

Perceptions and Experiences of School Counselor Trainees on Self-Care Grounded in Mindfulness and Social–Emotional Learning



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This study, using a transcendental phenomenological approach, explored the perceptions and experiences of school counselor trainees participating in a self-care course grounded in mindfulness and social–emotional learning. Seven students who enrolled in a master’s-level school counseling program and completed a summer self-care course shared their experiences, leading to the identification of five key themes: (a) recognizing the importance and need for self-care, (b) cultivating a nonjudgmental mindset toward challenging emotions, (c) integrating self-care into both personal and professional settings, (d) an increase in compassion and empowerment, and (e) a commitment to ongoing learning and advocacy. The school counselor trainees’ narratives highlight the importance of self-care as a way to reclaim power within themselves and become change agents in their school communities.

Keywords: school counselor trainees, self-care, mindfulness, social–emotional learning, advocacy

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the way we live, work, learn, and interact on a daily basis, making self-care a crucial topic of discussion in both schools and workplaces (Harrichand et al., 2021; Norcross & Phillips, 2020). Many K–12 students are facing increased emotional distress and mental health issues, such as high levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic symptoms (Chen et al., 2020; Marques de Miranda et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020). At the same time, school counselors are also struggling with issues such as fatigue, burnout, and even vicarious trauma (Parker & Henfield, 2012), along with other challenges like high workloads, uncertainty about their role, and a lack of perceived support and professional development opportunities (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). This makes self-care for school counselors and trainees more critical now than ever before (Harrichand et al., 2021).

Self-care refers to engaging in activities or behaviors that promote one’s overall wellness and prevent burnout (Christopher et al., 2016). This concept can also be expanded to include a larger sense of self-care that encompasses embracing one’s humanity; increasing awareness of internalized negative cultural messages; and fostering a positive cultural identity that embraces one’s heritage and community strengths, assets, traditions, and legacy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Some scholars view self-care as the start of personal power (hooks, 1994) and a process of humanization in education that is reciprocal, anti-oppressive, and supportive of collective well-being (Paris & Winn, 2013). Additionally, many educators and scholars believe that dismantling oppressive ideologies and power structures is an important objective in the transformative process of self-care, which involves critical self-reflection, recognition of dehumanization, and reclaiming agency (Berila, 2016; Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 1994; Litam & Hipolito-Delgado, 2021).

The significance of self-care has led to it being viewed not just as an individual responsibility, but also a professional one. Leading counseling organizations, such as the American Counseling Association (ACA) and the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational

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Programs (CACREP), consider self-care to be a crucial aspect of a mental health professional's duties. The *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) states that "counselors engage in self-care activities to maintain and promote their own emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual well-being to best meet their professional responsibilities" (p. 8). The CACREP (2015) standards, under the Professional Counseling Identity section, include standards for counselor education programs that emphasize self-care strategies appropriate to the counselor role (Section 2.F.1.i). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2019) promotes the monitoring of "emotional and physical health and practice wellness to ensure optimal professional effectiveness" for school counselors (p. 7).

However, despite the recognition of self-care as an ethical responsibility, most counseling training programs do not incorporate it as part of their curriculum (Chen et al., 2020; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2007). Lack of time, academic pressure, and the absence of guidance and faculty role models are cited as barriers (Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Nelson et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there is a pressing need for self-care strategies to be included in counselor training and curriculum (Mitchell & Binkley, 2021). This study utilized transcendental phenomenology to investigate the essence of self-care experiences among school counseling trainees who participated in a 10-session seminar course that focused on mindfulness and social-emotional learning (SEL).

Literature Review

Mindfulness as Humanizing Process in Self-Care

The integration of mindfulness as a self-care practice into counseling training and programs has been widely adopted over the past three decades (Bohecker & Horn, 2016; Bohecker et al., 2016; Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2007). Research has shown that mindfulness can lead to numerous benefits, including reduced levels of anxiety and depression, enhanced life satisfaction, increased social connection, optimism, tolerance, empathy, and self-efficacy (Bohecker & Horn, 2016; Bohecker et al., 2016; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Christopher and Maris (2010) asserted that incorporating mindfulness practices into counselor training programs could help reduce burnout, compassion fatigue, and other stress-related physical and psychological symptoms by providing education in self-care and stress management. Furthermore, Shapiro and his team (2007) found that Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction training had a significant impact, decreasing stress levels, negative affect, rumination, and anxiety, and boosting positive affect and self-compassion.

