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Navigating Compassion Fatigue as Teachers and Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Longitudinal Study

Monica Anthony
Georgia Gwinnett College

Erin Hogan
University of Louisville

Virginia L. Byrne
Morgan State University

Neil Dhingra
University of Maryland, College Park

ABSTRACT

This qualitative longitudinal research study examines the experiences of graduate student instructors as they navigated emergency remote teaching in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that participants experienced many of the symptoms of compassion fatigue, both during online instruction and when returning to in-person instruction. Our findings document how participants navigated and responded to these symptoms, both successfully and not. We provide recommendations for how institutes of higher education can support graduate student instructors.

Keywords: graduate student instructors, higher education, COVID-19, compassion fatigue, emergency remote teaching

In Spring 2020, colleges and universities quickly shifted courses online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in emergency remote teaching (ERT; Hodges et al., 2020). The abrupt transition to ERT, and the broader impact of the pandemic as a simultaneous traumatic event (Figley, 1995), produced profound feelings of overwhelm to persons across the globe, due to physical, economic, academic, and social burdens. These feelings are understood as trauma (Gross, 2020; Housel, 2021). While there is a growing body of literature documenting the ERT experiences of university and college instructors (e.g., Pandya & Patterson, 2021), we have not yet seen longitudinal studies of the pandemic's impact on graduate student instructors (GSIs; graduate students who teach undergraduate courses at higher education institutions). Graduate student instructors experienced two layers of potential trauma

during this period: personal trauma from their own experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, and secondary trauma experienced through their work with their students. Secondary trauma, known as compassion fatigue, is the behaviors, emotions, and stresses that arise from knowledge of another's trauma and wanting to help them (Figley, 1995). Early reports of the pandemic's effect on caring professionals (e.g. nurses, counselors, educators) found that the personal and professional stresses faced by these professionals led to compassion fatigue and burnout (Szilagyi, 2021). Our study builds on and extends these early reports by examining the long-term impact of the pandemic and ERT on GSIs. We follow the experiences of nine GSIs from Spring 2020 to Summer 2022. Our research addresses the following questions: *What evidence is there that participants experienced compassion fatigue as a result of ERT? What are the factors that contributed to symptoms of compassion fatigue? How did participants navigate and respond to compassion fatigue over time?*

Our study examines the experiences of GSIs, a population who often does not receive formal training for the courses they are teaching (Cervantes & Inlow, 2022; Schwaller, 2022). Cervantes and Inlow (2022) summarize the collective experience of GSIs as "a unique position which we are forced to navigate without much direction or instructor training" plagued by anxieties and uncompensated labor (p. 2). In our prior research, we found that the absence of formal training resulted in GSIs lacking the skills and knowledge to effectively utilize the available learning technologies (Byrne et al., 2021). Considering the traditional dearth of support for GSIs, we were interested in learning about how they responded to the stressors of teaching during ERT and a global pandemic.

Although local and global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have relaxed and institutions of higher education have largely returned to in-person instruction, the effects of the pandemic are still disrupting daily life (Trust & Whalen, 2021). In higher education, for example, undergraduate students have faced difficulty when returning to in-person classes (e.g., Malesic, 2022). Students found it difficult to be engaged, often struggling with attendance and completing coursework on time. Hence, educators continue to be faced with circumstances that can contribute to compassion fatigue. Therefore, it is important to examine the consequences of compassion fatigue on teaching and learning in higher education if we are to recruit, support, and ultimately retain effective educators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Figley (1995) defined compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD), as the behaviors, emotions, and stresses resulting from knowledge of a traumatizing event and wanting to help a traumatized person. In contrast to burnout, which is gradual, compassion fatigue can emerge suddenly, coupled by "a sense of helplessness and confusion, and a sense of isolation from supporters" (Figley, 1999, p. 12). While initial research focused on compassion fatigue among therapists and counselors, over the past three decades, research has documented compassion fatigue among social workers, nurses, first responders, K-12 teachers, and higher education faculty (Figley, 1995; Lynch, 2022; Lynch & Glass, 2019). Given the dearth of research on GSIs, we relied on literature that examined K-12

teachers' and higher education faculty's experiences teaching during ERT and their experiences of compassion fatigue.

Regarding higher education, Lynch's (2022) research on student affairs professionals linked the work environments and professional culture of supporting students in higher education to secondary traumatic stress disorder. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, student affairs professionals felt a sense of personal responsibility for students they knew were experiencing trauma, often leading to poor boundary setting with such students. Lynch (2022) stated that across interviews with student affairs professionals, their sense of personal responsibility was rooted in a mistrust of the university, its leadership, and its broken supports for students. This mistrust can lead to educators going beyond their assigned roles, resulting in compassion fatigue. Yang and colleagues (2021) found K-12 educators to do just that. As educators made more frequent attempts to connect with stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, administrators) during ERT, "teachers could have more exposure to students' respective challenges and trauma, which could increase teachers' secondary traumatic stress" (p. 512).

