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Sustaining the Work: Self-Care and Occupational Psychosocial Wellbeing in Trauma-Informed Flexible Schools

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ABSTRACT

In flexible schools, re-engaging young people in education relies heavily on the quality and continuity of relationships. Staff often work with young people whose experiences of schooling have included exclusion, disadvantage, disruption, and trauma. This can make the work deeply purposeful, but it can also place considerable emotional and psychosocial demands on those undertaking it. Self-care is commonly discussed as one way of supporting staff wellbeing, although a narrow focus on individual practice risks overlooking the workplace conditions that influence stress, recovery, and the capacity to sustain relational work.

This paper considers self-care as a multidimensional practice that is shaped by the context in which work occurs. It presents an exploratory mixed-methods case study of staff participation in a 10-week self-care process. Measures of professional quality of life and psychosocial working conditions will be examined alongside reflective journals, interviews, and focus groups. The study is not intended to test the causal effects of the self-care process. Instead, quantitative patterns will be considered together

with participants' accounts of how self-care was interpreted, adapted, supported, or constrained in their workplace. In doing so, the study treats staff agency and organisational responsibility as connected influences on occupational psychosocial wellbeing.

KEYWORDS: self-care; occupational wellbeing; psychosocial safety climate; trauma-informed practice; flexible schools; educational justice

The Occupational Context

In Australia, flexible schools provide alternative educational pathways for young people for whom mainstream schooling has not provided a secure or sustainable basis for participation. Compared with mainstream schools, they emphasise individualised learning, flexible engagement, and relational support. Re-engagement extends beyond curriculum provision and depends substantially upon staff capacity to establish trust, maintain professional boundaries, and sustain relational continuity when engagement is inconsistent or progress is non-linear.

Staff wellbeing is significant not only as an occupational outcome but also because relational practice is undertaken by workers whose capacity to remain professionally available is influenced by their psychosocial circumstances. For young people affected by exclusion, disadvantage, or trauma, the workplace conditions that sustain educators' relational availability are therefore integral to educational justice. Teacher wellbeing is multidimensional, with social relationships among its important correlates and predictors (Hascher & Waber, 2021). In flexible-school settings, where relational engagement is central to practice, the conditions under which staff undertake this work warrant particular attention.

Persistent workload, role ambiguity, inadequate resources, limited recovery opportunities, or weak organisational support may make demanding work more difficult to sustain. Conversely, autonomy, collegial support, appropriate resources, and opportunities for recovery may operate as occupational resources. Staff wellbeing should therefore be considered in relation to both individual practices and the organisation of work.

Reframing Self-Care

The limitation of conventional accounts of self-care is not that individual practices lack value. Butler et al. (2019) conceptualise self-care across physical, professional, relational, emotional, psychological, and spiritual domains, indicating that self-care extends beyond isolated lifestyle behaviours.

The difficulty arises when self-care is treated primarily as an individual responsibility or as a compensatory response to demands that may themselves be excessive or structurally embedded. A broader account therefore requires attention to both personal practice and the conditions under which that practice is enacted.

The Job Demands–Resources model provides one framework for understanding this relationship. It distinguishes job demands requiring sustained effort from job resources that support goal attainment, reduce associated costs, or foster motivation and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Within flexible schools, demands may include emotionally intensive relational work, workload, administrative requirements, and behavioural complexity, while resources may include autonomy, supervision, collegial support, role clarity, leadership support, and recovery opportunities.

Psychosocial safety climate provides a complementary organisational perspective by directing attention to organisational policies, practices, and procedures concerning psychological health and safety (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). Together, these perspectives qualify what may reasonably be expected of self-care. Staff can exercise agency, but that agency is enacted within occupational conditions that may enable or constrain it.

Proposed Study

The proposed doctoral study will employ an exploratory mixed-methods case study design across multiple flexible-school sites. Participants will engage in a 10-week self-care process incorporating psychoeducation, development of an individual self-care plan, implementation of self-selected practices, and structured reflection.