Moreover, mindfulness is more than just a form of relaxation, but a transformative and proactive approach to self-care. It involves increased awareness of internalized negative cultural messages and the cultivation of a positive cultural identity (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). The practice of mindfulness can lead to critical self-reflection and bring to the surface issues of power and privilege, and through deep reflection and honest dialogue, can support the process of humanization and the dismantling of oppressive ideologies (Berila, 2016; del Carmen Salazar, 2013).

Given the high levels of stress and burnout that school counselors commonly experience, prioritizing self-care practices is crucial for maintaining their personal and professional well-being. Mindfulness-based self-care has emerged as a promising approach for addressing these challenges and provides a unique opportunity for school counselors to reflect on their identities within societal and cultural contexts. Additionally, the SEL framework can be helpful in self-care training by outlining specific skills essential for managing stress, fostering well-being, and developing advocacy in both personal and professional contexts.

Social–Emotional Learning

SEL is defined as “the process in which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feelings, and behaving to achieve important life tasks” (Zins et al., 2007, p. 194). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) outlines five core competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2023a). CASEL’s mission is to make SEL a fundamental aspect of every child’s education through offering training and educational opportunities to advance scientific research, assessment, and implementation of effective SEL practices in schools (CASEL, 2023b). Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of SEL programs on students’ growth (Carrell & Carrell, 2006; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Lapan & Harrington, 2009).

Despite the positive effects of SEL in education, its traditional definition has faced numerous criticisms for its inadequacy in addressing equity and justice issues in classrooms and the educational system in light of recent racial and gender awareness. Higheagle Strong and McMMain (2020) argued that the traditional SEL approach reinforces oppressive ideologies by valuing White, middle-class knowledge systems above others, portraying marginalized students as troubled and incompetent, and perpetuating injustice. With a growing emphasis on cultural responsiveness in the SEL definition (Higheagle Strong & McMMain, 2020; Jagers et al., 2019), a critical question arises: “Are we teaching individual students to manage their emotions and behaviors simply for the sake of upward mobility or recognize and reclaim their emotions and relationships as fuel for social and cultural healing and transformation?” (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021, p. 16).

CASEL subsequently revised their definition of SEL and introduced a new concept of *transformative SEL*, defined as “a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences; learn to critically examine root causes of inequity; and develop collaborative solutions to community and social problems” (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 2). This updated definition acknowledges existing educational disparities and places an emphasis on authentic partnerships between schools, families, and communities. It also calls for a re-examination of the curriculum, instructional methods, and evaluation systems. Educators are encouraged to adopt an equity-focused lens when assessing the five core SEL competencies, asking questions such as “What are the social dynamics among students from different backgrounds in your class? Do you view these differences as a liability or an asset?”, “How do you create an inclusive and safe learning environment for all your students?”, and “Are there policies or practices in your school that prevent your students from receiving the quality education they deserve?”

Overall, the principles of SEL are closely aligned with the goals of school counseling, particularly in developing the skills necessary for promoting the social, emotional, and cognitive development of their students and promoting equity, social justice, and cultural competence necessary for supporting diverse student populations. School counselors can leverage SEL strategies to create a welcoming and inclusive environment that fosters learning, resilience, and well-being among students. Van Velsor (2009) emphasized the role of school counselors as SEL consultants, empowering students to achieve their personal goals and promoting prosocial behaviors, with the ultimate aim of improving the well-being of both the school and society.

Self-care has been integrated into the ethical standards of school counselor preparation programs (Christopher et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2018), and mindfulness is often taught and studied in these programs (Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Christopher & Maris, 2010). However, there has been a lack of research investigating the experiences of school counselor trainees when learning and practicing self-

care alongside mindfulness and SEL competencies in counselor education. In this study, we created and implemented a self-care curriculum for school counseling trainees and examined how this curriculum impacted their personal and professional lives through the use of transcendental phenomenology. The goal was to delve into the experiences of master's students who took part in a summer course on self-care that was grounded in both mindfulness and SEL.

