No Need to Set the Alarm, I’ve Been Up Since 2:30am! Why My Teaching Job Keeps Me Up at Night: A Phenomenological Research Study on Empathic Strain of Iowa Educators

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No Need to Set the Alarm, I’ve Been Up Since 2:30am! Why My Teaching Job
Keeps Me Up at Night: A Phenomenological Research Study on Empathic Strain of
Iowa Educators

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Lindsey Cornwell
University of Northern Iowa
July 2023

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Abstract

Empathic strain describes a stressor on individuals in professions in which one cares for others who have endured their own trauma or stress (Mathieu, 2021). While previous studies have looked mainly at medical, social work and law enforcement fields as being some of the most impacted by empathic strain, more recently educators have been identified as those challenged with this phenomenon.

Through a phenomenological qualitative study, which included a Facebook-marketed Qualtrics survey on empathic strain, four individual interviews and a metaphorical data analysis focus group experience, the lived experiences of educators with empathic strain were collected. Each of the stages of data collection targeted the following research questions:

- How do Iowa educators understand and negotiate empathic strain?
- How do Iowa educators prevent and regulate empathic strain?
- What could Iowa school districts do to support educators with empathic strain?

This iterative data collection process, with partial analysis provided by the focus group participants themselves, delivered distressing results regarding the impact of empathic strain on Iowa educators. This study is an educational imperative for Iowa at a point where the teaching pool is dwindling and Iowa’s students are in need of strong teachers more than ever.
This Study by: Lindsey Cornwell

Entitled: No Need to Set the Alarm, I’ve Been Up Since 2:30am! Why My Teaching Job Keeps Me Up at Night: A Phenomenological Research Study on Empathic Strain of Iowa Educators

has been approved as meeting the dissertation requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Dedication

Dr. Ron Rice and Becky Rice, you were my two best teachers and coaches. I always said I became a teacher because I didn’t know there were actually any other jobs outside of that field. Now that I’ve been in Iowa education for over 20 years, I cannot be more proud of choosing this field, your field. You were my after-school “therapists” for so many years as I called you on my drive home from school to vent to you about my daily issues. You listened and coached me.

I wish you could read this study. You would see how what you were doing for me is what all educators need. You let me talk, and you listened.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to Chad and Carson for offering me the time and space to do this important work for my colleagues and fellow teacher friends. You know that this job is a personal one to me, and I thank you for allowing my “school life” to be intertwined with my “home life.”

Chad, thank you for giving me the time and encouraging me to keep working, even when I didn’t want to anymore. I love you, and am so grateful for all you do for me!

Carson, although you probably hardly noticed I was working on this project, as you are busy with high school life. I want you to know how much your humor means to me. You make me laugh, and that was so necessary when in the thick of this deep work. I love you so much.
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**Chapter 1: Overview and Statement of the Problem**

Something is going on with Joe. He used to be friendly with the other students and with me... I mean, not talking much, but he’d respond to me. Now he has his hood over his head and eyes all day and puts his head down when I’m talking to him. I greet him every morning and put kind notes on his desk. He doesn’t even care. He walked out of my class today for no reason. I don’t know what it is, but something has happened to him. I worry about him all the time now. What can I do?

Teachers are stereotypically empathic beings, going into this field of work with the purpose of helping children. While teaching has stressors and external factors contributing to the organizational trauma (Newell & MacNeil, 2010) of the work, the trauma from students themselves plays a large impact on the social-emotional health of Iowa’s teaching force. Student trauma causing trauma in those who care for them for 180 days each year.

Critical trauma theory is a more recent concept evolving from World War II and the Holocaust. Understanding the psychological repercussions of a horrific event after the Holocaust, other genocidal events, the Vietnam War, 9/11, and the war on terrorism after 9/11, have brought the concept of a trauma framework to light (Traverso & Broderick, 2010). In addition, studying the effects of other catastrophic experiences like hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and most recently, a pandemic, have continued to grow, morph and critique this theory.

Caruth (2014) noted that within trauma theory, the initial trauma will almost always return in some way to individuals. Caruth compares this to Freud’s concept of traumatic repetition, where an event is repeated as thoughts or memories. This concept is
challenging to conceptualize or even verbalize. After an initial trauma, one’s schema for living and thinking changes. The way they live, communicate and exist within their beliefs is modified (Caruth, 2014).

While tragic events, collective or isolated, have caused trauma in individuals or groups, firsthand trauma is prevalent in the United States ranging from natural disasters, abuse, poverty, violence and the more current Covid-19 pandemic. It is now also recognized that the individuals that support those directly traumatized may be impacted by Secondary Traumatic Stress, the “emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another” (NCTSN, 2011, p. 2).

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) initially was identified as a concern for healthcare professionals, law enforcement, social workers and mental health workers, as they are typically recognized for being initial supports for children or adults in crisis. More recently, educators, including teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and counselors, have been identified as experiencing a prevalence of STS. Educators are, by nature, very empathetic and create caring relationships with their students. This puts them at risk for the transfer of trauma. When educators learn of a student’s trauma, they may experience avoidance, other negative thoughts, blame and mood instability (Lawson et al., 2019).

Some of the common symptoms of STS, according to Baicker (2020), are:

- Increased anxiety and concern about safety
- Intrusive negative thoughts and images related to student’s traumatic stories
- Fatigue and physical complaints
- Feelings of numbness or detachment from students and peers
- Diminished concentration and difficulty with decision making
● Desire to physically or emotionally withdraw from others
● Feelings of professional inadequacy

Over the past few decades, the concept of STS has also been referred to as ‘compassion fatigue’ by Figley (1995a, 1995b). Later this term was modified by Mathieu (2021) to the concept of ‘empathic strain.’ Beyond the literature review, the term utilized for the concept of educators being traumatized by the traumas of the students they serve will be known as empathic strain.

With childhood trauma on the rise, more than 10 million children struggling in the United States yearly (NCTSN, 2011), it is inevitable that educators are continuously exposed to their students’ traumatic experiences. When educators are overwhelmed by the traumatic experiences of their students, in addition to their own personal challenges and professional responsibilities, they are more likely to be less effective in personal relationships and less impactful as a teacher. As illustrated in Heartland AEA’s Social Emotional Behavioral Mental Health (SEBMH) Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Pyramid (see Figure 1), adult mental health, social competence and emotional competence serves as the foundation for student and school MTSS. Students cannot effectively be supported in schools if teachers do not have strategies in place for preventing or regulating empathic strain.
In order to meet the needs of students we serve in Iowa’s public schools, it is necessary that the foundation, the mental health of educators, is strong and resilient. Without this solid base, the achievement of our students will suffer. Qualitative inquiry through a phenomenological method with constructivist grounded theory was the most efficient and effective manner in which to gain insight into educators’ thoughts on how they experience empathic strain. To understand how the lived experience of a teacher with empathic strain lives and works was distilled from survey, interview and focus group data (Saldaña & Omasta, 2022).

The phenomenon of empathic strain on teachers in Iowa was investigated through this study. Gaining understanding from a personal standpoint, the researcher learned how Iowa educators negotiate empathic strain. Through the personal reflections, the researcher
better understands the strategies educators use to prevent and regulate empathic strain as not to impede on their personal lives or professional abilities.

The research questions for the study are as follows:

- How do Iowa educators understand and negotiate empathic strain?
- How do Iowa educators prevent and regulate empathic strain?
- What could Iowa school districts do to support educators with empathic strain?

Summary

Empathic strain has been recognized in professions other than education for decades, and now has been noted as a cause of stress in those working with students. With adult mental health, emotional competence and resiliency being the foundation for student well-being and achievement, this study reviews the literature on empathic strain in chapter 2. Next, chapter 3 explains the methodology for this iterative study including a Facebook-promoted Qualtrics survey, four 1:1 interviews and a focus group discussion. Chapter 4 “zooms in” on images created by focus group members to metaphorize the data. Chapter 5 “zooms out” to look at the broader perspective of the study, including all components of the research. Chapter 6 indicates why naming empathic strain in Iowa’s education system and providing supports for those impacted is an educational imperative.
Chapter 2: The Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the literature related to secondary trauma stress, compassion fatigue and empathic strain. This review follows the concepts’ beginnings in professions where trauma was traditionally normalized as part of their work. In more recent literature, the concepts are applied to the field of education, as it now has been recognized that educators are also subjected to the traumas of their students. The impact of secondary trauma stress and compassion fatigue in educators has resulted negatively in teacher effectiveness, collegial relationships, mental health of the teacher and personal relationships.

Secondary Trauma Stress, Compassion Fatigue and Empathic Strain

Figley (1983) first studied the concept of secondary trauma stress (STS) in relation to sexual assault survivors and combat veterans’ partners. More recently, the concept was adapted to apply to careers in which the individual directly serves those who are survivors of sexual assault or other traumas. Professions such as law enforcement, nurses and therapists are included in this latest addition (Figley, 1995b). While Figley determined that only one severe exposure to one person’s trauma could cause symptoms, McCann and Pearlman’s (1990) study showed symptoms resulting from exposure from multiple contacts over time.

Another term, compassion fatigue, is most recently connected to STS by being called Secondary trauma stress disorder (STSD). The terms STSD and compassion fatigue have been used interchangeably (Kendrick, 2020). Figley (1995b) suggested that PTSD should actually be called primary posttraumatic stress disorder, as the one who actually experienced the trauma firsthand is impacted. The same symptoms of PTSD can
be found in those who experience trauma secondhand, which he refers to as STSD, or *secondary traumatic stress disorder*.

Compassion fatigue describes a work-related hazard which impacts workers who care for or about patients, clients or students. Almost all who work in caring professions will have some degree of compassion fatigue, however the level of severity differs (Mathieu, 2007). Those in healthcare, first responders, therapists and social workers are those typically considered to be at risk for compassion fatigue, however educators work directly with children on a daily basis. Through hearing stories of their students’ experiences outside of school, teachers should also be in this category.

With the terms compassion fatigue, STS, and STSD all similarly describing the same phenomena, Mathieu (2021) shared his realization, after years of researching the concept that one cannot be fatigued by compassion, which is actually a positive response to a relationship with a person who is suffering. Singer and Klimecki (2014) inspired Mathieu’s thinking by sharing “[…] it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other’s well-being. Compassion is feeling for and not feeling with the other.” He synthesized that with past literature complicating the multiple terms, that a more accurate term for this concept would be *empathic strain*.

