Building Resilience in Pre-Service Teachers: What Do Faculty Need to Know?

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Abstract: Pre-service teachers are entering a career that is demanding and stressful, and, despite it also being profoundly gratifying, many teachers leave the profession within the first five years, leading to a teacher shortage. It is no longer sufficient for faculty to prepare students to become highly effective teachers. We must also prepare them to persevere. The purpose of this article is to inform faculty of the types and prevalence of student trauma, its impact on learning, and how it will affect aspiring teachers. Research-based topics and strategies to incorporate during class time are discussed.
Keywords: Pre-service, trauma, resilience

Introduction

Each generation is shaped by historical events that leave indelible marks on both society and the individual. For Baby Boomers, these events included the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War; for Generation X, the AIDS epidemic and the emergence of the World Wide Web; for Millennials, the September 11 attacks and the rise of social media; and for Generation Z, the COVID-19 pandemic. In a study conducted two years after the pandemic, Hu et al. (2022) examined the mental health of college students. The researchers found that 95.7% of participants reported experiencing moderate to severe mood disorders, including anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances. On a 10-point scale assessing students' perceptions of the pandemic's negative impact on their learning, the average score was 7.6.

College students are among the most stressed demographic in the nation (Bourchrika, 2025). A 2024 Gallup poll showed that 1 in 3 students considered leaving college (Marken, 2025). Although this figure peaked at 41% in 2022, it has remained consistently high over the last five years. The primary reasons students cite for wanting to unenroll are not financial challenges or difficulty understanding the content. Instead, students cite emotional stress and personal mental health.

While students experience unique challenges and stress in preparing for a career, K-12 educators are also stressed and burned out, with about 40% leaving the profession within the first five years (Craft, 2024). Given the unprecedented teacher shortage, this is exceedingly problematic and detrimental to not only the profession, but to society. Many states, most recently South

Carolina, have adopted legislation policies that no longer require teachers to hold a teaching certificate (Green, 2025).

Faculty are engaged in an uphill battle as they prepare education majors for a career in teaching. Many students enter their first college classroom pre-loaded with anxiety and depression (Craft, 2024), and the professors are attempting to prepare these students to enter a field that carries its own significant stress. This is akin to building a house on a foundation that is already on fire. Not only do faculty need to teach students how to extinguish the fire, but they also need to teach them to manage that fire once it reignites - and it will reignite. Stress and burnout may be unavoidable, but resilience is key to a lifelong career in teaching. In this article, we will examine what happens in the brain during stress, how it affects individuals academically, and what we, as faculty, can do to slow the mass exodus from a highly rewarding and essential profession.

The Need for Maslow Before Bloom

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) was conceptualized from his theory, in which all individuals, regardless of age, have needs that must be met to thrive. The five tiers of needs identified in Maslow's paper are broken down into three categories, and the needs in each tier must be met to thrive maximally. The first level of Maslow's hierarchy is physiological needs (food, water, shelter, clothing), and the second level is safety and security. Maslow goes so far as to claim that any man who does not have all his basic needs met is, in fact, a "sick man" (p. 394), which underscores the importance of teachers meeting the needs of their students. Unmet needs have a direct impact on academic success.

Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) comprises three learning domains scaffolded based on observable behaviors that increase in complexity. To be successful in completing complex tasks at the highest level, the individual must be able to complete simpler tasks. With the two hierarchies juxtaposed (see Figure 1), the simplest tasks, such as those that require recalling information, may be difficult. Maslow's hierarchy of needs espouses that meeting students' basic needs is a prerequisite to academic achievement. 'Maslow before Bloom' is a phrase used by many educators, as it highlights the importance of meeting one's physical and emotional needs before attempting to teach academic content.

Stress is an unavoidable part of life; however, not all stress responses are equal. There are three different categories of stress. The Center on the Developing Child (2014) described these as positive stress (e.g., having a toy taken away), tolerable stress (e.g., losing a loved one), and toxic stress from an adverse childhood experience. Also known as ACEs, these are potentially traumatic events experienced by children under 18, which involve abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction (e.g., parent incarceration, divorce). In a survey conducted from 2011 to 2020, almost 64% of the adults reported having experienced at least one ACE, and 17.3% reported four or more ACEs (Swedo et al., 2023). Approximately 66-85% of college students report having experienced at least one potentially traumatic event by the time they enter college (Read et al., 2011), and about 33–40% report multiple traumatic events (Walters et al., 2024). Swedo and colleagues (2024) found that the three most prevalent ACES are emotional abuse (65.8%), poor mental health of someone in the household (36.1%), and physical abuse (32.5%).

When an individual is under stress, the hormone cortisol is released. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child reported "prolonged and/or excessive exposure to fear and states of anxiety can cause levels of stress that can impair early learning and adversely affect later performance in schools, the workplace, and the community" (2010, p. 5). Cortisol has the

potential to rewire the prefrontal cortex (PFC), which is responsible for executive function (Suor et al., 2015). The brain's executive function encompasses working memory, decision-making skills, impulse control, and attention. These skills are required for paying attention, recalling information, reading, connecting, and adjusting new content with previous knowledge. The PFC is not fully developed until the age of 25; therefore, the effects of cortisol could have significant implications for students' academic achievement, as well as their overall well-being (Arain et al., 2013).