Methodology

The transcendental phenomenological investigation is often used in research to explore individuals' subjective experiences and perceptions of a particular phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Using this approach, we aimed to explore the school counseling trainees' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the personal and professional changes in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The umbrella research question that guided this study was "What is the essence of the lived experiences of self-care of school counseling trainees who took 10 seminar sessions grounded in mindfulness and SEL in a master's-level counseling program over a 5-week period?" Semi-structured interview questions were used to explore the participants' experiences in their own words, which are detailed in Appendix A. After the approval from the IRB, we invited counseling trainees to participate in the study and followed the three steps of Moustakas's (1994) transcendental approach: (a) the epoche, (b) the eidetic reduction, and (c) the transcendental reduction in data analysis.

Participants

The purposive sampling method outlined by Glesne (2011) was utilized to select participants for the study. Invitations were extended to all 15 students who had completed the EDCO 298 Seminar in Professional Counseling during the summer course. Based on the guidelines set by Polkinghorne (1989), a sample size of 5–25 individuals is recommended for a phenomenological study. Seven participants, who were female graduate students in the counselor education program, agreed to take part in the study through in-depth interviews. The participants were between the ages of 21 and 45 and attended a single, mid-sized, public university designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution in Northern California, United States. Five of the participants identified as Hispanic, Mexican, or Latinx, while two identified as White.

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected through qualitative interviews with individuals who had completed a summer course, EDCO 298 Seminar in Professional Counseling, taught by Kyoung Mi Choi. To ensure impartiality and minimize the impact of the professor's influence, three precautions were taken: (a) participants were contacted at least 14 days after the course had ended and their grades were posted, (b) they were informed that participation in the study was voluntary, and (c) all interviews were conducted by Jung Hee Hyun, who had no association with the program and held no power over the students' grades.

Description of the Course

In summer 2020, Choi created an online 5-week course called EDCO 298 Seminar in Professional Counseling, which is detailed in Appendix B. The focus of the course was on self-care, combining six mindfulness core values (such as presence, gratitude, and compassion) and the five SEL competencies framework (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making). The course was attended by 15 master's-level school counseling students. The aim of the class was to encourage and inspire the students to make a deeper connection with their thoughts, emotions, and physical well-being.

The objectives of the course were to (a) explore the five SEL competencies, (b) explore the mindfulness-based self-care and SEL interventions for counseling and personal growth, (c) understand the effectiveness of the SEL tools and practice mindfulness in daily life, and (d) create a workshop that serves the community the student hopes to serve. The instructor's role was to create a supportive and safe environment in which students could share their personal narratives and experiences, including their strengths, cultural assets, resilience, privilege, discrimination, and oppression. Throughout the course, various mindfulness practices were utilized, such as collective breathing, body scan, mindful walking, mindful eating, mindful speaking, journaling, storytelling, visualization, and meditation.

Individual Interviews

After the summer session was over, Choi's counselor education department gave permission to announce the research project via email. Those who showed interest in participating were given a research packet containing details of the study, informed consent, and a demographic sheet, as well as contact information for further inquiries. At every stage of the recruitment and research process, it was emphasized that participation or non-participation in the study would not affect the participants' course credit or final grade. To be eligible for the study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) enrolled in the counselor education program, (b) completed the summer seminar, (c) successfully finished the entire course, and (d) willing to participate in a voluntary lengthy interview.

Once students agreed to participate in the study and submitted their informed consent, contact information, and demographic questionnaire (including a pseudonym, gender, age, self-identified ethnicity, and specialization), they were individually interviewed by Hyun through Zoom. The interviews lasted for approximately an hour and followed a semi-structured format consisting of 16 open-ended questions asked in a consistent order (see Appendix A). The interviews were recorded in their entirety and then transcribed by a graduate student who was not affiliated with the study. After being reviewed by the participants and analyzed by the researchers, the audio recordings were deleted. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, only pseudonyms were used in all written materials.

