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Emily E. Scida
University of Virginia

Jill N. Jones
University of Virginia

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Navigating Stress: Graduate Student Experiences with Contemplative Practices in a Foreign Language Teacher Education Course

Emily E. Scida
University of Virginia

Jill N. Jones
University of Virginia

The present case study investigates the experience of stress among graduate students, particularly stress related to teaching, their coping strategies, and their experience with contemplative practices integrated into a teacher education course. While there is a significant body of research on contemplative practices in K-12 teacher development, few studies have looked at the integration of contemplative practices in graduate student experiences in higher education. Data for this case study include interviews with 19 graduate students enrolled in foreign language M.A./Ph.D. programs. Results suggest that students' perceived stress stems from the difficulties of adapting to and balancing new responsibilities and concerns about teaching. To cope with stress, graduate students most commonly rely on emotional support from peers and time management strategies. Students report that participating in contemplative practices together as a class cultivated community, providing them with support, collegiality, interconnectedness, and collaboration as teachers and scholars. The integration of contemplative practices promoted an awareness of the importance of self-care, compassion for self and others, and social and emotional awareness.

This study explores how graduate student teacher education can better foster both intrapersonal and interpersonal development to prepare future faculty to handle the challenges of teaching and academic work in higher education. While traditional graduate student teacher development emphasizes pedagogical and curricular knowledge, we argue that it fails to consider the development of social and emotional competence—or “habits of the mind,” (Dorman, 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012)—and the cultivation of connectedness and community to support teacher work. Costa and Kallick (2009, p. xxii) define habits of the mind as those intelligent behaviors performed in response to questions or problems with no immediately known explanation—“conditions that demand strategic reasoning, insightfulness, perseverance, creativity, and crafts-

manship to resolve.” Habits of the mind enable teachers to respond appropriately to challenges related to teaching and include tendencies to gather data through all of the senses, to be aware of and reflect on experience in a nonjudgmental manner, to be flexible when problem solving, to regulate emotion and be resilient after setbacks, and to attend to others with empathy and compassion. (Roeser et al., 2012, p. 167)

In their Prosocial Classroom Model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 494-5), teachers’ social and emotional competence—which involves self-awareness of emotions, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management of emotions and behavior, and relationship management—are important in establishing positive relationships with students and colleagues and reducing the risk of teacher stress and burnout and can be cultivated through engagement in contemplative practices like mindfulness. Socially and emotionally competent teachers develop interpersonal, collaborative connections, building a strong community of support.

The cultivation of these skill sets and support structures in graduate student teacher development can prepare graduate students for the challenges they will encounter during their time in graduate school—in their unique role as students, teachers, and scholars—and into their faculty careers in higher education. As Roeser and colleagues note:

Generally, teacher education and teacher professional development programs do not assist teachers in developing skills such as mindful emotion regulation or attitudes such as self-compassion that they then might use to address the inherently stressful aspects of their work environments (Roeser, Skinner, et al., 2012). And yet...we hypothesize that it is these kinds of higher order skills and mind-sets that are needed for individuals to function effectively in inherently high-stress professions like teaching. (Roeser et al., 2013, p. 3)

This case study seeks to understand whether the integration of contemplative practices in a teacher education course might improve students’ experience of stress and coping strategies, particularly stress related to their roles as teachers. While prior research has explored contemplative practices in K-12 teacher development, few have addressed this in relation to the preparation of graduate student teachers. In this study, we look at the existing literature on graduate student stress, teacher stress and burnout, and the benefits of contemplative practices on health and well-being, and we extend this work to a related context—the preparation of future faculty in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Graduate Student Stress

Graduate students are likely to experience stressors that are unique to their new roles as students, scholars, and teachers, and the greatest sources of stress reported in one study included coursework, finances, and graduate/teaching assistantships (Oswalt & Riddick, 2007). “Graduate students are particularly vulnerable to pressures related to conducting research and teaching, publishing, and finding employment, in addition to stress from the often ambiguous expectations of advisors” (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006, p. 248). This stress can lead to low academic achievement, poor teaching performance and job satisfaction, burnout, and mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and exhaustion.

Students with mental health concerns tend to experience poorer relationships with other students and faculty, lower levels of engagement, lower GPAs, lower rates of retention and graduation, and suicidal ideation (Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). In a study of graduate students across academic fields and schools, Hyun and colleagues found that 44.7% of respondents reported having an emotional or stress-related problem over the previous year but only 31% sought counseling (2006, p. 255). In another study, 48.9% of graduate students surveyed reported feeling stressed and 24.7% very stressed while less than 1% reported no stress (Oswalt & Riddick, 2007).

