programs reported significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion than their peers with no prior experience.

Both the CSWE and the NASW recommend that self-care be included in formal social work education, but researchers have found that many graduating students are not able to identify signs of burnout or have the ability to practice self-care in a preventative way. Social work students and recently graduated social work practitioners are especially vulnerable to burnout due to their lack of work experience, self-awareness, and reflection abilities. Given this, it would benefit both social work students and the social work field as a whole if a focus on burnout and self-care was included in formal education (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Banko, 2013; Iacono, 2017; Humphrey, 2013).

**Self-Care in Social Work Curricula**

**Current curricula.** Despite the findings in the literature supporting the importance of addressing self-care and burnout in social work education, there has been little focus on examining the ways in which schools address this. This section will explore curricular approaches to these topics in some schools of social work. Current approaches described in the literature include formal courses on these topics, student-led groups to help students currently in a field placement, and in-class activities aimed at strengthening student self-awareness.

*Formal courses.* Formal social work training and education prepares students to assist clients with life stress, without a focus on preparing students to apply these skills to their own personal and professional lives (Peterson, 2016; Jackson, 2014). "A valuable tool that can be offered to these social workers is a solid foundation during their collegiate studies in the area of self-care" (Peterson, 2016, p.13). One study looked at students who had graduated from various schools of social work and found that student respondents rated education and training on self-care as "very high, extremely important, significant, and very important" (Peterson, 2016, p.32). Many schools of social work have recognized the importance of this information being included in their curricula, and have been able to deliver it to students in a variety of ways.

One school of social work holds bi-monthly education courses that focus on stress reduction skills for professionals (Jackson, 2014). As stress can contribute to burnout and feelings of emotional exhaustion, learning skills to combat this early in a social work career can be helpful. The University at Buffalo School of Social Work created a self-care kit comprised of tools and resources to support students in coping with different stressors (Jackson, 2014). One of the tools used in this kit is a book titled *Self-Care in Social Work: A Guide for Practitioners, Supervisors, and Administrators*, which includes assessment tools for students to use on themselves, resources for engaging in self-care, and worksheets that go along with different topics in the chapters (Jackson, 2014). The assessment tools measure workplace stress, burnout, ways of coping, mindful attention

awareness, and compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue (Cox & Steiner, 2013).

The worksheets focus on a variety of topics, including sources of stress, self-care basics, how to notice signs of stress, and self-efficacy (Cox & Steiner, 2013).

 ***Student-led approaches.*** Humphrey (2013) examines a student-led approach to address issues of burnout and self-care. The administration and students in this school worked together to create a senior BSW student-led social work practicum support group that became part of the course requirements. The group provided students a space to come together to discuss their field placements in a student-run environment. Students found the mutual aid and information shared in the group to be beneficial for identifying symptoms of burnout and learning self-care skills from other students' experiences. The students expressed relief at not being alone in their feelings and having other students to relate to.

 ***In-class activities.*** Another issue that students of social work can be affected by, both during school and while in the field, is stress. Moore, Bledsoe, Perry and Robinson (2011) argue that students can have many roles while attending school (e.g. student, parent, employee, caretaker, etc.), which can contribute to higher levels of stress. One school of social work realized that "nowhere within the curriculum were there formal mechanisms designed to encourage students to practice self-care activities" (Moore et al., 2011, p.547), which could decrease these levels of stress. The school chose to address this by using journaling as a form of self-care to enhance self-reflection and reduce stress.

Students were asked to keep a bi-weekly journal describing the actions they took to tend to their emotional, physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs in order to keep themselves healthy. Journal entries had to include references to scholarly articles to support the students' statements on how the measures they were taking would help them and their self-care strategies. Self-reflection is an important aspect of social work, especially when dealing with burnout and self-care, because students need to be able to gauge where they are at and react to these feelings appropriately.

**Suggestions for Curricula**

Despite the scant literature on current practices in social work curricula in regard to burnout and self-care, many suggestions for curricula have been made. In regards to direct guidance for programs on ways to address these topics, Newell and Nelson-Gardell (2014) suggest:

> It is reasonable for social work education programs to assume some responsibility in providing students with content in this area in the formal teaching environment, where material on topics such as professional burnout…and self-care can be infused into social work courses and classroom exercises in a meaningful and practical way.
(Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014, p.428)

Social work educators can address these issues by teaching students about the definitions, signs, and symptoms of burnout, as well as strategies for actively engaging in self-care in a preventative way and figuring out how to implement these skills appropriately (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Learning these skills and strategies

while still in school can help prepare students for working with traumatized clients later in life (Humphrey, 2013).

**Infusing information on self-care.** Self-care assignments can be used in foundational social work practice courses to "enable students to critically understand how to make appropriate use of the self" and develop a stronger sense of self-awareness (Moore et al., 2011, p.547). Self-awareness could help students differentiate between empathetic concern, the ability for a person to care about and understand another individual's emotions, and emotional contagion, when the worker enmeshes their feelings and emotions with the client's (Han et al., 2012). It would be beneficial for educators to help students develop or give them information on effective coping strategies, such as stress management training, using cognitive behavioral approaches, deep breathing, relaxation therapy, and mindfulness so that students may monitor themselves and be able to recognize negative symptoms they may be experiencing (Han et al., 2012).

One study showed that it may be advantageous to offer a semester-long course on self-care strategies, and that students who had participated in this type of course showed an increase in their levels of self-compassion and improved self-regulation; these courses could also be designed to be weekly drop-in classes (Iacono, 2017). Professional self-care and organizational structures as related to burnout could be addressed in macro social work courses. Writing assignments on how agency directors could manage things differently and analyzing the beliefs that created these organizational structures would

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require students to think critically about burnout and self-care (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Education on burnout and self-care is critical to training new social workers, and can be beneficial to the student, their future places of employment, and their future clients.

**Teaching self-compassion.** Iacono (2017), defines self-compassion as the "attitude and practice of having compassion for oneself" (p.455). There are three components to self-compassion: self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-compassion requires a person to reflect inward and acknowledge their negative feelings about themselves and their suffering, and work to decrease self-criticisms and increase self-understanding and self-kindness. University students who showed greater levels of self-compassion had higher levels of self-efficacy, a component lacking when a person is experiencing burnout. Practicing self-compassion can also reduce stress and anxiety. One of the ways that self-compassion can be taught is through writing exercises. In this process, students describe a stressful or distressing situation they encountered and then write a compassionate letter to themselves addressing their reaction to the situation.

**Significance of the Current Study**

Given what is known about the impact that education on burnout and self-care can have for social work students, it is important to examine and understand how these elements are being included in curricula. This case study explores how these topics are

addressed at the University of Southern Maine School of Social Work, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. There was no literature found on what students have found helpful to learn about in regard to burnout and self-care, and scant literature on what students have learned about these topics. Additionally, little research was found describing how professors have been able to incorporate these topics into their curricula.

This study will add to the literature in several ways. It will showcase the differences and similarities in what is being taught at these two educational levels, explore how professors are able to incorporate this information and what they think is important to teach, and look at what students have found to be most helpful and how they have been able to utilize this information in their practice.

## CHAPTER THREE: Methods

This study utilizes a single-case study design of the University of Southern Maine School of Social Work because it allows for an in-depth focus on the curriculum at one school. Focus on one school is useful due to the researcher being a student there and having access to both professors and students, and appropriate given the constraints of the research time frame. The research questions in this study are explanatory, and are best served through use of a case study, as they focus on "a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control" (Yin, 2017, p.13).

The researcher collected information from three data points: professor interviews, student interviews, and a content analysis of social work course syllabi, textbooks and assigned articles. These areas were chosen for data collection for triangulation as they allowed for an in-depth look at the implementation of burnout and self-care from three different viewpoints. Professors were able to give information on what they teach in the classroom, students were able to give information on what they have learned in their social work courses, and the syllabi, textbooks, and assigned articles allowed for an analysis of how and if the information discussed in the interviews was outlined in the syllabi. The researcher recognized their role as a participant observer as a student at the school in which this study took place, and actively worked to guard against confirmation bias. This is further discussed in the "Data Analysis" section.

