

Teaching Practice generated stressors and coping mechanisms among student teachers in Zimbabwe

John S Mapfumo and Natsirayi Chitsiko

Faculty of Education, Africa University

Regis Chireshe

Department of Psychology of Education, University of South Africa, South Africa
chirer@unisa.ac.za

We sought to establish stressors and coping mechanisms for student teachers on Teaching Practice from a Christian-related university and a government-owned teachers' college in Zimbabwe. The sample was made up of 77 participants (38 females, 39 males). Thirty-two participants were from the university and 45 were from the teachers' college. A questionnaire and an interview schedule were used to collect data. Frequencies and percentages were used in quantitative data analysis while qualitative data were thematically analysed. The main stressors revealed were problems with difficult learners, low allowances, heavy workload, and shortage of teaching and learning aids and, to some extent, supervision-related matters and the effect of the protracted industrial action by serving teachers that overlapped with the Teaching Practice period in the study. Most coping strategies were in the form of social-support networks, particularly interactions with family and friends. Student teachers suggested a number of actions to be taken to reduce the related stress. Recommendations are made.

Keywords: stress; stress coping mechanisms; student teachers; Teaching Practice; Zimbabwe

Introduction

Teaching Practice in colleges and universities in Zimbabwe is seen as the centre piece for the process of training teachers, whether for primary school, secondary school or higher academic levels. It is an integral part of the teacher training programme (Chireshe & Chireshe, 2010). Ngidi and Sibaya (2003) state that Teaching Practice is a period during which a student teacher is given an opportunity to do teaching trials in a school situation. The student teacher is given the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge acquired in lecture rooms to classroom teaching before actually getting into the real world of teaching (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009). Maphosa, Shumba, and Shumba (2007) cited in Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) view Teaching Practice as a period of guided or supervised teaching during which the student teacher takes teaching responsibility for a given group of learners over a period of time under a mentor (a qualified and experienced classroom teacher).

Teaching Practice is often described by student teachers as “the most worthwhile part of my programme”, and “where I really learned to teach” (McNay, 2003:1). Teaching Practice has also been described as the most important experience in the professional preparation of teachers (MacKinnon, 1989).

Although Teaching Practice has been described generally as beneficial, a consistent

minority of the student teachers on Teaching Practice have persistently been stressed by the exercise (Capel, 1997). Student teachers in many parts of the world have reported moderate to high levels of anxiety with respect to Teaching Practice (Kazu, 2001; Morton, Vesco, Williams & Awender, 1997). In the same vein, stress and workload are reported to be recurring themes explaining the withdrawal of student teachers from teacher training programmes in some countries (Chambers & Rogers, 2000). The nature of the stress is described here.

Stress factors

'Stress' has been defined and understood in a variety of ways. Fontana and Abouserie (1993), as cited by Murray-Harvey (1999:1) refer to stress as the:

“demand made upon the adaptive capacities of the mind and body, a demand which, if continued beyond the ability of these capacities to respond, leads to the physical and psychological exhaustion and possibly ultimate collapse referred to by Selye (1956)”.

The definition is supported, among others, by Franks (1994) who added that apart from the threatening situation, stress may involve self-doubt, anxiety, fear and even anger accompanied by such physical symptoms as muscular tension, headaches and exhaustion. However, stress is not always negative. There is also 'good stress' that can enhance motivation and effort, thus contributing to professional growth and development (Jelinek, 1986). The present study focused on negative stress.

Teaching has consistently been ranked as a high stress occupation (Griffith, Steptoe & Cropley, 1999; McCormick, 1997) with between 33 and 37% of teachers studied regularly reporting being 'very/extremely' stressed due to factors intrinsic to the teaching profession (Chan & Hui, 1995). Because of the occupational stress in teaching, the attrition rate for teachers has reached alarming proportions in some parts of the world (Chaplain, 2008; Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007). Student teachers have been reported to be vulnerable to stress because they enter a field in which the professional teachers are highly stressed (Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis & Parker, 2000). Within the programmes for the training of teachers, the most stressful component was Teaching Practice (MacDonald, 1993).

