Supporting the Mental Health of Teachers in COVID-19 through Trauma-Informed Educational Practices and Adaptive Formative Assessment Tools

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To address the emotional and mental health needs of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, existing instructional technology tools can be rapidly adapted to support trauma-informed educational practices. In this action research and practice brief, the instructional strategies and communication tools used to support the mental health needs of preservice teachers within an instructional technology course are detailed. Preliminary outcomes indicate that although preservice teachers are effective in using instructional technology tools to articulate the status of their health and well-being, not all preservice teachers chose to engage in course activities, highlighting that the most vulnerable preservice educators need additional support during COVID-19 teaching and learning. Implications for preservice and in-service education are discussed.

The nature of a crisis can impact both schooling and its purposes (Hughes & Jones, 2020). In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis "can and should be viewed from the perspective of trauma" (Horesh & Brown, 2020, p. 334). To better support students impacted by trauma, educators should first ensure the emotional and physical safety of their students (Carello & Butler, 2015). It is important to provide safe learning environments where students feel supported and can express their emotions (Honsinger & Brown, 2019).

A challenge for educators during this time of "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020) and "learning in the time of COVID-19" (Darling-Hammond, 2020) is that the discourse around well-being and self-care is limited (Horesh & Brown, 2020) and the strategies being employed by teacher educators to address the mental health needs of preservice teachers remains unclear. This action research and practice brief details the instructional strategies used by a faculty member to support the mental health and well-being of 15 preservice teachers at a large Southern public university during the first five weeks of COVID-19 schooling. This article details the theoretical framework used, the process employed, the results of the intervention, implications, and areas for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although teacher educators may not be formally trained in trauma-informed teaching, there has been a call for individuals outside the mental health field (e.g., educators) to be trained and provide trauma support to those impacted by the COVID-19 crisis (Horesh & Brown, 2020). To address students' mental health needs in a preservice teacher instructional technology course during emergency remote teaching, the instructor applied trauma-informed educational practices suggested Carello and Butler (2015). Carello and Butler recommended that teacher educators "acknowledge, normalize, and discuss difficult feelings" (p. 270) around trauma. To accomplish this important task, Carello and Butler suggested that verbal check-ins with students are beneficial to assess how students are doing emotionally. Carello and Butler also encouraged educators to invite, but not require, preservice teachers to complete written check-ins at the beginning and end of class and to follow up individually with students that need additional support. These research-based strategies, among others, guided the interventions described below.

PROCESS

Given the context of emergency remote teaching, the faculty member in this action research project used a free formative assessment tool to carry out check-ins with preservice teachers during synchronous course sessions in Zoom. The instructor started each weekly class with verbal questions centered on the preservice teachers' mental health and well-being. The tool used to facilitate discussion was Spiral (www.spiral.ac), specifically a free tier called Spiral Lite. Using the tool's free Quickfire Lite feature, which is designed specifically for verbal questions, the instructor asked students questions such as, "What worries you at this moment in time?" (Figure 1), "How would you rate your stress level this past week on a scale of 1 to 10?" (Figure 2), and "How are you positively coping with stress?" (Figure 3). Students joined the discussion using gospiral.ac, inserted a join code, and typed in their name. There was no need to create an account to participate.
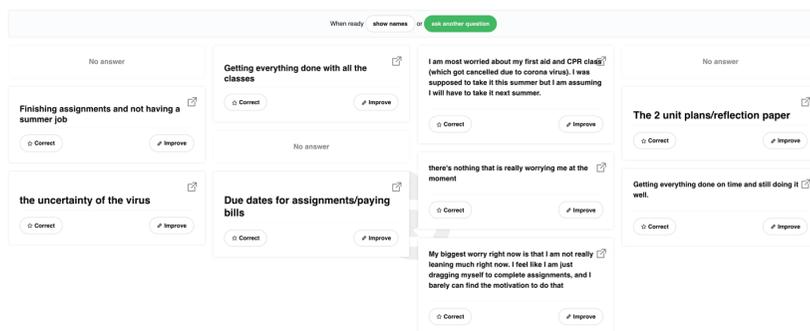
Figure 1. Preservice Teacher Responses to the Question, "What worries you at this moment in time?" within Spiral.
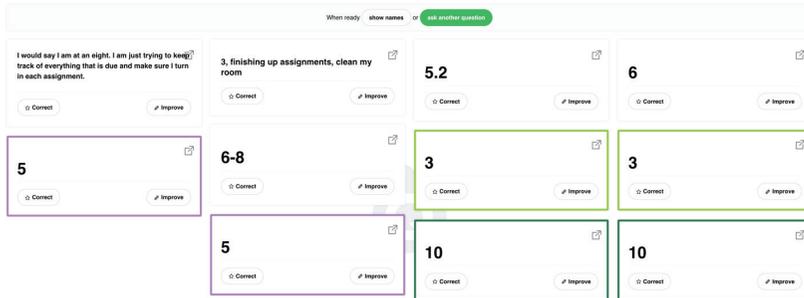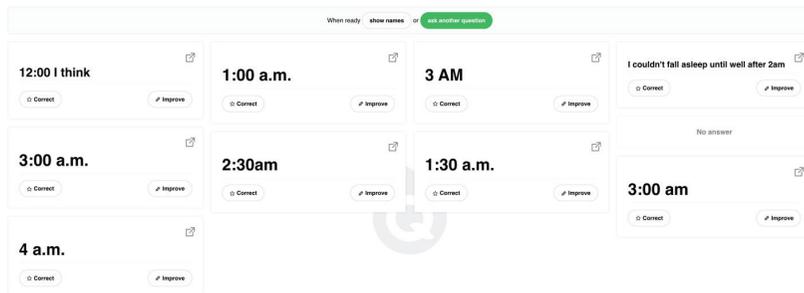
Figure 2. Preservice Teacher Responses to the Question, "How would you rate your stress level this past week on a scale of 1 to 10?" within Spiral.
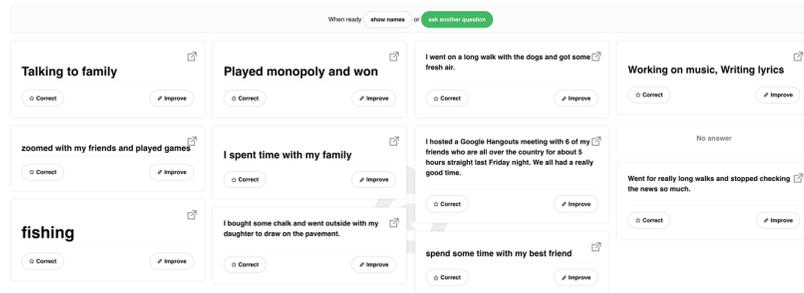
Figure 3. Preservice Teacher Responses to the Question, "How are you positively coping with stress?"

