

Stress management among female student teachers on Attachment Teaching Practice: The Case of Marymount Teachers College, Zimbabwe

By

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Abstract

One of the major challenges facing student teachers on attachment teaching practice is coping with stress. This study examines some of the forms of stress, their causes and the means of dealing with the stress from the perceptions of female students, mentors and lecturers. One hundred (100) female students, forty (40) mentors (teachers and school heads) as well as ten (10) male and ten (10) female lecturers were involved in the study. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and interviews. The study established three main categories of stress which were home based (socio-economic), school based (academic, professional and socio-economic) and college based (academic, socio-economic). Common forms of stress were inadequate of support from home, ineffective mentorship, high college expectations and harassment by lecturers. 95% of the students considered high college expectations the top most stressor, while the majority of mentors and lecturers were of the opinion that the main causes of stress were not institutional. The study suggests coping mechanism to reduce the ugly effects of stress on students on ATP.

1. Introduction

This study focuses mainly on managing stress among female students on Attachment Teaching Practice for five terms during the course of their Diploma in Education Programme popularly known as the '2-5-2' Programme. This mode of training was adopted by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education of Zimbabwe requires student teachers to spend two terms at college, and then go for Attachment Teaching Practice (ATP) in local schools for five terms, after which they will come back to college for the final two terms. The purpose of the study is to explain what stress is and to investigate the main forms of stress that affect female students from Marymount Teachers College while on Attachment Teaching Practice. A similar study was conducted by Mavhundutse (2004) but it mainly focused on student teachers in general and this study dwells on female primary school student teachers.

The study also attempts to determine student perceptions of stress and how it affects them during ATP. The study does not go into the conceptual and psychological intricacies of stress but an attempt is also made to explain the major causes of stress among female students. Besides the more general stress factors or 'stressors' (Mapfumo, Chitsuko & Chireshe, 2007) like low allowances, dating, peer pressure and parental pressure (social stress); heavy work load, preparation of learning and teaching aids, and supervision related issues (academic stress), this study has gone further to look at the specific circumstances of a single college whose conditions may not necessarily be the same with other colleges or polytechnics.

Recommendations or 'coping mechanisms' are made on how the stress could be managed which include various measures different stakeholders like the students themselves, the college and the schools could take in an attempt to manage stress and therefore reduce its ugly effects on student performance while on ATP.

Scope and delimitation of the study

The study covers students in primary schools in Manicaland Province where Marymount Teachers' College deploys its students for ATP. The students do teaching practice for five terms, a period which is quite critical in shaping the primary school teacher who finally teaches in Zimbabwean primary schools and this is significantly different from the mode of training of secondary school teachers in the country who go through only a term or so of teaching practice.

Background to the study

Concern is raised when individuals react to circumstances (such as failing an examination) and challenges (such as being double-crossed by a lover) in ways that seem too extreme or radical. For instance, a number of students, mainly female, have attempted to take their own lives in a number of ways in the country.

Some of the cases are listed below;

1. A polytechnic female student attempted to hang herself in 2011.
2. A female student at the same institution took an overdose of tablets in an attempt to take her life in the same year.
3. One student teacher at a Teachers' College attempted suicide by taking a dosage of pesticide.
4. In 2012, three cases of attempted suicide by female college students were reported in a short space of one year which involved pouring boiling water on the body, throwing oneself in front of a moving vehicle and getting seriously injured, and another taking poison and suffering severe injuries.
5. A preliminary inquiry among selected schools also indicated that female student teachers had a higher incidence of excusing themselves from or absconding work than males.

The majority of these cases were female students, hence the need to focus on female students in this study. It is apparent that the problem under study has a national dimension, but a more focused study on one college like Marymount will allow a deeper analysis of issues whose results can still be applied to other institutions because there is lot in common in terms of social and academic demands between the Teachers' Colleges and Polytechnics in Zimbabwe.

It was strongly suspected that the high incidence of these cases was a result of stress in its various forms. All these near fatal incidents are indicative of deep seated challenges faced by students in tertiary institutions. It seems to indicate that many female tertiary students go through stressful situations some of which they fail to cope with, hence they think the only way out is to end their lives. D'Rozario and Wong (1996) and Morton et al (1997) established that female student teachers were more stressed than males while on teaching practice though the environment they studied was different from the one under study. It would therefore be quite interesting to find any parallels. Zindi (1994), Shumba and Matema (2002) and Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) found very high incidence of sexual harassment of student teachers in Zimbabwe's higher educational institutions which teachers' colleges are certainly part of.

A number of questions that guide this study were therefore raised which included:

- What is stress?
- What forms of stress affect our students or what are the signs of stress?
- What are some of its causes?
- How can stressed students be assisted by different stakeholders who include the student, the mentor, the school authorities and the college?
- How does this impact on 'The student friendly college'?