Causes of stress in teachers worldwide have been extensively researched but little work has been done on the causes of stress in student teachers (Mundia, 2010; Head, Hill & McGuire, 1996). There is, however, some emerging interest in the area in some developing countries such as South Africa (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009; Quick & Sieborger, 2005; Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003).

The reason for the low level of research in Teaching Practice is, perhaps, that the stress in that area is viewed as a normal part of teacher development which is accepted as a natural aspect of the transition from student teacher to qualified teacher (Murray-Harvey, Slee, Lawson, Sillins, Banfield & Russell, 2000).

Coping mechanisms

It is important to have knowledge of how student teachers cope with stress that results from the challenges they meet on their Teaching Practice. This knowledge is important because it would provide lecturers and administrators in teacher education programmes with a good idea of the most effective ways of providing support to student teachers (Murray-Harvey, 1999). It is also known that effective coping strategies make the effects of stress less damaging and hence such knowledge would make it possible for the leaders in teacher education to help students develop adaptive ways of handling their stress. Student teachers would thus maintain high levels of

performance which would be compromised by stress that is not well-handled.

Research on teacher stress indicates that student teachers and serving teachers who do not handle stress effectively are subject to early onset of burnout and this may explain why many teachers in the profession exit the profession during the early part of their careers. Effective coping skills make it possible to some extent to reduce the attrition of teaching professionals. Potential stress which can be expected in professional teaching which student teachers may expect from experiences on Teaching Practice may also explain why many individuals who train as teachers never in fact take up their positions as professional teachers (Greer & Greer, 1992).

Suggestions to ameliorate stress and to improve coping mechanisms for student teachers have been made by researchers in the area of student teacher stress and coping mechanisms. Morton et al. (1997) suggest that coping on the part of student teachers could be enhanced if lecturers and administrators in teacher education identified stressors and gave the student teachers the support that they needed. Bowers, Eichner and Sacks (1983) urged teacher education practitioners to pay more attention to psychological readiness of student teachers to cope with stress rather than just concentrating on teaching the student teachers the methodologies for their various subjects/disciplines.

Specific coping skills used by student teachers have also been identified by various investigators. Payne and Manning (1990) successfully used cognitive restructuring and self-instruction to assist student teachers to significantly decrease self-reported stress. On the other hand Capel (1997) found that the best effect was obtained not from using one or the other of the strategies suggested by Payne and Manning (1990) but a combination of cognitive and palliative strategies. Elkerton (1984) and Morton et al. (1997) found forming of support networks and developing of interpersonal skills to be effective while MacDonald (1993) and Murray-Harvey (1999) found talking to a cooperating teacher/supervisor about stressful situations as the most important coping resource. Other strategies were exercising, eating, relaxing, and drinking. However, drinking may not necessarily be a viable strategy as it may lead to such professionally maladaptive behaviours such as absenteeism.

The researchers of this study were not aware of any study in Zimbabwe that directly addressed the issue of student teachers' stress whilst on Teaching Practice. Mavunduse (2004) looked at sources of stress among teachers' college students in general without focusing on Teaching Practice. The present study directly explored Teaching Practice-related stress among student teachers in relation to gender.

Abouserie (1994) found that female university students reported significantly higher levels of stress symptoms. These female students reported more frequently job-related concerns. At the same time female students were more likely to seek help even from their friends whereas men were even unwilling to seek psychotherapy (Padesky & Hammen, 1981). Female student teachers were more stressed than males while on Teaching Practice (D'Rozario & Wong, 1996; Morton et al. 1997).

Zindi (1994), Shumba and Matina (2002) and Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) established that there was rampant sexual harassment of student teachers in Zimbabwe's higher education institutions. The above three Zimbabwean studies did not directly focus on stress although sexual harassment is a stressful life event. The present study focused on Teaching Practice-related stress among student teachers in Zimbabwe.