Furthermore, operating within an institution they found inflexible and unsupportive exacerbated educators' sense of helplessness. For example, in their self-study, teacher educators Rice and Diacopoulos (2023) reported that during ERT they alternated between states of restoration and nihilism. At times, the shift to online instruction provided opportunities to reimagine teacher education (restoration). Yet, any hopes of radically revising courses and programs were thwarted by their institutions taking away instructors' decision-making power (nihilism). Similarly, Trust and Whalen (2021) found that K-12 teachers felt ill-equipped to face the challenges of ERT and these challenges were exacerbated by school administrators who were demanding, unsupportive, and did not provide strong leadership.

Taken together, research on caring professionals and educators suggests compassion fatigue resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic can be a product of their efforts to connect with and care for students. Their perceptions of institutions as hindering their ability to do this work exacerbated compassion fatigue and related feelings of helplessness.

Navigating Compassion Fatigue

Although teachers across the educational spectrum experienced compassion fatigue during the pandemic, they also leveraged self-efficacy, agency, connectedness, and acceptance to navigate challenges.

Benight and Bandura (2004) define self-efficacy in response to "calamitous events" as "the perceived capability to manage one's personal functioning and the myriad environmental demands of the aftermath occasioned by a traumatic event" (p. 1130). Self-efficacy beliefs impact how a person navigates decision-making and their ability to persevere when faced with adversity. Individuals with a high sense of self-efficacy are emboldened to seek solutions that minimize the effects of problematic situations and stress (Benight & Bandura, 2004). Across studies of K-12 teachers and higher education faculty, work-related self-efficacy was associated with fewer

symptoms of compassion fatigue, while empathy was associated with increased symptoms (Lynch & Glass, 2019; Yang et al., 2021).

Related to self-efficacy is agency, which is "not only the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans, but the ability to give shape to appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution" (Bandura, 2001, p.8). A person with a strong sense of personal agency is able to enact with intentionality and forethought. For example, Shoffner (2023), in a self-study of her own teaching, found herself to be agentic when she was able to make ongoing adjustments to her instruction in real-time in response to students' needs. This process was in contrast to her pre-pandemic routine of reflecting on her instruction and course materials between semesters. Shoffner's analysis of her teaching found that in the semesters since March 2020, she checked in with her students more frequently, was more flexible with absences and late assignments, and used student feedback to continually revise assignments in real-time.

Yang and colleagues (2021) found a positive and significant correlation between K-12 teachers' perception of teachers' feelings of closeness to others at their school, sense of belonging, and feelings of safety and care (i.e., *school connectedness*) and distance teaching self-efficacy. During ERT, school connectedness had a mediating effect on compassion fatigue, thus lessening its negative impact. Hence, feelings of connection between and among teachers and administrators during ERT may have promoted self-efficacy and mitigated compassion fatigue. Similarly, the K-12 teachers surveyed by Trust and Whalen (2021) found connectedness beneficial for navigating the stresses of ERT. Connecting with other educators, both locally and globally, supported teachers' affective, cognitive, and social growth.

For some educators, accepting that ERT was not going to be the same as traditional in-person teaching enabled them to reframe their experiences. Teachers reported "accepting the loss of control; accepting that emergency remote teaching will be messy; and accepting that they are doing their best" (Trust & Whalen, 2021, p. 154). This acceptance of the realities of ERT freed teachers to be flexible and to shift their focus to maintaining relationships with students and supporting their well-being. In higher education, Rice and Diacopoulos (2023) describe transitioning from a cycle of grieving the personal and educational losses caused by the pandemic to understanding the pandemic as a change in circumstances. This change in perspective enabled them to prioritize choices and practices rooted in restoration, rather than nihilism. A person's ability to reframe their perspective (Rice & Diacopoulos, 2023) is an example of self-regulation of thought processes, which is tied to self-efficacy (Benight & Bandura, 2004).

METHODS

This study is part of a larger project that examined how GSIs, all of whom were novice online teachers, navigated the transition to online instruction mid-semester (Byrne, 2021; Gannon, 2021; Hogan, 2022). Study participants were a convenience sample from the School of Education at a large Mid-Atlantic university. In this study, we focus on nine participants who met two inclusion criteria: 1) they were teaching assistants (n=1) or instructors of record (n=8) in Spring 2020 who had rapidly moved

their face-to-face course online mid-semester; and 2) they continued to serve as instructors of record or teaching assistants at each interview point. We interviewed participants in Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and Summer 2022. As of Summer 2022, five of the participants completed their doctoral degrees and are now faculty at different higher education institutions, the remaining four participants are still enrolled in their doctoral programs. We present anonymized quotes using pseudonyms and they/them/their pronouns. See Table 1 for participant information.

Data Sources

Data collection began in April 2020, following ethics board approval. First, a survey was emailed to all graduate students at the university's School of Education. Twenty-three GSIs completed the survey. This survey consisted of Likert-type and open-ended questions that solicited information regarding GSIs' courses, their teaching experience, resources they were utilizing while teaching online, and their feelings regarding online instruction. Our survey and the subsequent semi-structured interview protocols were based on the Mid-Semester Evaluation of College Teaching (MSECT), a validated online teaching feedback and evaluation tool (Byrne & Donlan, 2020).