Because individuals in caring professions have empathy for those who are suffering, those who care may either be compassionate, offer positive support, or experience empathic strain, personally react in a negative manner (Mathieu, 2021). This describes the empathic work of educators. For the purpose of this study, compassion fatigue, STS and PSTS will be defined and referred to as *empathic strain*. 
Empathy has emotional and cognitive dimensions. Emotional empathy is when the emotional state of others produces a similar emotion in a listener or caregiver, in this case, an educator. This emotion is usually more connected to another’s position than one’s own (Hoffman, 2008). The other dimension of empathy is cognitive empathy. This is when one deeply understands another’s emotions (thoughts and feelings) without feeling it him/herself. (Eisenberg et al., 2010). In the context of the classroom, relationships with teachers are especially important for the social, emotional and academic development of students. Empathy is a skill necessary to create strong, caring relationships with students to support them in their educational journey. When this empathy is strained, impacts reach further than just the classroom. They can impact the educator’s personal life in addition to the professional one.

*Cognitive schemas* also have an impact on the level of which one is empathically strained in a relationship. These schemas are the cognitive structures used by individuals to create meaning of past experiences and knowledge as they function in their environment (Bowlby, 1969; Epstein, 1991). Based on these cognitive schemas, those who care for others may have increased or decreased symptoms of empathic strain due to current or past life experiences, personal history of trauma and the content of the trauma by the primary victim (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995).

**Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) work with human development is based on the comprehensive ecological system where one works, lives and grows. More specifically, the relationships in layers of the ecological system and their interactions directly
influence the well-being of an individual, in this case: educators (Price & McCallum, 2015).

Within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, there are five concentrically organized ecological systems (see Figure 2). Cross and Hong (2012) applied Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory to teacher’s emotions in school contexts. The school’s microsystem directly connected students, colleagues, administrators and teachers to one individual teacher, who has his/her own distinctive beliefs, values and identity. The mesosystem connects the individuals and groups within the microsystem. Outside of the mesosystem is the macrosystem, which contains greater systems, like the school board, district administration, federal policies. The macrosystem influences the internal systems greater than the internal circles would impact that system. The chronosystem is the influence of time on all of the internal systems including interactions between individuals or groups within the entire ecological system (Duchesne et al., 2013).
With students in the microsystem, the ecological system with the closest relationships to the teacher, emotions may be directly correlated between interactions between the two. Cross and Hong (2012) found that teachers with positive relationships with their students often experienced joyful emotions. While not mentioned in their study, the opposite could be assumed. If teachers experienced worry or unpleasant experiences with their students, they could then feel more unpleasant emotions.

**Empathic Strain in Schools**

Educators work with many adults and children with whom they have been subjected to trauma, similar to crisis workers (Dubois & Mistretta, 2018). In addition, they may experience traumatic events with students or colleagues in the workplace (Kendrick, 2020). In Iowa, 13% of students live in poverty and 20% of parents lack
secure employment according to the 2022 Kids Count Data Book. Poverty can be linked to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs; Hughes & Tucker, 2018), which may increase the likelihood of childhood trauma. In addition, racial inequities are brought to the surface and questioned at the school level (NASEM, 2019). With poverty, ACEs and equity challenges as the root of years and years of trauma, the Covid-19 Pandemic joined forces in 2020. The pandemic, as a world-wide emergency over the course of two years, brings its own set of stressors to educators and to the students whom they serve. The “crisis worker” mentality certainly fits the role of teachers in today’s schools.

In 2007, a qualitative study was conducted by researchers Hoffman et al. to understand the effects of empathic strain on novice (0-6 years) middle school special education teachers. The themes that emerged from the 20 semi-structured interviews were that of loss of control, responsibility and empathy. This study claimed to be the first of its kind in order to use empathic strain as a theory to understand experiences of novice middle school special education teachers who would possibly be leaving the profession due to stressors in the classroom.

A study by Borntrager et al. (2012) with the University of Montana was conducted with teachers in six public schools in the Northeast United States. Teachers self-reported that 77.3% of their students were traumatized, which is considered “moderately traumatized.” In addition, 35.5% of the staff had moderate levels of depression. The levels of empathic strain in the public school staff was comparable to that of licensed clinical social workers (LCSW). The difference between the two professions is that LCSW are typically trained in primary and secondary trauma and have
support systems in place through the workplace. In public schools, there are typically no embedded support systems or consistent trainings on empathic strain for staff.

As a follow up to Borntrager and colleagues’ study in 2012, Caringi and colleagues (2015) interviewed a sample from the original study as part of a qualitative study to find that 75% of that sample was leaving the educational profession, moving to a new school system or planning to retire. This second phase of the study implies that empathic strain can be so impactful that it causes turnover.

To measure one’s empathic strain, individuals may use the ProQOL designed by Dr. Beth Stamm (2010). While not a diagnostic assessment, it can offer individuals scores on burnout, empathic strain and compassion satisfaction. With high scores on burnout and empathic strain and a low compassion satisfaction score, an individual may have depression and require treatment. Post-traumatic stress disorder is one of the most common disorders connected to empathic strain.

A mixed methods study on empathic strain in educators was conducted in Alberta, Canada in 2020 utilizing the ProQOL and survey questions. One of the questions on the survey given to the educators was: Why do you feel mainly compassion fatigue related to your work role? (Kendrick, 2020) This open-ended question offered five themes that impacted the respondents:

- An unsupportive or unhealthy workplace culture (35.1 %)
- Work intensification (26.4 %)
- Indirect exposure to client trauma (26.2 %)
- Changed perspective on one’s ability to make the world a better place (16.5 %)
The current COVID-19 pandemic (16.4 %)

These themes can be directly correlated to the Borntrager et al. (2012) and Caringi et al. (2015) studies as the educators who worked with traumatized students were later found to be considering leaving the districts in which they worked. Educators’ symptoms of empathic strain may look like “disengagement or withdrawal in the workplace” (Lawson et al. (2019). Other workplace symptoms are absenteeism, exhaustion, dread of working with certain students, reduced ability to make decisions for students and irritability. They may also extend into the personal lives and homes of educators with depression, substance abuse, sleep disorders, the inability to separate work from personal life, and hypersensitivity or insensitivity to emotional material (Lawson et al., 2019).

With a number of educators having negatively impacted well-being through the symptoms and characteristics of empathic strain, it is clear the theme of an unhealthy workplace culture would exist due to the attitudes of the staff. In addition, the work seems to be intensified when individuals feel as if they are alone in accomplishing an overwhelming task to support students with needs greater than the classroom walls. The theme of being part of a change to better the world is diminished when educators are overwhelmed by students’ emotional needs and their own. Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic has only magnified the issues that existed prior to the pandemic, impacting societal well-being.

Organizational Trauma

The intended focus of this research study is on empathic strain. Educators collectively are now experiencing another type of trauma that is a layer on top of the empathic strain they experience with their own students. While organizational trauma is
a systemic trauma, it must be recognized as a layer that teachers experience which does impact the way they are able to negotiate empathic strain.

Trauma, while typically thought of being an individual’s concern, can also apply to a small group or larger group. The source of the trauma can be internal or external to a system and may be in our relation to one another, or our organized or natural world. (Abram, 1996). In 2001, our country experienced organizational trauma on September 11. Our government systems, transportation systems, and our overall sense of safety and security in our country was rocked and, as a nation, we were traumatized.

Our current public education system is currently under duress, especially in the state of Iowa. In a survey conducted by Steiner et al. (2022) results showed that educators report job-related stress twice the rate of general working adults. Several respondents to the survey or interviews in this study made mention of the respect teachers had during Covid. However, just three short years later, teachers are critiqued by parents, community members and politicians. With federal and state mandates expecting high rigor of students, schools must push students out of their developmentally appropriate learning zones. In addition, the curriculum taught is combed through and questioned by parents and legislators to ensure students are not being ‘exposed’ to parents’ unwanted public school teachings. High, and frankly, unachievable expectations are coming at a time where time, money and staffing is short.

**Empathic Strain Resiliency**

With students and families experiencing increased stressors in the home due to the pandemic, poverty in the community and high expectations for academic instruction, educators are placed in a challenging position to meet the emotional needs and academic
needs of students while balancing their own well-being. While our societal systems are struggling for mental health and basic need resources in the communities, schools are struggling with how to balance the needs of all. To stay well, educators must increase their resiliency to empathic strain.

Empathic strain resiliency includes a balance of “self-care, detachment, sense of satisfaction, and social support” (Figley & Figley, 2017, p. 6). These protective factors can support a professional in maintaining their competency at work and at home while being able to care for others. While self-care, social support and detachment are important and require intentional attention, one of the protective factors is very accessible in a school setting: sense of purpose through compassion satisfaction (Larson, 2020). Teater and Ludgate’s (2014) study concluded that educators actually receive more compassion satisfaction from their jobs due to the work with children and youth, which can diminish symptoms of empathic strain.

With educators continuing to work with traumatized students, this study has led us to ways empathic stress manifests in educators and the ways in which educators manage their empathic responses. Which factors are within the control of educators and their school districts to prevent or manage empathic strain?

Summary

This chapter presented a review of the literature on the concepts of secondary trauma stress, compassion fatigue, and empathic strain; Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory; empathic strain in educators; organizational trauma; and empathic strain resiliency. The first section described the evolution of the concepts of secondary trauma stress, compassion fatigue, and, ultimately, empathic strain. The next section then
described the realization of empathic strain in educators, as it had previously been identified in emergency personnel and therapists. Lastly, empathic strain resiliency was described.

There are few studies on the impact alone of empathic strain in educators. The significance of this study for educators and school districts is key, as it will determine the phenomenon’s current existence in Iowa educators and possible supports for educators and districts.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The studies synthesized within the Literature Review are valid and responsive to the experiences of educators in recent history, however none of the studies were completed mid- or post-pandemic. Our world has changed, as has the culture of public school education over the past three years. The stressors on children and families have been intensified by the global pandemic, and Iowa has not been immune. Iowa families have been challenged with increased prices, lack of resources and mental health concerns, which then translates to the children within those homes. Educators are then challenged with the task of supporting students in meeting academic standards while trying to balance the differing social-emotional needs of each child. Through this process, empathic strain is experienced by the educators who are desperately working to meet the needs of all students.