Aims of the study

The present study sought to a) identify sources of stress among student teachers on Teaching

Practice; b) identify and describe the stress management strategies that were used by the student teachers on Teaching Practice to cope with what stress they might be experiencing; and c) collate student teachers' suggestions on what could be done at university/college and school level to reduce any of the stress that they might be experiencing on the Teaching Practice. The student teachers' perceptions were established in relation to gender

Methodology

Design

A Mixed Methods Design was employed to enable triangulation. The quantitative approach was employed because it had strength in dealing with the large numbers that participated in this study. The qualitative approach provided descriptions of how people experienced the world on a given research issue. Because qualitative research is more demanding and labour intensive, a small sample was invited for the unstructured interviews.

Sample

The sample was made up of 77 conveniently sampled student teachers. Of these, 32 (17 male, 15 female) were final-year students in the Faculty of Education at the Church-related university who were studying Bachelor of Arts/Business Studies with Education. Forty-five (22 male, 23 female) were third-year students from the government-owned Teachers' College who were studying for a Diploma in Education. This sample was made up of student teachers who had been on Teaching Practice from January to April 2008, and had been deployed in high schools in Manicaland, Mashonaland East, and Harare provinces. The study used the whole-group sampling approach where everyone who had been on Teaching Practice from January to April 2008 was requested to participate in the survey, the reason being that the total number of the students on Teaching Practice from the two institutions during the given time was manageable.

Instrumentation

The study used a questionnaire and an unstructured interview schedule to collect the data. The questionnaire was the main instrument used in this study. The questionnaire solicited students' bio-data, stress-related issues and suggestions for amelioration of stress on Teaching Practice. The unstructured interview schedule was meant to complement the questionnaire. The questionnaire and the unstructured interview schedule were pilot tested to check the usability of the items.

Data collection procedure

Permission to carry out the study was obtained in writing from the authorities from the University and the Teachers' College. Students volunteered to complete the questionnaire. The researchers personally distributed questionnaires to the student teachers who had gathered for the purpose at each of the research sites.

After completion of the questionnaires 11 students (6 males, 5 females) at the Teachers' College and 12 (6 males, 6 females) at the University volunteered to be interviewed. The interviewees agreed to have their responses recorded in notebooks. It took about 10 minutes to interview each participant. Participants were promised anonymity and confidentiality.

Ethical considerations

The researchers explained the purpose of the study to the participants. Participants were in-

formed that participation was voluntary and that they could discontinue their participation if during the process they found that they were no longer interested in completing the process. Verbal consent was obtained from the participants. Respondents were asked not to write their names on the questionnaires to ensure confidentiality.

Data analysis

Data were analysed at the quantitative and the qualitative levels. Quantitative analyses involved labelling and categorisation of data. The items in each category were presented in tables. Qualitative analysis involved scrutinising and transcribing interview responses into statements that belonged together around the major themes of the interview. Some statements were recorded verbatim in the feedback on the research.

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows that the main sources of stress for student teachers on Teaching Practice were discipline issues, finances, workload and shortage of resources. On the other hand, the least number of student teachers were stressed by recognition as staff members in the host school and by language barriers.

Table 1 Sources of stress on Teaching Practice

Stressor	<i>f</i>	%
1. Dealing with difficult students	59	24.1
2. Finances	39	15.9
3. Workload	31	12.7
4. Shortage of T/L aids and textbooks	30	12.2
5. The protracted Strike by serving teachers	19	7.8
6. Supervision	18	7.3
6. Accommodation	16	6.5
7. The mentor	12	4.9
8. Relationship with other staff members	11	4.5
9. Recognition as staff members	5	2.0
10. Language Barriers	5	2.0
TOTAL	245	100.0

Figure 1 shows the five top stressors for student teachers. Of these both female and male students were most stressed by misbehaviour of learners and least by the protracted strike action by serving teachers. Female student teachers showed more stress than male students in all the main areas except with respect to finances.