There were two research questions that guided the design of this study: 1. How do social work professors address the topics of burnout and self-care in their classes? 2. What do social work students think about their education on burnout and self-care from their social work classes?

**Participants**

**University of Southern Maine population.** USM is a regional public university that offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate degrees, as well as professional programs. For the 2018-2019 academic year, there were 5,249 undergraduate students enrolled, and 1,231 graduate students enrolled. There are three campus locations within the USM community: Portland, Gorham, and Lewiston-Auburn. The School of Social Work is headquartered on the Portland campus, and offers both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Accredited by the Council on Social Work Education, the School of Social Work is a generalist program that allows for graduates to become licensed at the LSW or LMSW level, depending on what program the student has completed. For the Spring 2019 semester, there were 147 undergraduate students (pursuing a Bachelor's of Social Work, of BSW), 106 graduate students (pursuing a Master's degree in Social Work, or MSW), and 12 full-time professors within the School of Social Work.

**Recruitment.** To be included in the study, interested participants were required to be professors or students in the School of Social Work at USM. Both professors and

students were recruited to participate through email and asked to respond within a six

week period. Professors were sent an initial email through their university accounts, using

a list of all current faculty in the School of Social Work located on the University of

Southern Maine website. Students were sent an email through the Bachelors of Social

Work and Masters of Social Work list serves. These emails introduced the researcher, the

study, what is being asked of the participants, and how they could contact the researcher

for more information or to set up an interview. Consent forms were included in these

emails. A follow-up email was sent to professors and students a few weeks after the initial

email.

      All participants who responded during the interviewing time period were eligible

for an interview. Five professors responded to the recruitment email, all of whom

participated in interviews. Of the 15 student respondents, 11 agreed to participate in an

interview. Two respondents did not respond to subsequent emails, and two others

responded after the interview period had concluded. Out of the 11 students interviewed,

six were in the MSW program and five were in the BSW program.

**Procedures**

      This case study and all corresponding materials were reviewed and approved by

the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the start of data collection. Participants

were sent consent forms in the initial recruitment emails and encouraged to review them

and contact the researcher with any questions. Before each interview, the participant was

given a hard copy of the consent form to sign, thus giving their consent to be a participant

in this study and to be audio recorded for the duration of the interview. The researcher

reviewed the consent form with participants and gave them an opportunity to ask

questions before giving their consent. Participants were given a list of definitions for

burnout, personal self-care, and professional self-care that they could reference as

needed. For phone interviews, participants were emailed a consent form and definition

list prior to the phone call, and verbal consent was given over the phone. A copy of the

definitions list can be found in Appendix A.

Participants completed one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the researcher.

Interviews with professors took place in their respective offices on the University of

Southern Maine campus, with one interview taking place in a meeting room at the

campus library. Interviews averaged 25 minutes in length, with the shortest lasting 15

minutes and the longest lasting 33 minutes. Out of the 11 student interviews, 9 took place

in a meeting room at the campus library and 3 took place over the phone. Interviews

averaged 15 minutes in length, with the shortest lasting 8 minutes and the longest lasting

23 minutes.

**Instruments**

The interview questions were developed by the researcher and were guided by the

research questions and a thorough review of the literature. Questions were designed as

open-ended to allow for participants to think critically and elaborate on their responses.

Questions for professors were aimed at eliciting background information on their practice history and teaching experience, and exploring how they address burnout and self-care in their courses. They were also asked to describe the challenges of teaching about these topics, as well as what is working well for them. There are a total of ten interview questions for professors, and a full list of these questions is included as Appendix B.

Interview questions for students varied from asking about previous experience before coming to their social work program, what they have learned while in the program to what information they think has been the most important or helpful. They were also asked about their internship experiences and what they have gained there. There were a total of ten interview questions for students, included as Appendix C.

**Data Analysis**

Two types of data analysis were used in this study; thematic analysis and content analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) process of thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview content. This process consists of six phases: 1. familiarizing yourself with your data, 2. generating initial codes, 3. searching for themes, 4. reviewing themes, 5. defining and naming themes, and 6. producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process was chosen because it allowed the researcher to analyze the patterns within the interview responses more flexibly and organize the responses based on these patterns. After the interviews were transcribed and reviewed, all responses were coded. From these codes, broader themes were determined based on the patterns within the codes. Themes were

reviewed alongside the responses to ensure that the themes accurately represented the data.

Content analysis was used to examine the social work course syllabi, textbooks and assigned articles to see how burnout and self-care were incorporated in different classes. Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) process of summative content analysis was utilized, which requires "understanding the contextual use of the words or content" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1283). This process was used because it allowed the researcher to explore the ways in which burnout and self-care are incorporated in these materials, rather than simply quantifying how often these terms are used. The researcher gathered 36 syllabi from the 2018-2019 academic year from this study's thesis chair. The thesis chair emailed all USM social work professors requesting all their syllabi for the 2018-2019 academic year. Not all syllabi from the 2018-2019 year were included as not every professor responded. Each syllabus, textbook, and assigned article was reviewed to see if and how burnout and self-care were mentioned. From the syllabi, textbooks, and assigned articles that did contain this information, the researcher analyzed the content of this information and elaborated on what was mentioned and how professors were incorporating this material.

As a participant observer, the researcher guarded against confirmation bias throughout the data analysis process and the overall study. The researcher remained mindful of the biases and background they brought with them, and continually worked to

keep these in check throughout the research process. The researcher routinely received

feedback from the thesis chair and committee members on how to curb these biases

further.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Results

There were five themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of professor and student interviews; 1. Varied Backgrounds, 2. The Professor Experience, 3. Mixed Student Exposure, 4. Trouble on the Horizon, and 5. Room for Improvement. These themes were chosen because they capture the views, opinions, and ideas discussed in the interviews. These themes are further broken down into sub-themes to explore the participants' responses more thoroughly. These themes were developed by the researcher rather than using in vivo coding to encompass the idea behind each theme more accurately. Among these themes, some pertain to both professors and students, and some are exclusive to each group. The themes compare the similarities and differences between the professors' and students' experiences in the classroom, as well as highlight student experiences outside of the classroom. Further, they include experiences shared by both professors and students, as well as suggested changes. These themes and sub-themes are outlined further in Table 1 below.

The content analysis consisted of reviewing 36 course syllabi, textbooks, and assigned articles for the 2018-2019 academic year to identify how burnout and self-care were addressed. This content analysis resulted in several different ways in which burnout and personal and professional self-care were addressed within the syllabi: through class discussions, a reading assignment, and the provision of self-care resources. However, the content within the syllabi that was able to be analyzed provided little information on

course content related to burnout and personal and professional self-care. The results

from the content analysis are woven throughout this section.

| Themes | Sub-Themes |
|---|---|
| Varied Backgrounds | - Students' backgrounds: BSW and MSW students differed in their rate of time in the program as well as their prior knowledge on burnout and self-care.<br>- Professors' backgrounds: Professors involved in this case study had a wide range in years of experience teaching in social work, as well as different experiences in practice settings. |
| The Professor Experience | - What they teach: Professors described different approaches to addressing burnout and personal and professional self-care with students.<br>- What they do: For all of the professors, they viewed what they did in the classroom and how they conducted themselves to be just as important to students as what topics they were teaching.<br>- What's working well: Many of the professors identified certain ways of teaching that have been working well for them.<br>- What's challenging: All of the professors described difficult areas and barriers they faced when teaching about burnout and self-care. |
| Mixed Student Exposure | - Information gained: Many of the students had a lot to say about the information they had learned in class from their professors.<br>- Internship exposure: All of the students interviewed were in field placements, and most of them discussed how burnout and self-care have been addressed in these settings.<br>- Other points of education: Both BSW and MSW students discussed seeking out their own information outside of the classroom.<br>- What could strengthen the program: Within the student interviews, they discussed some areas of the curriculum that they thought needed strengthening. |

| Themes | Sub-Themes |
|---|---|
| Trouble on the Horizon | - Self-care deficits: A common sentiment amongst the students was a desire to have more hands-on time for practicing self-care and discussing self-care practices in-depth.<br>- Experiencing burnout: Though these students may still be in school, that has not prevented them from experiencing feelings of burnout already.<br>- What professors are seeing: Professors also expressed concern in seeing students experiencing burnout or not seeing it as a potential problem. They also described instances where students have blurred their lines on professional self-care. |
| Room for Improvement | - What students want to see: Students discussed some changes they would want to see within the program to further strengthen it.<br>- What professors want to see: Professors had similar suggestions as the students in what changes they would like to see to strengthen the program. |