In order to unearth the answers to the following research questions, information was collected from those closest to the trauma of students, Iowa’s educators.

- How do Iowa educators understand and negotiate empathic strain?
- How do Iowa educators prevent and regulate empathic strain?
- What could Iowa school districts do to support educators with empathic strain?

In the following chapter, data collection, analysis and interpretation will be presented. Starting with an electronic survey via social media, to a targeted small group of individuals, to a focus group of teachers within one district, data was collected through multiple avenues. Then all data was coded and analyzed for discussion. Empathic strain was studied through the various perspectives and angles of Iowa educators to ultimately make recommendations to schools and districts for ongoing support.
Data Collection Methods

Data collection for this study was a compilation of three different stages (see Figure 3). The first stage was a Qualtrics survey directed at Iowa teachers via Facebook social media advertising. With 74% of Iowans utilizing Facebook, ads marketed on this social media platform are highly accessible. Additionally, 35% of Iowa’s Facebook users respond to ads in the platform (NFIB, 2021). The researcher was interested in capturing as much narrative data as possible from many teachers around the state to have a broader sense of the impact of empathic strain on Iowa teachers, including rural, suburban and urban. Because the final stage of data collection took place in the Des Moines metro area, it was beneficial to the study to encompass various place-based perspectives statewide.

Figure 3

Data Collection Stages
To introduce participants to the Qualtrics survey via Facebook (see figure 4) and to share IRB information, the researcher created a short video introduction in order to humanize the survey for those interested. To allow participants to put a face with the data collection, a 1:50 video gave them the sense of security in knowing a “real administrator” in the state is looking to hear their voice. In addition, there wasn’t extensive reading prior to the survey to dissuade participants from accessing the actual survey, as time is a factor for educators in Iowa.

This survey, open for approximately five weeks in the months of December and January, captured open-ended responses from Iowa educators on their experiences with empathic strain, their strategies to prevent or regulate empathic strain, and their thoughts on how their school districts do or could support them with empathic strain. Participants could share their contact information if they would be willing to share additional information with the researcher regarding this research. The survey questions can be found in Appendix B.
The second stage of data collection was speaking personally with the educators who responded via the social media survey that they would share additional information. With a sample of four individuals, the researcher had phone or Zoom interviews within four weeks of the closing date of the electronic survey to ask additional questions in response to their answers. These follow-up questions were further developed from the initial Qualtrics responses and the initial coding (Sample questions can be found in Appendix C). These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis in NVIVO software.

The third stage of data collection took place one month after the follow up meetings with individual Iowa teachers. The data collected from the survey and the interviews were presented to a focus group of local school district educators from the Des Moines Metro area including a suburban high school teacher, two suburban elementary
teaching different districts, and three elementary teachers from an urban school setting. The focus group of teachers discussed the information they read through interview summaries or quotes read from the open-ended questions from the Qualtrics survey. They then had the opportunity to discuss the results and share scenarios familiar to them. Additionally, the participants were asked to draw an image or symbol in creation of a metaphor to synthesize the themed data. Thinking visually is a way for participants to share metaphorically with the researcher (Saldaña, 2015). The focus group was asked to share possible supports that could be in place for educators based on the data findings. The focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. In addition, field notes were scribed during the session to capture inaudible gestures, motions, facial expressions and general interactions between focus group members.

Research was conducted as a phenomenological study to “describe the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). After analyzing the data into the “what” and the “how” of the phenomenon of empathic strain and its impact on Iowa educators, a composite description was completed to get to the “essence” of the experience and its surrounding impacts, including the “what’s next” of the phenomenon of empathic strain on educators (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Taking this constructed concept and connecting it to learning as a researcher is integral to the findings. This inductive approach of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2017) allowed the participants’ responses on empathic strain to co-construct meaning with the researcher.
The initial Qualtrics survey was advertised on Facebook in December, which was intentional timing. Eighty-six Iowa educators provided information to the survey. At this point in the school year, educators had relationships developed with students and had possibly experienced some recent impacts of empathic strain. The four-week follow up with Iowa educators occurred in early January, with focus group discussion happening in early February. Collecting information from educators about students was very relevant during this second trimester time frame, as winter in Iowa causes additional stressors on families, which in turn may cause increased symptoms of empathic strain in educators.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis of the first stage of the Qualtrics survey via Facebook was captured electronically. The results were compiled through NVIVO software for coding until saturation was complete. The codes were descriptive in nature, in order to then create categories or themes of data. In Vivo coding was also utilized, as the voices of the participants were key to balancing the follow up questions for the next set of interviews in this iterative design. More specifically, the data was Emotion Coded, which was a collaboration between In Vivo and states of emotion (Saldaña, 2021). Empathic strain impacts educators interpersonally and interpersonally, which makes Emotion Coding appropriate for this study. Saldaña (2021, p. 160) shared “since emotions are a universal human experience, our acknowledgement of them in our research provides deep insight into the participants’ perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions. Virtually everything we do has an accompanying emotion.”

The second stage of data collection utilized the four interview transcripts from the selected respondents to the Facebook Qualtrics survey. Through In Vivo coding and
emotion coding, categories or themes were created and compared to that of the initial survey. Concepts were created from these emergent themes. Through this level of data, the emotions and the actions that caused the emotions were studied more in depth (Back et al., 2010).

The third stage of data collection was the focus group conversation. The participants of this group reviewed the quotes, codes and concepts evolved from the first two stages of data collection. Through the researcher as facilitator, the group inductively determined concepts from the quotes and categories derived from the initial data sets. Their conversations around the previously collected data, along with their personal experiences with empathic strain, brought more focused perspective to the concept of empathic strain. This analysis utilizing Constructivist Grounded Theory allowed the participants and researcher to co-create a theoretical framework of this phenomenon.

In addition, the metaphorical images drawn by the focus group participants to represent their experience with empathic strain were analyzed. The drawings supported the discussion around the initial reading of the summarized survey and interview data, filtered with the focus group participants personal experience with empathic strain.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Triangulation of the data was integral to the dependability of the data in this study. Ensuring the data points from each stage of data collection connected conceptually was key to finding relevant meaning in the Qualtrics survey, individual interviews and focus group conversations. As the data aligned with other data from the study (Cope, 2014), dependability was inferred.
To determine credibility, member checking occurred post coding of the individual interviews (Cope, 2014). The participants were able to recognize their thoughts and insights as true, cross-checking the data along with the participants ensured trustworthiness.

In addition, the researcher practiced analytic meta-memoing throughout the analysis stage to “stimulate thinking about the data’s connections, interrelationships, and the bigger picture” (Saldaña & Omasta, 2022, p. 229). This process secured a “think aloud,” as the practice is called in elementary schools, to journal about the process along the way.

**Significance of Study and Limitations**

The significance of the study is critical to school districts in order to have a stronger understanding of the impact of empathic strain on their educators. In order to increase the efficacy of a school system, the foundational level must be strong and healthy. This research should ignite or strengthen conversations about how to create a support system for those who work directly with students.

As this study is limited to Iowa educators, and a limited number of individual interviews, the data could be isolated and represent a local area only. The goal is that this data is presented in descriptive detail so that the findings can be applied to other settings.

**Researcher Identity**

The researcher is in her 22nd year as an Iowa educator. She taught in two suburban school districts prior to becoming an elementary school principal in an urban school district in 2007. She is now an elementary school principal in a suburban school district. It wasn’t until the Covid pandemic that she learned of empathic strain through a
book study she led with some teachers from her school called *Trauma Stewardship* (van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009). This text supported her through the online teaching era, as she worried tremendously about her students not coming to school.

In the years following 2020, she continued to reflect on this book as it pertains to empathic strain in teachers with whom she works. With perspective on empathic strain, she noticed the stressors, the symptoms, and how different teachers would handle the heaviness of the phenomenon.

Through the research study, the researcher found herself connecting personally with some of the participants’ thoughts and feelings on empathic strain. Education is a very personal job because they work with young people all day to encourage them to reach their fullest potential. This researcher cares tremendously for the students she serves and for the staff who serve those students.

**Summary**

This phenomenological study was designed to understand how Iowa educators understand and negotiate empathic strain, how Iowa educators prevent and regulate empathic strain and determine what Iowa school district may do to support educators with empathic strain. This chapter described the research questions, research design, data collection methods and data analysis to better understand this phenomenon.

Chapter 4 will share the results of the research and data analysis through metaphorical images. Chapter 5 will discuss additional data findings, while Chapter 6 will discuss implications for school districts and individuals experiencing empathic strain and suggestions for future research.
Chapter 4: A Macro Lens View: Metaphors of the Focus Group

Zooming In

The design of this research study began with an online survey to Iowa educators, answering to a Facebook post inviting them to share their insight on what keeps them up at night. Data was collected from multiple educators, all across the state. They shared their worries about students and how they manage the stressors of caring for their students. Then, the researcher spoke individually with four of the respondents of the survey who had offered to share additional thoughts via personal interviews. Additional data was collected on their experiences with empathic strain. Ultimately, a focus group convened to analyze themed data sets and portions of raw data to construct a synthesis of the data meshed with their own experiences. This chapter will focus on one portion of the focus group session: When the participants were asked to draw a metaphor representing the themed data sets, including quotes from surveys and interviews, to symbolize the phenomenon of empathic strain.

The Story Begins…

On a winter evening, six metro Iowa educators met with the researcher as facilitator to review the quotes, codes and concepts evolved from the first two stages of data collection: the online survey data and the four individual interviews. The group inductively determined concepts from the quotes and categories derived from the initial data sets. Each educator brought years of experience, with different backgrounds to the group. The names of the focus group participants are pseudonyms.

First off, meet Julia. Julia has been teaching in a suburban district for over 25 years. With a background in special education, 6th grade teaching and teacher librarian
experience, she has seen different perspectives of student needs over the course of her teaching career and positions. With her current position, her role is centered in the middle of the school. She sees and hears much throughout the school and shares that no position has it easier than another.