2. Methodology

The broad nature of the student population base and the need to get a truly representative picture of the problem of stress among the female students, who far outnumber their male counterparts and therefore make the larger part of the student body at the college, necessitated a survey. Open-ended questionnaires were therefore mainly used to collect information from a sample of one hundred (100) student teachers. This was fairly easy to do because the researchers, as lecturers, were in constant interaction with the students through teaching practice supervision and assessment errands as well as purposive research visits to students on ATP.

However to get a deeper understanding of some of the issues related to specific cases related to stress, interviews with affected female students, school and college authorities and lecturers were done. These gave pointers to some issues which could not necessarily be generalized with all the female students. An investigation into current efforts by the college to address issues related to stress also necessitated the consultation of records. The study therefore used an eclectic methodology which combined both quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods-questionnaires and interviews, what Chireshe et al (2012) call 'the Mixed Methods Design' which helps in triangulating the findings.

The data were presented mainly in prose only because of its largely qualitative nature.

Significance of the study

This study will certainly go a long way

1. in creating a student friendly college and help students on how they can manage various forms of stress while on ATP.
2. towards identifying practices by lecturers and mentors which stress students.
3. towards suggestions to help minimise stressful situations for students on ATP.

3. Literature Review

Stress is an everyday phenomenon. What vary are its causes, its forms and levels to which individuals manage the stress (Forman, 1990). According to Slowik (2012), stress is the emotional and physical way in which we respond to pressure. It is the physical, mental and emotional strain or tension caused by exposure to different situations. Stress causes self doubt, anxiety, fear and even anger (Franks (1994).The teaching practice period exposes female student teachers to different situations in which causes and effects of stress are found. Research has shown that 'teaching stress' is ranked as a high stress occupation with 33-37% teachers reporting to be very stressed (Mapfumo et al, 2007; Griffith et al, 1999; McCormick, 1997). Mavhundutse (2004) made a significant contribution to the literature on stress among college students but he adopted a more general approach.

Stress causes both mental and physical symptoms and its effects vary with different people (Forman, 1990; Slowik, 2012). For the female students, what can be considered as stress to one student may not necessarily be the same to others. Stress in teaching is sometimes considered as normal for the student teacher and can only end with one graduating (Murray-Harvey et al, 2000). This is unfortunately a great misconception, because stress is counterproductive. It is an unfortunate ordeal that students have to grapple with as they practice teaching. It is, however, almost impossible to live without stress but when it gets out of control it becomes harmful (Slowik, 2012).

Managing stress involves taking charge of thoughts, emotions, schedules, relationships and the way to deal with challenges (Capel, 1997). Jelink (1986) has, however, argued that stress can also yield positive results, hence 'good stress.' This is, however, not the main focus of this study. The lack of uniformity in the causes of stress and the varied nature of its effects works against a prescriptive approach to stress management. Research has shown that stress reduces productivity and creates or worsens health problems (Chireshe et al, 2010; Mapfumo et al, 2007; Nyoni and Mufanechiya, 2012). Stress can cause hormonal

imbalance in the body which often results in impaired cognitive function, increased blood pressure, increased abdominal fats which is associated with heart disease and stroke (Slowik, 2012). College students are not spared from these effects although most of the cases are not investigated and documented.

Various 'coping mechanisms' (Mapfumo, Chitsuko & Chireshe, 2007) have been suggested which include restructuring of tasks and self-instruction. Payne and Manning (1990) and Morton et al, (1997) suggested establishing support networks and developing interpersonal skills besides exercising, eating and relaxing which can also reduce stress.

Stress management or 'coping mechanisms' therefore, besides being a health care measure are also prescriptions for confidence and better academic performance by college students. Coping mechanisms can also be referred to as intervention strategies or stress inoculation. These strategies can be applied at three levels which are the individual level, the organizational level or both. This means that the college or school where the student teacher operates can assist students as individuals or it can reform itself as an organization to create a less stressful environment for the student teachers. Nyoni and Mufanochiya (2012), in their study of student teachers perceptions, advocate a non-restrictive and barrier free environment.

4. Research findings

Student perceptions of stress are revealed in what they identify as causes of stress. A common issue in all the cases presented by students was that stress was anything that brought physical or mental discomfort while they were on teaching practice. Although rather broad, such a conception of stress has greater flexibility in terms of identifying causes and solutions to problems that cause it.

The study established causes of stress which were quite varied but can be classified as school based, home based and college based. All these are presented together because of the close link between them.

