

# Social Support as a Coping Strategy of Ameliorating Teaching Practicum Related Stress.

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## **Abstract**

*The current study examined the use of social support as a coping strategy to ameliorate teaching practicum related stress. A survey design was used to collect data from the respondents. The sample consisted of 72 male and 81 female (n=153) Bachelor of Education pre-service teachers. The data were analyzed using the Chi square test. The findings revealed that .all the pre-service teachers used social support as a strategy of coping with teaching practicum related stress and there were no statistically significant differentiations with regard to the participants' gender, age and personality in the use of social support to reduce the perceived teaching practicum stress. Based on the findings the study recommended that all stakeholders should provide pre-service teachers with quality social support to enable them to reduce teaching practicum related stress.*

**Key Words:** *Stress coping strategy, teaching practicum, pre-service teacher, social support*

## **Introduction**

Teaching practicum provides students with realistic learning experiences in authentic settings within which the students could develop their professional competence under the guidance of skilled mentors in a milieu of mutual trust. For Herrington and Herrington ( 2000) teaching practicum presents students with a new practical environment where they begin to develop their identity as teachers. Notwithstanding these enormous benefits, literature has shown that teaching practicum is a source of considerable stress for many student teachers (Edwards, 1993, Forgarty & Yarrow, 1993).

The perceived teaching practicum related stress is inevitable as a certain amount could be regarded as a normal part of the process of adapting to unfamiliar environments, of forming new relationships, and of coming to terms with a range of new and different expectations required of their role as classroom teachers (Murray-Harvey, Slee, Lawson, Sillins, Banfield& Russel,2008).

The stress that pervades the teaching profession impacts negatively on the pre-service teachers as they conduct their practicum whilst immersed in environments that are progressively becoming less healthy (Denhere, 2011)]. It is not surprising, therefore, that literature claims pre-service teachers experienced higher levels of stress than in-service teachers.

Denhere (2011) claims that pre-service teachers use coping strategies to ameliorate experienced practicum stress. Some coping strategies are regarded as active while others are inactive. The primary aim of this study was to examine the use of social support as a coping strategy utilized by pre-service teachers in an attempt to reduce stressful experiences.

## **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study is twofold:

- To find out if pre-service teachers use social support as a coping strategy to reduce teaching practicum stress.
- To find out whether the use of social support is dependent on the pre-service teacher's gender.

## **Research hypotheses**

In this study the researcher hypothesized that:

- Student teachers use social support as a coping strategy to reduce teaching practicum related stress;
- There is no statistically significant gender differentiation in the use of social support as a stress coping strategy to reduce teaching practicum stress.

## **Literature Review**

Essentially, teaching practicum or field teaching is absolutely important in the development of teacher trainees Lengua, 2000). It is assumed, that teaching practicum provide student teachers (mentees) the opportunity to develop a professional identity, teach and practice in multiple, complex and concrete experiences essential for meaningful learning and teaching Brock & Mouton, 2004; Herrington & Herrington, 2000). However, researchers have shown that field teaching might not be a stroll in the park for the pre-service teachers because just like in-service teachers, they have to deal with a myriad of challenges, chief among them work related stress.

Lazarus (1999) defined coping as a constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. It is vied

as the way student teachers manage their stressful circumstances as they grapple with their teaching practicum related stress.

Social support has been variously defined as ‘resources provided by( Denhere & Chireshe, 2005) as ‘coping assistance’ (Thoits, 1986), or as resources provided by the provider intended to enhance the recipient’s well – being . In this case social support can be perceived as the assistance rendered by the family members, friends, mentors, and university lecturers to buffer student teacher’s teaching practicum related stress.

McNeely’s study on stress coping strategies indicates that social support was considered by the majority of the participants (82%) as a major coping strategy, while 72% considered it an effective strategy(Matud, 2004). Social support can assist coping and exert beneficial effects on various health outcomes (Sarason, Sarason & Pierce 1990 & Shen, 2008) provided that the measures are prophylactic or proactive ( Thompson, Murphy & Stradling, 1994). There is a large body of empirical evidence that indicate that maintaining close personal relationships with others is a social resource factor that can , to a certain degree, protect one against illness.

Social support includes intimate relationships and social networks. For instance, pre-service teachers may get support from fellow students, their friends, relatives, in particular their families, mentors, fellow teachers and university supervisors. A study conducted by Matheny, Ayock, Pugh, Curlette and Canmella (1986) found out that social support was a central coping strategy in 54% of the studies reviewed(Ngidi & Sibaya, 2002). It is an essential coping resource as it provides a buffering effect, protecting the person from adverse effects of stress. Research has shown that social support as a coping strategy reduces the level of perceived stress (Denhere,2011). Social support is seen as an exchange of information and a provision of emotional help. It has been found to be positively related to physical and psychological health. Social support has been found to assist people with high stress cope better (Denhere, 2011).