Table 1: Themes and Sub-Theme Descriptions

**Theme 1: Varied Backgrounds**

The theme 'Varied Backgrounds' spurs from different experiences that

participants brought with them to the School of Social Work. It was apparent in the

interviews that both students and professors had vastly varying experiences. For students,

experience varied in terms of their previous knowledge on burnout and self-care and the

amount of time they had been in the BSW or MSW program. Both of these factors helped

to shape students' overall responses to the interview questions, and highlighted what

information they were bringing with them when they entered their program. For

professors, their practice histories and years spent teaching as social work professors

were wide-ranging. This was important to address as it gives context to the information and personal experiences they are bringing into their classrooms, as well as how they incorporate this within their curricula.

      **Students' Backgrounds.** Both BSW and MSW students differed in their rate of time in the program as well as their prior knowledge on burnout and self-care. For BSW students, time in the program ranged from 1.5 years to 4 years, while MSW students' length of time in the program ranged from 1 semester to 3 years. However, length of time in the program did not seem related to level of knowledge about these terms, as most students shared they had only a general idea of what burnout and self-care meant before entering their program.

      BSW student responses were quite similar, and overall indicated a basic familiarity with the terms. One student described their knowledge as "just a general idea of burnout and the—I took it as the working so hard in whatever you're doing: sports, school, work or whatever. Just getting so drained, mentally and emotionally," while another explained "burnout…yeah, I mean yeah. I'd heard of those things. I didn't know that much about them and I didn't really know about them in the context of social work". One BSW student described a more in-depth knowledge of burnout, which they experienced with a family member. They described that "I had an understanding of burnout. My mother was a home care provider for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and went through burnout, so I had that knowledge of it."

Seeing the effects that burnout can have on an individual, and how burnout can impact multiple areas of one's life helped the student to frame the idea of burnout in a more concrete way.

Similarly, most of the MSW students were unaware of specific definitions and examples of burnout and self-care before learning about them at USM. When asked if they had knowledge of burnout and self-care before entering the program, one MSW student responded, "Not specifically in social work, but just, you know, general self-care and making sure you're maintaining health and happiness." Another student described their prior knowledge as "nothing specific. I knew about those topics like a layman would, but no. No, I thought the harder you work, the harder you should work. There was no such thing as burnout, I guess." Similar to the BSW sample, there was one MSW student with prior experience with burnout, describing "I've had professional experience with burnout, not as a social worker but in the field of mental health." Professors also had different definitions and views of what burnout is, which will be further discussed in the theme 'The Professor Experience'.

**Professors' Backgrounds.** The professors involved in this case study had a wide range of years of experience teaching in social work, spanning from 6 months to 23 years, as well as different experiences in practice settings. There did not seem to be a direct connection between time spent teaching and practice history, with some coming to teaching later in life. Regardless of time spent teaching, the professors had broad practice

histories that in many cases overlapped with at least one other professor's experience in a similar setting. One professor had years of experience working as a clinician in several settings with individuals, families, and groups, stating:

> So I was in clinical practice for approximately 11 years…I've spent approximately the past nine and a half years working with an adult population, primarily females but some male individual clients, as well. So individual, I worked on a DBT team which was originally informed and then went to standard, so I've worked in both of those two realms. I've done group therapies, which was in the context of early recovery.

Another area of commonality was that of having a background in clinical supervision. One professor had experience of supervising within a hospital setting, overseeing students. "And I started supervising there, supervising social work interns. In a given year, we had fifteen-plus social work interns from all over; Smith, Simmons, from BU, from BC, BSW students from Wheelock College, just from all over." Another professor had supervisory experience working with the homeless population in large, community organizations, sharing:

> I worked with homeless youth primarily in youth programs and first in a very well-known, big multi-service center. Went to Preble Street where I spent the last most of 20 years doing program development, supervising staff, developing programs, grants as the associate director.

One professor had several years of experience working in their own private practice while also working at a separate organization.

> I had a small private practice while I was there. I was really only one day a week there that I was doing private practice, and really more like a half day. It was like five or six hours a week private.

Another professor brought with them experience working in a number of roles within different non-profit organizations. "So I have worked from each side of the spectrum, from case management, to intake, to outreach, and then moving into grant writing and forming programs and directing programs, evaluating the programs." These vastly different practice histories allow professors to apply expertise from their lives to the classroom to support student learning in the field of social work.

**Theme 2: The Professor Experience**

This theme was developed from responses to direct questions in the interviews. The sub-themes explore what and how professors teach, what they do to support students, and what they found has been working well and what is challenging about teaching about burnout and self-care. Professors address the teaching structures they have to work within, and how these influence how they are able to teach.

**What they teach.** Professors described different approaches to addressing burnout and personal and professional self-care with students. For some professors, burnout is covered within the scope of practicing in the field. One described being upfront about burnout as a way of preparing students for what could happen, stating "that it's inevitable unless you step up and do something about it right out of the gate." Another professor had a similar approach, teaching students to be realistic in what they are going to accomplish and to enjoy the smaller victories. In their words they will share with students to "start by feeling good about what you're doing, and recognize when you don't

or finding the balance there. Not everything is going to be great, but one has to really find rewards from the work you're doing."

For some professors, the topic of burnout did not come up within the context of working in the field, but rather within the context of the class itself. One professor found it helpful to talk with students about how to avoid burnout while in a class with a topic they are not comfortable or familiar with, such as research. By addressing the anxieties and misconceptions students have in this particular course, the professor felt that students were able to move more easily through the material once they were able to have their concerns addressed.

For another professor, the topic of burnout was addressed in class, but only when it came up within discussions. This professor had positive experiences of having these kinds of conversations with students, though more so as it related to the discussion they were having in a particular moment rather than being a planned topic, saying "we haven't really talked a lot about burnout. I think we—there are ways in which it comes up indirectly because students are often stressed and, you know."

Professional self-care was one area that many professors discussed with students. One aspect that was stressed was the importance of supervision, both in the field after graduation and while students are at their internships. There was an emphasis on the use of self-reflection and having a supervisor guide this process. One professor addressed the

different reasons why supervision can be helpful for students, and what that should look

like, describing the importance of,

> …helping people learn how to utilize their supervision. I think a lot of
> people don't know how to do that. And the supervision model in social
> work is one where it's instructive and supportive at the same time, at least
> it should be, a good supervisor should do both of those things. And
> helping people to learn how to lean on their supervisor if something is
> pushing their buttons with a client, or they feel like they made a mistake
> with a client and they need to process that and they need to not feel
> ashamed or afraid to bring that up to a supervisor.

Other professors explored additional aspects of professional self-care, such as

having good boundaries with clients and colleagues in order to keep work and home

separate. This involved discussing the ability to figure out individually how to stick to

these boundaries, and having the self-awareness to notice when the boundary between

these two areas of life start to blend. One professor viewed "healthy" boundaries and

realistic goal setting as two of the major components of professional self-care, both with

co-workers and while working with clients.

One professor brought up the topic of mindfulness as a way to practice self-care

to prevent burnout. They describe teaching students specific skills to pay attention to their

own feelings, and then use self-awareness to take a look at how those feelings affect them

within their practice, sharing:

> So we focus on the observation of feelings that we have, what's our breath
> like, how is our body, what is our posture like. So description then is
> putting words to that and then participation is acting on it. So just noticing
> if I feel overwhelmed, what does overwhelmed feelings look like in the
> body? And then the "How?" skills are, in essence, how do we play out the

"What?" skills and interact with things. So the practice of nonjudgemental
stances. So if I'm working with an individual in field practicum, how do I
notice if I'm having a judgmental reaction to that individual, and just
notice that it's there and yet not act on it.