The second educator participant was Renee. Renee has been teaching for less than ten years in an urban elementary school with 73% free-reduced lunch as a kindergarten teacher. Renee is an empathetic soul, who cried quietly throughout the focus group when responding to what others have experienced, triggering personal emotions. She had come with her pockets filled with tissues, as she had a feeling she may cry during this focus group event based on the topic.

Next, meet Emma. Emma co-teaches with Renee as a kindergarten teacher in that same urban elementary school. Emma has worked for the same urban district for over 20 years, first as a behavior disorders special education teacher, then as a classroom teacher. Emma shared she has anxiety from school. She arrived 20 minutes late to the focus group, as she had been with her therapist.

The next participant was Claire. Claire taught elementary school for many years in a private school, however this year she made a move from private to public, joining a suburban school district as a behavior interventionist. While not in public school for long, the empathy had for students doesn’t seem to cross public or private school boundaries.

Anna was our next educator. Anna is an art instructor at an urban elementary school. Anna has an interesting perspective on students, as she sees all students in the building and in art class, where many share their traumas through their work.
The final educator participant in the focus group was Hazel. Hazel has been teaching general and vocal music for over twenty years in the elementary and high school settings. For the last several years, she has taught in a large suburban district high school, directing vocal music groups. It was evident that she creates strong relationships with her students through her stories. After the focus group ended, Hazel returned to the room where it was held with one of her former students who she had mentioned earlier in the evening. She wanted me to meet this resilient student of hers!

The participants became comfortable with one another, then read through the data collected through the Facebook Qualtrics Survey and the four individual interviews. They looked through the initial codes and themes, as well as read multiple quotes from Iowa educators about their experiences with empathic strain. This, paired with their personal cognitive schema (Bowlby, 1969; Epstein, 1991), elicited thoughts and emotions around the concept of empathic strain. The focus group participants then put their thoughts to paper and created a symbol, a visual metaphor, to synthesize their thoughts around empathic strain.

Creating a metaphoric image is a characteristic of sense-making in a humanistic way (Wilson & Wilson, 1979). The image task from the focus group setting was to create a conglomerate reconstruction of the data processed during the session and personal schema, filtering unconsciously through the participant’s mind (Weber & Mitchell, 1996).
Julia drew this image (see figure 5a) when considering the impact of empathic strain on herself and others. She finished long before the others, however did not return to add any other details to her work. She simply shaded in the cloud shape and waited until the others were finished. “It’s just constant… It’s just that constant pull… You’re being pulled in multiple directions all the time,” Julia shared.

Figure 5a

*Julia Metaphor*

Emma then shared her image, the pinball machine (see figure 5b). She drew a circle on the backbox of the machine with symbols representing “life, school, family, everything,” as if this were the goal of interconnectedness. On the playfield, she shared that there were dead ends. “There’s the falling down in between the paddles and just kind of hopeless,” Emma shared with desperation in her voice.
Through tears, Renee shared her image (see Figure 5c) of a person carrying buckets on a yoke over his/her shoulders. “Everything is just pushing down coming in on this singular person because that’s how it feels. You’re just, it’s you. You’re by yourself and you’ve got all these things that you’re carrying [that] everybody else is putting on you.”

Her drawing shows the weight of the expectations pushing down and away from any ideal state. The person in the image has bent knees, as if trying to push up, however cannot due to the weight put upon him/her. Renee also noted that she didn’t want to give endpoints to her tightrope, as her reality is never ending, however she wanted her image to show that it was a tightrope.
Anna’s image (see Figure 5c) has a faceless teacher at the center with concentric hearts on her shirt on the bottom half of the page. The teacher’s heart is her reason for teaching in the first place, because of a deep care of children. Behind the teacher is an extensive pile of tasks and actions to process in a day, all of which are priorities. Drifting off into the background are empty thought bubbles. Anna shared, “You just never feel caught up, like you just never…. At the end of the day, [the hearts] are why we’re there. That’s why we continue to navigate it all because we care.”
Claire started by drawing a large heart, broken in half. She sat for a period of time looking at it, then added a school building to the lower left quadrant and a home on the lower right quadrant (see Figure 5e). “Heartbreaking. It’s just sad. It’s heartbreaking that it affects everything that you are doing,” Claire shared with the group. With the broken heart taking up the most space in the center, there is the sense that there is a large barrier to hope.
Hazel’s metaphoric image (see Figure 5f) took a different twist from the others. The lower quadrants of reality in her image are a valley and the upper quadrants of the ideal are the mountaintops. Connecting the bottom left quadrant to the upper right quadrant is a bridge with missing slats. Hazel described her drawing, “We’re down in the valley and there’s some trenches but there’s usually a bridge to get back and forth. It feels like we’re missing some of the slats in the bridge that we need to get from one point. I think we do have to shift back and forth between the two… Some of the supports have fallen away. It is like people acknowledge that both of these things happen but they don’t have the path to navigate back and forth the way they need to.”
Each drawn metaphor showed some inference to imbalance, hopelessness, disconnect and the overwhelming volume of empathic strain. The dismal tone of the conversation around the drawings would only be uplifted in small moments of laughter. This laughter, however, was purely laughter of recognition, with the participants’ only giggles being those of connection and recognition of one another’s personal thoughts around the phenomenon of empathic strain. This type of laughter is a social response signaled by empathy, agreement and nervousness (Pietrowicz et al., 2019).

Within 20 minutes, the mostly unfamiliar participants were connecting with the data shared by other Iowa educators and with each other over the most collectively challenging work they do in classrooms, caring for students. The focus group
participants even alluded to their own spouses not understanding what they go through on a daily basis to care for students as much as they care for their families, as they shared their images and recognized their similarities.

The following table encapsulates the images drawn by each of the focus group participants. The drawing portion of the focus group was only a short period of the entire conversation, however the information gleaned from the initial look at the themed data and personal connections left a resounding impact on each participant.
Table 1

Table of Metaphor Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Metaphorical Image</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Dark cloud taking up most of the page</td>
<td>Little hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Pinball machine with dead ends not leading to a circle of connection between home and school</td>
<td>No way of getting to a balance with the barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>Person on tightrope with weighted buckets; arrows pushing down</td>
<td>Trying to balance life while all perceived or actual expectations are working against the person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Teacher, with a large heart on her shirt, standing in front of stacks of tasks, including self-care; so many priorities; thought bubbles signifying the feelings of never being caught up</td>
<td>Teachers are never caught up and continue worrying about not accomplishing all there is to do, which includes care of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>A valley near mountains; a suspension bridge with broken slats connecting the valley to the mountains</td>
<td>Not all supports are in place to connect the reality to the ideal state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>A large broken heart suspended above a school and home, with a line drawn between the school and home</td>
<td>Teachers feel so much for their students, which isn’t separated between school and home; overwhelmed by heartbreak</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

This chapter was a glimpse into the minds of educators as they filter other Iowa educators’ concerns of empathic strain through their personal perspectives. Through images of hopelessness and heaviness, the educators in the focus group displayed the major themes of the survey and interview data through drawings. The visuals created imagery for those who empathize with empathic strain, or for those who haven’t yet experienced this phenomenon. By analyzing what is currently felt by Iowa educators with empathic strain, it is understood what weighs on the minds of teachers. The next
chapter focuses on the remaining discussion of the focus group, which is additional synthesis into the depth of empathic strain through the data collected in the Qualtrics survey and individual interviews.
Chapter 5: A Panoramic View: Collective Voices on Empathic Strain

Zooming Out

This chapter will examine the data that was collected in the online survey teachers in Iowa, the four personal interviews held with self-selected participants of the online survey, and the focus group conversation. Chapter 4 was a macro lens view of the six focus group participants and their metaphorical summarizations of empathic strain. Chapter 5 is a broader picture of the data sets collected and more specifically addresses the three research questions of this study.

- How do Iowa educators understand and negotiate empathic strain?
- How do Iowa educators prevent and regulate empathic strain?
- What could Iowa school districts do to support educators with empathic strain?

The illustrations in chapter 4 were created by the focus group participants, who shared their artistry and synthesis of data analysis in early February 2023. Their synthesis was partially based on Qualtrics survey data collected between December 2022 and January 2023. Eighty-six Iowa educators completed the survey disseminated via Facebook, including elementary and secondary teachers; those in rural, suburban and urban districts; those with 1-3 years of teaching experience; those with over 20 years of experience; and those with BAs, MAs and PhDs. 93% of participants shared that they believe they have experienced empathic strain within their educational career (see Table 2).
Table 2

*Qualtrics Survey Data Summary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Summary of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you heard of the term <em>empathic strain</em>?</td>
<td>49% have heard of the concept of empathic strain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you believe you have experienced empathic strain in your educational career in working with students?</td>
<td>93% experienced empathic strain in their career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was the situation in which you experienced empathic strain?</td>
<td>70% had concerns about the well-being (i.e. safety) of the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11% had concerns about academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9% had concerns with mental health needs not being met with a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7% had concerns about COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the care and concern you have for your students impact your life outside of school?</td>
<td>36% thought about students while at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29% lost sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20% had a hard time connecting with their own families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17% were physically sick or exhausted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15% were stressed or anxious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12% were angry and had a quicker temperament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12% spent money on basic needs for their students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5% lost their desire to be social outside of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you are worried/concerned about a student outside of school hours, what do you do to relieve your concern?</td>
<td>36% talk with someone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25% relax or have a hobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16% pray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15% do nothing and continue worrying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12% exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19% problem-solve and/or journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8% drink alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What support systems do you have at your school to help teachers with their student concerns?</td>
<td>43% had a support person (i.e. counselor, social worker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27% said “none”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19% had a colleague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13% had a school support team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11% had a supportive administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5% had SAP or EAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When education is so challenging right now, what makes you stay?</td>
<td>71% stay for the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17% stay because they are too close to retirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8% stay for the money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7% are quitting or are ready to quit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Four participants from the survey offered to speak with the researcher directly in early January 2023 to elaborate on their experiences with empathic strain. The interview transcripts from the four thirty-minute interviews of Sally, John, Missy and Tina were the second data points to add to the empathic strain data pool.