Most female student teachers who were interviewed attributed difficulty in managing their classrooms to the fact that difficult learners, whom were usually boys, tended to disrespect female teachers more than they disrespected male teachers. One of the interviewees remarked that *“the boys seem to bother us with their behaviour much more than they trouble male teachers. They have no respect for us.”*

This was because female respondents especially at the Teachers' College reported that when they were introduced to the learners for the first time by some headmasters of their host schools, they were introduced as *‘student teachers’*. The female respondents went on to say that

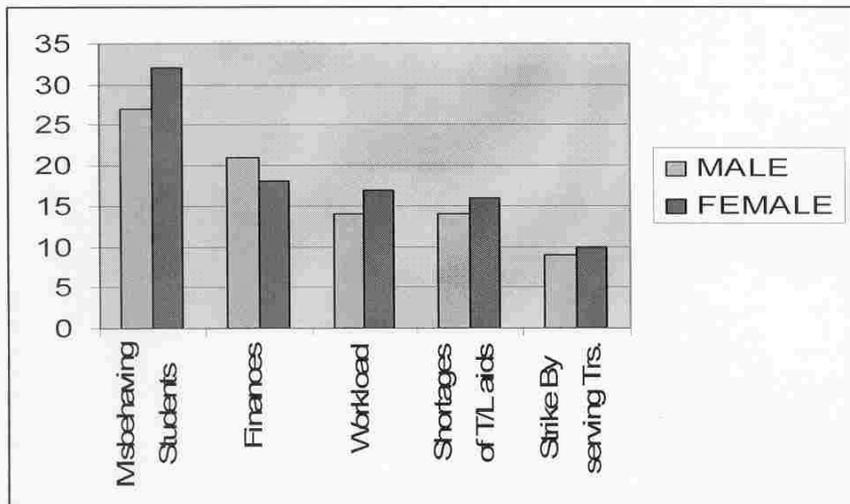


Figure 1 Sources of stress for male and female student teachers on Teaching Practice

the fact that they were introduced to the learners as student teachers demoralised the student teachers and it also gave learners in the school the ‘*courage*’ to undermine the authority of the student teachers in and outside the classroom. Some even reported that their mentors and other school leaders seemed more concerned with deadlines and work that had to be done than with helping students become more disciplined. One of the participants said in the interview,

“You get the impression that other teachers including the senior teachers also have to bear the problem of misbehaviour by the boys in the various schools. It is like it’s nothing strange to have these boys misbehaving.”

The respondents experienced financial problems. They reported that they had to use their own pocket money to buy teaching aid materials, food, and pay for transport costs. Others reported that they even had to pay rent during the four months during Teaching Practice as the host school did not provide accommodation for them. An observation by a male student teacher from the University seemed to capture the extent of the problem,

“You are really on your own in these matters. Supervisors insist on teaching aids for every lesson and yet nobody assists you with meeting the costs for buying teaching and learning materials. You have to fend for yourself. This is hard.”

Due to the harsh economic conditions during the time the respondents were student teachers on Teaching Practice, the small allowance they received was far from enough to cater for their needs.

The finding (from Table 1, Figure 1 and interviews) that Teaching Practice was considered stressful, in general, by the majority of the student teachers was consistent with the findings of several researchers in the area of stress among student teachers (Capel, 1997; Morton et al., 1997; Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009; Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003). These researchers

found that the Teaching Practice, although valued greatly by student teachers and their supervisors, was the most stressful part of a teacher-training programme.

It emerged from the study that female students were more stressed than their male counterparts. These results confirm the findings of D’Rozario and Wong (1996) and Morton et al. (1997) that Teaching Practice was more stressful for female student teachers than it was for their male counterparts. Female student teachers were unable to explain why they were less stressed by financial problems than their male counterparts, only saying that

“their relatives and friends were, perhaps, more sensitive to their needs than the relatives and friends of the male student teachers were to the latter’s needs”.

The study also revealed that difficult learners were a source of stress for student teachers on Teaching Practice. The challenges that student teachers faced with difficult learners confirms Kyriacou (2000) and Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009)’s findings. When student teachers were faced by an unruly classroom which they could not control, the student teachers become overwhelmed and struck by panic. Zeidner (1988) pointed out that those disruptive learners created high levels of stress to both qualified teachers and student teachers on Teaching Practice. The finding that female student teachers felt more stressed by misbehaving learners than their male counterparts was also consistent with the finding of Antoniou, Polychroni and Walters (2000) who found the same among Greek Special Education teachers.