Personal self-care was another topic that professors made sure to address in the

classroom. Some reviewed it more generally as a definition, telling students to "learn to

know what you love… and just do whatever it takes to care for yourself." Others

discussed what specific things students could do, such as "eating well, good sleep

hygiene", "saying no to people", "taking naps" and encouraging their students to do these

things. One professor viewed personal self-care as not just something you do, but as

something you integrate with your life. "Self-care is a lifestyle, it's not just one little

thing you do. It's really a fully integrative lifestyle that you have to make choices."

Self-advocacy within the workplace and being comfortable with practicing this

was another aspect of professional self-care that some professors addressed. For one

professor, this was more of a general idea, sharing with students that "we're advocating

for everyone else so we should advocate for ourselves as well." For another professor, it

was framed in a way that suggested that students need to be able to advocate for

themselves and their own needs if they are going to be practicing in the field.

**What they do.** For all of the professors, they viewed what they did in the

classroom and how they conducted themselves to be just as important to students as what

topics they were teaching. For some, this means checking in with students to see how

they are doing throughout the semester, seeing if they are feeling overwhelmed or

anxious about upcoming assignments and encouraging students to speak up. One professor took this approach and made it more personalized to the students, asking specific people about certain things that are happening in their lives and how they are coping overall, offering a listening ear;

> Sometimes I kind of chat with people about who has family obligations and trying to really support the challenge. You know, recognize that it's really hard to have a lot of different things to do. A lot of the students have to work, and I know that that adds a lot of stress and really trying to validate how hard all those things are.

Some professors have found that being flexible in the classroom helped prevent students from becoming burned out. This is not possible for all students in all classes because it "depends on the class and it depends on the timeline". When possible, some professors are able to make changes for students who feel overwhelmed if it means making things easier, such as extending the due date for an assignment. Trying to lessen the stressors that are able to be shifted was one way to support students in preventing burnout at school.

Another way of supporting students in detecting and preventing burnout is through encouraging them to reach out for help. In regard to schoolwork, one professor reports telling students "it really is ok to reach out to your professors. Your professors have so many resources for you, and it really is okay to take care of yourself, to do what you need to do."

For issues that are happening outside of the classroom and outside of the

professors' control, some will suggest students seek other resources to deal with these

challenges. One professor states that they "give them some guidance on places they can

go and some resources that may be available to them on campus where they can get some

help and get some relief as well." Another professor discussed outside resources,

specifically the counseling services on campus.

> I always remind people that they should be taking advantage of counseling
> services. That if they start to feel overwhelmed or if the material in the
> course or if what they're doing in field work is kicking up a lot of stuff for
> them personally, that that's a signal that they need to do something about it
> and that it's really ok. More than ok actually, I wish we could require
> people to do it. But it has to be personal choice, you can't make somebody
> do that. But try to normalize the experience of getting your own help,
> that's another thing that I do.

Another way professors try to teach their students about burnout and self-care is

by modeling it through their own professional behavior in the classroom. For one

professor, this included having discussions in class about their own experiences with

keeping structured boundaries to keep their personal and professional lives separate, and

for keeping time carved out for self-care. Another professor exemplified this by focusing

specifically on professional self-care, discussing time management and structured

boundaries.

**What's working well.** Many of the professors identified certain ways of teaching

that  have been working well for them. One of these strategies was being interactive in

class with students and keeping them engaged when it comes to discussing self-care. Also

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related to self-care, one professor experienced positive results when being open with their students about their own struggles with this topic and having students use it as a learning experience. Another professor found that when discussing burnout and self-care in class, it has been necessary to both allow room for students to bring things up on their own, and create structure around topics that students may not otherwise bring up. They would center these conversations around internship experiences and what is working well and what has been challenging. Finding the balance between creating this structure and allowing things to come from students organically required gauging the atmosphere in each class with different students.

**What's challenging.** All of the professors described difficult areas and barriers they faced when teaching about burnout and self-care. One of the biggest challenges was incorporating this information in content-heavy courses. For some professors, the heavy content required in the class obstructed any content on burnout and self-care. Talking more specifically about self-care, one professor noted that it was easier to discuss these topics in their diversity courses rather than policy and research courses. Another professor went a step further, suggesting that social work programs outside of USM have similar issues when addressing these topics, stating:

> So I think it's a challenge in all social work programs because we tend to focus more on practice areas. Working with families, working with children, working in substance abuse or mental health settings or policy research and I don't think it's an area we've identified as a priority in social work education.

One professor describes the challenge of teaching students about mindfulness, and how their inaccurate interpretations of what mindfulness is has led to them practicing this method of personal self-care incorrectly. This professor felt that many of their students' preconceived ideas about and misuse of mindfulness stemmed from its wide use in pop-culture. Conversations that explored what mindfulness meant to students often resulted in the realization that they were not practicing true mindfulness.

Some professors described being challenged in their teaching when facing differences in student experience. As some students are less seasoned than others, this can create a barrier to applying new learning. One professor shared a concerned that "for people who are greener coming into the profession and they maybe don't have a context for what it really means on the ground, to see those boundaries." Another professor found it challenging to discuss personal self-care when the students had differences in how they approach and practice their own self-care, including cultural differences.

One professor expressed that it can be challenging to approach the topic of burnout with students altogether, as they do not want to discourage them from entering the field. However, the professor also recognized that not addressing this topic can lead to other challenges once the students have entered the field, such as not knowing the signs of burnout which could lead to experiencing it. The professor felt unsure how to address these issues, stating:

> I don't think we do a good job as social work educators about some of the
> challenges…So sometimes we wanna talk about it, but it feels like scaring

students if we over talk about it. But it's something I think they should
know. So how do we balance that?

**Theme 3: Mixed Student Exposure**

Students described a wide range of experience related to learning about burnout

and self-care through the USM School of Social Work, with some sharing they learned a

lot related to burnout and self-care, while others felt they had not learned enough.

Students overall shared that they were not only learning about these topics in classes, but

also in their field placements as well as through steps taken on their own to further

explore these topics.

**Information gained in classes.** Many of the students had a lot to share about the

information they had learned in class from their professors. When it came to burnout,

both BSW and MSW students had similar experiences. One of the things they had learned

was that burnout is common in social work. MSW students shared comments such as;

"…it's very common. I'm finding out more and more through my classes and my

internships that it's very common"; "Burnout can happen to anybody because I've

watched other people get burnt out in different ways." One BSW student noted that the

social work field as a whole is mindful of burnout and how this has helped them, saying,

"I mean it was good, for one, to be like warned about it. And to sort of know that like,

from what it seems like from USM, that the social work field is aware of burnout."

Another BSW student talked about learning how self-awareness can help prevent

burnout, stating that it can help a practitioner "…see the signs in themselves if they're

going towards burnout, they're going towards being overly stressed and then because they're noticing that, revert to something else and do something that makes them feel better."

In the content analysis, burnout was mentioned in one course syllabus, SWO 651 - Advanced Practice: Individuals and Families. A class discussion on burnout was scheduled for the second class of the semester. The description within the syllabus follows: "What makes a good provider? How can providers care for themselves? Addressing burnout and compassion fatigue".

In terms of personal self-care, students reported experiences that ranged from cursory mentions to deeper explorations. One MSW student shared they had one class, a generalist course, that approached personal self-care in depth and reviewed different self-care techniques almost every class meeting. Two BSW students felt that many of their classes had included the basics of personal self-care, stressing the importance of self-awareness in recognizing symptoms of burnout and making sure to keep work and home lives separate. An MSW student had a similar experience in their classes, and feels well-informed because of it.