Data Analysis

The research methodology employed by the team was transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), aimed at uncovering the fundamental nature of human experience (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). NVivo12, a qualitative data analysis software by QSR International (2018), was utilized for data storage, coding, and retrieval. To analyze the data, we followed Moustakas's (1994) steps for data analysis, which involved the following process: (a) the researchers reflected on and recorded their own experiences of self-care, mindfulness, and critical consciousness before, during, and after data collection; (b) the transcripts were imported into NVivo12, and key statements that provided insight into the participants' experiences of self-care were highlighted (horizontalization); (c) themes were formed by summarizing these significant statements (cluster of meanings); (d) the significant statements and themes were used to describe the participants' experiences as a collective whole (textural description); (e) the context that influenced the participants' experiences of self-care was described using the significant statements and themes (imaginative variation/structural description); and (f) a synthesis of the meanings and essence of the experience was provided by integrating all of the textual and structural descriptions into a universal description.

Reflexivity Statement

Choi is a professor and holds a master's degree in school counseling and international relations, as well as a doctorate in counselor education and supervision. She has been teaching at the master's level for over a decade and has received extensive training in mindfulness, yoga, and SEL.

Hyun is an associate professor specializing in school counseling and holds a master's degree in school counseling and a doctorate in counselor education. She provides counseling and consultation to children and parents using play therapy and multicultural counseling interventions. Choi taught the course that the study is based on, while Hyun conducted the participant interviews. Both Choi and Hyun have prior experience in qualitative research and are dedicated to promoting multiculturalism and social justice in counselor education.

In our research, we utilized the epoche technique, which involves temporarily setting aside our preconceived beliefs and assumptions about self-care to approach the research with an open mindset. Throughout the research process, we made a conscious effort to examine and clarify our assumptions to avoid potential biases. We also practiced reflexivity by reflecting on our own positionality and how it could affect our assumptions and interpretations of the data. This approach helped us to ensure that our findings were based on the actual experiences and perspectives of the participants, rather than on our own assumptions. Our assumptions about self-care included the following: (a) the importance for counselors to be responsible about self-care; (b) the impact of self-care practice on both personal and professional life; (c) the necessity for counseling programs to provide specific tools and strategies to support students in developing the knowledge and skills for self-care; (d) the holistic approach of self-care, encompassing cognitive, emotional, physical, interpersonal, and spiritual well-being; (e) the gradual development and continual practice required for self-care ability; (f) the possibility of self-care looking different based on individual and cultural backgrounds; and (g) the transformation process of self-care, facilitating the humanization process, increasing awareness of internalized oppressive messages and cultural identities and leading to individual and collective liberation.

Establishing Trustworthiness

In order to enhance the reliability and validity of the study, we employed the use of an external auditor and member checking (Glesne, 2011; Hays & Wood, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The external auditor, a research assistant with previous experience in phenomenological approaches but no prior knowledge of self-care or mindfulness research, was appointed to assist in increasing the credibility of the study. The external auditor reviewed the research process, examined the interview process for potential biases, and verified the interpretations of the data. Additionally, we utilized member checking, in which we presented emergent themes and interview content to the participants to ensure their agreement with the written comments and to check for any additional information or edits.

Findings

We identified five themes that reflect the perceptions and experiences of school counseling trainees regarding self-care grounded on mindfulness and SEL: (a) recognizing the importance and need for self-care, (b) cultivating a nonjudgmental mindset toward challenging emotions, (c) integrating self-care into both personal and professional settings, (d) an increase in compassion and empowerment, and (e) a commitment to ongoing learning and advocacy. These themes, which capture the essence of the participants' experiences, are contextualized as follows.

Theme One: Recognizing the Importance and Need for Self-Care

Participants in a summer course focused on self-care were aware of their motivations and inspiration for registering for the course. They reported their experiences of struggle and challenges in their lives, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Elizabeth stated, "I was facing personal challenges. This course arrived just when I needed it the most." Sophia added, "I was struggling with intense emotions during the lockdown period and had doubts about myself. But after taking the first class, I felt that it was meant for me."

Despite the eagerness of all participants to gain knowledge on self-care, they lacked a clear understanding of the concept. The term “self-care” had been mentioned in other classes within the counseling program, but the application of self-care through mindfulness and SEL was unfamiliar to most of them. Daisy expressed:

I never truly comprehended the meaning of connecting with oneself, which requires dedicating time for personal reflection within daily activities and establishing a connection with one’s body and emotions. This was a new idea for me, as I had not previously implemented or even recognized its significance before participating in the course.

