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Female student teachers' experience of contemporary personal and professional demands



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Sallie also delivers mindfulness-based programs for educators, and is completing a PhD in the area of psychological distress and contemporary coping strategies among student teachers.

Abstract

The prevalent discourse is that teaching, and the teaching practicum, are stressful. This paper reports on the views of contemporary primary school student teachers, most of whom are female. The aim was to understand current demands on student teachers, both personal and professional, from their perspective. Participants were primary school student teachers in their fourth year of an undergraduate degree at a Queensland university. Views were obtained from open-ended questions included in three questionnaires completed by student teachers as a baseline, pre-internship and following their internship. Their responses indicate the stress imposed by the financial need to work while studying, feeling overwhelmed by the academic demands, and concern that their Internship performance would impact on their career prospects, and their future.

Introduction

I have supervised student teachers and, as an educational and developmental psychologist, met many very talented female teachers and student teachers. However, I became concerned when I learnt that some of those highly competent mature-aged female student teachers had dropped out after only a few months of teaching. From what they had told me, they achieved top academic results, and glowing reports from their mentor teachers following their practical experiences in schools. Despite exemplary academic reports, preparation and classroom teaching, these well-trained, highly competent females were overwhelmed by anxiety they associated with demands and responsibilities in their new role. As a result they remain lost to the teaching profession.

Teaching is biased towards females in early childhood and primary school. Looking into the evidence, a picture of psychological distress emerges among females. However it is not just academic or work demands that are

responsible for this distress. A family history of anxiety or depression, a loss, through death, divorce or other significant relationship breakdown, or having to deal with substance abuse may lead to personal vulnerability [1]. The mental health of female student teachers may be compromised by these factors and other personal demands and responsibilities.

The stressors inherent in teaching are well documented [2], but today, in addition to the challenges associated with practicum, there are a myriad of new government initiatives in schools which may impact on stress levels among student teachers and teachers [3]. These range from the rapidly changing curriculum, testing, dealing with technology and cyber-bullying, to coming to grips with new styles of hyper-connectivity, including email, Facebook, Twitter blogs and information published via website, as well as social and cultural stressors.

The literature paints a picture of anxiety among female teachers, showing them to be more vulnerable to mental health problems. This is in addition to professional demands, which may include lack of peer support, fears about being bullied by other staff, and frustration from feeling they had no choice but to become a teacher [4]. On a positive note, we also find that, whilst the stressors seem legion, different teachers and student teachers manage these stressors differently [5]. Whereas for some the consequences may be serious, others enjoy a very supportive mentor relationship, and have well-developed coping strategies.

Fear associated with whether or not they would obtain a teaching role may result in reluctance by some female student teachers to acknowledge to their mentor teacher(s), and/or university supervisor(s) that they are under any personal or professional distress prior to, or during, their practicum. Therefore, in addition to the stress related to the profession, anxiety in this predominantly female workforce represents a particular challenge for



“Too much is expected of us in a limited time.”

educational leaders, and those who train teachers for the 21st century.

In the study reported in this paper, 145 full-time Australian primary school student teachers in their final year of a four-year undergraduate Bachelor of Primary Education degree were invited to complete three questionnaires. The aim was to provide an understanding of the experiences from their perspectives. The first questionnaire was undertaken at the beginning of the year, when it was anticipated that they would be least stressed, with no exams imminent. The second one was completed pre-internship. They had undertaken an intensive two-week Capstone program, and were then to go immediately to their allocated school for their internship. The final questionnaire was administered post-internship.

From the original sample of 105 student teachers who responded the baseline questionnaire (Q1), there were 102 responses to the open-ended questions. These comments were provided anonymously, as respondents were matched by a unique code, which included gender, for purposes of confidentiality. Of the 97 student teachers who responded to the pre-internship questionnaire (Q2), only 30 provided qualitative data, and from post-internship questionnaire (Q3) there were only 16 written responses.

Each questionnaire consisted of open and closed questions, but only the results of the qualitative data are presented in this paper. Participants were invited to comment on their psychological distress, and elaborate on particular personal or professional demands they faced. Initially, time was spent reading the data from open-ended questions, and re-reading it, to gain an overall feel for the material provided. After the qualitative data was analysed in a global sense, it was thematically analysed.