> And…well I have learned a lot about [personal self-care] in our classes. In each class, there's at least some…something paid to it. Whether it's a mindfulness activity in the class, or talking about resources outside of the class. So now I feel like I'm trained up, like I know better.

One MSW student shared they were able to take the information gained from their classes and apply it with their clients at their field placement this year, saying, "When I

work with clients now and when I work in groups, I always take the time to do the mindfulness piece because there's been a part of that throughout the program, some more dedicated than others to it."

The content analysis showed that two syllabi made reference to self-care. One course, SWO 503 - Social Work Practice I, lists self-care as a class discussion that is scheduled on the syllabus for three separate classes. There is no further information given on what this discussion includes. Another course, SWO 603 - Advanced Practice: Groups, has the following as part of the class description: "As self-care is a quintessential component of social work, I will be incorporating discussion and practice of wellbeing and mindfulness exercises." This same course also lists "mindfulness and self-care" as a discussion for one class during the semester.

Three course syllabi, SWO 370 - Critical Thinking about Human Behavior in the Social Environment, SWO 552- Critical Thinking about Human Behavior in the Social Environment, SWO 605- Social Work Research II, provide a link to the USM website for The Well, which is the campus wellness center. The syllabi describe The Well as having resources for student wellness. Similarly, 21 of the syllabi made reference to USM counseling services somewhere within the syllabi. Also provided were links to the counseling services website, and a phone number for their office on the USM campus.

When discussing professional self-care, many of the BSW students reported learning a lot about supervision in classes, and its importance within the field. One BSW

student explained how supervision has been helpful to them by giving them a space to seek advice and guidance from someone who has more experience than them, while also respecting their role as an intern and student who is still learning. On the topic of support, one MSW student mentioned how the topic of collegial support has been brought up. This included conversations on joining organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers and how staying connected to other professionals can be beneficial.

Further, some BSW students had discussions in class about personal self-care that focused more on strategies of practicing these skills. One student discussed courses in which the use of boundaries was reviewed for both professional roles and personal self-care. Another BSW student had class discussions on the importance of maintaining structured boundaries in relation to ethics, as well as the importance of taking breaks.

In one course, SWO 404 - Methods of Social Work Practice III, there is a reading assigned titled, "Dual Relationships: Personal and Professional Boundaries in Rural Social Work". Within this article, there is some discussion that practitioners need to maintain professional boundaries with clients when working within a rural community. The rest of the article focuses on dual relationships, and is unrelated to professional self-care as it is being used in this case study.

**Internship exposure.** All of the students interviewed were in field placements, and most discussed how burnout and self-care have been addressed in these settings. This includes trainings on burnout, conversations with colleagues and supervisors on self-care,

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and seeing other practitioners model positive behaviors. An MSW student highlighted

how their internship had built collegial support into the model they use.

> Within each day of service I do, 2 hours are devoted almost to just being
> with the other co-facilitators, talking about our day, what we're bringing
> into the room, how we can leave that and be present for the participants.
> And then at the end, if
> anything came up, if you're triggered, if there's anything weighing you
> down, you can also leave that in the room before you go home.

Students also discussed the ways they have learned about burnout from their

placements. When asked about education on burnout at their internship, an MSW student

stated they had been able to see how their supervisor addresses burnout and uses formal

boundaries to keep a "work-home divide". Similarly, a BSW student discussed how

burnout is addressed in their placement, and that employees are supported when they start

to experience symptoms of burnout. Another BSW student had even more exposure with

burnout, and was able to attend a training through their internship that focused solely on

self-care and preventing burnout.

In regard to personal self-care, one BSW and one MSW student had individuals at

their internships who had modeled for them appropriate ways to practice self-care. The

BSW student witnessed this with a staff person keeping their structured boundaries.

> I know someone who is at my internship, she works there, and she doesn't
> take any of her work stuff with her. She puts it all in a bag and she leaves
> it at her desk at work. And I think that's a really good example of being
> able to set boundaries.

The MSW student witnessed a similar use of boundaries with some of the clinicians they

collaborate with, sharing:

> Burnout is interesting there because with the clinicians I work with, they
> are not very burnt out. And I'm not sure they have a lot more power over
> how they do their work there. If something that is emotionally draining
> happens, they have the power to be like, "Ok, it's 3:30. I'm going home
> because I can". And nobody seems to really, like, enforce them not doing
> that, which is interesting. But I will say that everybody works the full 40.
> They probably work more than that in reality. And the hours that they are
> there, they're able to give 100%. If somebody cuts out early, they're not
> not getting work done, they're just there for an hour less or whatever.

**Other points of education.** Both BSW and MSW students discussed seeking out

additional information on burnout and self-care beyond what they were learning in the

classroom or at their field placements. For some students, this meant looking into the

research themselves and finding their own information. One MSW student did individual

research before coming to USM, including practicing yoga and researching mindfulness

and healthy eating. Another MSW student shared that they supplemented what they were

learning in class, stating:

> I always did my own work as well, whether it was a self-help book or any
> type of reading for me personally aside from what was structured in the
> curriculum. And I did a lot of my own journaling and reflection aside from
> anything related to school and that was really helpful.

Another strategy that students used to gain more information on burnout and self-

care was by talking individually with others, whether that be peers or USM faculty. One

MSW student mentioned that they prefer to get this kind of information from their fellow

USM peers, as well as colleagues at their field placements. A BSW shared a similar experience, describing conversations they had with classmates about their experiences with burnout at field placements, and self-care practices that were working well for them.

**What could strengthen the program.** Across the interviews, students made suggestions for areas of the curriculum that could be strengthened. For example, many expressed the desire to have more time in class dedicated to these topics in order to learn the information more in-depth. Through the content analysis, it was evident that not every class had content related to burnout or self-care, with 26 of the 36 including some reference to these topics. One BSW student discussed her first few classes in the program in terms of burnout, saying "I remember it was a topic I didn't really hear about the first semester so much. I was in my intro classes, I didn't really hear a whole lot about that." Another BSW student had a similar experience, stating "With burnout, that word sort of gets talked about a lot and you know, we bring up burnout or how people in social work get burnt out, but we've never had like, a lot of discussion on that." One BSW student mentions that the information they have gained from classes has been somewhat basic and repetitive, suggesting "so it'd be neat if they kind of connected more and realized they were all teaching the same, very basic level of it, so they could dive deeper in."

When it came to personal self-care, students wanted to have more substance and variation to the information that they were learning. One BSW student shared a desire to have more in-depth information provided on self-care, while another BSW student

suggested having conversations around what self-care can look like. One MSW student had similar experiences in their classes, sharing that some classes will review lists of some basic self-care practices. Another MSW student expressed interest in learning more about time management and how much time is healthy to devote to work, self and personal life.

With professional self-care, two students share that their classes have not dedicated much time to discussing it. In regard to how much time in class is spent on this, one MSW student stated "Not too much, it's almost…it might be expected at this point in a lot of people's lives. And if they do need a reminder, that's all it would be." A BSW student talked about having some knowledge on professional self-care from previous job experiences. This student wanted to see more incorporation of "professional self-care, because that is something outside of here I've learned about at jobs. But in school that isn't a topic they've focused on."

**Theme 4: Trouble on the Horizon**

Students and professors alike identified challenges students face in regard to burnout and self-care. For some students, this included challenges they personally faced with experiencing burnout, while for other students, this meant seeing their peers struggling to adequately practice self-care, or having unhealthy coping mechanisms and calling it self-care. Similarly, professors describe instances in which the have seen

students facing challenges with burnout and practicing both personal and professional

self-care.

**Self-care deficits.** A common sentiment amongst the students was a desire to

have more hands-on time for practicing self-care and discussing self-care practices in-

depth. An MSW student shared that although practicing self-care was discussed in some

classes, they did not feel that they had enough free time to meet this expectation. Another

MSW student was in a similar situation, with too many responsibilities to feel like they

had time to practice personal self-care.

> But it's, I have to say it's very difficult being in grad school. I know what
> I'm supposed to do, but a lot of the time I don't do it because I don't think
> I have time. Because I feel overwhelmed with classes, and internship, and
> wife, and kids and all this other stuff so.