The 23 respondents were invited to participate in interviews, conducted via Zoom. Fifteen respondents consented to interviews which were conducted approximately one month after the start of ERT. By the time of the third interview (Summer 2022), only nine of the 15 participants met the inclusion criteria. All nine participants completed the survey and all three interviews. Two members of the research team conducted each interview. Interviews were semi-structured and designed to explore what instruction looked like before and after the transition online, and GSIs' experiences with online instruction (sample questions are presented in Figure 1). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. Transcripts were manually checked for accuracy.

Data Analysis

We began with deductive coding, developing a code book based on the literature on secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD), compassion fatigue, and self-efficacy (see Table 2). We identified the symptoms and behaviors associated with STSD, as outlined in Figley (1995), and Lynch and Glass (2019) and looked for evidence of these symptoms in participant responses. We also looked for evidence of burnout, which is sustained over time and marked by exhaustion, chronic work-related stress, and frustration (Figley, 1995; Yang et al., 2021).

In addition to symptoms of STSD, we coded for factors that contribute to compassion fatigue, as identified by research (Lynch & Glass, 2019; Trust & Whalen, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). We also coded for evidence of factors that mitigate the effects of compassion fatigue: self-efficacy (Benight & Bandura, 2004), agency (Bandura, 2001), acceptance (Trust & Whalen, 2021), and connectedness (Trust & Whalen, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Additionally, the research team completed several rounds of inductive coding where we bracketed a priori ideas of STSD and coded for

the unique experiences of respondents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). For example, we added an inductive code of *worrying about students and their future as teachers*, since the majority of GSIs taught courses for pre-service teachers. The first two authors independently coded each transcript using the codebook in Excel and made analytic memos about the patterns and trends across each participant's three interviews. We then met together and compared memos on each participant. Finally, we looked at trends and anomalies across all nine GSIs.

Reliability and Validity

At the time of initial data collection (Spring 2020), the members of the research team and all participants were enrolled in doctoral programs within the same School of Education. Thus, participants either had established rapport with the research team or appeared to establish it easily in interviews. This rapport may have diminished the likelihood of social desirability bias (Bergen & Labonte, 2019), but we attempted to mitigate any possible risk in several ways. First, we guaranteed confidentiality. Second, interview questions had no obvious 'correct' answers but instead asked for personal reflections on teaching experiences. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the research team to probe into participants' responses for clarification and to avoid making assumptions about intended meanings. Additionally, we sought to increase trustworthiness of findings by looking for consistency in each respondent's survey responses and all three interviews (triangulation; Yin, 2014). We also corroborated findings across all participants' data sources to ensure themes reflected patterns of participant experiences as well as notable exceptions to those patterns.

FINDINGS

We found that all nine participants experienced symptoms of compassion fatigue, or STSD, with some symptoms being more common than others. Both adjusting to ERT (Spring 2020) and transitioning back to in-person instruction (Summer 2022) resulted in symptoms of compassion fatigue as GSIs strove to empathetically respond to student trauma. Thus, from the initial interview to the final interview, all participants exhibited some of the symptoms associated with STSD. Our findings are organized around each of the research questions.

Evidence of Compassion Fatigue

According to our data and analysis, no participant exhibited all of the symptoms or behaviors associated with STSD as outlined in Figley (1995) and Lynch and Glass (2019). However, some behaviors associated with STSD were common among participants. Across interviews, the majority of participants (6 of 9) demonstrated that they were "unintentionally thinking about their support of students who experienced trauma, feeling tense when thinking about supporting students who experienced trauma, and unable to stop thinking about the details of the trauma the student shared"

(Lynch & Glass, 2019, p.6). GSIs demonstrated unintentional thoughts about their support of students when they were asked about their instructional decisions.

Representing the experiences of others, Parker consistently shared their awareness of and desire to mitigate student stress through instructional decisions. For example, they shared that they frequently used Zoom breakout rooms and leveraged the chat feature so students could communicate. They made this decision because

> ...one student was living in a small house with 10 other people and just was not able to turn their mic on because there was no quiet place in the house. She was communicating but I told the class that this particular student was able to chat. She can hear you but just don't expect her to turn her mic on. (Fall 2020)

Similarly, Geddy surveyed their students before moving their course online and knew there were students in their class who did not have reliable internet at their homes or were responsible for younger siblings. However, when it came time to enact supports for students, they expressed doubt in their ability to make the 'right' decision during ERT. They wondered if there was more they could have done to support those students, "I don't know that I found a good way to help them through that, other than not making their life particularly difficult" (Fall 2020).

As the university transitioned back to in-person courses, GSIs continued to be aware of their students' pandemic-related traumas, and sought ways to support them. Ryan commented that their students were "overwhelmed" with returning to in-person classes. Reflecting on the Fall 2021 semester, Ryan shared

> I had several [students] with like very bad mental health stuff going on during that semester…it was very unusual…every week it was like multiple people were coming to me saying like, "Hey I, I have this going on, I have this going on, my anxiety is really bad." (Summer 2022)

Peyton, Geddy, and Taylor also reported significant numbers of absences from their in-person classes for Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 and responded by being flexible with assignment deadlines and hosting what Geddy called "the illegal Zoom." Here, Geddy and others allowed students to join in-person classes via Zoom, despite institutional mandates to hold in-person classes.