Emerging themes

Of the student teachers in this study, 81 were female (77%) and 24 were male (23%). Ages ranged from 20-49 years, but most student teachers were under 27 years of age (77.9%). Of these, 43% lived at home, and 82.9% intended to pay their university fees through their taxes once they began teaching. Thematic analyses of the open-ended questions resulted in clustering of comments into two themes. These were 1) personal demands and responsibilities, and 2) predicted professional demands expected at their internship. Only responses attributed to female student teachers are presented.

Theme 1: Personal demands and responsibilities

The majority of responses related to significant financial commitments, the global financial crisis and the need to work while studying. Personal financial demands included paying rent or mortgage (34%), car loan repayments and running expenses (40%), family responsibilities, phone and Internet expenses (13%), child-care, health-care, food, electricity and clothing (20%) and credit card and other living expenses. Their comments reflected an awareness of the strain their work and study imposed on relationships and other family members, as encapsulated in the following comment:

My husband has to work two jobs to keep up with the bills. This makes me feel guilty and stresses me even further.

(Female student teacher A, aged 30)

The global financial crisis and the current economic climate, together with managing a disabled family member, contributed an example of extreme stress. For example:

I feel extremely stressed. My husband is in the building industry, and we are faced with dealing with bankruptcy, therefore I have to work at a second job to support the family.

(Female student teacher B, age not provided, worked up to 40 hours per week)

The lack of opportunity to engage in paid work during their internship, due to the fact that it was a full-time commitment was common in Q1 comments made at Time 1. However, as illustrated in the comments below, the same student teacher in Q2 pre-internship, then in Q3 post-internship, indicated that she was still very conscious of, and stressed by, the impact of the full-time commitment to the internship, even after the internship. Her comments ranged from pre-internship:

Not being able to work on internship will make it hard to pay bills, and keep on top of things...

to post-internship:

Not being able to work, when I still have to pay the rent and my bills was stressful.

(Female student teacher C, aged 24)

I feel overwhelmed when I think about the future. I expect the internship to be the main cause of my stress. It is hard because the expectations are so great, and the forthcoming internship even predicts my future, but I have other commitments as well, so it will be difficult to deal with.

Theme 2: Professional demands

The second theme, related to professional demands, was the impact of the academic program on life balance and managing time commitments. Stress was also associated with the requirement to attend the Capstone program, as this impacted on preparations for their internship. A third professional demand was the perception that it would be necessary to do well at the internship in order to secure a teaching position. There were 43 references to the time needed to manage their academic program, and professional demands associated with the need to prepare for their internship. Illustrative comments demonstrate individual student-teachers' psychological distress associated with assignments in the first weeks of the year, and stress, due to personal time management (and other issues such as their computer crashing) are:

Too much is expected of us in a limited time.

(Female student teacher D, aged 20)

I was stressed above average due to the workload expected in our final year.

(Female student teacher E, aged 28)

Not all of the 95 student teachers who responded to these open-ended questions were stressed by the workload or university course demands. Three mentioned that they were very well organised, and two mentioned that they had become organised through necessity, as a means to get through what they predicted to be a very busy year. They reported that it was necessary for their well-being. One student teacher described losing motivation in third year, but regaining her interest in her final year "because my goal is closer" (female student teacher F, aged 22).

When completing the first questionnaire, most student teachers said they were stressed due to the assignment workload. However by the second questionnaire, completed after the Capstone program and immediately prior to the internship, their views had changed, and there was an acknowledgement among some that their pre-existing anxiety was exacerbated under this stress. These views are reflected in the following comments:

Because of Capstone, I am feeling particularly stressed, as they haven't left us enough time to plan for the internship.

(Female student teacher G, aged 30)

Capstone stressed me so much I couldn't handle it and stressed out my already stressed relationship with my boyfriend of four years. The end of this relationship further added to my stress, so at this point my emotional status is shaky.

(Female student teacher H, aged 22)

I am a stressful person, and this Capstone stress has escalated it. I had a fight with my mother. I am a high achiever, therefore I put everything into the experience, and I know I will become an emotional wreck in the internship.