A possibility that accentuated difficulties with handling students is that the student teachers felt exposed when the management in the schools, as reported by some of the student teachers were

“more concerned with enforcing deadlines and other performance matters rather than prioritising supporting student teachers in their interactions with the difficult learners in question”.

This was consistent with the findings of Smith (2007) who revealed that heads of schools and parents in England were much less concerned with helping teachers handle misbehaving learners but more concerned with high standards of teacher performance. The handling of difficult learners as a source of stress for student teachers was more for female student teachers who believed that being introduced to learners as student teachers compromised their authority. The learners were more likely to treat student teachers as second class teachers hence undermining their ability and authority.

It emerged from the study that workload was a stressor. Murray-Harvey et al. (2000) found similar findings among Singaporean and Australian respondents on Teaching Practice. Bhargava (2009) also concluded that the workload on Teaching Practice was overwhelming.

Student teachers on Teaching Practice also mentioned the shortage of teaching and learning aids and textbooks as a source of stress during Teaching Practice. This finding confirms the study conducted by Brown and Brown (1990) which revealed that Teaching Practice co-ordinators frequently reported the shortages of teaching materials as a leading difficulty that prevented good teaching by student teachers on Teaching Practice. The study also revealed that supervision is a stressor during Teaching Practice. This is in line with the findings of Kyriacou (1987), which indicated that student teachers suffered very high levels of stress during assessment and supervision while they were on their Practicum.

Interpersonal relationships among staff were also cited as one of the sources of stress. Problems in this area seemed to emanate from the whole approach to preparing student teachers for Teaching Practice. Bowers, Eichner and Sacks (1983) state that there is a disregard for psychological ‘readiness’ of student teachers by concentrating more on methodology and less

on preparing them to cope with the inevitable anxieties and stresses associated with student teachers' role relationships and responsibilities of teaching.

Contextual causal factors

Findings in this study were in general confirmatory of findings elsewhere on teacher stress. There were, however, certain important contextual factors that coloured the expression of certain stressors. It seems that with the sample in Zimbabwe, there were additional difficulties for student teachers who may have wanted to use their own resources to acquire appropriate teaching resources. Zimbabwe at that time was going through some of the most difficult economic times with an inflation rate of 2.2 million per cent (McGreal, 2008). These economic difficulties could be expected to have a singular contribution on the extent to which the student teachers expressed their stress.

It also emerged that student teachers were stressed by the absence of serving mentors and other teachers during the period of the widespread industrial action by teachers. Because of the absence of serving mentors and other serving teachers it is likely that student teachers suffered a good deal of role overload and felt abused as they were engaged in roles that were in excess of what they would otherwise be engaged in (McNay, 2003). It may also be possible that serving teachers did not want to be seen giving too much support to the student teachers, whom they saw as 'stabbing them in the back', i.e. keeping schools functioning when the serving teachers wanted to bring schools to a halt to press home their point for more pay.

Coping strategies

Table 2 reveals that student teachers on Teaching Practice attempted to reduce levels of stress by engaging in social activities in and around the school and community. The leading stress management techniques were socialising with friends and relatives and creating leisure activities.

Table 2 Coping strategies used by student teachers during Teaching Practice

Coping strategy	Male (<i>n</i> = 39) respondents	Female (<i>n</i> = 38) respondents
1. Socialising with friends and relatives	35	37
2. Creating leisure activities	26	30
3. Going to church	7	10
4. Absenting oneself from duty	4	10
5. Beating students	4	6

Information from the interview revealed that some respondents turned to deviant behaviour such as beating up students in frustration. Some participants pointed out that they would absent themselves from work to avoid the problems while others said that they sometimes did not attend lessons in the difficult classes even when they were present in the school during the time those classes had to be taught.