The researcher created a coding tree utilizing the coded interview transcripts and survey data, which then became a table of quotes connected to themes for the focus group participants to study. The focus group then read through the quotes and themes to synthesize their thoughts around empathic strain as a concept. The discussion of this group meeting was recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Figure 6 is the researcher’s concept map to frame the phenomenon of empathic strain as shared by Iowa educators in this study. This chapter will delve deeper into the home implications of students, the symptoms of empathic strain, the school resources available to support teachers and students, and the healthy or unhealthy coping strategies of educators with empathic strain.
How Do Iowa Educators Understand and Negotiate Empathic Strain?

Throughout all stages of the research study, it was evident that many Iowa educators were unaware of the phenomenon of empathic strain, however could easily identify themselves as experiencing it. In the Qualtrics survey, open to Iowa educators in the months of December 2022 and January 2023 via Facebook, empathic strain was defined as:

*Empathic strain* is when you have had empathy for another person to the point where it is a stressor in your life. Also known as *compassion fatigue* or *secondary trauma stress*, you may experience this when you care or worry about a student outside of school hours.
49% of the survey participants had heard of the concept. After reading the definition, however, 93% of the participants could identify and agreed that they have experienced the phenomenon of empathic strain to some capacity. John, one of the interviewed participants, shared that when he read the definition, he identified himself with the concept of empathic strain. This gave him a label to match what he had been experiencing for years as a teacher and coach.

**Home Implications**

Missy, an elementary teacher from a large, urban district expressed in an interview, “So many [students] have these really dramatically hard situations. It’s hard to extend patience all day long and then go home and keep extending patience to your own elementary-age child when you have been on all day trying to be calm and respond mindfully.” Like Missy, so many other participants shared stories or heartbreaking situations about the students they have served. Iowa educators are empathically strained by students who have seemingly disappeared, moving overnight with no warning; students who experience physical and verbal abuse situations in the home; student who have outbursts at school; students who are grieving; students who have suicidal ideation; students living in poverty or homeless; student death; student substance abuse; student mental health concerns; refugee students; and students who experience inadequate parenting.

**Constantly Thinking About Kids**

One survey participant disclosed their personal symptoms of empathic strain:

This strain has led me to extra work hours, come home exhausted and stressed, has led to illness and injury, led to pressure not to take time off when I really need
time off, lose sleep at night, wake up in the middle of the night with thoughts of students, led me to mentally unavailable or short with my own children, led me to overeat and feel too exhausted to maintain a healthy lifestyle with diet and exercise.

While this is one participant’s statement, many others in this study echoed similar concerns. 29% of the participants in the survey shared that they have trouble sleeping at night due to worry about their students. Missy concurred with the others in her interview that “it takes up a lot of your mental bandwidth to be thinking about these really serious consequential situations and how to handle them.” Staying up through the night, worrying about what might be happening with students when they are out of the safety of their classroom, causes exhaustion in Iowa educators. Because educators create relationships with their students, and students have entrusted those educators with their stories, teachers’ empathy is in full-force.

Survey participants shared that as they worry, they limit themselves outside of school. One participant sadly disclosed, “[I’m] in a depressed state… constant worry about the situation. I don’t do many social activities.” Yet another participant shared that in addition to worrying, he/she spends long hours at school and home researching ways to help the student. Educators feel helpless in these situations, grasping at whatever they may Google to find a new strategy to support a student.

Disconnect with Own Family

Renee, from the focus group, expressed through tears, “My 11-year-old asks, ‘Why don’t you quit?’” When educators’ own children have been impacted, empathic strain has reached an extreme level. This survey participant shared an equally concerning
confession, “I’m always on high alert for messages from parents to try to help them get their kids support. I’m so emotionally exhausted [that] I don’t want to hold my own child.” Educators shared through the survey and through personal communication how they many times expend their energy, patience and focus at school as they care for others’ children. When they get home, they are quick to frustrate when dealing with their own children. This causes guilt and the feeling that they are never doing enough for their students at school and their personal families at home. “You snap or get more irritated than you normally would because you’ve done it all day long with much more dramatic situations,” a survey participant explained the drain of energy’s impact on their family.

“It got to the point that I was recognizing patterns that my husband and I would fight every Sunday. It’s because I was dreading going to work,” Tina expressed one of her gravest points. The exhaustion and the anxiety of what was to come that week causes strain in families.

**Physical Symptoms**

In the personal interview, Tina shared that the physical symptoms she was experiencing were due to a rare autoimmune disease caused by stress. Her period stopped for an entire year. The doctor told her that if she didn’t get it under control, she would die within three years. Others in the study commiserated with Tina’s health concerns. Emma shared in the focus group how she also had been diagnosed recently with a rare autoimmune disease, “It was triggered by stress is what they’re thinking. That kind of hit home that stress does have a seriously negative effect on, not just your mental well-being, but your body.”
Helplessness

It’s the helplessness [of seeing] the problem. You can see a parent who doesn’t get it or a sibling that is a terrible influence… you can very much see at least a handful of things that might improve [a situation for a student]. You have no control and you have no authority to make that happen.

Anna revealed her frustration with having no sense of control over a student’s family situation. This comment animated the focus group with resounding recognition as talking about the sense of helplessness or defeat when knowing about students’ home situations and not being able to do anything about it is something they all had in common.

Tina offered a possible solution to empathic strain by encouraging some people to not have children. “I think people need to think twice before they have kids. We have people having kids that have no business parenting.” The focus group discussed this comment specifically. While they felt this was somewhat of a sarcastic comment, they also sensed the reality of it. “That just feels like someone who’s really struggling to see the light,” Anna reflected.

For those who have tried to separate themselves from caring for students and caring for their own families, have had negative reactions as well. Feeling “heartless or numb” was a common sentiment between participants trying not to care about their students so much. Sally explained her struggle with creating a separation of caring at school and caring at home, “Early on in my career, I couldn’t not take my kids’ experiences with me and the worry of families and home. It took me a long time to
figure out how to separate my work life from my personal life. I remember thinking that I was becoming heartless. There is some guilt with that.”

**How Do Iowa Educators Prevent and Regulate Empathic Strain?**

“There is no job in the world that is worth your emotions, emotional drainage and your life,” Sally told a mentee of hers that had resorted to cutting herself as response to the strain of teaching. While this was one of the most harmful coping mechanisms heard from participants of this study, Iowa educators reported a wide spectrum of ways they prevent or regulate empathic strain, ranging from extremely unhealthy methods to much healthier options.

**Coping**

Alcohol was mentioned eleven times within the survey as a way to regulate empathic strain. While some survey participants shared openly about the alcohol usage in their school staff, “The school counselor and some staff get drunk at one of the local places down by the river on Friday nights.” A few others paired the drinking with more positive coping mechanisms, “I try to be proactive and exercise, but lately it’s been drinking,” and “I run, read, and drink.”

While unhealthy coping strategies seemed prevalent in the study, fourteen participants in the study referenced prayer as a tool for regulation. One survey participant, who worried about a student with drugs in the home, mentioned that she often walks through beautiful cemeteries in her town and prays aloud the St. Michael the Archangel prayer (Pope Leo XIII, 1886), as seen in Figure 7. “Defend us in battle. Be our defense against the wickedness,” the prayer refers to protecting those in battle, which in this case is empathic strain and the life stressors of Iowa students.
Prayer, mediation, and even just thinking positively about students were ways participants shared they have coped with empathic strain.

Mental health treatment was also an option for some of the study participants. In fact, Emma showed up late to the focus group as she was at a therapy session. When she popped in late, she explained she had been visiting her therapist for school issues lately. Talking with a professional was mentioned a few times in the study, however anxiety or depression medication was only mentioned twice in this entire study, which was somewhat unexpected due to the number of participants who seem to be struggling.

Sally, one of the interview participants, had experienced some major health issues due to the stresses of school, which completely erupted when she was preparing for an extended absence. She was so worried about leaving her students for that time frame that she experienced a panic attack, which triggered an autoimmune disease. It was at that point where she decided she needed to make a change in how she balanced school and

Figure 7

St Michael the Archangel Prayer (Pope Leo XIII, 1886)

St. Michael the Archangel,
   defend us in battle.
Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the Devil.
May God rebuke him, we humbly pray,
   and do thou,
by the power of God,
thrust into hell Satan,
   and all the evil spirits,
who prowl about the world
seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.
home. She shared that she chose her son over everything. “Nothing was more important than him.”

Creating Boundaries

“I honestly feel like it’s with you all the time even when you’re consciously trying to put it out of your mind… It’s just there’s always something that can be done. You have to schedule yourself not to do anything,” Sally conveyed the pressure of all there is to do and think about as an educator. The challenging part of empathic strain is that if one cares about students, which most teachers do, one is at high risk. These phrases were mentioned throughout the study:

- Never caught up
- Always something to do
- Multitasking
- Never ending
- Pushing on you
- No end in sight

Educators have a never-ending to-do list for their job, and for their students. There is always more they could be doing for a student, their classroom, their school, or their own family. This stack of open-ended tasks is infinite, unless there are boundaries set.

In Sally’s case, she learned techniques from a therapist to control her stress and to control what was truly important in her life. While her balance ebbs and flows with the workload, she laughed and shared that she actually had stayed up til 4:15 that day to do some work to help her team, which is out of the ordinary for Sally. She uses self-talk when presented with additional tasks, “I [have] got to walk away from those. [I tell
With educators experiencing empathic strain, there are two types of boundary settings. The first are more physical, tangible boundaries, while the second are mental. The simpler boundaries can be set by turning off email on a personal phone or not opening a school computer after a certain time in the evening. Leaving or arriving at school at specified hours can also be a way to create a boundary. The participants, through the survey and personally, shared how they create those physical boundaries, “A few years in, I had to take email off my phone and just set hard boundaries with myself when I would look at school stuff and when I would not.” In addition to creating time outside of school to limit school work, others found they were spending too much of their own money on students, which is a financial boundary. “I buy things they need like gloves, boots, school supplies and snacks for school.”

Creating a boundary for when one thinks about students is actually the greatest challenge of empathic strain. Educators care for their students, which means they do think about them during the school day and at night, as they do for their own families. “It can be hard for me to have the social and emotional bandwidth for my own family, especially in the hours right after work.” To focus attention on one or the other at certain times has to be intentional. One survey participant said, “It used to make me cranky until I identified why. Now I spend time thinking about how to help them. I often fall asleep thinking about them.”