(Female student teacher I, aged 22)

Student teachers in the pre-internship questionnaire (Q2) discussed their views as to how the internship would impact on their future prospects for employment as a teacher. As they considered their internship, stress levels were high. They felt apprehensive about their future, and stressed about getting a job, particularly in view of the financial sacrifices they had already made to study.

The stress of the practicum may exacerbate pre-existing anxiety (and depression) [6]. School student behaviour is known to be a stressor. The key stressors of practica identified in a study by Cheng and So (2002), with similar numbers of female participants (N = 78.4%), indicated that female primary school student teachers were more concerned with student discipline, and about academic issues than their male counterparts [7]. This was consistent with an earlier study by D'Rozario and Wong (1996) who reported that primary school student teachers, the majority of whom were female, were more stressed, and reflected in this study. A sample of responses from Q2

(below) is illustrative of their feelings at the time:

I feel overwhelmed when I think about the future. I expect the internship to be the main cause of my stress. It is hard because the expectations are so great, and the forthcoming internship even predicts my future, but I have other commitments as well, so it will be difficult to deal with.

(Female student teacher J, aged 22)

Our whole career depends on our performance in this internship and now there's not enough time given to us to prepare for it. After being so long at university, and being broke, a job is vital, so I must do well at the internship.

(Female student teacher K, aged 22)

Responses provided in the final questionnaire (Q3), following the internship provided a more positive perspective. Just as the impact of the Capstone experience, and fears about lack of time to prepare for the school experience seemed less relevant, most student teachers wrote in Q3 about developing a good relationship with their Mentor Teacher. This support assisted them to cope with the demands of their internship. Thus, overall, the 16 qualitative responses to the professional demands of the internship were very different from those at Times 1 and 2.

The word 'confidence' came through in several responses. Time management continued to be an ongoing issue, but there was a sense of optimism that they would be placed in the profession and successfully manage new teaching careers. Their preparedness to push themselves to meet the demands of the internship was obvious in the comments made by those who returned Questionnaire 3, following the end of their internship. They had worked hard and willingly, but there was also a level of exhaustion in meeting the demands.

This also included taking out personal loans, which they planned to repay with their teaching salary upon obtaining a position. Thus, they placed great store on their performance at the internship, the impact they would make on their Mentor Teacher, and any reference they would obtain to use in the interview process. There was concern about gaining employment as a teacher, following the internship and about their performance at the interview, which would be held after the internship.

Conclusion

Student teachers may approach the demands associated with the profession differently, depending on their personal responsibilities, but personal demands may contribute to psychological distress among student teachers. These findings relied on self-reporting, and the positive result after the internship requires cautious interpretation, as the more stressed student teachers may have left the study [8].

As expected from the literature, financial factors, social support networks, expectations of self, perceived family expectations and demands, availability of coping resources, and work-family conflict associated with personal demands on university students [9], were also mentioned by this cohort. Most of the female student teachers in this study were in their twenties, and lived at home. This may have offered them some protection against the demands in life, such as financial and family responsibilities. Previous research had revealed that female student teachers, aged less than 28 years,

who had been bullied either by the teacher(s) in the school where they were undertaking their practical experience, or by university tutor(s) have reported feeling a loss of confidence to the point where they had considered leaving the profession [10]. This was quite different from the response made by student teachers in this study. Those student teachers who responded to the post-internship survey had only extremely positive comments to make about their mentor teachers, and their relationship with them.

Student teachers may be vulnerable to negative emotional experiences triggered by perceptions of self-doubt and psychological distress associated with both personal and professional demands. This was the tone of the responses to the first two questionnaires. As the reason so many did not return the questionnaire post-internship is unknown, the findings about different personal and professional demand factors associated with stress among student teachers requires greater exploration.

The study does raise a number of issues that have implications for teacher preparation programs. One of these may be to provide preventative strategies within the university teaching curriculum. These could help student teachers manage and/or alleviate stress associated with personal and professional demands. To do this, further investigation of the link between distress and coping mechanisms is recommended.

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