From Table 2, it is clear that most of the ways in which student teachers in this study dealt with stress while on Teaching Practice could be predicted from the literature. Nearly all the coping mechanisms belonged to the area of social support. Murray-Harvey (1999) and other

researchers such as Bowers et al. (1983) as well as MacDonald (1993) found, as in the present study, that turning to family and friends in times of crisis or simply for conversation and reflection was widely reported as a significant coping strategy. The greatest difference between the findings in this study and those by Murray-Harvey (1999) was that Murray-Harvey found that the supervising teacher was the most important source for coping by students on Teaching Practice. There was hardly any mention of the role of the supervising teacher or lecturer as part of the coping mechanism of the student teachers in the present study. The supervising teachers could not have been mentioned as a source of coping in this study because they were on strike as already mentioned earlier. Some 'physical' coping methods were also mentioned in the form of sport and active creation of leisure activities (Murray-Harvey, 1999). There is no supporting evidence from other studies where the student teachers used such methods as beating up students or otherwise punishing students as a way of coping with their stress. However, frustrated and alienated workers have been known to displace their motivation and seek satisfaction in other, sometimes, counterproductive goals (Bohte & Meier, 2000) such as seeking to impose themselves on learners by force as opposed to seeking the achievement of organisational goals. It is sad to note that none of the student teachers stated that they managed stress by planning and rationalising their activities. This may mean that most of the coping strategies were palliative. They gave short-term relief.

Actions suggested by student teachers to be taken by the college/university/host school to reduce/eliminate Teaching Practice-related stress in zimbabwe

From questionnaire responses, major suggestions provided by the participants included provision of allowances and accommodation, priming on staff relationships in the school, announcing intended supervisions in good time, respect, recognition of student teachers by serving staff members in the schools, more time allocation and coaching for file preparation, mentors treating student teachers with respect and fairness and reducing workload for the student teachers. The literature confirms student teachers' request to be treated with respect by their mentors (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009).

From the interviews, student teachers recommended that the administrators in the various schools should be firmer in dealing with learners who misbehaved against their teachers. One male student teacher from the University said:

"I think the problem is that the heads of schools and other senior teachers do not support the student teachers vigorously. Even when stubborn learners are punished, the punishment is often so light that the learner may believe that the misbehaviour is not serious."

Also from the interviews, female student teachers suggested that heads of schools be respectful of the student teachers with the same respect that they treated serving teachers. Unless this was done, they believed that learners would continue to see

"them as lying somewhere between the learner and serving teachers and hence not deserving of the respect which the learners accorded other staff members in the school". Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) had similar findings in their study.

Finally, both male and female student teachers suggested (during the interviews) that the college and the university authorities should bring pressure to bear on the government of Zimbabwe to pay higher allowances to the student teachers on Teaching Practice so that they would be able to live *"as normal a life as possible as opposed to the suffering that we went through"*. Some student teachers also felt that schools should also help the situation by sup-

porting student teachers with such items as foodstuffs. They all felt as one female student at the College explained: “schools should play their part in some way. It should not be too difficult for schools to provide some small things such as basic foodstuffs”.

Conclusion and recommendations

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that student teachers in schools faced many stressors and they employed a number of strategies to overcome the stressors. A number of recommendations can be drawn from the findings of this study. The teacher education input during Teaching Practice should include aspects such as stress management and coping mechanisms for student teachers on Teaching Practice. It is also important that lecturers at university or college train female student teachers in assertiveness skills so that they can be proactive in dealing with disobedient pupils. There is a need for schools and colleges to support the student teachers so that their Teaching Practice is more beneficial and less stressful. Training institutions should not just focus on curricular and methodological issues but should equip their students with priming in dealing with such things as interpersonal relationships with other staff in the schools in which they serve their attachment. There is need for a policy on how much teaching the student teacher has to do or how much other assignments the student teacher has to be involved in without compromising the quality of training. Policy makers should make for higher allowances for students on Teaching Practice so that they can provide for their own basic needs and be able to purchase materials for the teaching and learning process as well as for subsistence. This recommendation on higher allowances is in line with Gove’s (2011) drive to offer financial incentives to make teacher training attractive.

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