The purpose of this proposed study is to explore the relationship between self-care practices, workplace conditions, and occupational psychosocial wellbeing in trauma-informed flexible schools. It asks: "*How do self-care practices influence the occupational psychosocial wellbeing of staff in trauma-informed flexible schools, and what individual, relational and organisational conditions shape this relationship?*". The study is exploratory and is not designed to determine whether participation causes changes in wellbeing; instead, it examines pre–post patterns alongside participants' interpretations of the conditions in which self-care occurs.

Quantitative data will be collected before and after the 10-week period. The Professional Quality of Life Scale, Version 5, will assess compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress (Stamm, 2010). The 2010 manual explicitly identifies these three components and cautions that the instrument is not diagnostic. Selected dimensions from the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire III will examine psychosocial characteristics of the working environment (Burr et al., 2019). COPSOQ III is a multidimensional instrument designed to assess psychosocial work characteristics. These measures will provide comparative information across two time points rather than evidence of causal effectiveness.

Qualitative data will be generated through reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups examining how participants understand, adapt, and negotiate self-care and the conditions that enable or constrain it.

Integrating Experience and Context

Pre–post comparisons may identify patterns of stability or change across the 10-week period; however, they cannot establish that the self-care process produced those changes. Outcomes may reflect multiple personal, occupational, and temporal influences. Quantitative findings will therefore be interpreted as patterns requiring contextual explanation rather than evidence of intervention effectiveness.

The qualitative component is central to this interpretation. Participants' accounts will be examined in relation to workload, autonomy, leadership, boundary management, collegial support, help-seeking, recovery opportunities, and workplace culture. Integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence

will allow observed patterns to be considered alongside participants' accounts of how their experiences changed, or remained stable, during the study period.

The purpose is not to identify a universally effective form of self-care or attribute observed outcomes to participation in the process. Rather, the study seeks to examine relationships among self-care practices, professional quality of life, and psychosocial working conditions within particular organisational contexts.

Implications for Practice

This framing shifts attention from whether responsibility for staff wellbeing resides with individuals or organisations towards how responsibility is distributed across personal, relational, and organisational levels.

Individual self-care may provide personal and professional resources, but its enactment occurs within a workplace context. The Job Demands–Resources model similarly positions employee wellbeing in relation to both job demands and available resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Organisational responsibility therefore extends beyond individual wellbeing activities. Workload, role clarity, staffing, supervision, autonomy, and recovery opportunities remain features of the working environment.

This position aligns with the World Health Organization's (2022) guidance on mental health at work, which differentiates between organisational responses to psychosocial risk and interventions directed at individual workers. That distinction is important. Helping staff manage the demands of their work is not the same as changing the conditions that generate those demands or ensuring that appropriate resources are available.

In trauma-informed flexible schools, the sustainability of relational practice therefore depends on more than individual coping. Personal resources matter, but so do the relational and organisational conditions that support their use. Professional resilience should not be understood simply as the capacity of individual staff to absorb ongoing strain. Sustaining this work requires attention to self-care, collegial support, and the way work is structured, resourced, and led.

Reflection

Presenting at the Educational Justice Symposium helped clarify both the conceptual focus and methodological direction of the study. I had initially approached the work through the relationship between individual self-care and organisational responsibility. Dialogue with colleagues broadened that framing and prompted closer consideration of how self-care is defined and examined within the study, how organisational conditions are accounted for, and why sustaining staff capacity matters to the relational work at the centre of educational justice.

Conversations with colleagues working in different educational contexts also prompted me to reconsider which assumptions were specific to Australian flexible-school settings and which may have broader relevance. The experience reinforced that academic presentation is a process of testing assumptions, refining methodological choices, and learning through scholarly dialogue. I left with

stronger professional connections, greater clarity about the study's international relevance, and a deeper appreciation of collegial exchange as a form of scholarly learning.

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