

**Examining compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction in Florida school-based agricultural education teachers**

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### **Introduction**

Nationwide approximately 50% of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers leave the profession within the first six years of teaching (Clark, Kelsey & Brown, 2014). One reason SBAE teachers leave the profession is a lack of work-life balance leading to burnout (Igo & Perry, 2019). Differing from burnout, compassion fatigue is a gradual lessening of compassion over time (Figley, 1995). Although the symptoms between burnout and compassion fatigue can be similar, compassion fatigue proposes the symptoms can be treated or even prevented. While burnout and compassion fatigue both have a negative impact on a teacher's well-being, compassion satisfaction has a positive impact on the teacher. Through studying compassion satisfaction in the helping professions, the literature points to compassion satisfaction reducing symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue (Bakker et al., 2006; Figley, 1995; Stamm, 2002). Burnout has been studied within populations of SBAE teachers (Kitchel et al., 2012; Smith & Smalley, 2018), but compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction have only begun being studied (Hasselquist & Graves, 2020). This study sought to examine the compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction of Florida SBAE teachers and address the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda Research Priority 5: Efficient and effective agricultural education programs (Roberts, Harder & Brashears, 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The researchers used Stamm's (2010) Professional Quality of Life and Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory as models for this study. These models are a useful framework to examine how one interprets the environments in which teachers are entrenched. Stamm (2010) divided compassion fatigue into two parts. Part one addressed typical burnout concerns, such as exhaustion, frustration, anger and depression. Part two incorporated secondary traumatic stress which is a negative feeling driven by fear and work-related trauma. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) contends to understand human development one must examine interpersonal dynamics which include direct contact with others and effects of others actions.

### **Objectives**

- 1) Describe the level of compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction in Florida school-based agricultural education teachers.
- 2) Determine the relationship between the demographic variables of gender, age, years of teaching, certification method, and the level of compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction in Florida school-based agricultural education teachers.

### **Methodology**

The target population for this study was all Florida school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers. A total of five recruitment emails were sent to each teacher over a 5-week period. The response rate for this study was 28.6% (n= 133). Due to the low response rate, the results should not be generalized beyond this study. Instrumentation used in this study consisted of the ProQOL scale (Stamm, 2010) and demographic questions. The ProQOL scale is a 30-item instrument measuring compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue. Cronbach's alpha scores for the instrument have ranged from 0.72-0.87 (Bride, Radey & Figley, 2007).

### Findings

The demographics variables of gender, age, years of teaching, and certification method for Florida SBAE teachers included 75.9% ( $n = 101$ ) of participants described their gender as female, while 24.1% ( $n = 32$ ) described their gender as male. Participants described their age in the following ranges: 18 to 25 years = 9.0% ( $n = 12$ ), 26 to 35 years = 33.8% ( $n = 45$ ), 36 to 45 years = 18.0% ( $n = 24$ ), 46 to 55 years = 24.8% ( $n = 33$ ), 56 to 65 years = 12.0% ( $n = 16$ ), and 66 years and above = 2.3% ( $n = 3$ ). The Florida SBAE teacher participants taught for an average of 13 years ( $M = 13.06$ ,  $SD = 9.89$ ) and 44.4% ( $n = 59$ ) of participants were traditionally certified through an Agricultural Education teacher certification program, while 55.6% ( $n = 74$ ) were alternatively certified.

Objective one sought to describe the level of compassion fatigue (CF) and compassion satisfaction (CS) in Florida SBAE teachers. Participants had moderate amounts of CF ( $M = 48.12$ ,  $SD = 11.69$ ). The participants also reported moderate amounts of CS ( $M = 38.16$ ,  $SD = 7.157$ ).

Objective two sought to determine the relationship between the demographic variables of gender, age, years of teaching, certification method, and the level of compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction in Florida SBAE teachers. Gender was significantly positively correlated ( $r = 0.195$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ) with compassion satisfaction, and significantly negatively correlated ( $r = -0.327$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) with compassion fatigue. Age was significantly positively correlated ( $r = 0.261$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) with compassion satisfaction, and significantly negatively correlated ( $r = -0.210$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ) with compassion fatigue. Years of teaching was significantly positively correlated ( $r = 0.218$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ) with compassion satisfaction. Certification method for Florida SBAE teachers was significantly negatively correlated ( $r = -0.177$ ,  $p = 0.042$ ) with compassion fatigue. Compassion satisfaction was significantly negatively correlated ( $r = -0.518$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) with compassion fatigue.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Research in compassion fatigue supports the notion there is a negative impact on teachers in the educational field (Steen, 2019, Koenig et al., 2018; Kokkinos, 2007). SBAE teachers reported a moderate risk for compassion fatigue and equally moderate level of compassion satisfaction. The correlation between compassion satisfaction and gender, age, years of teaching was positive. Further demographics, including certification methods, were statistically significant when correlated to the concept of compassion fatigue.

It is recommended that further research is completed on the phenomenon of compassion fatigue within a broader sample of SBAE teachers. Based upon these initial findings, training programs and local schools are advised to care, in a holistic approach, for teachers who work in school-based agricultural education. SBAE teachers should receive education around the phenomenon of compassion fatigue. The concept of fatigue is not foreign to most individuals; and when one feels fatigue there is an innate feeling that one can achieve rest and recovery. This awareness would begin the needed mindset shift in creating longevity for all teachers to potentially stay in the classroom.

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