By default in Quickfire Lite, when students reply to verbal questions, responses are anonymous. Quickfire Lite requires that instructors reveal responses simultaneously, a feature that can help prevent student response bias. To engage students more deeply in the discussion, the instructor encouraged students to pose their own questions to their peers (see Figure 4). A key feature of Quickfire Lite is that the instructor can revisit student responses later with names displayed, enabling the identification of students who need follow-up communication. For example, if a preservice teacher rated their stress level a 10, the instructor could reach out to the student individually for support.

**Figure 4.** Peer Responses of Preservice Teachers to the Question, "When did you go to sleep last night?"

Although the instructor used Quickfire Lite within Spiral to support students' mental health, other comparable free formative assessment tools exist (see Table 1), including Webjets (app.webjets.io) and Padlet (padlet.com).

Table 1
A Comparison of Free Formative Assessment Tools
with Similar Functionality to Spiral

Tool Name	Access	Attribution Student names can be displayed above posts	Comments Allow viewers to comment on posts	Tracking Anonymous posts can be identified later for follow-up purposes	Post Approval (Moderator can approve posts prior to display)	Filter Profanity (Bad words replaced with emojis)	Student Registration Required
Spiral	Free full access during COVID-19; Spiral Lite free for up to five classes	X		X			
Webjets	Unrestricted free full access with educator plan request	X	X				X
Padlet	Free up to three boards	X	X		X	X	

A key benefit of Webjets is that educators can have free unrestricted tool access by requesting an educator license, whereas Padlet (padlet.com) limits users to three boards. Both Webjet and Padlet lack Spiral's functionality that enables students to post anonymously with the option for the instructor to view names later, but if that feature is not critical, Webjets and Padlet are suitable alternatives to Spiral. Other common collaborative cloud-based