Considering the prevalence of ACEs in pre-college students (Swedo et al., 2023), coupled with possible traumatic events experienced while in college, it is imperative that faculty become informed about types of trauma, prevalence, effects of trauma, and strategies to overcome traumatic experiences (Howe, 2020). Trauma-informed faculty understand that a significant number of students have experienced trauma in some form of abuse, neglect, and/or family dysfunction, and that these experiences affect their executive function. A college student with executive dysfunction may show veiled signs through their lack of engagement during class, poor management of workloads, and untimely and/or non-proficient assignment completion, which may be difficult to recognize as being trauma related. Increased awareness of stress and burnout and calls to support teachers are being placed on school administrators to retain teachers (Agyapong et al., 2022), and university faculty must integrate this into their classes, as well, and teach future teachers self-care strategies so that they do not burn out and leave the profession.

Teaching Resiliency Through Self-Care

In an investigation of the mental health impacts of COVID-19 on college students, Lee and colleagues reported an increase in anxiety, depression, and/or feelings of loneliness ranging from 54%-61% (2021). In Spring 2020, at the height of the pandemic, Guillen and colleagues (2022) studied college students' capabilities to understand and manage their emotions and compared their capabilities to their engagement and academic performance. The researchers learned that students' emotional intelligence was positively correlated to resilience, subsequently impacting engagement and academic performance.

The pandemic created a decline in mental health. As a result, discussions focusing on self-care and resilience increased. Resilience is defined as "the ability to successfully adapt to stressors, maintaining psychological well-being in the face of adversity… It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed in everyone" (U.S. Department of State, 2017). Becker and colleagues also found that those who were diagnosed with COVID-19 suffered from greater executive dysfunction than those who were not infected (2023). Given the evidence that many students' stress response systems have been or are currently in overdrive, coupled with many teachers leaving the profession within the first five years, there is a clear need for faculty to incorporate self-care strategies to support students in both the present and future.

In response to the growing number of teacher vacancies each year and personally experiencing teacher burnout, Authors (2025) created a framework to teach self-care strategies to pre-service teachers by beginning to research why teachers are leaving the profession. With generalized stress and anxiety forming an overarching concept, the researchers developed a conceptual model supported by Hasher and colleagues' (2021) integrative model that promotes teacher well-being and resilience. Three themes emerged: (a) relationships; (b) spirituality; and (c) health, and subtopics were added under each theme. Research and practical application on subtopics were shared with students during the semester before student teaching so that they had

the opportunity to learn about and practice the strategies in class, and then, hopefully, continue the strategies during student teaching and beyond. Each instructor focused on one domain and expanded on the topics within that domain (see Figure 2).

The Relationships Domain emphasizes nurturing relationships, establishing professional and personal boundaries (National Alliance on Mental Health, 2025), and developing strategies for conflict resolution (Martin, 2022). Topics within this domain explored the importance of making time for friends, and learning how to set and enforce boundaries with friends, family, and employers, along with how to say 'no'. Strategies for successful conflict resolution are practiced, as well (Maxfield, 2013). Students found learning and practicing strategies on how to say 'no' the most beneficial because it helps them protect personal time and set boundaries for others. Additionally, students reported that they better understood the importance of spending time with friends despite being "too busy" (Authors, 2025).

The Health Domain includes topics on exercise, nutrition, and sleep. Since exercise is known to reduce stress and anxiety (Paluska & Schwenk, 2000), students learn about the importance of taking "brain breaks" and fully disconnecting, avoiding the tendency to swap out one electronic device for another. On the topic of nutrition, and after witnessing what students eat and drink in the cafeteria and during class, the importance of eating nutritious food because it promotes balance and healing is shared (Bethel et al., 2019). More specifically, the negative effects of caffeine and artificial sweeteners and the positive effects of water and vitamin D are discussed. The last topic within this domain, sleep, was included because college students appear chronically tired. Bouchrika (2025) reported that over 40% of college students do not feel rested, and those with less sleep tend to have lower GPAs, so topics of avoiding all-nighters and maintaining a proper sleep schedule are discussed, along with the effects of technology use on sleep patterns. Students reported that they became more cognizant of their sleep habits and water intake, and they found themselves taking more walks to release anxiety, increase motivation, and refocus.

The Spirituality Domain focuses on topics of meditation, mindfulness, and gratitude. Growing evidence supports mindfulness-based interventions for educators as an effective means to reduce burnout and promote emotional balance (Oman, 2008). Students learned about the benefits of grounding (Ghaly & Teplitz, 2004), yoga (Novotney, 2009), diaphragmatic breathing techniques (Harvard Health Publishing, 2016), and journaling (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Again, students practiced these strategies in class and, at the end of the year, reported that the strategy employed most often was the breathing techniques. Many students reported using these techniques several times a week, and also incorporated them into their own classrooms with students who were struggling to manage their emotions (Authors, 2025).

This framework reflects a holistic view of teacher self-care, suggesting that multidimensional strategies addressing relational, physical health, and spiritual needs may be necessary to sustain teachers in their roles and reduce turnover rates. Overall, the research and strategies were well-received by the students, and they reported incorporating some of the strategies in their daily/weekly habits. For others who were already incorporating these strategies, the science of understanding why the strategies decrease stress was beneficial and provided affirmation. Students understood that the strategies will not eliminate stress; rather, they are a means to manage stressful situations and overall feelings of anxiety (Authors, 2025).

Conclusion

K-12 teachers are facing unprecedented levels of stress and burnout, which directly impact teacher retention. With nearly 40% of new teachers leaving the profession within their first five years, this compounds an already critical teacher shortage. Early life adversity and ongoing stressors can impair brain regions responsible for learning, decision-making, and emotional regulation, making it difficult not only to be successful in college but also to remain in a physically and emotionally demanding profession. As a result, it is essential for faculty to become trauma-informed so that they understand the physiological effects associated with it, address any current anxiety and depression students are experiencing, and prepare students to become resilient during stressful periods in their careers. Satisfaction and longevity are necessary to retain our most valuable teachers.

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