According to Schultz and Saklofske (2007) it is the quality of support that is important, not the quantity.. For example pre-service students who perceive the workload as distressful are likely to have their stress severity reduced if the supervisors decide to reduce their load by assisting with marking and planning (high quality support) than by having many friends reassuring him/her that he/she will overcome the pressure ( low quality support).

Lastly, researchers have found out that the support of spouses, family members, and friends can help stressed teachers by increasing their access to information, strengthening a sense of personal control, fostering self-esteem, and boosting their feelings of optimism (Helgenson, Cohen & Fritz, 1998).

Literature has shown that the use of coping strategy may be affected to a large extent by variables such as gender and personality among other things (Denhere & Chireshe,2005). However, this is not conclusive as findings differ.

### **Gender differences in stress coping**

Previous studies suggest that men and women differ in their coping strategies (Lim & Teo, 1996).There are studies which have examined gender differences in coping ( Lengua, 2000). For instance, Denhere and Chireshe longitudinal study revealed that women prefer using emotion-focused coping strategies, distraction methods, seeking social support and faith or religion (Denhere,2011). Tolor and Felon’s (2010) study showed that male students had greater tendency to use problem focused strategies such as positive action and information-seeking . Denhere (2011) showed that more females than males would prefer to talk to someone about their stressful situation. This study revealed that female students showed more inclination towards talking to a family member as compared to male students.

Ramya and Parthasarathy’s (2009) study on the use of stress coping strategies by second year university students, revealed that the majority of the students adopted the emotion- and problem-focused strategies. Male students had greater inclination towards using problem-focused coping strategies than female students].

Some researchers have provided empirical support for gender differences in the use of coping strategies (Matud,2004). The authors noted that when individuals encountered stressful situations, men tended to engage in problem –focused coping more often than women. It is believed that coping responses or strategies can mediate or alleviate the effects of stress.

Matud’s (2004) study of gender differentiation in the use of stress coping strategies revealed that females scored significantly higher than males in emotion and avoidance coping styles ( Schulze & Steyn, 2007).. However, Lengua’s (2004) study did not find any gender differences in coping among student teachers on teaching practicum. According to Matud (2004) the

women's coping styles are more emotion focused and fewer problems focused than those of males.

#### **Coping strategies used by pre-service teachers**

Researchers have also investigated how teachers cope with stress. Lazarus (1999) identified eight forms of coping that also appear on Ways of Coping checklist. These are confrontational coping, distancing, and self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape avoidance, planful problem solving and positive reappraisal. Lazarus(1999) further suggests that some of these coping strategies may increase positive emotions and decrease negative ones, whereas other forms may make things worse.

A related study by Kyriacou (2001) identified social support and expression of feelings as most frequently used coping strategies. Social support, as a coping strategy, was also ranked highest by Kloska and Ramasut (2000). Other reported coping strategies in the same study were: leading as varied life as possible outside the school; looking forward to holidays; talking to wife/husband/ partner/ friends, and talking to others on staff. Talking to husband/wife/ friends and talking about it as coping styles were also mentioned by participants in Dunham's study (Greenglass, 2002).

Rajala's (1990) study found that the most frequently invoked coping efforts were problem- focused coping, social support and positive comparing. Also a study conducted on student teachers' perspective on ways they coped with practicum stresses, revealed that they coped by using strategies that were categorized as communication (e.g. talking to the teacher) (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2002). The student teachers in the study raised issues such as debriefing with the teacher and talking through the problems with the mentor as some of the important ways of coping with practicum related stress.

#### **Effectiveness of the coping strategies employed to reduce stress**

Effectiveness has been conceptualized in two ways as follows: reducing felt stress related to life problems and resolving problems, shortening the duration of the problem, or reducing further problems . Denhere's(

#### **Data Analysis**

The Chi square, a frequently used test of significance in social science (Babbie & Mouton ,2004) was utilized to determine significant differences between various independent and dependent variables. The Chi square is based on the assumption that there is no significant difference between two variables. The null hypothesis in the study was tested to determine if the differences were not due to chance. For this study the null hypotheses rejection levels was set at 0.05 <p level of significance.

2011) study has not shown that not all coping efforts are functional or effective in alleviating stress nor are they all efficacious across situations.

Paquette and Chen's (2002) study found that student teachers considered talking to colleagues and an administrator as effective ways of coping with stress. The reason given for this was that colleagues are also experiencing the same situations.