The majority of participants did not exhibit avoidance behaviors, and continued to fulfill their roles as teaching assistants and instructors of record. Only two participants alluded to avoiding aspects of their responsibilities as instructors of record. Across interviews, Morgan and Frankie shared that they were doing just enough work to "get by," being satisfied that the instruction they were providing for students was "good enough." In the first interview, Frankie shared, "you're not gonna get my A game necessarily… I think, you know, expectations have been lowered across the board." Similarly, Morgan stated, "I feel like it's been kind of an opportunity for me to cop out or like to not be as invested" (Spring 2020). When asked about how moving courses online impacted their teaching, Frankie expressed a desire to do things differently or implement new technologies, but ultimately, they

did not exert the effort to do so: "And I just didn't have the time or the like energy to do that" (Fall 2020).

While Frankie appeared satisfied with their instructional choices, Morgan expressed guilt about "phoning it in" during ERT, stating, "I'm very driven by my guilt and feeling like I need to do the right thing" (Spring 2020). Morgan continue to express feelings of guilt in their second interview:

> [teaching online] made me aware of what I was, and was not doing in my class in terms of what I felt was maybe effective or what I felt guilty about in terms of, like, could I be putting in more effort? Could I be doing this differently? (Fall 2020)

We posit that Morgan's guilt was rooted in compassion fatigue - they had the desire to help students but ultimately felt overwhelmed and unable to fulfill that desire. As we will discuss further, Morgan was the only participant who appeared to agonize over their instructional decisions in a self-debilitating way that ultimately resulted in inaction (i.e., a freeze response).

None of the participants shared that they were feeling jumpy, easily annoyed, or had trouble sleeping. However, our interview questions did not inquire explicitly about participants' moods or sleep habits. Still, a few participants shared that there were times when they felt drained, discouraged about the future, or were less interested in being around others. For example, in Spring 2020, Peyton shared that they were escaping by playing video games, "I just want to play Animal Crossing all day" (Spring 2020). Logan expressed they were feeling uncertain and discouraged about career prospects. Logan was still enrolled in their doctoral program, but had already accepted a postdoc position, in the hopes that in another year or two, the job market would improve:

> I am doing a postdoc…for at least a year. And maybe two, just depending on you know, what jobs are and what money is available…I mean the pandemic is kind of ongoing, so who knows what's going to happen … it does feel very uncertain in terms of kind of, you know, will I get the kind of job that I want and will that even be available? (Summer 2022)

Ideally, Logan wanted a tenure-track job at an R1 institution, but thought that ultimately, those types of positions might not even be available in the next few years. Even though all nine participants displayed some symptoms of compassion fatigue (STSD), they each continued working in academia, either as a GSI, postdoc, or faculty at a new institution.

Factors Contributing to Compassion Fatigue

In addition to explicit connections to the STSD symptoms list (Figley, 1995; Lynch & Glass, 2019) we also found evidence of factors shown to contribute to compassion fatigue: making efforts to connect with students, lack of institutional

support, and worrying about students' futures. These factors were evident both when transitioning to ERT and when returning to in-person instruction.

Making Efforts to Connect With Students

When transitioning to online instruction in Spring 2020, all nine participants made efforts to connect with students about their course assignments. Several participants solicited feedback from students about the transition to online coursework. Taylor shared the positive feedback for their asynchronous course: "[students] like how the modules are organized, or they like how it's pretty succinct and they know where to go to get everything that they need" (Spring 2020). Other GSIs went beyond surveys, providing additional check-ins and supports for students. Geddy and Morgan facilitated optional Zoom sessions where they reviewed assignment instructions in detail. Peyton held one-on-one meetings with each of the students in their class.

In Spring 2020, several participants were intentional about doing regular wellness check-ins with students as courses transitioned online. These check-ins represented a novel and extra step compared to their pre-pandemic instruction. For example, in the first online session, Logan asked their students, "How are you feeling? Where are you right now? Where do you wish you were right now?" (Spring 2020). However, only Jordan, Ryan, and Parker engaged students in regular wellness checks throughout Spring 2020 and beyond. Reflecting on the Spring 2020 semester, Ryan shared, "I tried to always do a check-in at the beginning of class…whether that be *rose, bud, and a thorn* type of discussion or a specific question about the transition to going home or how they're feeling about online instruction" (Fall 2020). These regular check-ins provided participants with insights into their students' lives outside of class, which can contribute to compassion fatigue.

Lack of Institutional Supports

Across interviews, participants described a dearth of institutional supports on two fronts: (1) as instructors and teaching assistants, and (2) for students. When courses moved online in March 2020, GSIs teaching teacher education courses with embedded field components were left wondering how to triage their courses. Ryan and Taylor found themselves initiating conversations with faculty, and leading the problem-solving process. Ryan was frustrated with the faculty on their teaching team, "considering that I was the only graduate student on that team. And there were two other faculty members on the team with me. I didn't feel like that expectation should be on me to organize that and make sure that we're on the same page" (Fall 2020). Similarly, Taylor crafted a way for their students to conduct reading interventions with first graders online. However, Taylor was not provided any resources or guidance in creating this solution.