Turning to stress management, Oswalt & Riddick (2007) found the most common coping strategy among graduate students was talking with friends, but 31.9% of respondents reported not managing their stress well. Having strong social support, financial confidence, a functional relationship with one’s advisor, good physical health, and sense of control over one’s personal life and academics all have a positive effect on coping of stress (Hyun et al., 2006; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). In research on stress among millennial college students, Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham (2012) reported that the most common coping strategies are ineffective, because they are avoidant-oriented (cleaning, shopping, calling friends). Emotional support (feeling supported by family, friends, and teachers), an approach-oriented strategy, was the sole significant protective factor for high stress tolerance. Oswalt & Riddick (2007, p. 39-40) recommend that “[a]s university professionals, we need to examine ways to increase the likelihood of these students engaging in the healthy coping strategies that they are interested in, versus negative ones (like using alcohol or cigarettes) or even neutral ones (like vegging out).” One way to achieve this is by highlighting stress management during the departmental/university orientation for new students and through preventative measures addressing mental health concerns.

Teacher Stress and the Emotional Work of Teachers

Teacher stress has been widely studied and is understood to be "...the experience by a teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of their work as a teacher" (Kyricou, 2001, p. 28). Teaching is an emotional practice and a form of emotional labor (Hargreaves, 1998), where teachers are expected to manage, maintain, suppress, or alter certain emotions in interaction with others in order to achieve educational goals.

New teachers may experience a wide range of emotions "evoked by the fear of not being liked or respected, the vulnerability that comes with awareness of judgment by others, the anxiety of not being familiar with the subject matter, and the discomfort that comes from having to make rapid-fire and uncertain decisions" (Chang, 2009, p. 204). Frequently cited sources of teacher stress include student incivilities and disruptive behavior, workload, low self-esteem, and dealing with parents and colleagues (Bauer et al., 2006; Chang, 2009; Kyricou, 2001). Beginning teachers are particularly vulnerable to developing burnout, and in fact early stages of teacher burnout may actually begin during teacher education (Hultell, Melin, & Gustavson, 2013).

Burnout, defined as a "psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job," includes three dimensions—overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 103). Burnout is correlated with psychological symptoms like depression, anxiety, stress disorders, and exhaustion syndromes. Among teachers, burnout is significantly higher in those under the age of 30, single people, those with fewer than 5 or more than 15 years of experience, those with higher levels of education, and part-time teachers (Bauer et al., 2006; Chang, 2009). In one study of German teachers, 32.5% of the sample suffered from burnout while 17.7% belonged to the at-risk category (Bauer et al., 2006). The impact of teacher burnout can be seen in the high rate of early retirement (Bauer et al., 2006) and high attrition rates of new teachers. In the U.S., up to 25% of beginning teachers leave teaching before their third year, and 40-46% leave the profession within the first five years (Chang, 2009; Roeser et al., 2012).

Contemplative Practices and Teacher Education

Contemplative practices like mindfulness are the focus of various approaches to reduce stress and improve health. Mindfulness, defined as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4), has been incorporated into programs designed to develop attentional focus, bring an awareness to present moment experience, and devel-

op positive emotion as well as emotion awareness and regulation. The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979, is an 8-week program that includes weekly meetings, instruction, and homework in meditation, mindful movement, body awareness, awareness of emotions, and compassion practices. A significant body of research has shown that MBSR and similar interventions are effective in reducing stress and enhancing well-being and in alleviating physical and psychological symptoms of illnesses such as chronic pain, cancer, anxiety, and depression (Astin, 1997; Baer, 2003; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

Within education, mindfulness-based training has been integrated into programs for K-12 teachers with the goal of reducing stress and burnout and promoting overall well-being. Research has shown that MBSR programs for educators result in reductions in depression, stress, anxiety, and burnout (Abenavoli, Jennings, Greenberg, Harris, & Katz, 2013; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bounus, & Davidson, 2013), increases in self-compassion (Frank, Reibel, Broderick, Cantrell, & Metz, 2013), increases in teacher self-efficacy (Frank et al., 2013), and improvements in observer-rated teaching performance (Flook et al., 2013). Examples of programs for teachers include: Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE), Comprehensive Approach to Learning Mindfulness (CALM), Mindfulness-Based Wellness Education (MBWE), Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques in Education (SMART), and the Inner Resilience Program.