Hazel expressed a unique view on this research question and her experience with empathic strain. She is a public high school choral director whose husband also works in
a public school. Hazel and her husband have raised their daughter, Harmony, with a strong intertwined relationship between Hazel’s work and home. Working 70ish hour weeks sometimes, with evening and weekend events, the family joins in. Harmony spends time in the summers and evenings at choral practices and events and has connections with many of her mother’s students. While Harmony doesn’t always tag along, she seems to understand why her mom needs to be where she is.

I don’t feel as much guilt maybe as some of these people do because my daughter will say, “Well, what time are you going to get home?” She’s in it. She watches it. She hears the stories. I’m pretty open. She’s like, “That kid needs you more right now.”

**Colleague Support**

Sally disclosed what helps her the most at school manage empathic strain, “The number one thing that has helped me is having my school spouse, my school bestie. You know, the person I can go close the door and lay it all out there…Not everybody has one of those. That makes me sad.” Julia shared, “At my building, we call it ‘being in the mud.’ Somebody who you can go and just unleash and they get it. They don’t judge you and they don’t think anything bad about you and then it’s done and you walk away. I can go home and complain to my [non-educator] husband, but he doesn’t get it. He’s like, ‘Well, why don’t you just do this, this, and this?’” The options offered by Julia’s husband were not deemed school appropriate by the focus group.

While spouses or friends who are non-educators may not understand the limitations of school employees or the symptoms of empathic strain, having a trusted person to talk to is important. Sally explained, “I think a friend is your next line of
defense because you have a common conversation that you can both complain about and problem solve about. So, the immediate people around you are the ones that are probably suffering from this fatigue more than anybody else. It is like the disabled helping the disabled.” Renee concurred with Sally’s sentiment.

I stayed after school two days ago for 45 minutes talking to teachers from another hallway that I don’t ever get to talk to and just walking away from that conversation which was a relatively negative conversation. I still felt so much better because I had gotten to talk to other people and feel like they’re going through the same stuff. It’s the same thing down the hall as it is down our hall and we kind of feel the same way and we’re in this together.

**What Could Iowa School Districts Do to Support Educators with Empathic Strain?**

“That’s like trying to turn the Titanic!” Sally exclaimed. Most participants shared that much of what happens in our school districts impacts all who work there. The concerns that students experience outside of school are not getting less severe.

“Everybody is experiencing that strain from the top, down.”

**School and Building Culture**

The school building and district culture do lay a strong role in the way educators view support from their system. They appreciate administrators who find value in their work and are willing to listen. As Anna evoked in the focus group, “I will follow great leadership every day of the week.” Positive, strong relationships with colleagues and administrators conveyed value through all three stages of data collection.

Professional learning opportunities are embedded in most school districts’ school calendars, as evidenced by the references of most participants in the survey, interviews
and focus groups. It was clear through the multiple responses that the professional learning topics across the state are quite varied. Some respondents feel their educator development is differentiated and meaningful, while others feel it doesn’t meet their immediate needs. Participants disclosed the most unvalued professional learning time was spent on ‘self-care.’

**Self-Care**

Something Iowa educators feel makes a mockery of their work is the current ‘self-care’ movement that began during the Covid years for teachers. There were six references throughout the three stages of data collection referring to this theme. Several referred to taking time out of their school day to practice ‘self-care,’ whether that be through a professional learning session or an appreciation attempt by their school leader. Sally noted that “It seems like a mockery when we’re taking the time [during the school day]. When really, the strain of teaching is not having that time to get back on the list of things to get done, which is causing that stress to occur.”

Even the staff appreciation attempts that many school administrators tout throughout the year, are considered haphazard if not ingrained in the school culture. Anna explained why she was so annoyed about an attempt at culture building at her school.

Our school is doing massages next week, which is like something, right? I don’t want to be a dick because it’ll be a really great 15 minutes of my week. But there’s kind of a larger societal thing about how you can’t just give your workers a ‘pizza party.’ The ‘pizza party’ being the massage. It’s systemic. It’s just a band-aid. We’re going to have this massage day and try to lift some spirits and
then you feel like a Debbie Downer if you’re not like, “Woo-hoo, massage!” But you’re still like, “Yeah, so-and-so’s still going to be rolling on the floor when I’m done with the massage.”

While districts pride themselves on having Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), that offer 3-6 free counseling sessions per person, this also seems insincere when the opportunity is offered to staff only when they are in crisis. Sally shared her frustration with the common response of administration when they share EAP information when teachers are emotional about a situation. “Hand me a flier that has some isolated phone number or a website… It seems disconnected. It seems disingenuous.” Counseling can be found in the ‘self-care’ realm, however when educators are frustrated with a situation, they do not find a personal counseling visit to be a possible solution to a student issue.

What participants shared would be more sincere is if these components to self-care were actually not so disjointed within the school culture. If there were built in, intentional supports, it wouldn’t seem as if the self-care opportunities were a checklist to a healthy challenge. Claire in the focus group mentioned that her school had embedded monthly morning get-togethers for staff and monthly staff luncheons for school staff to join. Anna noted these opportunities were part of Claire’s school culture. She was disappointed her school didn’t have that as part of their culture. “Nothing formal, but a great group of teachers to talk through issues with.”

Hazel, a focus group participant, was quiet through a portion of the focus group, listening intently to other participants share about the challenges of self-care professional learning sessions or massage sessions at school, came up with her own idea for
professional development. “We could teach people how to harness empathy and turn it into compassion… I have empathy [for my students] but I think I turn it into compassion. I think that’s why I don’t ever feel like my tank is empty.”

**School Supports for Students**

Another school support that would be helpful for teachers, was mentioned by Missy, an interviewee. She shared that basically getting help for students would be a relief for teachers.

   It would be more helpful to the teacher if it was easier to get help for the students.

   If I have a student in crisis, but I can’t get them the help that they need, that student is just continuing to unravel. Which is hard for the student. It’s hard for the other students depending on how their crisis is manifesting.

Renee shared a similar sentiment, as she is a kindergarten teacher, “All of the things we could prevent, if we would start with us,” referring to her early intervention opportunity in kindergarten. “These kids need support. They need services. They need help. They need these things that we provide to other kids but our hands are tied because we have to get the data. We have to give them a chance… we have to, whatever it is.”

   Area Education Agency (AEA) staff, instructional coaches, social workers and school counselors were mentioned by 43% of the Qualtrics survey respondents as supports to teachers. Support personnel within schools are not only supports for students, they are also there to listen to teachers and offer advice or coaching.

   Other participants in the surveys identified their school’s Building Assistance Team (BAT) as a support for teachers. While most schools in Iowa have some sort of assistance team, the way each team and support structure to get additional academic or
behavior help to students varies. Iowa requires MTSS systems in place for Tier I, Tier II and Tier III within school buildings, however that looks very different across the state due to the allocation of resources for supports. With strong building or district systems in place, there should be systemic and timely ways to offer additional support to students in need. The “timeliness” component is left to the perception of the teacher. Missy honestly conveyed the time constraints of teachers in her interview, as whenever a student issue arises, it does take time away from something else that needs to be done:

All teachers need more time. If you are trying to juggle multiple crisis situations on top of the regular burden of teaching, you just need even more time. After school, I spend my time going to make a phone call to a family member or go talk to another staff member to update them or to ask them what they could do to somehow connect to them or whatever. That’s time that I didn’t spend on lesson planning and just attending to the work of academics.

Summary

This chapter was a compilation of Iowa educators’ thoughts and feelings about their experiences with empathic strain, as shared through the Qualtrics survey, personal interviews or the focus group. It was evident that teachers care deeply for their students, so much that they worry about them at night, feel helpless in their efforts, and may experience disconnect from their own families in the process.

The Iowa educators expressed the multiple coping strategies used which include substance abuse, prayer, exercise, therapy, creating boundaries and colleague support. While not a complete list, educators have found healthy or unhealthy manners in which to support themselves with empathic strain symptoms.
The participants in this study offered thoughts on which systemic supports help them in their efforts to support students. Supportive administrators and colleagues create a positive school culture, which allows teachers to feel safe. Knowing there is a response system for academic and behavior support is also a relief to educators within a building or district. Haphazard efforts at ‘self-care’ time are not appreciated, and actually have an adverse impact on the culture of the building.

Whilst many concepts, terms, themes were discussed in all components of the study, the focus of what teachers care about continues to be students. Even in challenging times politically, economically and socially, Iowa educators keep students at the center. Figure 8 is a word cloud created from the Qualtrics survey results. At the center of it all are the students.
Figure 8

Word Cloud of Survey Respondents
Chapter 6: Discussion and an Educational Imperative

On that cold winter night described in chapter 4, I was packing up the materials from my focus group experience. I threw away the water bottles and replaced the box of Kleenex back on the counter of the library conference room. I was still reeling from the experience of hearing from these incredible educators sharing their challenges with empathic strain. While the other participants had said their goodbyes and headed on their way home after a long day of work and ‘focus grouping’ with me, Hazel was taking her time with her coat and bag. She had more to share.

She stood near the door, still pondering all she had heard in the focus group session. She was the one focus group participant who didn’t seem to be overly fazed by empathic strain, as she actually had shared that she and her family embraced her role as a teacher. A very thoughtful and intelligent person, Hazel was processing what she had heard that evening and tried to make meaning of it all.

Hazel then spoke, sharing an analogy she had once heard about prioritization. She shared how all of us at that table are “juggling many balls” each day. Each ball represents something we should do for ourselves, families or for school. Each task is assigned a glass ball or a plastic ball. The plastic balls may drop and get picked up tomorrow, whereas the glass balls must be kept in the air. Not all personal things are glass balls; not all work things are plastic. There are some of each in motion each day.

This analogy, which I later learned came from a Jennifer Barnes (2020) Twitter post, inspired my own drawing of how educators respond when experiencing empathic strain. There are glass balls, which include school tasks and family needs, which can’t be dropped, or they are “broken.” There are plastic balls, which include school tasks and
family needs, which can be dropped for a day or two. Then there is a beach ball, which is kept afloat between all of the other balls. This ball bounces between all of the others, trying to knock others out of the juggling orbit. This ball represents an extensive worry about a student at school, empathic strain. This worry or concern can tap the priorities in an educator’s life out of orbit, some are high priority, others are not, yet it makes an impact.