GSIs' perception of a lack of institutional supports for undergraduates compelled several GSIs to provide additional emotional and academic supports for their students. Across interviews, Taylor talked about how the pandemic is "not normal" and "everything is harder" yet the university and school of education seem to carry

on with "business as normal." Taylor stated, "there was a lack of structural support that would have demonstrated empathy… Maybe individually instructors felt empathetic and maybe they incorporated something into their courses to support their students" (Summer 2022). In Spring 2020, the university allowed students to take their courses as pass/fail without a letter grade, with no impact on their GPA or financial aid. However, the same accommodation was not offered in subsequent semesters. Furthermore, GSIs perceived university policies requiring in-person classes as harmful to students. In response, they exercised the few options they felt they possessed to support students. They adjusted deadlines, made intentional decisions about content to cover, and provided unsanctioned Zoom links. As Peyton said, "I did this kind of against the institution's policy… but, I felt like in [Fall 2021], if I didn't do that added Zoom option as just a 'just in case' I would have been failing some students, or at least taking away opportunities for some students to learn" (Summer 2022). GSIs found ways to demonstrate compassion and empathy to their students, when the institutions failed to do so.

Worrying About Students' Futures

GSIs instructing teacher education classes from Spring 2020 through Spring 2021 (Parker, Jordan, Ryan, and Taylor) expressed concerns about their students' future success as K-12 teachers. In response to the pandemic, local school systems moved all instruction online in March 2020. As a result, pre-service teachers were no longer able to participate in early field experiences. Teacher candidates completing their practicums were permitted to interact with their mentor teachers and students via online platforms. These restrictions continued through the Spring 2021 semester when local school districts transitioned to hybrid instruction. As a result, teacher candidates' practicums were completed primarily online, with some opportunities for small group instruction in-person. During the 2021-22 academic year, local school districts and the university returned to in-person instruction, but opportunities for early field experiences were still limited.

Given this disruption to pre-service teachers' field experiences, GSIs expressed concerns about their students' preparedness for teaching. Parker was concerned that marginalized K-12 students (e.g., multilingual students) would get underprepared teachers who would perpetuate the cycle of inequity. Jordan expressed frustration with the lack of attention to practical supports: "[Faculty] want to teach them what's in the standards right now, what's in the competencies right now. And prepping for a first day of school, as a first-year teacher online isn't in that list of standards" (Spring 2020). Jordan wanted to put aside philosophical conversations to focus on the immediate need: preparing pre-service teachers to teach online.

Overall, these GSIs were concerned that pre-service teachers would not be able to translate their online field experiences to in-person whole class teaching. For example, Ryan shared:

> I would say that those pre-service teachers were probably just not as prepared as people before COVID. But you know, I think, in some ways, they were, of course in terms of digital awareness and virtual classrooms like, they're super well

> versed in that. But I can't say for sure about their actual teaching methods and getting in front of a classroom full of kids after being on Zoom for that long had to be a super challenging experience for them. (Summer 2022)

Similarly, Parker shared, "I don't think a virtual internship can prepare folks for an in-person teaching job in the same way" (Summer 2022). Although these cohorts of pre-service teachers gained experience in online teaching, there was concern that they would struggle with in-person teaching. Taylor hoped that school districts would provide that needed support: "They may not know how to teach kids how to read…hopefully, they're in schools where they get enough early career support… and hopefully it aligns with the science of reading" (Summer 2022). Taylor's comments express that there is a possibility that recent graduates of teacher preparation programs lack critical pedagogies and local districts may not be able to fill the gaps. GSIs' concerns for pre-service teachers may have contributed to feelings of compassion fatigue, such as feeling discouraged about students' futures as novice educators.

Navigating and Responding to Compassion Fatigue

Our findings document that the majority of GSIs were able to mitigate the effects of compassion fatigue through their self-efficacy and sense of agency, by accepting the realities of ERT, and utilizing self-created support networks.

Self-Efficacy and Agency

Across all three interviews, all but one participant (Morgan) expressed confidence in their abilities as instructors to navigate ERT and online teaching. GSIs saw themselves as proficient in the technologies needed for online instruction. GSIs highlighted their ability to problem-solve and "figure things out" as they adapted in-person courses for online and hybrid instruction. For instance, Logan stated, "I'm confident that I could come up with solutions that could make it work" (Summer 2022). Five of the participants' professional self-efficacy was further supported by the fact that their Spring 2020 courses were courses they had taught before, knew the content well, and felt confident in making adjustments to course assignments and expectations. Although some GSIs expressed anxiety about transitioning their courses online, once they were teaching online many of those anxieties faded. After a few weeks of being online, Geddy stated, "I'm content right now…[students] seem to have it. They're logging on. You're seeing faces…they seem relatively happy with things" (Spring 2020). Positive student feedback from Spring 2020 courses bolstered GSI's assurance in their decision making as they prepared for the Fall 2020 semester. For example, Ryan shared, "overwhelmingly, the feedback that I got was really positive, which was affirming for me" (Fall 2020). Overall, GSIs were able to think about themselves and their instructional decisions in self-enhancing ways.