CARE for Teachers is a program designed to reduce stress and build teachers' inner resources through the integration of mindfulness practices, emotion skills training, and compassion-building activities (Jennings, 2011), and is offered as a 4-5 week program and as a 5-day summer retreat. Research indicates that CARE is effective in improving teacher well-being, teacher efficacy, burnout/time-related stress, and mindfulness (Jennings, Frank, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2013). A qualitative study (Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, & Frank, 2016) showed that CARE participants developed improved emotion regulation and greater self-awareness of both their physical and emotional health, including the physical manifestations of stress in the body and the importance of practicing self-care.

A program for teacher candidates, Mindfulness-Based Wellness Education (MBWE), combines mindfulness training with a formal wellness component in an elective Stress and Burnout course (Poulin, Mackenzie, Soloway, & Karayolas, 2008; Soloway, Poulin, & Mackenzie, 2011). Results indicated that participants in the treatment group experienced increased mindfulness, life satisfaction, and teacher self-efficacy compared to those in the control group but no significant changes in psychological distress. Participants identified applications of the MBWE practices to their teaching and to their personal lives—better response to stress-

ors, present moment awareness, acknowledgment of negative emotions, and use of mindfulness practices in their teaching.

The present case study investigates the experience of stress among graduate students, their coping strategies, and their experiences with contemplative practices integrated into a teacher education course. Based on prior research on mindfulness-based interventions with teachers, it is expected that graduate students will experience reduced stress, greater awareness of emotions, improved teacher efficacy, and increased self-compassion. The following research questions guided our study:

1. In what ways do graduate students describe their experiences with stress?
2. How do graduate students cope with stress?
3. What were students' overall perceptions of and experiences with the contemplative practices integrated into the course?

THE STUDY

Course Description

The pedagogy seminar *Teaching Foreign Languages* offers graduate students the opportunity to observe and apply new ideas and teaching principles through practical activities and to develop their own personal theories of teaching through systematic reflection and experimentation. This course is required for all M.A./Ph.D. students in their first semester of the program while teaching a foreign language course at the beginning or intermediate level. The seminar is designed to support graduate student instructors new to teaching and to address their immediate needs and concerns as novice teachers.

Students

The pedagogy seminar generally enrolls 9-12 graduate students from the Spanish, Italian, and Middle Eastern Studies programs at the University of Virginia. The student population is diverse, most coming from the U.S. but others from Europe, Latin America, or the Middle East. While enrolled in this course, the Italian M.A. students teach one section of Elementary Italian, the Middle Eastern Studies M.A. students teach one section of Elementary Arabic, while the M.A./Ph.D. students in Spanish teach one section of Intermediate Spanish.

Research Design

This project involved the integration of contemplative practices in the pedagogy course with the goals of reduced stress and improved teaching experiences. The first author led the class in brief 10-minute contemplative practices at the be-

ginning of class time every other week in Fall 2013 and once a week in Fall 2014. The benefits of and research on contemplative interventions were presented, and students were invited to participate but were not required. A variety of contemplative practices were chosen to expose students to diverse options, including:

- Breath meditation
- Mindful movement/yoga
- Visualization practices
- Loving-kindness practice
- Music meditation
- Sound meditation
- Deep listening
- Journaling
- Mindful eating
- Gratitude statements
- Setting intentions for class lessons

In addition to the in-class contemplative practices, students were invited to explore a practice of their choice outside of class time in an assignment called Teacher Centering, where they engaged in a brief contemplative practice before teaching their classes, three times a week for three weeks. In weeks two and three of the exploration, they reflected on their experiences and the perceived effect of this practice on their teaching and/or general well-being in their e-portfolios. Their engagement in this assignment started in week four of the semester and ended in week seven.

METHODS

The following section includes information about the sample of students, such as their demographic background, teaching experience, and experience with stress reduction practices. Thereafter, we describe the methodology and analysis used to answer the three research questions explored in this study.

Sample

The data collected for this qualitative research study come from two semesters of the pedagogy seminar—Fall 2013 and Fall 2014. The total enrollment from the two semesters was 21 students. In Fall 2013, there were eleven students: four Spanish M.A. students, three Spanish Ph.D. students, three Italian M.A. students, and one Middle Eastern Studies M.A. student. In Fall 2014, we had ten students: three Spanish M.A. students, five Spanish Ph.D. students, one Middle Eastern Studies M.A. student, and one Spanish lecturer. The age range was 21-45 years old. Nearly all students (95%; n=19) provided demographic information including

gender, race, citizenship, and year in the graduate program. Of the respondents who provided their race/ethnicity, gender, and year, 68.4% were female (n=13), and 31.6% were male (n=6). Respondents were mostly White/Caucasian (n=14), and the remainder was Hispanic/Latino (n=5). Sixty-five percent of respondents (n=13) were U.S. citizens, and nearly all were first-year graduate students (n=17).

