



# Stressors and coping strategies through the lens of Early Childhood/Special Education pre-service teachers



Kelli R. Paquette\*, Sue A. Rieg

Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Department of Professional Studies in Education, 570 South 11th Street, Indiana, PA 15705, USA

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Surveys were used to collect pre-service teachers' perceptions of field experience stressors.
- Stressors include managing time, teaching workload, and discipline.
- Relationships, exercise, time management, and "down time" were identified as coping mechanisms.

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## ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study was designed to identify stressors, describe coping strategies, and pinpoint ways in which university supervisors can assist Early Childhood/Special Education (ECSP) pre-service teachers while they perform student teaching responsibilities. In that vein, participants were asked to identify stressors they experienced while teaching in the classroom setting. These stressors included three main ideas of work overload, communication, and classroom management and discipline. Participants were also asked to convey the coping strategies they used. Coping mechanisms were comprised of relationships, exercise, time management, and the ability to schedule "down time." Finally, respondents were asked to state ways in which university supervisors could better support them. Answers evolved around the two concepts of effective communication and reassurance. Looking through the lens of ECSP pre-service teachers provides valuable insight for program improvement, student teacher success, and classroom teacher longevity.

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## 1. Introduction

Implementing newly-learned information in student teaching settings can be exciting, as well as challenging, to pre-service teachers. Although many pre-service teachers begin with a feeling of excitement and with the goal of making a difference in the lives of their students, their eagerness sometimes wanes because they are blindsided with overwhelming feelings of stress (Chaplain, 2008). This study was designed to identify stressors and coping strategies through the lens of early childhood and special education (ECSP) pre-service teachers while they were building their teaching skills in student teaching placements. Identifying the stressors and providing healthy coping strategies may assist pre-service teachers' classroom performance. The results of this study should be utilized by teacher educators, practicum supervisors, and

cooperating teachers so that their support of future teachers is realized.

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was three-fold. First, pre-service teachers' perceptions of stress-related factors experienced while student teaching were examined. Secondly, participants were asked to identify coping mechanisms employed to help deal with stressors. Finally, participants were asked to pinpoint ways in which their university supervisors could better assist them while they were student teaching. This study is significant because it furthers the investigation related to classroom-related stressors felt by pre-service teachers (Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007) and counteracts the notion that "less attention has been paid to the demands of the practicum and mental health and well-being of student teachers" (Gardner, 2011, p. 18). Once stressors are identified, methods in which to cope positively can be implemented, thereby supporting pre-service teachers' healthy emotional, social, and physical well-being. When these issues are addressed, pre-service teachers may be more successful during

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [kpaquett@iup.edu](mailto:kpaquett@iup.edu) (K.R. Paquette), [srieg@iup.edu](mailto:srieg@iup.edu) (S.A. Rieg).

their student teaching experiences and in their future teaching careers.

## 2. Literature review

Retaining high-quality teachers who are in the early stages of their careers is a significant accomplishment and a worldwide concern (Chaplain, 2008; Scheopner, 2010; Sharplin, O'Neill, & Chapman, 2011). Consequently, the literature review on teachers' resisting stress and burnout, attrition, and retention is abundant (Bellingrath, Weigl, & Kudielka, 2009; Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Caires, Almeida, & Martins 2009; Curry & O'Brien, 2012; Gardner, 2011; Hemmings & Hockley, 2002; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 2011; Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005; Sharplin et al. 2011). As poignantly noted by Newberry, Gallant, and Riley (2013), "Of all the reasons for teachers leaving, issues of burn out – being emotionally exhausted – remains at the top of the list" (p. 44).

This section will synthesize the literature and describe teacher stress and burn-out, as used operationally in this study. Additionally, identified sources of stress and descriptions of various coping strategies employed as reported by participating pre-service teachers will be highlighted. Finally, ways in which university supervisors can assist those of whom they observe during their student teaching field placement will be outlined. With these stressors determined and effective coping skills implemented, hopefully, success will be experienced and high-quality teachers will remain in the educational profession.