For the majority of participants (6 of 9), their self-efficacy and confidence in their abilities as instructors were rooted in their prior experiences as K-12 teachers. Frankie expressed that despite the uncertainties of ERT, they felt "pretty confident when I go

into a classroom, or a digital, virtual classroom, I kind of have a sense of what I'm doing" because of their experience as a high school teacher (Spring 2020). Jordan shared that without their K-12 expertise, they would have felt overwhelmed by the transition to ERT:

> I think it would have also been really difficult if I hadn't been a K-12 teacher. I cannot imagine what GSIs are doing if they aren't used to just having the rug pulled out from under you… I was more used to a crisis in a K-12 situation, and because of that I can handle a crisis, I feel like a little bit more, because I have that pedagogy in my back pocket. (Spring 2020)

Across interviews, Jordan continued to elaborate on how their past as a K-12 educator equipped them to "think on my toes." Similarly, Logan expressed that their experience as a high school teacher "has helped me to sort of understand student needs, maybe in ways that other professors who haven't had that experience can't do or can't wrap their head around" (Spring 2020).

Self-efficacy also appeared to be the product of GSIs' ability to execute decisions motivated by feelings of empathy for students. All participants prioritized students' physical and emotional needs above course assignments and due dates. Peyton and Taylor commented that they made changes to their courses which resulted in more work for them (meeting with students; creating asynchronous modules) but with the goal of making learning more meaningful and less burdensome for students. Reflecting on Spring 2020, Ryan stated, "I feel like I felt so much empathy and sympathy for my students that it just became pretty much whatever you need to be successful in this class" (Fall 2020). Taylor added "And so I think up until this spring [2022] I have felt pretty confident about my teaching. And I think it stems from the fact that I was able to make these very intentional decisions that first, that emergency Spring" (Summer 2022). Furthermore, four of the GSIs exercised their self-efficacy to display empathy in the face of institutional policies they perceived as harmful to students. For example, Geddy described his experience providing Zoom links:

> You know, there was this big kind of strange push, at least in the universities I was involved with, to like, don't do hybrid… So I think ultimately I just became a more flexible teacher. And just overcame my inherent rule-following nature. It's like, what are they going to say about Zooming in a student? What could possibly happen? (Summer 2022)

As expressed by Geddy, GSIs valued enacting empathy and care for students more than they feared any consequences for disobeying university policy.

Morgan. In contrast to the other participants, Morgan expressed self-doubt and a lack of self-efficacy across all three interviews. When courses transitioned online in Spring 2020, Morgan chose to make their course asynchronous because they had prior experience teaching an asynchronous online course. Yet, Morgan was worried that the asynchronous format was not "engaging enough" but did not seek feedback from students: "whether [being asynchronous] is something that students like or don't

like, I don't know. I haven't asked." In the second interview, Morgan shared that they did eventually solicit feedback from students, "So I emailed them about halfway through, just be like, 'hey, is this working? Is there anything you want different or changed?'…I did check in to make sure it was sufficient for them, and it seemed to be". Despite the positive (or neutral) feedback from students, Morgan still appeared to agonize over the decisions they made in structuring the asynchronous course. Throughout the second interview, Morgan discussed that they disliked discussion board posts - both as a student and as an instructor. However, they felt like there had been no time to devise a better solution:

> I hate discussion boards…I use it because I haven't come up with a better solution yet and with the shift to online, in reality, I mean, and then being a grad student working on dissertation stuff, I just, I could have sat down and maybe thought of a different or better activity. And I just, I didn't because of time purposes…I kind of did that because it was less time consuming for me. (Fall 2020)

It seemed that Morgan's sense of urgency to transition to asynchronous instruction impeded their ability to problem solve. However, by the third interview it became apparent that Morgan's inability to adapt their teaching was not due to insufficient time - it was a freeze response. When reflecting on their Spring 2020 course, Morgan shared that they were initially fearful of the unfamiliar course content and unsure about how to convey the information virtually.

At the time of the third interview, Morgan was an adjunct at a new institution of higher education and was still on the job market looking for a full-time professorship. Morgan's lack of self-efficacy manifested in self-deprecating comments about their "laziness" and lack of confidence in applying for academic positions. For example, they said, "I didn't do anything the first year of the pandemic, I feel like I should have…I think, 'Gosh [Morgan], you just had two years of free time'…I'm not joking when I say, for the last two years, I have watched Netflix" (Summer 2022). Through the interview, Morgan expressed guilt about not handling the pandemic as well as other people or not being as productive as other academics.

Acceptance

Accepting the realities of ERT enabled GSIs to successfully navigate online instruction. All GSIs (except Morgan) reported a tension in their Spring 2020 interviews where they wished the online course could replicate/continue the in-person experience but understood that ERT required a change in expectations. As Jordan shared, "I'm trying to make the best of it but I'm just frustrated that the power of that class cannot be everything that I would hope for it to be."

By the Fall 2020 interview, participants shifted expectations away from exposing students to all pre-pandemic content and toward maximizing content acquisition while reducing student stress. Geddy, Ryan, and Taylor, for example, talked about "slimming down" assignments and lectures to the most essential information: "it became easy for me to cut things in a way that I wouldn't have been comfortable

cutting in person" (Geddy) and "if [students] leave my class, being able to do [the pared-down content], then I've done my job" (Ryan).