Most graduate students were novice teachers, while some had limited teaching experience at the secondary level or in prior graduate programs. With regard to contemplative practices, two students already had established contemplative practices. About half had limited exposure to contemplative practices in other contexts; however, 65% indicated that they engaged in activities to alleviate stress, like exercise.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual interviews (n=19) with students, which lasted approximately an hour each, took place after they completed the course. Additionally, follow-up interviews were conducted with the first participant group one year later (n=9). Interview questions covered topics such as students' perceptions and experiences with the pedagogy course, experiences as a graduate student, balancing graduate student responsibilities, relationships with peers and advisors, and career aspirations. To ensure anonymity, the interviews were done by the second author and a graduate student researcher who are trained to conduct qualitative interviews. Interviews were conducted between January 2014 and April 2015. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and codes were applied to researcher names (for confidentiality) and uploaded to the qualitative data analysis program Dedoose Coding. Within the Dedoose program, the uploaded data were manually analyzed phrase-by-phrase. During the first iteration of coding, researchers established core themes and then refined codes (or themes) and modified some of the initial coding. After the coding scheme was refined and coding was complete, a second set of researchers checked all phrases and codes to ensure accuracy and consistency. To further establish accuracy and consistency in the coding, researchers met to discuss the codes, their understanding of the codes, and use of the codes—a process called peer debriefing (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). After researchers completed all manual coding and refinement, we used Dedoose analytics to produce summary statistics for the coding frequencies and prevalence.

RESULTS

Table I displays the frequency of each code from the interview data and the percent of interviewees whose interview reflected that code. The "Frequency of Code" represents the total number of times the code was mentioned in all inter-

Table 1: Prevalence and Frequency of Codes

Code	Frequency of Code	% of Participants Represented in Theme Count	Average Frequency Per Interview
Experiences with Balancing & Adapting to Graduate Responsibilities (Teaching, Coursework, Research)	235	100%	8.4
Causes of Stress & Anxiety (What causes stress and anxiety? How does the stress or anxiety feel?)	119	89%	4.8
Intersection of Causes Stress & Anxiety AND Experiences with Balancing & Adapting to Graduate (Cross-tab) Responsibilities*	-	68%	
Coping with Stress:	134	93%	5.2
Planning & Time Management	47	68%	2.5
Self-Care (reducing internal judgment, engaging in practices, including contemplative, that decrease stress or increase happiness)	49	68%	2.6
Resources & Help	54	64%	3
Help or Support from People within the Department	46	61%	2.7
Help or Support from other Materials and Resources	28	43%	2.3
Positive Impact of Contemplative Practices (e.g., personal life, professional life, reframing prior practices, using mindful language)	133	93%	5.1
Community Feeling & Friendly Support from Department	106	93%	4.1
Positive Perceptions of Department, Teaching Supervisor, and other Professors:	73	93%	2.8
Perception of the Department (in general)	40	68%	2.1
Perception of Teaching Supervisor	28	71%	1.4
Perception of Professors	19	50%	1.4
Positive Impact of the Class	41	75%	2
Personal Transition to Graduate Life	38	61%	2.2
Support from External Networks (e.g., family)	27	68%	1.4

*We noticed that causes of stress and anxiety were often related to balancing and adapting to graduate responsibilities. This is a crosstab between those who indicate that the causes of stress and anxiety are related to balancing and adapting to graduate student responsibilities.

views. For “% of Participants Represented in the Theme Count” we capture the percentages of instances where the theme arose among all 28 interviews. For example, the theme “causes of stress and anxiety” was present in 25 out of 28 interviews, or 89% of interviews. Finally, the “Average Frequency Per Interview” captures the average number of times the theme was discussed during an interview, whereby the denominator is the total number of participants represented in the code; this measure provides a level interview saturation whereby a higher number (or darker shading) represents a higher prevalence within interviews.

Graduate Student Experiences with Stress

The majority of graduate students reported experiencing stress—the Causes of Stress and Anxiety code appeared 119 times in the data and among 89% of students. Many also described feeling overwhelmed, anxious, nervous, worried, and pressured. The most salient cause of stress centered around the major life changes entering a new academic program—their new roles as instructors, graduate students, and scholars, along with adjusting to a new town, new housing, new friends, and the burden of managing finances—“So...the first year you are...just thinking [about] everything constantly” (student interview, 2013).