The participants were amazed to discover the relationship between their body, mind, emotions, and nature when they made time for self-reflection and self-care. Stacy expressed, “I never considered the idea of self-care before. This class has shown me that some of the things I already do actually fall under the category of self-care.” Sophia also said, “Self-compassion, I did hear about it or read about it, but I never truly dedicated myself to practicing it.” Furthermore, Stacy added, “I never realized the importance of having a complete connection between the body and nature.”

Theme Two: Cultivating a Nonjudgmental Mindset Toward Challenging Emotions

The participants shared their difficulties in managing emotions such as anxiety, depression, anger, disappointment, uncertainty, and shame. They found learning practical mindfulness strategies to recognize and process these emotions without judgment to be helpful. Elizabeth shared how she connected with her body and was able to understand the physical and emotional cues signaling her needs through increased self-awareness:

I have always been constantly on the move and never took the time to acknowledge my physical and emotional well-being. This class taught me the importance of paying attention to my body’s signals, both physical and mental, signaling the need to slow down. I learned to recognize signs, such as backaches, sore muscles, and headaches, and to listen to what they are trying to tell me about my overall well-being.

Sara echoed, saying, “Self-awareness is about embracing and loving myself.” Veronica, who identified as an immigrant, shared her insight on the impact of self-compassion and a shift in perspective:

As an English learner, I often get nervous during public speaking or classroom presentations because I self-doubt. That’s where self-compassion has played a crucial role for me. Instead of viewing myself as someone who doesn’t speak perfect English, I see myself as someone who has accomplished much despite being an immigrant. I used to struggle with low self-confidence, but after being introduced to self-compassion, it has opened my eyes to see everything as a growth opportunity rather than a potential failure. It’s about focusing on what you have, rather than what you lack, and viewing yourself as a human being like any other. This shift in perspective has been healing.

Carol explained how the class aided her in processing challenging emotions, saying “I learned to create space between myself and my emotions, have more control over impulsive emotions, and take breaks to have fun or engage in self-care.” Daisy summarized her approach to dealing with challenging emotions by saying, “The course taught me that it’s okay to accept my feelings, allowing myself to experience them without judgment. I understand that they are temporary and by processing them, I am able to let them go.”

Theme Three: Integrating Self-Care Into Both Personal and Professional Settings

A strong connection between understanding the importance of self-care and its practical application in daily life was evident in the narratives of all participants. They explored, experimented with, and reinforced a variety of self-care strategies both in and outside of class. Sophia stated, “The class helped me to become more patient, and I now practice those techniques daily.” Elizabeth also spoke of the impact of the class and her daily self-care practices:

I realized the enormous benefits of taking time for myself, both in the morning to start my day and in the evening to relax. Practicing mindfulness and self-care, such as staying aware of my body’s signals through yoga, stretching, and breathing, has been incredibly helpful. My physical healing has become a path to emotional healing. I’m making a conscious effort to care for myself. The class was the perfect introduction to this.

Veronica echoed similar experiences in implementing what she learned from the course.

I feel like I gained a lot from this course because we were able to put what we learned into practice. This class provided a deeper understanding of the subject through reading and trying different practices such as meditation and deep breathing. I’ve made a conscious effort to practice mindfulness daily, instead of only when I felt the need. Currently, I’ve been more consistent and practice it at least five times a week.

Positive and affirmative perspectives toward oneself transformed the participants’ relationship with themselves. Sophia described this transformation by saying, “Since taking the class, I have become a different person. By different, I mean that I approach things differently and I don’t feel stressed out as much. I am able to identify and process my emotions, and accept them.” She explained how her 5-minute mindfulness practice changed her challenging relationship:

Mindfulness allows me to connect with myself, to disconnect from external distractions. I only need 5 minutes of silent meditation to feel that inner connection. If I have an issue or conflict with someone in my family, I take those 5 minutes to disconnect from the story, reflect, and become more relaxed.

Theme Four: An Increase in Compassion and Empowerment

The participants, who exuded confidence and a newfound sense of self-care, expressed their eagerness to assist others in their own self-care journeys. They saw their role as school counselors as being further strengthened, and they showed a keen interest in exploring effective mindfulness and self-care techniques. Veronica stated, “I am confident that offering emotional support online will be just as impactful as in person. I now have a wider range of tools and activities to support my students.” Sophia also shared how her newfound sense of empowerment has made her more compassionate toward her students, saying:

I have changed. Our learning has taught me that my students are the most important individuals sitting in front of me in my counseling offices . . . my goal in supporting them is to acknowledge their opinions, feelings, and emotions. I care about all that they are experiencing, not just their issues but also their emotions. I have gained more empathy for them and strive to provide them with the best support I can.