A BSW student further supports this claim of not having time, sharing that when

they are experiencing symptoms of burnout, they do not always think to practice self-

care, as they do not have time to. Another BSW student has seen concerns in their fellow

classmates with their approaches to personal self-care; "I've seen a lot of my classmates

joke about self-care when they drink, and that concerns me. I see that a lot, actually."

**Experiencing burnout.** Though these students may still be in school, that has not

prevented them from experiencing feelings of burnout already. Two MSW students

shared their own struggles of dealing with burnout during their time at USM. One student

described their difficulty with finding balance between having a personal life, completing

school work, and taking care of a household. A second MSW student described their

shock at how quickly they had experienced burnout and how this had taken them by surprise.

> I didn't expect it to hit home so quickly, so closely. Like in the internship. I figured once I graduated and I was in the field for a while then after a while it would become an issue…but it happened really early in the internship…it just surprised me how quickly it came up, you know?

**What professors are seeing.** Professors also expressed concern in seeing students experiencing burnout or not seeing it as a potential problem. They also described instances where students have blurred their lines on professional self-care. One professor describes seeing signs of burnout at specific times, such as during midterms or finals, and seeing students have breakdowns in the library. Another professor described how cavalier students can be about the realities of burnout and practicing personal self-care, sharing:

> I find a lot of students, and years ago myself I was included with it, is we kind of go in with that super social worker mindset of, "I can take it on! It'll be fine! I have youth on my side!". And the problem is, is that that is when we need to start our work on, "How do I take care of myself so that I can then be integral to the profession?" Because if I'm not doing that I'm either going to leave the profession, I'm going to become really unhealthy in the profession, or I'm just going to get really sour.

Professors also shared concerns about the quality of supervision their students are receiving. In the words of one professor:

> And I worry… when students say the supervision they get is just, "When I need it, I walk in. I just ask a question", that's a different thing than being able to take an hour, or even less time where you're sitting and you're asked to bring in what's going on, what's difficult, other things to talk about. When you do it all ad hoc it doesn't necessarily happen.

Similarly, another professor had a discussion with their students in class regarding professional boundaries with clients at a field placement. The professor had concerns about a student explaining a situation where they had informal boundaries, explaining:

> We had a discussion, I forget when it was, in one of my classes not too long ago, about the use of your own phone with texting with clients. So there's always pressure, and clients will say, "Well what if I need to reach you?" and put on the spot like that, so somebody was like, "Well here's my cell phone number, you can text me". It's a slippery slope. People shouldn't do it, never do it. As well intended as it is.

**Theme 5: Room for Improvement**

This theme developed as a result of the responses from both students and professors regarding changes they would like to see implemented within the USM School of Social Work. Some students suggested creating a new course that addresses burnout and self-care, while others suggested adding this content to pre-existing courses. Some professors echoed these sentiments on seeing a new course created. One professor suggested the idea of hosting an annual self-care workshop for students and faculty to address this content more thoroughly.

**What students want to see.** Students discussed some changes they would want to see within the program to further strengthen it. A common suggestion from students was to incorporate more education on burnout and personal and professional self-care at USM. One student suggested this be done by creating a new course that is specifically designed to address these topics, with an emphasis on promoting student self-awareness

to recognize personal limitations and symptoms of burnout. Another BSW student

suggested that if there was a course dedicated to practicing self-care skills, students could

take this knowledge and implement it with the clients they work with to increase their

coping mechanisms.

Some other students recognized that an entire class on self-care may not be

possible, and would like to see the addition of more information in the classes that

already existed. One BSW student suggested creating a plan for implementing these

topics in pre-existing courses. Another BSW student expressed a desire to have more

conversations on practicing self-care strategies in a more concrete, attainable way. One

MSW student would also like to see information on burnout incorporated thoroughly into

a class, but did not see a need for it to be made into an entire course.

> I think it would behoove the university to make self-care a pivotal part of
> at least a class, not necessarily an entire class. But I think we're doing the
> students, especially the green students who haven't worked in the field, I
> think we're doing them a disservice to not prepare them and let them
> know that burnout is coming.

Rather than incorporating this information more in classroom discussions, an

MSW student discussed bringing in other ways of learning about the challenges of

burnout and self-care from people with experience in the field. They stated, "Why don't

they get alumni's who've graduated, who've been in the field for a few years, bring them

back to the school and have a question/answer time for students?"

**What professors want to see.** Professors had similar suggestions as the students in what changes they would like to see to strengthen the program. Professors supported the idea of focusing the topics of self-care and burnout in one course, and some further explored the possibility of adding this content to pre-existing courses. One suggestion made was that information on burnout and personal and professional self-care could be integrated into an existing course, rather than creating a course exclusively focused on these topics. One professor explained the potential benefits of this model, saying, "I think I see it as something that should maybe be incorporated more into the clinical courses. Because that's where, often times, in practice settings… we see that more in clinical practice." Similarly, another professor made the argument that the field work class is not heavy on content and would be the appropriate place for these discussions, as field work courses are process driven rather than content driven.

Like some of the students mentioned above, one professor thought that having an entire course dedicated to burnout and self-care would be the best way to integrate more information at USM, possibly through a one credit professional course. Similarly, another professor thought that an annual workshop on self-care would be beneficial to students and faculty.

> So it'd be nice for us to be able to do that on a regular basis, to have that just sort of infused in our practice here. Even just once a year have an annual self-care training that's open to students and faculty, maybe even field instructors. I know [the School of Social Work Field Coordinator] has done that a little bit in field, but that's something that we could do.

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## CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion and Implications

Learning about burnout and self-care in social work programs is crucial for adequately preparing students for recognizing their own symptoms of burnout and knowing how to actively work to reverse and prevent them through the use of self-care. The students' and professors' responses shed light on current approaches within USM's School of Social Work, and provide concrete suggestions for ways to strengthen the inclusion of this content across the curriculum. This section will discuss the implications of the findings related to the current state of the curriculum, areas for change and growth, and suggestions on how these changes could be implemented.

### Burnout

Prior research has identified moderate-to-high burnout rates among those in the field (Kim et al., 2011; Poulin & Walter, 1993; Wacek, 2017; Morse et al., 2012), and aligns with the description on how burnout happens slowly and progressively (Han et al., 2012). Students shared that they learned that burnout can happen as a result of unhealthy work environments, which is supported by Bakker and Demerouti's (2017) theory of Jobs Demands-Resources and that too many demands within a job can cause burnout symptoms if an individual is not able to meet these demands.

Some of the findings demonstrated burnout and issues stemming from lack of self-care were already impacting students. Students reported that though they know some personal self-care skills, they do not feel like they have time to practice self-care. This

mindset of "not having the time" has been suggested as a reason that those in the social work profession experience burnout so frequently (Jackson, 2014). Moore et al. (2011) point out that students can have many responsibilities while in school, which can lead to higher levels of stress and less time for self-care. Students in this study shared their own struggles with burnout and trying to balance all of their school and internship responsibilities with taking care of themselves. Making time for personal self-care for students is crucial in order to combat symptoms of burnout (Banko, 2013; Han et al., 2012; Jackson, 2014; Lee & Miller, 2013; Denyes et al., 2001), increase their retention in the field (Smith, 2015; Smullens, 2012), and increase their ability to handle the stresses of the job (Humphrey, 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Lee & Miller, 2013). The process of burnout, along with steps for recognizing it and enhancing self-care, could be formally integrated into the USM School of Social Work curriculum. While both students and professors share that it is discussed in classes, responses indicate that it is not implemented consistently.

The findings of this study reflect that while self-care and burnout are taught in many courses, students expressed a desire for more detailed information, especially in regard to personal self-care skills. When students are not prepared to adequately practice self-care, they run the risk of experiencing burnout when they enter the field (Iacono, 2017; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Humphrey, 2013). Students are learning the skills to help their future clients cope with life, but are not learning all the skills necessary to

take care of their own needs (Peterson, 2016; Jackson, 2014), even if they identify this information as important to their learning (Peterson, 2016).