The challenge of balancing their teaching jobs, coursework, and personal lives contributed to student stress. Experiences with Balancing and Adapting to Graduate Responsibilities was the most prevalent code, appearing 235 times and among 100% of participants, while Balancing and Adapting to Graduate Responsibilities was indicated to be a stressor by 68% of interviewees. Sources of stress included doing research, preparing for comprehensive exams, engaging in scholarly activities, and feeling unprepared for academic work. Many described thinking about work all the time: “...for me it is like if I am not working, I am doing something wrong” (student interview, 2014).

Stress also emerged from high expectations to excel academically and the ambiguity of expectations from professors.

Most new graduate students have no prior teaching experience, and so their job as instructors can trigger anxiety, stress, feelings of self-doubt, and low self-efficacy. “I think teaching obviously raises a lot for your insecurities, like ‘Do I know this, is my accent good enough?’...it had been years since I actually had that feeling of ‘I cannot do this.’” (student interview, 2013) Others worried about their teaching performance, mastery of the content, effective lesson planning, establishing authority in the classroom, and their students’ perception of them: “...now I had 18 students watching me and judging me, and they were the same age as me; it makes me...freak out!” (student interview, 2014).

Their teaching job was perceived as very time-consuming, because

you need a lot of time to plan your lessons and then to grade or to answer all their emails...it’s...non-stop because it’s not like another

er kind of job where...it starts at 8 and it finishes at 8. No!—with teaching it's like all the time...so I think that's also hard to differentiate your working life from your private life sometimes. (student interview, 2013)

Coping with Stress

Graduate students describe coping strategies that can be categorized as personal strategies or external strategies. In the data, the theme Coping with Stress emerged 134 times and among 93% of students.

Personal coping strategies. To better balance teaching, research, and personal life, most adopted time management skills, which reduced their stress around feeling overwhelmed, and as one student stated “I just feel...calmer and more centered” (student interview, 2013). These Planning and Time Management Strategies emerged as a theme 47 times and among 68% of participants. Setting boundaries on commitments was helpful, as one student described: “...you have to balance class...not only teaching time and reading time but also...class time and your own research time. I think one thing I do is...try to limit things that I shouldn't be working on” (student interview, 2013).

Another student compartmentalized office space for teaching-related work and home space for graduate coursework.

Another personal coping strategy described was self-care and taking time for oneself:

I think planning my academic life has helped...give me time that my personal life requires...it's kind of the invisible work...that you need to do for yourself.

once I started to...indulge a little bit of personal time for myself... That was something very helpful, like I learned it was healthier. (student interview, 2013)

For others, self-care meant taking off from work on the weekend, socializing with friends, reading for pleasure, cooking, watching TV/movies, or shopping. One student recognized the importance of caring for oneself both physically and emotionally: “Just getting me to see that it is okay to think about yourself every now and then, just as much as you think about other people” (student interview, 2013). This theme of Self-Care emerged 49 times in the data and among 68% of students.

A greater attention to self-care manifested itself in positive perspectives and approaches to life. Some came to a place of acceptance and self-compassion, accepting their own limitations and failures, reducing the pressure they place on themselves. One student noted:

I think a lot of gratitude and compassion things are really effective in academics, especially towards yourself, because it's very easy to compare yourself to everyone else, if you're behind, or you didn't get the grade, or your paper is horrible...but then obviously towards one another, compassion and gratitude towards our students. (student interview, 2013)

External coping strategies. In times of stress, graduate students most frequently turn to other graduate students in the department for support: “there is moral support, there is emotional support, there is support as a teacher, support as a grad student” (student interview, 2013).

Because all new students attend a teaching orientation and the pedagogy seminar together during their first semester, a sense of community and bonding develops among the cohort: “I've definitely seen it making a difference in my well-being. It's like I know I'm walking into a group of friends every single day” (student interview, 2013). The closeness extends beyond the professional realm of the department into the personal life of the student, and many report talking to peers as a common coping strategy: “...part of us having this constant conversation with each other is part of what keeps the stress level down” (student interview, 2013). The theme Help or Support from People in the Department emerged 46 times in the data and among 61% of students. Many also find emotional support in their “old social life” and family, which helps them put their problems in perspective; the code Support from External Networks emerged 27 times and among 68% of participants.

Within the department, the pedagogy seminar itself provides an important space for social and academic support, and in our data the theme of Positive Impact of The Course emerged 41 times and among 75% of students. “I feel that connection with our cohort...I think Professor Scida's class has a lot to do with that bonding experience in that first semester and people that you can hold onto for your life” (student interview, 2013).

The course itself helped to ease teaching-related stress by providing students with resources, support, and positive feedback on their teaching practices as well as a space for self-reflection and collaboration.