Elizabeth stated, "As a future school counselor, I am confident that incorporating mindfulness practices into my work will have a positive impact on my interactions with students, staff, and teachers. I have learned these techniques in class and am eager to put them into practice." Daisy shared her engagement with her students, saying:

At times, I can feel overwhelmed by the volume of students I see in a day and the diverse range of topics discussed. However, by taking the time to connect with myself and acknowledge my emotions, I find that I am more grounded after a workday. This has also helped me form stronger connections with my students.

Carol also expressed that mindfulness can rejuvenate one's energy and foster positive relationships with oneself and others:

When you have a student who requires a lot of your energy, and you find yourself feeling depleted afterwards, it can be challenging to give your best to the next student. I think it's important to learn how to recharge quickly so that each student receives the best version of you. With the pandemic, it's even more crucial to meet the students' needs academically, emotionally, and for career and college planning. What I have found is that students especially need emotional support because of the stress caused by COVID-19.

Theme Five: A Commitment to Ongoing Learning and Advocacy

The participants recognized the significance of self-care and appreciated their capacity to support others with openness, curiosity, and empathy without any judgments. They viewed self-care and mindfulness as a never-ending journey of learning and personal growth. They expressed their determination to continue their mindfulness-based self-care journey. Elizabeth described the process of healing as like a domino effect, in which one positive change can lead to a chain of similar changes in other areas of life: "Healing one aspect of my life has a positive impact on other parts as well. I'm excited to attend workshops and read more to further my mindfulness journey." Daisy spoke of her strengthened connection with her students, saying "I feel like I am able to better communicate with my students. I strive to offer them a warm and caring presence, and I am being transparent and accepting of their diverse cultural backgrounds."

Sara explained her practice with her family, saying, "I have been continuing to study and practice throughout the summer and have been sharing and discussing with my family members. This has been a really healing experience for our family." Sophia also emphasized the importance of continuing her practice, stating:

Healing is a process, and it doesn't happen overnight. However, it does help us become better people, improve our connections with others, become better listeners, judge less, and listen more to ourselves. This class has had a truly positive impact on me, and I plan to continue my mindfulness practices.

Advocacy is seen as a natural progression. Stacy also expressed her commitment to practicing alongside her students, saying, "It's important to understand the importance of congruence in both teaching and life. If I just tell my students what to do, they won't listen. But if I practice alongside them, it's more effective." Sophia spoke about the power of sharing mindfulness practices and their impacts with others, stating,

As a counselor and advocate for these techniques, I want to bring them into the K–12 education system at an early age. I hope to introduce these practices wherever I go and to our students, as I believe everyone can benefit from them.

Discussion

The five themes embody the significance and definition of self-care grounded in mindfulness and SEL for graduate students in counseling who took a summer self-care course. Participants reported a new experience in self-discovery through the practice. Despite the difficulties brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online education, learning about self-care helped them cope with daily stress. By participating in a group, they discovered their personal and professional understanding of self-care. They learned how to connect with their emotions, physical sensations, thoughts, and others in their relationships. Particularly, they emphasized the importance of embracing difficult emotions. The self-care grounded in mindfulness and SEL taught in the course enabled them to face emotions such as anger, disappointment, anxiety, uncertainty, and shame with nonjudgment and acceptance. The students connected their understanding of self-care with their daily practices both in and outside of the class. The consistent and dedicated practice demonstrated a true embodiment of self-care among the participants.

Along with displaying great confidence in themselves and their self-care practices, the participants strongly expressed their desire to help others in their communities. Their professional identity as school counselors was enhanced, and the participants developed agency to empower underserved students and communities by introducing self-care strategies and mindfulness practices. After completing the course, the participants expressed their intention to continue the practice and viewed self-care and mindfulness as a lifelong journey.