Connectedness

Every participant commented that either the supports offered by the institution were insufficient or the institution's actions added to the stresses of ERT and the ongoing pandemic. As a result, GSIs turned to self-created support networks, such as peer groups and Twitter (now *X*).

Prior to ERT, Jordan, Ryan, and Parker participated in a community of practice composed of GSIs who identified as teacher educators. The GSIs in this community of practice were instructors of record for teacher education courses or field supervisors for teacher candidates. In March 2020, this community of practice met to troubleshoot the shift to ERT. Parker described that meeting:

> When we were meeting, we were basically like, "Look, this is coming down the pipe, what can we do?" What activities can we think of? What software? Things like that. And we just did a brainstorming of all the different kinds of tech that we could possibly use, as well as different things that other Universities had been doing. (Spring 2020)

Both Ryan and Parker stated that working with this community of practice equipped them to make the shift to online instruction. Ryan said that they left that meeting "knowing, pretty much what I was going to do, based on the ideas that I had gotten from [other GSIs]" (Spring 2020). Jordan shared, "I think without that community of practice, I would feel remarkably isolated in my job and in my work" (Spring 2020). Meeting together with other GSIs helped Jordan stay informed of university policies and decisions. Jordan continued to praise the support of the community of practice throughout their interviews, stating, "I wouldn't even have all of the tools that I have today if it wasn't for that graduate teacher education network" (Summer 2022). Jordan was able to immediately apply the strategies and technologies brainstormed by the community as a GSI and in their new role providing online professional development to K-12 teachers.

Other GSIs created support networks in more informal ways. For example, Geddy was supported by GSIs who taught the same course as them. These GSIs were colleagues who, like Geddy, had taught the same course over multiple semesters. Geddy believed that this professional camaraderie was essential: "I just think it's even more important to formulate constructive relationships with professional colleagues. It's not just a sign of a casual thing - I think it's central to the work of teaching" (Summer 2022). The experiences of Geddy and the GSIs in the community of practice capture how graduate students came together to support one another professionally in the absence of guidance from faculty.

Academic Twitter was a resource utilized by Geddy and Taylor. Geddy was already an avid Twitter user pre-pandemic, curating a Twitter feed that they read like a newspaper. At the start of the pandemic, they found Twitter to be a helpful resource in figuring out how to approach online instruction: "I follow a number of people in

academic circles and people were just kindly posting their ideas for what they were suggesting for their classes. And I found a few helpful hints" (Geddy, Spring 2020). Taylor also turned to academic Twitter for help in navigating ERT. People on Taylor's Twitterfeed were posting "things about how to show students empathy during this time and how to be more equitable" (Spring 2020) which they found helpful in providing socioemotional support to students.

Logan. While the majority of participants felt unsupported by faculty and the university writ large, Logan reported a productive and supportive working relationship with their faculty teaching team. Throughout the three interviews, Logan reports that they worked collaboratively with the other instructors to shift their course to an online format and continually modify the course in subsequent semesters:

> What's worked really well is our ability to plan together and meet together via Zoom…they have a lot of experience teaching the class anyways, and, you know, understand the progression, understand what's worked before and what hasn't, so that's been really helpful to me to have all their expertise in pivoting to an online course. (Spring 2020)

While the other participants in our study received minimal support or clarifications from faculty, Logan was able to leverage the experience of their teaching team. Logan acknowledges that their experience was atypical, "I feel like I was in sort of this unique situation that other [GSIs] were not in where I had a bunch of people teaching the same thing and you know…we were close colleagues who already knew each other" (Summer 2022).

Influence of Compassion Fatigue on Professional Identity

Despite the compassion fatigue experienced during ERT and beyond, participants felt they gained a greater sense of professional identity and ability to make instructional decisions. Parker shared, "I felt like I grew a lot in terms of being an instructor of record…that I could get my students what they need" (Summer 2022). Between Spring 2020 and Summer 2022, Taylor earned their PhD and transitioned to a new university: "I trust myself a little more to teach and do a good job teaching, no matter what the setting is" (Summer 2022). Several participants also gained a more positive perspective of online instruction. For example, Logan stated, "Despite all the limitations of virtual learning, I do also think that it showed me kind of what's possible" (Summer 2022).

Several participants commented on their increased capacity to view students as "people and humans" (Morgan, Summer 2022). Overall, participants found themselves to be more empathetic, flexible instructors. Taylor explained,

> I now really try to think about the fact that my students are humans outside of the classroom and that they have their lives and experiences outside of the classroom and I've tried to, I don't know, to consider that or make room or make space for the understanding of that. (Summer 2022)

Taylor expressed satisfaction in their ability to teach in a manner that supported the whole student. Ryan and Frankie noted that the importance of building relationships with students was reinforced during ERT: "I know I made a very conscious effort, or concerted effort, to get to know my students in a way that I probably would not have had to do if we were in person…That is something I would continue doing" (Frankie, Summer 2022).