### 2.1. Defining teacher stress and burn-out

The definition of stress has yet to conform to one singular definition (Rieg, et al., 2007). Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978) defined teacher stress as "a response syndrome of negative effects (such as anger or depression) resulting from the teacher's job" (p. 1). After reviewing the literature on this topic, C. Kyriacou's scholarly work is pervasive. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, Kyriacou's definition was used. Teacher stress is often linked to the concept of "burn-out." Although connected, these terms have different meanings (Howard & Johnson, 2004). Burn-out is a product of stress and may be experienced when one works comprehensively to meet the needs of others. When one understands the complexities of high-quality teaching, it may come as no surprise that teaching has been identified as one of the most stressful occupations (Johnson et al., 2005; Klassen et al., 2013; Kyriacou, 2011). After analyzing physical health, psychological well-being, and job satisfaction among 26 various occupations, it was determined that teaching was one of six occupations that reported worse than average scores on each of these factors (Johnson et al., 2005). Consistent with this finding, Coronado (2011) cited that teachers reported their profession as "extremely stressful." When compared to other professions, teachers reported decreased mental health, lower job satisfaction, and symptoms of anxiety and depression. Although pre-service teachers often experience stress, this similar stress across cultures is common.

Bhagat et al. (2010) identified work stress across cultures, indicating that stress is common in various settings and most prevalent when work load is high and individuals experience conflicting expectations regarding this elevated workload. Klassen et al. (2013) further explored pre-service teachers' work stress in the countries of Canada, England, Hong Kong, and Thailand. Results indicated that one's self-efficacy can alter the way in which work stress influences the commitment to continue teaching. Gardner (2011) reported that student teachers may not recognize the symptoms; therefore, in order to address stress, sources of stress

much be determined.

### 2.2. Identified sources of stress in teachers

The documented sources of stress in teachers present a long list of job-related demands, voluntary opportunities for advancement within the profession, and emotionally charged elements. As noted by Newberry et al. (2013), teacher accountability is a recent trend and teachers are under increased political and societal scrutiny. Responsibilities of the demanding teaching profession continue to grow at local, district, and state levels. Gardner (2011) reinforces the concept of increased demands on the teaching profession. Managing one's time, teaching with limited funding and resources, learning and implementing new technologies, managing diverse student behaviors, being supported by administrators and teaching colleagues, and managing a crowded curriculum are documented stressors for pre-service teachers.

In one study, Doney (2013) identified stressors to include extra-curricular experiences, long commutes, low-performing students, changing classrooms, and second-language learners. In 2008, Chaplain conducted a study with pre-service teachers and found three main stressors: behavior management, workload, and lack of support. Excessive workload has been found to predict emotional exhaustion and gives one motivation to leave the teaching profession (Newberry et al., 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015) discovered that the majority of Norwegian teachers in their study identified workload and time pressure as extremely stressful. Teachers emphasized that the working days at school were hectic and provided little time for rest and relaxation. Too many tasks were expected to be conducted in too little time. Adera and Bullock (2010) reported that these stressors are apparent in veteran teachers, as well as pre-service teachers, and have been indicated to affect the decisions of teachers to remain in the profession.

Klassen et al. (2013) found that contextual factors such as field placement may have an effect on a pre-service teacher's commitment to remaining in the profession along with his or her self-efficacy for teaching. In more seasoned teachers, Adera and Bullock (2010) discovered low-retention rates related to the demands of dealing with students who have been identified with emotional and behavioral disorders. Teacher turnover was due to the stressors within and outside of the classroom and the elevated workload to meet the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disorders.

Coronado (2011) reported that pre-service teachers feel unprepared for the challenges that they will face in the teaching profession. Additionally, it was found that preparation focused on theory-base with fewer opportunities for field experiences or practical application of theory. Adera and Bullock (2010) further added that certified teachers may not have the specialized training to meet the needs of students with emotional and behavioral needs adding to the stressors faced by educators, echoing Coronado (2011) findings that pre-service training is insufficient in addressing the practical needs of teachers.

According to the literature, pre-service teachers' stress factors include inadequate preparation time, working with cooperating teachers and university supervisors, classroom management, student discipline, relationships with parents and students, teacher-related tasks and responsibilities (workload), lack of content knowledge, motivational techniques, time management, differentiating instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners, standardized testing, and lack of time for creative teaching projects (Rieg, et al., 2007). Although various degrees of stress affect pre-service teachers, many teacher candidates are resilient and are able to utilize coping mechanisms effectively.

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