The department is perceived as being a strong community where graduate students feel that they get the help and advice that they need:

Especially the grad students are very close to each other. They are very, very supportive of you...I know I can call pretty much anyone in the graduate department for advice, for help. And then the professors also have been supportive, they've always been...

putting, I guess, the right amount of pressure to improve ourselves but still recognizing that we do have to have this balance. (student interview, 2013)

Most students expressed positive perceptions of the department, teaching supervisor, and professors, a theme that emerged 73 times and among 93% of participants. One student describes his relationship with professors as one "... that builds a lot of confidence and trust and...really guidance...in the sense of maybe a little bit than mentoring...fundamental to getting through the program, getting through these five years...because this is a great environment but it is... rough outside" (student interview, 2013). This perception of support and community seems to arise also from the department's focus on the whole student, including an emphasis on ongoing professional development, balance, and stress management:

from day one Professor Scida was like you also need to...pay attention to your mental health because this is very stressful and usually grad students that teach and take classes at the same time experience... a lot of stress...I never thought about that actually. (student interview, 2013)

In the interviews, the code Feeling of Community and Friendly Support from the Department emerged 106 times and among 93% of students.

Experiences with Contemplative Practices

For many students, this course provided their first encounter with mindfulness, meditation, and other contemplative practices, and in general these practices were well-received. In the data, the Positive Impact of Contemplative Practices code emerged 133 times and among 93% of students. Their common understanding of contemplative practices emphasized stress management, but for one student, "the idea behind contemplative practices is actually...admitting that you have to step back and...allow yourself some time to reflect...if nothing else I guess that is what meditation is...actually allow our brain time to not think" (student interview, 2014). Students appreciated being exposed to a variety of practices as well as different applications of use. One student remarked,

I think that the biggest benefit has been to explore the different options. I think coming into this set of contemplative practices or mindfulness I would have thought just about like yoga and meditation... Whereas now I kind of understand that there is a much broader tree of various options to pull from. (student interview, 2013)

Themes that emerged from interviews include self-care, effects of the contemplative practices, application to new contexts, negative perceptions of the practices, and long-term effects.

The most salient pattern that emerged from our interviews is that the contemplative practices supplied students with a new language to describe their approaches to self-care and sparked a greater awareness of their own well-being. In addition, exposure to these practices provided validation that it is okay to take care of oneself and to make well-being a top priority. For one student, the loving-kindness practice was a “turning point” in realizing that “it is more important to be good to myself even if I know well-being comes above doing everything 100%” (student interview, 2013). Students adopted contemplative language to describe not just new practices but also past approaches to self-care, which helped to validate what they had already been doing.

[I]t made me try to be more mindful about doing all these things. I always had tried to do these things in the past in different ways...I try to exercise, running, doing yoga, just because from teaching in the past I know I get stressed or anxious that those things do help. In the morning, I try to pray every day just kind of think...about positive things in my life and just to set my intention for the day...I guess that by her bringing it up in class, it made me more aware of that. (student interview, 2014)

Students recognized the potential that the contemplative practices have to calm their anxiety, to settle into themselves, and to promote greater awareness of emotion. The loving-kindness practice helped one student disconnect from work:

and at the same time, I like that practice because since I'm no longer near my family or my friends, it's a time to, for me to think about them, to have good wishes about them, to wish them the best. (student interview, 2013)

Bringing an awareness to present-moment experience also emerged; one student describes the experience of being so worried “about all these things that are totally imaginary...so I think doing the mindfulness exercises...helped me to just concentrate on what I was doing right now” (student interview, 2013). Students adopted contemplative practices outside of our class, inspired by seeing peers integrate them successfully in their personal lives or by realizing how the practices shaped their own learning experiences in our class, as one student remarked:

So, when we start class with something relaxing, we actually feel more fresh and more willing to talk and less stressed...So when I realized that it was really helpful...I tried to apply it to my personal

life, and it helped a lot. Sometimes—I live close to a creek—so I just sit by the creek and meditate...I knew these things existed—I just never even thought about it as much. So this was brought to us in class, it made me realize it was actually very rewarding on different levels. (student interview, 2013)

For many students, the contemplative work they experienced in this course served as a model for their own classroom teaching, with the goals of helping their students develop greater focus in class, reduce stress, and support overall well-being. This was a shift, in the sense that “it used to be something very personal, individual for me, and now...I am able to see how it can work in the classroom setting and share it with others” (student interview, 2013). Integrating contemplative practices in the pedagogy course provided “a good example to see and then try to implement the same in our classes” (student interview, 2013). The contemplative practices helped graduate students feel calmer, more centered, better prepared, and more flexible in handling the unexpected in their teaching. Many attributed the closeness they felt with their peers to the contemplative practices used in class—these were perceived to be a “team building activity” that “put us close as a class” and helped to establish a warm, supportive sense of community (student interview, 2013).