These findings align with previous qualitative studies (Baker, 2016; Bohecker & Horn, 2016; Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Christopher et al., 2011, 2016; Christopher & Maris, 2010) on the experiences of master's-level students in mindfulness self-care courses. Across these studies, a common theme is that students reported substantial changes in both their personal and professional lives. This included increased confidence in their professional and interpersonal relationships, a greater appreciation for their physical well-being, healthier lifestyle choices, and the ability to handle challenging situations more effectively.

Furthermore, the significance of the current study is to confirm that self-care is imperative for counselor training. As the participants expressed their sense of empowerment and desire to engage in creating and providing workshops for their families, schools, and communities, they demonstrated self-care as part of social and cultural advocacy. There was a clear shift from a deficit- to a strengths-based self-identity regarding linguistic ability, emotional availability, and a healing-focused process. This is consistent with the role of school counselors, as system change agents need to critically examine dominant culture and its impact on their own racial identity development, power, privilege, and oppression in educational settings (Mitchell & Binkley, 2021). Before disrupting and dismantling the oppression and power in the system, school counselors will need to embrace themselves wholly and consider using themselves as a tool in advocating for those in need. When serving diverse students and communities, self-care goes beyond relaxation and self-awareness of one's own thoughts and emotions. It also involves reclaiming power within oneself—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and culturally.

Implications

The study's results have significant implications for counselor educators. First, student readiness is crucial for the maximum impact of self-care courses. What is noticeable in the findings is that the students were ready to change as they chose the course and had a strong desire to learn more about self-care. When students are prepared, the impact can be powerful. Additionally, students who accepted themselves, both strengths and weaknesses, and experienced the mind–body–spirit connection had a greater awareness of themselves and felt more prepared to serve others. The study suggests that self-reflection is essential to maintaining an ethical practice when working with people of different identities, values, and cultures. The participants in this study emphasized their humanity by accepting their identities, processing challenging feelings, practicing self-compassion, and sharing their experiences and knowledge to empower others.

Second, the study recommends that counselor education programs incorporate a self-care course or workshop into their curriculum, as it has been shown to have a positive impact on pre-service counselors (Harrichand et al., 2021). Students' strong desire to learn more about mindfulness and self-care is consistent with the literature (Baker, 2016) and shows the urgency of incorporating mindfulness practice, SEL, and self-care practice in the school counseling curriculum. The participants recommended offering the course every year and an advanced level later in the program. Because of logistical difficulties, it may be more practical to integrate self-care knowledge and practice into existing coursework and programs rather than adding an extra course.

Lastly, many studies on mindfulness, SEL, or self-care do not give enough importance to humanization, agency, inclusion, and equity in the individual and collective self-care process (Mitchell & Binkley, 2021). This study suggests that it is essential to include mindfulness in personal as well as social and cultural transformative processes. Participants expressed increased agency and advocacy during and after learning and practicing self-care. The self-care course can cultivate and strengthen the capacity to imagine a world beyond the current social conditions with confidence in the ability to bring change through individual and collective efforts (Pyles, 2020).

Limitations and Future Research

The authors of the study acknowledge that self-selection may have contributed to biases in the findings, as participants who enrolled voluntarily in the summer elective course showed strong interest in the research topic (Lavrakas, 2008). They also volunteered to share their experiences, which could have resulted in them focusing on positive and socially desirable narratives. The authors of the study also acknowledge that factors such as the class format, selected activities, and instructor's teaching styles may have contributed to the participants' experiences, which may not be generalizable to other school counseling trainees and programs. For future research, a study exploring how master's students with different placements (i.e., pre/post-practicum, internship) or cultural identities (ethnicity, sexual and gender identity, religion, generation) experience and practice self-care could provide valuable insights to counselor educators. Additionally, a quantitative study using pre- and post-surveys to assess progress in the five SEL competencies can provide useful data for counselor educators and researchers to understand students' social–emotional development.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of school counselor trainees in a self-care course based on mindfulness and SEL, consisting of 10 seminar sessions over 5 weeks. The findings revealed information about the transformation process, the importance of self-care in counseling preparation programs, and the empowering effects on graduate students becoming agents of change. Participants experienced a transformation leading to a change in their relationship with their mind, body, and emotions, and this transformation extended to their relationships with family, friends, students, and colleagues, empowering them to be more engaged with their communities and society. They embodied Carl Rogers's (1980) core conditions for change, including unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and empathy (Campbell & Christopher, 2012), both personally and professionally, describing the experience as encountering a new self through fresh eyes.