Shen's (2008) study of 530 teachers with higher general self-efficacy and social support tended to adopt adaptive coping strategies. The study suggested that social support and self efficacy are important factors that should be considered when designing a preventive program in the guidance of teachers' coping status among other things. A survey was conducted on the use of emotion-focused and problem focused coping strategies of 780 U.S. teachers in relation to their levels of stress (Mc Neely, 1996). The study suggests that active planning and seeking social support were effective moderators of stress.

#### **Research methodology**

This study utilised the survey method to collect data from the pre-service teachers on teaching practicum.

#### **Sample**

The sample of 72 male and 81 female (n=153) pre-service teachers on teaching practicum was drawn from a tertiary institution offering a B.Ed degree programme. To ensure that both female and male students were included in the study, a random stratified sampling technique was used.

#### **Instrumentation**

A 15 item 5-Likert type scale questionnaire was used to solicit data from the respondents. The questionnaire solicited the respondent's biographical data and their use of social support as a stress coping strategy. The questionnaire was pilot tested with a small sample of pre-service teachers not involved in the main study. The pilot study had an alpha coefficient of .73.

**Findings of the study**

TABLE1 SOCIAL SUPPORT COPING

Item	Gender	Affirmative Response	Negative Response	Total
Do you use social support to reduce teaching practicum stress	Male teachers	72	0	72
	Female teachers	81	0	81
Total		153(100%)	0(%)	153(100%)

In response to the question whether they used social support to reduce teaching practicum related stress, the results in Table 1 show that all the pre-service teachers (n=153) affirmatively responded that they do. Based on this finding, the alternative hypothesis that the pre-service teachers use social support to reduce practicum stress was therefore accepted.

TABLE 2 GENDER BY SOCIAL SUPPORT

Coping strategy	Test	Chi-square value	Degrees of freedom	p-value	Decision
Social support	Chi-square	2.165	3	.547	ns

\*Significant at 0.05

In Table 2 a Chi square analysis was performed to test the hypothesis that: There are no statistically significant gender differences in the use of social support as a stress coping strategy used by pre-service teachers to reduce teaching practicum stress. The test yielded a calculated Chi square value of 2.165 which is not significant at  $p < .05$ . The null hypothesis was therefore accepted.

**Discussion**

The current study explored the use of social support as a strategy of coping with teaching practicum related stress. The study provides evidence that pre-service teachers use social support as a strategy of ameliorating the perceived stress. This finding is in tandem with studies that show that pre-service teachers use social support to mitigate the experienced stress (Sarason et al. (1990). The finding affirms the claim that people need social support from others that provide them with emotional support, affirmation of self, appraisal of the situation, instrumental support and information (Scultze & Saklofske,2007). The pre-service teachers’ need for social support is not surprising given that the paltry salary they are given is undoubtedly inadequate to meet all their basic needs. Also there have been claims that the pre-service teachers experience more stress than practicing teachers. If that is the case their need for social support is but justified to moderate the traumatic experiences.

The result of the second hypothesis revealed no statistically significant gender differences with regards to the use of social support to alleviate teaching practicum stress. This implies that the frequency of use of social support as a stress coping strategy by the pre-service teachers is independent of the teacher’s gender.

This finding is at variance with those of the previous studies that suggest that men and women differ in their coping strategies (Kyriayacou,2001). Denhere’s (2011) study revealed that women prefer using emotion-focused coping strategies, distraction methods, seeking social support and faith or religion . Tolor and Felon’s

(2010) study revealed that male students had greater tendency to use problem focused strategies such as positive action and information-seeking.

However, the present study's finding is consistent with other studies (Matud, 2004, Sarason et, al. (1990) who found no statistically significant gender difference in the frequency of use of social support as stress coping strategy. Lack of statistically significant difference may be attributed more to the economic meltdown that was taking place in the country at the time the data were collected. Data were collected when teachers were getting salaries that could not buy more than five loaves of bread. This may imply that these pre-service teachers were predisposed to very stressful circumstances. They therefore equally depended on the charity of their families and friends.

### Conclusion

The current study provides evidence that the pre-service teachers need social support to buffer perceived teaching practicum related stress. These teachers should be given quality support by the all stakeholders such as their families, friends, cooperating teachers, and universities. This study's major limitation was that data were collected from one institution hence this limits the generalizability of the results.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of the study.

- There is need for all stakeholders to provide student teachers with quality social support to enable them to reduce teaching practicum related stress.
- For the provision of quality social support mentors who work with students on a day to day basis and teaching practice supervisors must be trained in stress management.
- Social support should be regarded an important strategy when designing a stress intervention and prevention program.

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