A professor suggested that a lack of these conversations on burnout may be due to concerns that teaching students about it may scare them and cause them to not want to enter the field. With rates of burnout in social work being reported as high as 75% (Kim et al., 2011), it is reasonable to think that this could discourage students. However, going into the field without knowing what burnout is and being made aware of the challenges that come with being a practitioner could also cause students to leave the profession (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). The realities of burnout could be interwoven more consistently throughout the courses using students' fears or concerns as a guide for discussing prevention while in the field.

**Supervision**

Both professors and students stressed the importance of supervision. Professors want students to learn the role of supervision and how to use it effectively to support their own growth and development. Supervision should be "instructive and supportive", as one professor stated. This is supported by Bakker and Demerouti's (2017) view that support within an agency can have a positive impact on the employees. Further, as Sargent and Terry (2000) explained, high levels of support in an agency can lead to higher levels of adjustment for employees. Not utilizing proper supervision can lead to burnout (Han et al., 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Though not much can be done about the quality of

supervision at field placements from USM's standpoint, if students are made aware of what supervision is supposed to look like and how it should be helping them, they will be able to advocate for themselves.

**Boundaries**

Structured boundaries are an important aspect of social work and are used by practitioners to maintain their professionalism. Several professors discussed how they teach students about the importance of using boundaries. In some cases, this refers to boundaries within the students' place of work, and in others, it is boundaries in regard to keeping the work life and personal life separate, both of which are vital aspects of professional self-care (Lee & Miler, 2013). Learning these skills while still in school is important and prepares students for what they will be facing once they enter the field as licensed professionals (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Lee & Miller, 2013). Additionally, if students were taught more about the negative effects that often come with having informal or unstructured boundaries (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Jackson, 2014), they may be more motivated to take these issues seriously and work to strengthen their professional self-care skills.

**Self-Care**

For personal self-care, both students and professors shared similar definitions of what it means to them, with the overall idea being "taking care of yourself". However, one professor pointed out that self-care is a lifestyle, rather than just one thing that you do

for yourself. This is aligned with Self-Care Theory and the idea that self-care is the process of human beings "attending to and dealing with themselves" (Denyes et al., 2001, p.48; Banko, 2013). Many students reported some of their classes had included specific self-care practices, which often served as a reminder to them to be practicing these skills, even when it may be difficult (Jackson, 2014).

Field placements were another point of contact for students to learn about burnout and self-care. Students gained knowledge on boundaries and professional self-care by watching how other practitioners at their placements behave and trying to model their behavior after them. These kinds of support mechanisms are important in the prevention of burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Sargent & Terry, 2000; Jackson, 2014; Sofology et al., 2019; Han et al., 2012; Malsach & Leiter, 2016; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). This type of experience allows students to see how these skills work within an agency setting, combined with the knowledge they have gained in the classroom.

**Inconsistencies**

There are inconsistencies in what professors and students report is being discussed in courses, and how course syllabi reflect what is being taught. Within the syllabi, there was not much content available to analyze, as mentions of burnout and self-care were limited. While a majority of the syllabi included information on counseling services offered at USM, one professor discussed this in an interview, and no students mentioned it. One of the syllabi mentions burnout as a discussion topic for one class

within the course curriculum, whereas students and professors state that this information is covered to some extent in multiple courses. Similarly, there are two syllabi that mention self-care discussions within the course, though students report learning this information in various courses. Professors stated that these topics mainly come up through spontaneous class discussions, which could explain their absence on the syllabi, as well as the lack of books and assigned articles containing this information.

Alternatively, professors may not see the need to include this information on their syllabi if the topic of the course is unrelated to burnout and self-care. Given these findings, it may benefit the faculty in the USM School of Social Work as a whole to consider ways to approach infusing content related to burnout and self-care consistently across the curriculum. Examples from other schools of social work include holding bi-monthly education courses on stress reduction skills (Jackson, 2014), creating a self-care kit for students that include self-assessments and resources for engaging in self-care (Jackson, 2014; Cox & Steiner, 2013), developing a student-led social work practicum support group (Humphrey, 2013), and requiring journaling as a form of self-reflection (Moore et al., 2011).

**Recommendations**

The findings of this case study show that there is a wide range of what is taught at USM in regard to burnout and self-care. Both professors and students shared concrete recommendations for ways to enhance content across the curriculum more consistently.

There is room for further improvement in how syllabi represent what is taught in class and how internships can approach these topics with students.

**Implementing the information early.** Given that students with various lengths of time in the program reported already experiencing symptoms of burnout, the program should consider ways to integrate this material into the first classes taken by students new to the program. As there are various ways for practitioners to experience burnout (Lloyd et al., 2002; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Banko, 2013; Jackson, 2014; Sofolofy et al., 2019; Han et al., 2012), discussing these signs and symptoms early on will give students a better chance at addressing their own signs of burnout if they experience them. For the students already experiencing burnout from their course work, having this knowledge may have been able to prevent these situations. For the students who do not see the need for self-care, having more conversations around what burnout is, how it can affect them, and how practicing self-care can prevent that from happening may show them the realities of what they are facing. Implementing this content at the beginning of social work education allows for students to build upon what they have learned as they go through the program, and incorporate this learning in their personal and professional lives.

**Being mindful of content.** Of the students who were not satisfied with the current coverage of burnout and self-care across the program, they overall expressed a need for less repetitive and more meaningful content. One way to address this would be by

professors asking students what they would find helpful to know about these topics. This allows the students an opportunity to voice their opinions on what they want to know, as well as avoid the repetition of information that they have already received in other courses. Having this conversation towards the beginning of the semester would allow professors to see if they have the time to include this content during the semester, rather than having to make time in class each time these topics come up. This would also help the professors by leaving out the guesswork of assuming what students may already know about burnout and self-care from previous courses.

      **Create a class.** One concrete suggestion from students and professors alike was that the program offer an individual class on burnout and self-care, to acknowledge the central role these topics play in the field of social work (Iacono, 2017; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Jackson, 2014; Lloyd et al., 2002; Lee & Miller, 2013; Banko, 2013; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Peterson, 2016). By creating such a course and including it in the core curriculum, meaning all students would be required to take it, this would increase the chances that they are getting the information they want and need before entering the field. Offering this information in a single course would eliminate repetition of content across multiple courses. Some topics will likely still be covered in other courses, but students will not have to rely solely on these conversations to gain the information. Further, covering this content in one course would alleviate some pressure from

professors who are challenged with content-heavy courses, as well as concerns about adding material that may be unrelated to the course topic.

One student suggested that having a specialized class for burnout and self-care would be particularly helpful for the students who do not have any or as much experience in the field. A lack of information could lead to them becoming burned out, which is a finding often reported in the literature (Iacono, 2017; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Humphrey, 2013; Peterson, 2016; Jackson, 2014; Smullens, 2012). To counter the effects of burnout that students are likely to face once they enter the field (Kim et al., 2011; Poulin & Walter, 1993; Wacek, 2017; Morse et al., 2012; Jackson, 2012), it is important that they get as much information as possible while still in school in order to hone their skills to prepare them for entering the field.

**Add to pre-existing classes.** Professors and students alike posited that adding content on burnout and self-care to pre-existing courses may be easier than creating an entirely new course. Adding this content may be more feasible in the field seminar courses, as these are discussion-driven classes focused on direct field experience. Conversations on burnout and self-care could incorporate student experiences at their internships, as well as how these topics relate to other areas of social work. This content could also be integrated in practice courses, as these classes are focused on working in a variety of settings. Content on burnout and self-care could be incorporated during each

section of the practice courses, giving students the opportunity to see how burnout and self-care look in different environments.

**Create a workshop.** Another professor suggested the idea of creating an annual self-care workshop to give both students and faculty an opportunity to learn about burnout and self-care. Having a workshop would allow students and faculty to come together and learn from both the workshop itself and from one another. Given that each person brings their own experiences on burnout and self-care with them, this would be a learning opportunity that includes a wide range of information. However, it would be important to consider that an annual workshop would not allow for an in-depth experience as that in a full semester class.