Figure 9 is my own metaphorical drawing of empathic strain, using the analogy of juggling balls.
The intent of this study was to understand how Iowa educators understand and negotiate empathic strain, how they prevent and regulate empathic strain and learn what Iowa school districts could do to support their educators with empathic strain. To understand how the lived experience of a teacher with empathic strain lives and works was distilled from the survey, interview and focus group data (Saldaña & Omasta, 2022).
Through personal reflections, I better understand the strategies educators use to prevent and regulate empathic strain as not to impede on their personal lives or professional abilities. In addition, through the focus group work, I learned what would make a difference for Iowa educators, including the educators I serve currently. In order to meet the needs of all students in Iowa’s public schools, it is necessary that the foundation, the mental health of educators, is strong and resilient.

Using my metaphorical imagery, I can restate the purpose of this study connected to the research questions. The purpose of this study is to have Iowa educators name each ball in their juggling orbit, identify which ones are glass balls and which are plastic balls, know how to convert the beach ball into a plastic or glass ball, and to help juggling coaches keep their jugglers juggling.

**How Do Iowa Educators Understand and Negotiate Empathic Strain?**

*How to Name Each Ball in the Juggling Orbit…*

First and foremost, Iowa educators need to know what empathic strain is. I was amazed at the number of respondents who had not heard of this concept, nor had an understanding of what the challenge of caring for a student could do to themselves personally and professionally. Being able to name that worrying about students outside of school, empathically straining oneself, is an actual phenomenon is extremely important.

After being able to identify that empathic strain is truly a “thing” that most educators experience, the next step is to be aware of the symptoms. Larson’s (2020) research with those in helping professions determined that suppressing the emotions and symptoms involved with empathic strain will only exacerbate the concerns. He shared
that those experiencing empathic strain should have full awareness and reflect to have full understanding. With an open approach to one’s own empathic strain, the stress and trauma become reverberations of the students suffering, not our own.

Whether this happens in preservice or throughout one’s career, educators need to know what symptoms are and how they may impact one’s profession and one’s family. Educators must know when they need a friend to talk with or when they need a professional to support them with their struggles. When they aren’t even sure what they are experiencing, and just place blame on the “tough work of teaching,” the empathic strain beach ball cannot be removed from the center of the orbit. It remains in the center, knocking out the other balls. By pulling it aside, and naming it a student name and an actionable step, it can become a plastic or glass ball to be placed into the juggling orbit.

**How Do Iowa Educators Prevent and Regulate Empathic Strain?**

*How to Juggle the Glass or Plastic Ball of Empathic Strain…*

The juggling balls either flow in their orbit, or get jumbled in together. The juggler may either enjoy the experience or worry the entire time about dropping the balls. In considering how Iowa educators prevent and regulate empathic strain, there were three key themes of resiliency that resonated through the study: interconnectedness, connectedness and compassion satisfaction.

**Interconnectedness.** One discovery I had throughout this learning process was how interconnected school and home are to educators. Because this work is so personal, educators think about students at school and home, just as they think about their own families. I reflected on a time where my mother was ill. I did think about my mom during the school day, as I was worried about her. I would do the same for a student that
I was worried about, even when I was at home. In chapter 5, I shared how educators want to create boundaries between school and home. I’m not sure that with such a humanistic career, you can actually create mental boundaries from space to space. Sure, you can avoid checking email from home or not respond to a call from your family at work, however the mind-work of caring for others cannot be compartmentalized into a time of day.

A theoretical explanation for why we can’t actually “turn off” our school or home brains is the Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory. This concentric human systems theory keeps those closest to the individual what is called the microsystem (see figure 10). People and places within this microsystem have the most impact on the individual, and the individual has most impact on those in their microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 2005). This theory assists us in making sense of empathic strain, as the microsystem that directly surrounds the educators is filled with the people closest to the person. The students are in the educator’s microsystem. In a typical day, educators spend as much time with their students as they do with their own families. Educators’ identities are integrally connected to those within the microsystem: students, colleagues and their own families. The positive relationships within the microsystem are necessary to offer support to the individual.
Cross and Hong (2012) applied Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory to teacher’s emotions in school contexts. The school’s microsystem directly connected students, colleagues, administrators and teachers to one individual teacher, who had their own distinctive beliefs, values and identity. The mesosystem connects the individuals and groups within the microsystem. Outside of the mesosystem is the macrosystem, which contains greater systems, like the school board, district administration, federal policies. The macrosystem influences the internal systems greater than the internal circles sometimes impact that system.
The data shared through the survey, interview and focus group all confirm Bronfenbrenner’s theory in relation to educators in Iowa, including the macrosystem. In chapter 2, organizational trauma was mentioned. This is another strand of strain which only magnifies the empathic strain. While empathic strain may not be something controlled by legislation, politics or community or national respect of educators, the organizational trauma endured by those who work closest with Iowa students cannot be ignored. It could be lessened by additional funds or reducing legislation that restricts teachers from doing what they do best, teach children. In the focus group, Julia mentioned, “During Covid, we were all praised for everything that we do. Then that faded pretty quickly. Now, what we see in Iowa is not support at all from the Capitol.” Sally reflected, “In my years of teaching, the problems don’t seem to be getting any less severe. Nothing seems to shock me anymore. Everybody… seems to be experiencing that strain from the top down.”

**Connectedness.** Educators need educators to talk to, and the time must be created for them to talk about their emotions and symptoms. In the Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) microsystem there is a place for this as well. It actually comes in at the same level as empathic strain. If teachers can match the levels of empathic strain with the levels of connectedness with other teachers, they can diminish the impact of the strain. As the study participants shared, even just recognizing that others are going through the same experiences allowed those participants to not feel alone.

The most key determinant of well-being is the quality of positive relationships. The ability to use personal resources, like friendships and collegial companions, is a
protective factor in order to be resilient (Ozbay et al., 2007). Creating positive connections professionally and personally need to be glass balls that educators keep in their juggling orbits. While still a “thing” that must be tended to, it keeps all others in balance.

**Compassion Satisfaction.** Through this study, it was evident that educators care for their students. With the word cloud being a collection of the most frequently used words in the data collected for the study, using survey, interview and focus group data, the greatest frequency was the word: students. Iowa educators care for their students. Because the role of a teacher is humanistic, it is natural for a teacher to care for their students. This creates an entry point for empathic strain.

When asked, “Why do you stay in this job if it is so hard?” the majority of respondents said it was because of students. The reason the job is so hard is the students, and for the exact same reason, educators want to stay. The concept of compassion satisfaction is one that must be considered and celebrated in school environments. When one experiences compassion satisfaction, they feel the gratitude and joy from those whom they serve (Larson, 2020). In an elementary school, teachers get hugs from students, handwritten notes and pictures from students, and can share in the elation when a student understands something for the first time. In a secondary school, teachers may get fewer hugs, but may get more verbal gratitude from students.

Sometimes educators really need to remember those positive points of compassion satisfaction throughout their day to remember why they are there. When that “beach ball of empathic strain” can be reduced to a “plastic ball of worry,” the educator’s perspective will have more clarity on what should matter most in their work. Hazel from
the focus group had shared this as a possible diminisher of empathic strain: to harness empathy to become compassion.

**What Could Iowa School Districts Do to Support Educators with Empathic Strain?**

*How Districts Lessen the Amount of Balls to be Juggled…*

While it seems for educators that balls are consistently being added to the juggling orbit, school districts and school leaders must consider ways to either hold some of the balls in the hopper, offer more courses in juggling or offer time for jugglers to work together. Training, time and cultivating a collaborative culture all offer tremendous benefits to educators, which ultimately impact students.

**Training.** In the work of therapists and social workers, Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995), offered several strategies for supporting trauma workers, including special training. This training supports those whom are traumatized by the negative effects of their work and to identify those concerns. Knowing that empathic strain is likely in education, training should be in place to help those who experience it to identify and treat it.

My husband is a police officer for the Des Moines Police Department. As I was researching empathic strain in teachers, he mentioned how his department offered a peer support network to its officers. Logically named The Peer Support Network (PSN), this non-profit organization housed in the Des Moines metro area is led by executive director and president, Jeremy Sprague. The PSN connects with departments of emergency responders to offer training and support in the area of crisis prevention and response. Through work with the Des Moines Police Department (DMPD), systemic prevention and response procedures are in place to support all levels of staffing. In an interview
with Jeremy Sprague (April 14, 2023), he shared the systemic prevention strategies in place with the DMPD. They offer training to staff and an application for their phone that includes proactive options for stress reduction like practicing gratitude, meditation, mindfulness and yoga. In addition, it has several quizzes to self-monitor depression and anxiety.

One of the most important options on this application are the phone numbers to those who serve as peer supports all over the state. Peer supports are trained individuals at different rankings within police departments, from dispatch personnel to the highest-ranking officers. These peer supports are not counselors, yet other police officers willing to listen. All calls and conversations remain confidential, with no reporting to any supervisor, however peer supports may refer individuals on to a counselor or therapist.

While the phone application offers a way for an employee to make the call, there are also protocols in place for supervisors at the end of watch for critical events. If it is known that an officer experienced something traumatic on watch, like providing CPR to a child, the officer’s supervisor would contact a member on the peer support team to reach out to the officer.

Other proactive measures the PSN has embedded in DMPD, are training for new recruits while in the academy. Giving new officers learning about trauma, stress, and the impact it can have on one’s life or one’s family is beneficial before the work begins. In addition, since 2021 DMPD now has all officers meet with a psychologist for one hour once per year. The officers may spend this hour however they wish, as some choose to not talk at all. However, Jeremy Sprague reported that they have been able to catch sleep
problems, substance abuse issues, and other mental health concerns much sooner through these yearly screenings.

Peer support members are available all over the state to support each other. Some departments in Iowa only have a few employees, which may cause officers or staff members to feel uncomfortable talking with someone. With having peer supports around the state, any police department employee would have access to someone at any time.

The entire PSN could be replicated within Iowa’s school district communities. Creating a system of colleague support at all levels, from paraeducators to counselors to teachers to administrators, is a vision that could become reality in Iowa. To have a system that would provide education to new teachers as they enter the field, to supporting all educators as they navigate this intensely humanistic career through yearly check-ins and as-needed connections along the way.