As for the practices that most resonated with students, the loving-kindness practice, journal writing, music meditation, and random-acts-of-kindness appeared most frequently in interviews. There was no one practice that resonated for everyone, however. One student remarked that the loving-kindness practice was the most difficult and uncomfortable, because his/her history with depression made the expression of self-love distressing. Additionally, journal writing brought a greater awareness to emotions, which caused unwelcome discomfort: “It is rewarding, but I didn’t truly like the writing as much because it gets too intense—it makes you think about things that you don’t want to think about” (student interview, 2013). For another student, the sitting practices triggered greater anxiety because “for me it’s just really hard to just sit still and not do anything” (student interview, 2014).

Of the negative comments, the most common referred to the personal and private nature of engaging in contemplative practices, and so our practice in a group setting (in class) caused uneasiness: “for me, those kinds of activities are very personal. So doing them in a group I don’t...know if I got as much out of it as some of the other students” (student interview, 2013). Frustration arose with constant intrusive thoughts during meditation, so one student concluded that “it didn’t work for me because I got distracted...a lot of times” (student interview, 2013). A student recognized the potential benefit of contemplative practices but not for them in this context:

I was very skeptical. Very, very skeptical...I think I still hold some of the skepticism, not because I don't think they're useful, but because I don't think they're useful for me, or they're not useful in that environment for me. (student interview, 2013)

Those practices that students adopted long-term included the loving-kindness practice, random-acts-of-kindness, journal writing, yoga, breath practice, and deep listening. Students learned that they could always “go back to breathing” and that “once you learn that you can do a five-minute breathing activity, you kind of unconsciously find yourself doing it in your office” (student interview, 2013). To calm nerves on opening night of a play, one student practiced loving-kindness with a peer to help center. The random-acts-of-kindness activity resonated for one person who applied it to her problematic relationship with a roommate when

I got in an argument with my roommate, so the day after I was feeling kind of...weird, so I just made biscuits and put them on the table saying ‘have a biscuit and have a good day.’ So, I feel really good and then after that we were both...a little better instead of like fighting again. I feel that we can actually do it...as an approach towards life in general...if you can focus on the positive thing, then do it. (student interview, 2013)

A contemplative mindset emerged for many who described kindness for self and others, acceptance, gratitude, compassion, and positivity as long-term effects they experienced, and in some cases bringing that mindset to their own teaching, acknowledging the stress and pressures that their own students experience and telling them to “be good to yourselves...and the priority is just to take care of themselves as a whole” (student interview, 2013).

DISCUSSION

In this study, we sought to understand graduate student experiences with stress, their strategies for coping with stress, and their experiences with the contemplative practices integrated in the pedagogy seminar. In particular, we were interested in how their experiences with contemplative practices shaped their personal descriptions of coping with stress and well-being. Looking at graduate students' reported stressors, students point to work/life balance, overwhelming workload, doing research, ambiguous expectations from professors, pressure (on self) to excel, low self-efficacy, feeling ill-prepared for coursework and/or teaching, and finances. Although many of these sources of stress are in line with what other studies have reported (Chang, 2009; Hyun et al., 2006; Oswalt & Riddick, 2007), some described here were not, namely pressure (on self) to excel, low self-efficacy, and feeling ill-prepared for coursework and/or teaching.

In looking at coping with stress, the strategy that stood out was emotional support—feeling supported by peers in particular but also by faculty and the department as a whole. Graduate students articulated that their perception of support and sense of community arose from experiencing their first semester together as a cohort. The pedagogy course and teaching orientation establish the space for first-year graduate students to form close personal and professional relationships and the support they need throughout the program and beyond. Social and emotional support appears in the literature as a common coping strategy among college students (Hyun et al., 2006; Wyatt & Oswald, 2013), and in fact it is the only significant factor that promotes high stress tolerance among millennials (Bland et al., 2012). Talking with friends, peers, and family appears frequently both in our interviews and in prior studies and can be seen as related to emotional support (Oswald & Riddick, 2007). To address the stress of workload and life balance, many students in our study reported adopting time management strategies like planning, scheduling, and setting boundaries—establishing a sense of control over one’s personal and academic life—which Wyatt and Oswald (2013) found to have a positive effect on students’ coping of stress. Finally, the importance of self-care emerged in our interviews, where students understood this to mean doing something enjoyable for oneself to take a break from their work and studies. Activities mentioned here include exercise, watching TV/movies, shopping, cooking, and going out with friends. Bland et al. (2012) considered these to be avoidant coping strategies and less effective in addressing stress.