Conflict of Interest and Funding Disclosure

The authors reported no conflict of interest or funding contributions for the development of this manuscript.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Title of the Study: School Counselor Trainees' Perceptions and Experiences on Self-Care Grounded in Mindfulness and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

To be consistent with the goal of qualitative research, all participants will be described through their own viewpoints and in their own words. All questions are open-ended, and these semi-structured interview protocols will guide the researcher throughout the interviews. However, it is not expected that the remaining questions will be asked sequentially, that all questions will be asked of all participants, or that the list of provided questions is exhaustive. Rather, we offer the questions below as representing possible directions in which we anticipate the interviews may proceed.

A. Introduction

We want to thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Recently, you completed the course EDCO 298-01 Seminar in Professional Counseling. Today, we would like to take some time to collect information on your perceptions, thoughts, reactions, and follow-up response to your mindfulness-based self-care and SEL practice. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or do not desire to answer a question, please let me know.

B. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What are the most important things you learned regarding mindfulness-based self-care and SEL?
2. How have your knowledge and practice of SEL affected your personal and professional life in the area of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness?
 - a. Do you attribute these changes to the class?
 - b. Have these changes stayed with you since you took the class? What has changed?
3. Describe the history of your self-care practices.
 - a. What self-care practices do you currently practice? How often for each?
 - b. How did the class influence these practices?
4. Describe how your mindfulness-based self-care affects your personal and professional life.
 - a. In what ways do your own practice of mindfulness and self-care change how you think about students' or clients' issues or problems? How have your ideas about what is therapeutic, or healing, changed since taking the class? Do you see mindfulness techniques as healing? How?
 - b. Have the mindfulness practices influenced who you are as a counselor, advisor, educator, or therapist or what it's like for you to be in the role of the counselor, advisor, educator, or therapist? How?
 - c. Have you tried to introduce mindfulness concepts/techniques with a client/student? Which techniques? What was your level of comfort with introducing the mindfulness techniques?
5. What are consequences/outcomes from mindfulness-based self-care practices? (elaborate)

C. General Questions & Feedback

Is there anything you would like to say about your experiences in relation to the course that we have overlooked? What suggestions do you have to make this course a better experience?

D. Ending

We want to thank you for your participation in this project.

Appendix B Course Content and Activities

Week	Module	Mindful Theme	SEL Competencies	Class Activities
One	1	Presence	Self-Awareness	Course Overview: Review syllabus, expectations, course requirements, and online resources What’s Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)? Three Collective Breaths Why Aren’t We Teaching Mindfulness: TED Video Pre-Training Survey Small Group with Accountability and Support
	2			Self-Connection Practice Mindful Listening and Speaking Brave Zone Trauma-Informed Practice: Grounding, Orienting, and Centering “Seven Up” Film My Seven Up Writing Body Scan Weekly Journal Entry
Two	3	Gratitude	Self-Management	Setting Intentions Mind–Body Connection Non-Violent Communication Empathy Practice Appreciation Circle
	4			Non-Violent Communication Tools: Mourn/Celebrate/Learn (MCL) Exploring Identities: “I Am” Thankful Thoughts Negative Bias Weekly Journal Entry
Three	5	Creativity	Relationship Skills	Play Therapy: Foundations and Techniques (1) Creative Arts Additional Readings
	6			Play Therapy: Foundations and Techniques (2) My Relationships Community Circle: Appreciation Practice Weekly Journal Entry
Four	7	Compassion	Social Awareness	Check-In: Daily Practice Compassionate Self-Talk Neuroplasticity “Into Light” Video My Life and Vision: Milestones
	8			Courageous Conversations Mindful Eating Sound Healing Capstone Preparation Weekly Journal Entry
Five	9	Equity & Inclusion	Responsible Decision-Making	Giving and Receiving Loving-Kindness Transformative SEL: Advocacy Gender Identities and Pronouns Mindful Breathing Silent Mindfulness Practice Yoga and Mindfulness
	10			Capstone Presentations Celebration: A Closing Ceremony Post-Training Survey Final Journal Entry