In my interview with Jeremy Sprague (April 14, 2023), we discussed how it may be more crucial for teachers to have this type of systemic support than law enforcement. While law enforcement may experience some extremely traumatic moments, they don’t have the personal connections with those whom they had the interactions. In teaching, it is all personal, which is why the stress can become overwhelming.

**Time and Collaborative Culture.** As a principal, I may have previously brushed aside concern of teachers that involves more money, more staffing or more time… as there will never be enough to go around, and typically those concerns are out of my control as a school leader. However, through this study, there was a resounding need for time for educators. Time to prepare, plan and connect with families, and time to meet
together as colleagues, professionally and personally, which all can be in my circle of control as a school leader.

Overwhelmingly, the participants in this study appreciated meaningful professional learning, yet did not want to spend any time with administrator-planned “self-care” sessions that would take away time from basically anything during the school day. Creating space for teachers to talk with one another personally or professionally is part of a school culture that supports the strengthening of the microsystem of a teacher.

In the school in which I currently work as principal, there are weekly professional learning sessions, in addition to weekly professional learning community meetings (PLCs). On the personal side of things, our social committee facilitates monthly staff luncheons and monthly morning gatherings, inviting all staff to participate. While simplistic in nature, upon reflection on these opportunities, these gatherings, professional or personal, do make a difference for educators in their connection with others. These opportunities do take time from the other tasks that educators may need to do, however building that network of support may ultimately save educators time in worry or stress from not knowing what to do with a student or situation.

When individuals recognize their organizations to be supportive, they experience lower levels of empathic strain (Jansen, 2004). School leadership’s recognition of the professional and personal needs of educators and culture are a large part of this perception of support. Creating systems for educators to connect, collaborate, and be compassionate for one another, while being respectful and protective of time, can increase educator efficacy while managing empathic strain.
Entry Points to Future Studies

This study is only a dent in the surface of the necessity to study empathic strain further in teachers. Empathic strain is not easily self-identified, hard to navigate with so many other teaching and life demands and not systemically supported by school leaders and districts. These research findings were clear throughout the survey, interviews and focus group conversations.

To dig deeper into empathic strain, a possible study would be to gather the group of educators who are regulating empathic strain or who have avoided it all together. How are these individuals able to continue teaching and not be taxed by the challenge of caring too much for one’s students?

Another possible study, or studies, would be to further explore Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory by considering relationships more in the mesosystem or exosystem. How do the relationships within the meso- or exosystems impact empathic strain in educators? Which issues or concerns from an outer sphere of the ecological systems theory can directly impact the empathic strain a teacher has for students? Or which issue or concern from an outer sphere has the most impact on a teacher’s work with students?

Researcher’s Personal Reflection

As an elementary school principal, this study brought this phenomenon to actuality. Being an educator myself, I certainly have experienced the challenge of caring for others, and this work reminded me of the tremendous care the teachers I work with have for their students. They spend more of their time each day with their students than they do their own families during the school year.
Being a teacher is personal. Teachers are accidentally called “mom” by their students on a frequent basis, which happens because of the caring relationships. Teachers, while having an important job to share skills, strategies and content in class, can be role models, pseudo-parents and/or mentors to students through building strong connections.

By listening to the survey data and listening to the participants share their stories, it is evident that educators are unable to completely disengage from thinking about their students outside of school, just as they may still think about their own family members during the school day. Caring relationships are human, and not set by a timeclock.

While doing the research for this study, I would have conversations with teachers about their concern for students. It was evident they were struggling with symptoms of empathic strain. I was able to share with those specific teachers about my learning on this phenomenon, however I plan on sharing with the entire staff during the next school year. I have great teachers in the building I serve, and my goal is to increase their knowledge on empathic strain and offer intentional opportunities to support them during the year through connection work with others. Those who care so much for others must have someone who cares for them.

**Summary**

Being able to identify empathic strain, and know when one is experiencing it is key to the reduction of the symptoms experienced. While Iowa educators are not going to be able to eliminate empathic strain, as it is a natural challenge of being in a caring profession, there are ways to manage and prevent it.
By utilizing the same ecological system that caused the empathic strain, there are ways to regulate the empathy with compassion. Within one’s microsystem, in addition to students, there are other teachers and support individuals. These colleagues should be used to support an educator with their strain, in addition to opening one’s heart to compassion satisfaction. Pulling in the care from other adults and the appreciation from students, may lessen the symptoms of empathic strain.

District and building leaders may promote these human supports through management of time, offering a peer support network, and by creating communities of educators through PLCs and social connections in the school day.

Even though the students are the primary cause of the stress, teachers are still advocating for the students. What is different about teachers and other professions that experience empathic strain… the strong daily connection between students and teachers. Therapists see their clients on a weekly basis, doctors treat patients for a period of time. Teachers are there every day for their students. They know their stories, understand their emotions and can identify their strengths and growth areas. They are in this profession because they care for young people.

In a simple word count of the survey and personal interview data, the largest count for a word was STUDENTS. Survey respondents scribed comments related to their love for students:

- “Someone has to care and the children at school are worth staying for.”
- “They are my purpose. They are my why. They make me laugh and cry.”
- “The fact that I am making an impact on my students daily.”
● “I truly have a passion to help kiddos succeed and help them know they can and will meet goals.”

Iowa educators care for their students, ironically, which is why they are struggling so very much. To keep people who care about children in this profession, education around empathic strain must be considered an educational imperative. Iowa’s students depend on us.
References


Barnes, J. L. [@jenlynnbarnes]. (2020, January 22). *One time I was at a Q&A with Nora Roberts, and someone asked her how to balance writing and having* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/jenlynnbarnes/status/1220182162118451200?lang=en


https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190464684.013.28


Appendix A: IRB Approval

Gayle Rhineberger <gayle.rhineberger@uni.edu>  
to Lindsey, me, Lori, Lisa, Karen  

Dear Lindsey,

Your study, "A qualitative research study on empathic strain in Iowa educators," has been approved by the UNI IRB through the review procedures authorized by 45 CFR 46.104, effective December 7, 2022. You may begin recruitment, data collection and/or analysis for your project. You are required to adhere to the procedures and study materials approved during this review, as well as to follow IRB policies and procedures for human subject research posted on the IRB website.

If you need to make changes to your study design, sample, procedures, or study materials, please email lisa.ahern@uni.edu to request approval of the changes before they are implemented, and attach any revised study materials with edits highlighted. You may expect a response within a couple of days.

Your study will not require annual review and approval by the IRB. However, you will receive an annual study update request, which will ask if the study is still active and if any problems have arisen. Advisors: If your student has graduated, please reply to the annual update request on the student’s behalf.

Problems or adverse events related to your research that were not anticipated must be reported promptly after being discovered, either within 7 or 14 days, depending on the seriousness of the event, as outlined on the Reporting Problems and Adverse Events page. Examples include unexpected injury or emotional stress for study participants, missteps in the consent process, or breaches of confidentiality. The IRB will advise on any next steps that might be necessary.

If you need a signed approval letter, contact the IRB office and one will be provided for your records.

Best wishes for your project success.

Gayle

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Appendix B: Qualtrics Survey Questions—Stage 1

Demographic Information:

1) Do you teach in Iowa?  A) Yes B) No

2) In which category would you classify your school? A) Public B) Private C) Other

3) In which category would you classify your school? A) Urban B) Suburban C) Rural

4) Which grade level do you teach? A) PK B) K-5 C) 6-8 D) 9-12

5) How long have you been teaching? A) 1-2 years B) 3-5 years C) 6-12 years D) 13-20 years E) Over 20 years

6) How long have you served your current district? A) 1-2 years B) 3-5 years C) 6-12 years D) 13-20 years E) Over 20 years

7) What is your highest degree earned? A) BA B) MA/M.Ed./MS C) Ed.S D) Ph.D. or Ed.D.

Targeted Questions:

1) Have you heard of the term empathic strain? Yes or no.

*Empathic strain* is when you have had empathy for another person to the point where it is a stressor in your life. Also known as *compassion fatigue* or *secondary trauma stress*, you may experience this when you care or worry about a student outside of school hours.
2) Do you believe you have experienced empathic strain in your educational career in working with students? Yes or no.

3) (prompted if yes to #2) What was the situation in which you experienced empathic strain?

4) How does the care and concern you have for your students impact your life outside of school?

5) When you are worried/concerned about a student outside of school hours, what do you do to relieve your concern?

6) What support systems do you have at your school to help teachers with their student concerns?

7) When education is so challenging right now, what makes you stay?

8) (optional) If you are willing to share more about your experience with empathic strain with the researcher via phone or Zoom, you may share your name and email address. While not all will be selected to participate in individual interviews, all who share their information will be entered into a drawing for one of four $25 Amazon e-gift cards.
Appendix C: Phone or Zoom Interview Questions—Stage 2

**Targeted Questions:**

1) When your concerns about a student continue after work hours, what impact does it have on your personal life?

2) Do your worries or concerns impact your ability to effectively serve other students in your classroom or school?

3) What school supports are in place to help you and the student(s) in which you are concerned?
Appendix D: Focus Group Questions—Stage 3

1) When you read through the themes, what resonates with you?

2) How do you feel these themes connect with the term *empathic strain*?

*Empathic strain* is when you have had empathy for another person to the point where it is a stressor in your life. Also known as *compassion fatigue* or *secondary trauma stress*, you may experience this when you care or worry about a student outside of school hours.

3) How do you personally connect with the themes of the respondents and the definition of empathic strain?

4) Please draw an image that represents empathic strain in educators.

5) What could help these respondents or others like you in coping with empathic strain in education?
Appendix E: Focus Group Invitation—Stage 3

I have surveyed and interviewed around 100 Iowa teachers about their experiences with Empathic Strain. I am eager to capture your perspective on my findings to support my doctoral research!

PLEASE JOIN ME AT THE WEST DES MOINES LIBRARY IN THE COMMUNITY ROOM FROM 5:30-7:00 ON THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2.

LET ME KNOW YOUR ORDER FROM PALMER’S BY WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 1! (MENU HERE)