This theme of self-care also emerged as graduate students described their experiences with the contemplative practices. The introduction to contemplative practices during the course and the emphasis on awareness and reduction of stress underscored for them the importance of taking care of their physical, emotional, and mental health. Schussler et al. (2016) reported similar findings for CARE: “Participating in the CARE program not only validated the need for self-care but also gave teachers the permission to attain it” (p. 138). Not surprisingly, students expressed an awareness of emotions—both positive and negative—and patterns of habitual thinking, such as worry over future events, as well as an awareness of the emotions of others (students, colleagues) and their need to also practice self-care. This aligns with numerous studies that have shown that mindfulness-based interventions result in greater awareness of and regulation of emotions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Poulin et al., 2008; Roeser et al., 2012). Students also articulated greater self-compassion and compassion for others (roommates, students), as has been suggested in other studies (Roeser et al., 2013).

Another salient finding was the discovery by graduate students of the benefits of contemplative practices beyond the confines of our course. Many described integrating meditation and random-acts-of-kindness in their personal lives and

adopting a more positive, contemplative mindset. Others reported feeling more calm, centered, and flexible in handling teaching challenges. The use of contemplative practices in the pedagogy course provided a model for graduate students that they then applied in their own teaching. A similar finding was reported in Poulin et al. (2008) with teacher candidates who applied practices in their own classrooms.

The integration of contemplative practices in the pedagogy course was perceived to function as a team-building activity that contributed to a strong sense of community, bonding, and support among the cohort of graduate students. It is interesting that participants in the CARE program (Schussler et al., 2016) expressed a desire for a greater sense of community, which is something that appeared to emerge naturally among the graduate students in our study. We do not expect that the positive culture within the department, as perceived by the students, is solely a function of the contemplative practices. However, students used mindful language and articulated an appreciation for and need to cope with stress and anxiety by applying self-care and mindfulness-based practices. Moreover, students expressed a genuine connection with their peers, a primary source of support for their graduate studies. In recognizing the stress of graduate school, mindfulness-based practices may be a critical component for students to cultivate practices of self-care and a community of peers who further support and affirm their graduate student experiences.

Despite the positive results of our study, it is not free of limitations. Because the data relied on self-report through interviews, findings are based on graduate student perceptions and not objective measures. And, as with many studies, this is a single-institution study with a small sample size and therefore the results cannot be generalized to all contexts of graduate student teacher education or all graduate student populations.

Future research might consider quantitative instruments to measure stress and well-being. To capture the impact of contemplative interventions on teaching efficacy, future studies might utilize teaching observations to measure changes in teaching performance and classroom climate. Another important contribution to this area of inquiry would be longitudinal studies that investigate the long-term impact of contemplative interventions on graduate students, their inclination to integrate these practices into their lives, and their ongoing development of social and emotional competence.

CONCLUSION

As Roeser and colleagues note, “[g]iven the uncertain and emotionally demanding nature of teaching, when teachers do not develop the habits of mind to manage relevant resources and demands effectively, it can lead to problems that undermine teacher well-being and instructional practice” (2012, p. 168).

And this is where teacher education can play an important role. Researchers have suggested that teacher education support the development of social and emotional competence and cultivation of community to prepare new teachers for the demands and challenges they will face in the classroom and to provide support for their work. Chang proposes that teacher education include the following understandings: “acknowledging that teaching is an emotional profession, identifying and reflecting on emotions and the underlying cognitive appraisals, regulating their emotions appropriately, and coping with emotions effectively” (2009, p. 212). For Schussler and colleagues, teacher development should “... consider not only the skills the teachers need to care for their students but also the skills and frame of mind the teachers need to care for themselves so that they have a greater capacity to meet the needs of their students” (2016, p. 140). The effect of enhanced well-being and emotional health may benefit not just the teacher but the students in their classroom, since research has demonstrated a significant relationship between teacher psychosocial variables and classroom quality and climate (Jennings et al., 2013). In fact, Roeser and colleagues (2013, p. 2) state that “mindfulness training for teachers is hypothesized to exert both direct effects on teachers’ capacities to teach more effectively and indirect effects on students’ capacities to learn more effectively (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; MLERN, 2012).” Our study suggests that the integration of contemplative practices in a graduate-level teacher education course may cultivate a sense of community and support, foster social and emotional awareness, and promote self-care, advancing our understanding of effective teacher education and professional development of future faculty in higher education.

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