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Practicum Stress and Coping Strategies of Pre-service English Language Teachers

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Abstract

As the leading position of English as the world's primary language for international communication has evidently been continuing for several decades, English language teacher education is getting more and more important. One of the most major components of teacher education programs is the practicum course that requires senior English pre-service teachers to observe classes and do practice teaching before actual teaching profession. Recently, there has been increasing research focusing on identifying stress and coping with this stress at practicum in order to maximize the efficiency of practicum. This study investigated the sources of 16 pre-service language teachers' stress and the strategies that they used to cope with this stress at practicum. The data of the study was gained via classroom observation and face-to-face interviews. The qualitative data was analyzed through content analysis and the sources of stress and the coping strategies were discussed under four categories: supervisors and mentors, classroom management, school-related issues, and affective factors. The highest source of stress was associated with supervisors and mentors. In coping with practicum stress, the participants mostly utilized Web.2 tools in ELT context. It is suggested that stress generating factors and the strategies that pre-service language teachers employ should be discussed and reflected upon in pre-service language teacher education programs.

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1. Introduction

It is important to pay special attention to teachers and their practice teaching (practicum) in teacher education programs. As Slick (1998) and Intrator (2006) describe, practicum gives pre-service language teachers an opportunity

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to become aware of the realistic nature of the teaching profession. However, teaching is placed among the professions which cause a lot of stress compared to other professions. According to MacDonald (1993), practicum is a source of considerable stress and pre-service language teachers encounter a range of stressful experience during this period. Though, successful practicum application entitles a stress free atmosphere (Coskun, 2013). According to Gupta (1981) sources of stress may be classified as individual, organizational, and outside of organization. Regarding this classification, Nahavandi and Malekzadeh (1999) explained that it is possible to divide them into two groups as individual and organizational stress. Organizational stress also called professional stress is defined as the interaction between working circumstances and the working person in situations in which the work demand surpasses the skills of the worker. The main factors of stress in organization are organizational policies, the structure and the atmosphere of the organization, physical conditions, and process (Luthans, 1994). Typical stressors consist of serious demands on pre-service language teachers' time and energy, carrying out written requirements, conforming to mistrusted practices, understanding the cooperating teachers' expectations, being evaluated, fear of not satisfying self-expectations, establishing a positive relationship with the cooperating teacher and university advisor, and managing difficult behavior in the classroom.

Taking teachers' stress into consideration from different perspectives, different definitions have been proposed. Kyriacou (2010) defines teacher stress as the experience by the teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, dissatisfaction or depression that result from some aspect of their work as a teacher. In Wisniewski and Gargiulo's (1997) view, stress is the outcome of how well teachers are able to meet the demands required in their professional roles. According to Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1979), stress is a reaction to a negative affect usually accompanied by potentially pathogenic physiological and biochemical changes because of some aspects of the teacher's job and mediated by the view that the demands made upon the teacher make up a threat to his-esteem and well-being and by coping mechanisms activated to decrease the perceived threat.

Although teacher stress is an extensively recognized problem, only a little attention is given in teacher education programs for pre-service language teachers (Greer & Greer, 1997). According to Jelinek (1986), excessive or extended stress can have negative impact on professional performance and role satisfaction of teacher learners. In this regard, developing different strategies for controlling stress associated with practicum can help teacher learners to develop in their future profession. Also it shouldn't be forgotten that whether or not pre-service language teachers perceive control over different stressors in practicum, complexities occur as stressors and perceived control interact with each other (Brown & Nagel, 2012). For example, teachers may have control in the overall management of the classroom, but as systems undergo a variety of changes and reforms at the legislative level, teachers have a limited voice in a process that propagates stress. Teachers have major roles in the establishment of relationships among colleagues, but school leadership influences the climate of the school that can potentially mediate stress levels of teachers (Pahnos, 1990).

The term "teacher stress" had appeared in the topic of an essay in 1977 when Kyriacou published a review of a research based on his own experiences as a teacher in the United Kingdom. Until that time it was difficult to find the term "stress" in teaching context (Kyriacou, 2001). Only a few researchers (Borg, 1990; Kyriacou, 1987) explored the field until the early 1980s. Studies conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Malta showed not only cross-cultural interest in this phenomenon, but recognized internationally the severity of the problem as well (Borg & Riding, 1991). Nowadays, stress and stress generating factors associated with teacher education programs have been the center of attention in the world as well as in Turkey (Bowers, Eichner & Sacks, 1993; Celik, 2010; D'Rozario & Wong, 1996; Gan, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2004; Korkucu, 1996; MacDonald, 1993; Merc, 2004, 2011; Morton, Vesco, Williams, & Awender, 1997; Murray-Harvey, 1999, 2010; Murray-Harvey, Silins, & Saebel, 1999; Numrich, 1996; Ong'ondo & Jwan, 2009; Paker, 2011; Reupert & Woodcook, 2010). Most of these studies investigated the reasons of teacher learners' stress as the practicum is designed to train them for their future profession. Kim and Kim (2004) reported that teacher learners are stressful while speaking English in the classroom, teaching speaking and listening skills, having classes with unmotivated and uninterested learners, being disable of managing their classes properly, and when they are being observed. In another study, Reupert and Woodcook (2010) revealed that classroom management is the most serious cause of stress for pre-service language teachers. Poor coordination between schools and universities and lack of cooperation between the teacher learners and the mentors is another stress generating reason for pre-service language teachers (Ong'ondo & Jwan, 2009).

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