A potential alternative would be to create a workshop in addition to a separate class, allowing for a different type of learning environment for students to practice self-care skills. This would ensure that students are still getting all of the necessary information in class, but can gain supplemental knowledge in a one-day workshop. Additionally, students involved in the course could be asked to facilitate different sections of the workshop, showcasing their learning and giving them an opportunity for getting feedback.

**Enlist alumni support.** After students graduate, they see first-hand how their skills and knowledge on burnout and self-care can be implemented in the field rather than in a classroom setting. USM School of Social Work alumni could be invited back to USM

to conduct a question and answer session with current students so that they can hear about these experiences of practitioners who are out in the field. This supports the importance of having a strong collegial support system and guidance (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Han et al., 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Lee & Miller, 2013), and gives alumni an opportunity to connect with students and help prepare them.

**Incorporation at internships.** Internships are where many students have their first experiences out in the field. It would stand to reason that this experience should include the incorporation of burnout and self-care education within their setting. Internship sites already collaborate with the School of Social Work in order to meet certain obligations of the internship requirement in the BSW and MSW programs. Information on burnout and self-care could become part of these obligations that sites need to meet, though this may mean different things to different placements. In the seminar courses that are coupled with field placements, students would be able to bring to class how they have been able to incorporate information on burnout and self-care at their internships. It would also give them a space to discuss any challenges they are facing in regard to burnout or self-care at their placement, and ask for input from other students who may have different experiences of dealing with these topics at their internships.

**Changing the syllabi.** Course syllabi did not reflect the work that both students and professors shared to be part of their classroom experiences. Course syllabi could be

restructured to accurately reflect what is being taught, including what specifically the professors plan to address. There is still the challenge of having classes where these topics come up unexpectedly, and it is unreasonable to assume that this should be included in the syllabi. However, for professors who do intend to address these topics, putting that in their syllabi both provides a structure for this while giving students an idea of what to expect.

**Limitations**

While this study was able to gather data from professor and student interviews, as well as course syllabi, textbooks, and assigned articles, there were limitations to keep in mind. First, the demographics of the students within this study are not representative of the demographics of students within the state of Maine as a whole. Further, the demographics of the students in the study may be different than the demographics of students in other schools of social work in other states. This limits the transferability of the results of this study.

This study considered only the 2018-2019 academic year at USM. This limits the transferability of this study in a few ways. Several new professors were hired prior to the start of the school year, bringing with them different teaching methods. In previous years, different teachers may have used different teaching methods, which may have yielded different results. Additionally, focusing on just one year limits the amount of data that can

be collected. Widening the study timeframe to focus on several years of experience may lead to different results.

The measuring tools used in this study have limitations regarding their credibility. Open-ended interview questions were used to gather data from participants. The wording of these questions may have influenced the responses participants gave. Had these questions been phrased differently, participants may have given different responses. Future studies could be designed with the use of different data points (i.e. focus groups, additional interviews, etc.), as this could strengthen the credibility of the results.

The researcher recognized their role in this study as a participant observer, as the researcher was a student at the school in which this study took place. Throughout the research process, the researcher was mindful of this role and the effect it could have on confirmation bias. The researcher and thesis committee worked together to ensure the researcher's role did not interfere with or influence the results of this study.

**Conclusion**

The literature demonstrates that burnout continues to have a strong presence within the social work profession, and that self-care is one of the ways to prevent it from affecting practitioners. Given that these are such important topics within the field, they should be addressed within the context of formal social work education. However, there is scant literature supporting that these topics are widely highlighted in social work curricula, meaning there is the potential for many students to miss out on this important

education. By learning the skills to identify and address burnout and practice self-care

before entering the field, students will be better suited to thrive in the field and be able to

adequately take care of themselves personally

and professionally.

This type of information has been incorporated into the curriculum at the USM

School of Social Work in a variety of ways. From in-class education and discussion, to

internship experience and personal exploration, students have been able to see the

different forms that burnout can take, and have been given personal and professional self-

care strategies to combat this. However, this study has shown that there are still

improvements that can be made within USM to strengthen this education further. By

providing more structured information on burnout and self-care, listening to the students'

needs and assessing their current levels of burnout, and working with internship

placements to incorporate this information within a different context, both BSW and

MSW students will be able to leave USM prepared for the field they are entering, well-

trained in the skills they will need to navigate their profession.

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**Appendix A**

Definitions

Burnout: a syndrome with dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment. This is a process that begins slowly and becomes progressively worse over time if not addressed.

Personal Self-Care: an engagement in particular behaviors that are suggested to promote specific outcomes such as a sense of subjective well-being, a healthy lifestyle, stress relief, and resiliency for the prevention of burnout (i.e. exercising, writing, cooking, attending counseling, talking with a friend, practicing mindfulness, etc.).

Professional Self-Care: the process of purposeful engagement in practices that promote effective and appropriate use of the self in the professional role within the context of sustaining holistic health and well-being (i.e. setting realistic work goals, taking a coffee/ lunch break, setting healthy boundaries with clients and co-workers, getting supervision, practicing effective time management, etc.)

**Appendix B**

<u>Professor Interview Questions</u>

1. Could you tell me about your practice history?

2. How long have you been teaching?

3. What courses do you teach here at USM?

4. What do you think are the important things for students to learn about burnout and personal and professional self-care?

5. How do you address burnout in the courses you teach?

   (If they don't address this, why not?)

6. In the definitions I shared with you, there are distinctions between professional and personal self-care. Can you tell me about how you approach this with students, talking about self-care in their personal lives versus in their professional lives?

   (If they don't address this, why not?)

7. Are there classes in which you can incorporate this material more easily than others?

   (If no, why is that?)

8. What are the challenges of teaching about burnout and personal and professional self-care?

9. What is working well for you in the way you teach about burnout and personal and professional self-care?

10. Are there any comments you'd like to add?

**Appendix C**

<u>Student Interview Questions</u>

1.  What social work program are you in and how long have you been in the program?

2.  Did you have previous knowledge about burnout and self-care in social work practice before coming to USM? If yes, could you explain what that was?

3.  What have you learned about burnout from your social work classes at USM? In what ways was this topic addressed (i.e. class discussions, readings, videos, etc)?

4.  What have you learned about personal and professional self-care from your social work classes at USM? In what ways were these topics addressed (i.e. class discussions, readings, videos, etc)?

5.  Can you tell me about the different ways you have learned about these topic? (e.g.: in class, a mentor relationship with a professor, conversations with peers, etc.)

6.  What are the most important or helpful things you've learned so far?

7.  Is there anything you haven't learned about yet that you'd be interested in knowing?

8.  Are you currently in a field placement? If so, are burnout and self-care addressed there? In what ways?

9.  (If in a field placement) If you've learned about burnout and self-care in your classes, have you incorporated what you've learned at your placement? Describe specific ways.

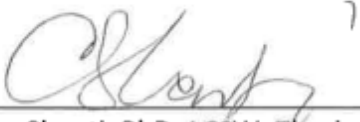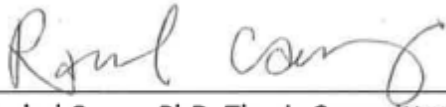10. Are there any comments you'd like to add?

**Appendix D**

GRADUATE THESIS APPROVAL FORM
The University of Southern Maine

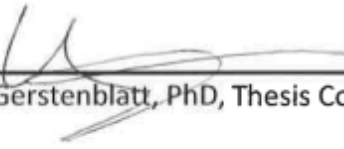School of Social Work
May 8, 2019

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Noelani Hansen, entitled "Education on Burnout and Self Care at the University of Southern Maine: A Case Study", be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Social Work.

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Caroline Shanti, PhD, LCSW, Thesis Committee Chair

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Rachel Casey, PhD, Thesis Committee member

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Paula Gerstenblatt, PhD, Thesis Committee Member

Accepted

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