tools (e.g., Google Sheets, Microsoft OneNote) can be adapted to facilitate
sharing and discussion without the board-like interface, if desired.
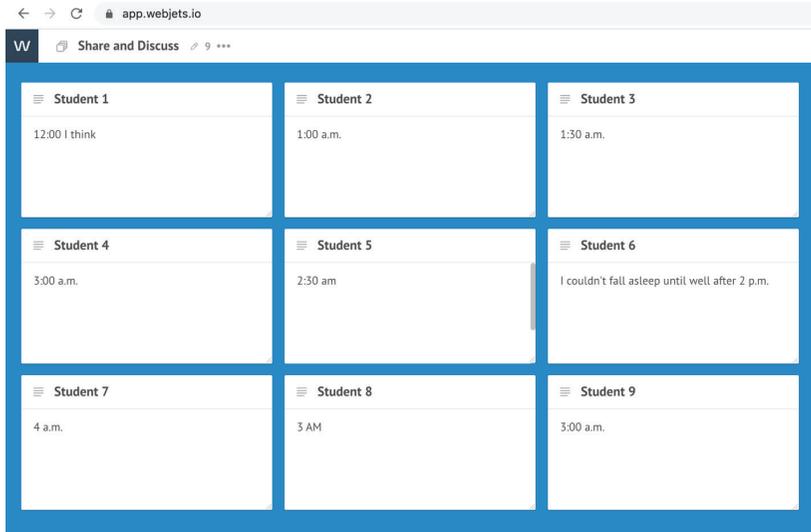
Figure 5. An Example of Webjet's Interface with Student Responses to the
Question, "When did you go to sleep last night?"
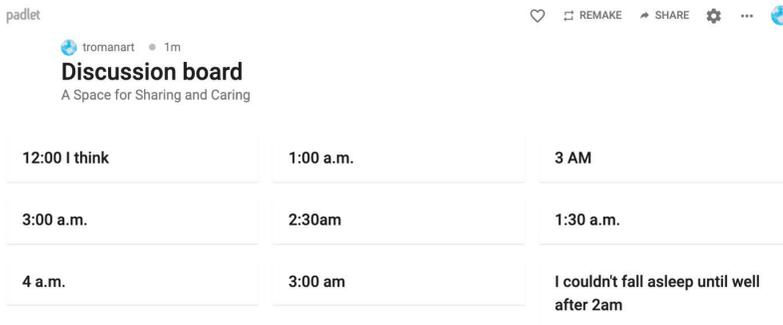
Figure 6. An Example of Padlet's Interface with Student Responses to the
Question, "When did you go to sleep last night?"

RESULTS

Twelve out of 15 preservice teachers in an instructional technology course regularly participated in five synchronous COVID-19 class sessions. Unfortunately, one third of students in the course (five students) were unable to share their mental health perspectives during synchronous sessions due to issues of tardiness, difficulty with browser navigation on mobile devices, absence from class, or by choice. Students who responded to the questions posed within Spiral provided transparent responses, with students reporting stress levels that ranged from positive well-being (a stress level of 3) to those with extreme levels of stress (stress levels of 8 or higher). Individuals with extreme stress received immediate individual follow-up from the instructor via email or GroupMe after class. Those contacted by the instructor expressed sincere appreciation for the additional support they received. The instructor worked one-on-one with the students to provide appropriate interventions and support services.

Preliminary outcomes of student use of Spiral within this context indicate that although preservice teachers effectively used the technology to articulate their feelings online, not all student perspectives were captured. At least three preservice teachers in the course disengaged from course activities (e.g., sync sessions, assignment submissions, GroupMe communication). This highlights a deeper issue of student absenteeism or disengagement during COVID-19 (e.g., Blume & Kohli, 2020). If students are not participating in course activities due to trauma, educators must ensure that students are still having their mental and physical health needs met by connecting absent students to immediate and accessible support networks (Carello & Butler, 2015). Additionally, when teachers provide emotional support to students, student motivation can increase (Ruzek et al., 2016). For educators working in an era of COVID-19 schooling, providing emotional support to students not only helps to ensure safety, it offers an opportunity for sustained student engagement.

IMPLICATIONS

This action research and practice brief demonstrates how formative assessment tools can be used to authentically support preservice teachers in their mental health needs through group sharing and discussion, especially when coupled with strategic follow-up by the instructor. Although formative assessment tools are limited in their capacity to reach those most in need of trauma support services, the flexibility of formative assessment tools, their

intuitive user interfaces, and their ability to keep track of user responses can be an effective trauma-informed teaching resource for preservice teacher educators and in-service teacher professional development during COV-ID-19. To that end, higher education faculty and K-12 administrators must be prepared to continue to support the mental health needs of preservice and in-service educators through trauma-informed teaching, which requires ensuring safety, establishing trustworthiness, maximizing choice, maximizing collaboration, and prioritizing empowerment (Fallot & Harris, 2009). If instructional technology tools can support trauma-informed teaching, the exact choice of tool is immaterial as long as the selected technology provides safety to respondents (e.g., anonymous user sharing) and provides facilitators the capability to follow-up with respondents who need further assistance and help during a time of crisis.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the limited in scope of this study, as well as its focus on preservice teacher mental health and shared strategies of resilience (see Knight et al., 2010), future research should focus on examining the depth and breadth of trauma-informed interventions in preservice teacher education settings during COVID-19. For example, the ways in which teacher educators are creating and sustaining trauma-informed teaching during COVID-19 is still unknown. Trauma-based researchers need to move quickly to identify strategies that can positively inform policy and practice (Horesh & Brown, 2020). Given the prevalence of trauma and stress in educational settings during normal times (Honsinger & Brown, 2019; Lever et al., 2017), one should assume that preservice and in-service teachers are experiencing their own trauma from the COVID-19 crisis. In-service teachers, in particular, are in need of research that can help mitigate their potential to experience compassion fatigue (Lever et al., 2017), while still enabling them to provide compassion (e.g., sensitivity to suffering, acceptance, nonjudgment, distress tolerance; Strauss et al., 2016) to their students.

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