Additionally, three participants expressed clarity around the type of institution that would afford them the opportunities to be the kinds of instructors they wished to be. Parker accepted a clinical professor position because they felt like the competing demands of a tenure track job would come "at the expense of being able to teach" (Summer 2022). Peyton accepted a clinical position at a large, research-intensive university but questioned "whether large institutions can care for, and create responsive systems that care for students and prioritize teaching" (Summer 2022). Geddy was unsure whether they could handle the demands of research while being the type of educator they desired to be. We posit that the duality of being a GSI during ERT provided participants with insights as to how the University operates which informed their selection of institutions.

DISCUSSION

Our findings show that, like K-12 teachers, GSIs experienced compassion fatigue during ERT and the transition back to in-person teaching. We found evidence of these experiences in participants' thinking about their support of students, especially in their reflections on whether they had done enough to make course content accessible and not a source of additional stress for students. Like the teachers studied by Yang and colleagues (2021), the efforts our participants exerted to connect with students appeared to be a source of stress and compassion fatigue. Additionally, we observed that participants had similar experiences to the student affairs practitioners studied by Lynch (2022). Namely, participants' sense that their institutions were not doing enough to support students led to both a sense of mistrust in the institution and an added sense of compassion fatigue, as participants felt the need to do more to fill the gap in institutional support. While other studies have shown that feeling supported by the school community and administration can mitigate the effects of compassion fatigue (Yang et al., 2021), we have little evidence of that type of support. Rather we argue that the institution was often viewed as a barrier to be overcome (Rice & Diacopoulos, 2023), for example, not permitting the use of Zoom when returning to campus.

Participants navigated these feelings of compassion fatigue in several ways. Their self-efficacy, which was, in part, rooted in their previous teaching experience, served to protect them from worsening compassion fatigue. Participants often displayed agency when they were able to demonstrate empathy for students in their instructional decisions (Bandura, 2001; Benight & Bandura, 2004). Although feeling excessive empathy for students may lead to compassion fatigue (Figley, 1994), we believe that our participants' sense of agency and ability to respond in satisfying ways to their desire to display empathy, served to protect them during and beyond ERT

(Shoffner, 2023). Furthermore, participants' ability to accept the reduced learning opportunities during the pandemic appeared to reduce their sense of stress and facilitated the satisfying feeling of focusing on student well-being (Trust & Whalen, 2021).

Looking longitudinally, we argue that participants' feelings of self-efficacy not only assisted them in navigating challenges faced during ERT and beyond, it promoted a sense of growth that they found satisfying (Trust & Whalen, 2021). As displayed in Figure 2, growth was produced when the downward thrust of factors contributing to compassion fatigue was balanced with the upward push of mitigating factors.

Although we appear to have crested the mountain of the COVID-19 pandemic, its effects continue to impact current GSIs, new faculty, and students. The nature of our study prevents us from drawing generalizations from the present sample of participants to broader populations, but we can use these findings to draw attention to implications for institutions seeking to recruit, support, and retain faculty who experienced ERT and beyond. Our sample of GSIs appeared to rely on prior K-12 teaching experience and personal networks of fellow instructors to navigate pandemic-related challenges. However, prior teaching experience may not be the norm for GSIs and university faculty across disciplines (Cervantes & Inlow, 2022; Schwaller, 2022).

Thus, we draw institutional attention to the feelings of disconnect and alienation GSIs experienced as part of ERT and its after effects, as well as the professional and personal agency they leveraged in negotiating these feelings. Accordingly, like Cervantes and Inlow (2022), we argue for providing opportunities to participate in communities that support new faculty's developing pedagogy. Institutions seeking to recruit, support, and retain faculty should work to support the development of professional identities that endure emergencies and the resulting threats of disconnection, anxiety, and compassion fatigue, while capitalizing on faculty's self-efficacy and agency. These professional identities must be able to understand the absence of physical presence, when "it's harder to read the 'room'" (Cain, et al, 2022, p. 1241); develop self-efficacy through pedagogical adaptiveness; and, especially, foster kindness based on the mutual perception of shared humanity *in extremis* (Cain, et al, 2022; Cartee, 2023). Given our participants' recognition of the lack of institutional support, we argue that institutions that share motivation toward empathetic action for students may ease the work of GSIs and new faculty.

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MONICA ANTHONY, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Secondary Education in the School of Education at Georgia Gwinnett College. Her research interests include the transition from teacher to teacher educator, field supervision, and productive struggle in mathematics. Email: manthony5@ggc.edu.

ERIN HOGAN, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Literacy in the Department of Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Teacher Education at the University of Louisville. Her major research interests lie in the areas of understanding effective literacy practices for middle grade readers, especially students who are acquiring English and identifying systems of teacher learning that facilitate use of this instruction. Email: erin.hogan.1@louisville.edu

VIRGINIA L. BYRNE, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs in the School of Education and Urban Studies at Morgan State University. Her research explores how technology is changing how we teach, learn, and connect. Email: virginia.byrne@morgan.edu.

NEIL DHINGRA, is Graduate Academic Advisor in the College of Information Studies and a Doctoral Candidate in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he studies the history and philosophy of education, education policy, and education law. Email: ndhingra@umd.edu.