- One of the causes of stress was very high college expectations. The top most complaint from students, as indicated in their responses was too much work that included scheming, planning, marking and assignments (academic pressure). Ninety five percent (95%) of the students complained that college work kept them busy everyday including weekends, and did not have time to spare for their families and to socialize. Students are expected to produce a detailed scheme of work to be evaluated weekly. In addition, they were expected to produce a minimum of twenty detailed lesson plans every week as these were to be available every Monday morning. These are certainly very high standards but, according to the students, these expectations of the course were too high. In addition, they were expected to mark their children's work and write college assignments. For many students (85%), the teaching practice period was too long. It exposed them to the pressures of teaching practice for too long.
- Another common factor in responses from both questionnaires and interviews was lack of social and financial support from families (social pressure) such that some students became destitute even though they were getting a small allowance from the government. Some students were also not aware of the support services that were available at schools and at the college. Those who were aware were not knowledgeable on how to use them. Some were aware of the existence of some counselling structures at college but were not sure of who to consult or sometimes did not trust the people in charge of these structures. This left them in a perpetual state of stress.
- The thought of accommodation and survival when one was about to go back to college after teaching practice was another haunting problem. More than 50% of the students at Marymount students are females, many of whom look for accommodation in the neighbouring suburbs of Greenside, Borderville and Palmerstone which are close to the college to ease transport costs. Students often live communally by sharing rooms and in some cases in groups of six people per

room, much in disharmony with the social demands of their lives where the need privacy cannot have any substitute. It is worse with married women who, in most cases, have to travel to meet their husbands.

- Some students complained of being attached to a sick or lazy mentor, which often resulted in overloading the student with work. Some mentors do not supervise the students resulting in poor performance. Such mentors do not appreciate their role as partners in training students, which points to the need for continuous mentorship training in schools.
- Some mentors were too strict and intolerant to the excuses of students and refused even to share marking, and the college does very little if any to solve conflict. Instead of building a reciprocal relationship with the student, the mentors rely so much on the 'I know it all syndrome.' Mentors, however demanded some form of payment for their services of assisting the students on ATP. The fact that the student teacher is attached to the mentor presupposes a stronger relationship between the two and makes the mentor more responsible and therefore more accountable for the feelings and actions of the student teacher.

- A very common problem was harassment, especially of female student teachers by female lecturers. It also happens with male lecturers but the reasons are mostly more personal than professional. Some lecturers were also very strict and fearsome. One female student reported that;

"They never appreciate anything that the student does but focus their attention so much on the weaknesses of the students. One wonders what kind of teaching this is when the same lecturers impress upon the student teachers to motivate their pupils by rewarding them in various ways." Some lecturers are unapproachable and their behaviour has never changed over the years and this is transferred from one intake of students to another.

- Some male lecturers ask for favours, and failure to provide often results in unfavourable treatment like passing bad comments and awarding low marks for turning down requests. One student retorted *"If a lecturer asks What will you do for me if I gave you a good mark? What am I expected to say? Is the mark genuine? Some of these male lecturers are very corrupt!, the 'a thigh for a mark idea.'* It is important to note that the frequency of such an activity could not be established due to the sensitive nature of the problem. Female lecturers rarely ask for favours but are popular for the bad comments, written and verbal, and low marks for their female counterparts.
- A study of Teaching Practice Assessment reports showed that some of the marks awarded by some lecturers did not tally with the comments given' leaving the student in a state of confusion. 'Fear of the unknown' or 'fear of failure' is a problem that affected many students. Certain students could also be favoured by certain lecturers when other students really knew their weaknesses. The main problem was, therefore, how to establish fairness. How do students address such issues? Some lecturers have sexual relations with female students, resulting in preferential treatment and abuse. Female students are certainly more vulnerable than their male counterparts.
- Some female students complained of lack of confidentiality in the school and college support services.

"Anything you say at school is published".

One student said, such that the students hesitate to open up on their problems and this allows the problems to grow to crisis levels. In other words, the support services at schools and colleges do not function properly. The absence of a counselling room at college, with trained qualified and certified counsellors and records on counselling activities create quite a glaring picture on efforts towards reducing stress in colleges.

- Social and economic problems emanating from the home are a big source of problems that cause stress among female students (social stress). Some complained of marital problems and lack of money to buy materials for their studies and for subsistence. Some ended up quite desperate thus keeping the temptation of prostitution and an increase in HIV infections quite high. One student

reported in an interview that no matter how creative one could be in trying to complement her stipend the poor economic environment in the country would frustrate all efforts.

“Keep a lot of chicken and end up eating them yourself or lend people for lack of a viable market in many rural areas”,

Another student reiterated (and),

“at the end some take a long time to pay or do not pay at all and you do not make any profit.”

- A few students were affected by cultural beliefs that often put them in very restricted working environments that governed their association with other people. Some are not given the opportunity to choose their own churches and ended up forcing themselves to follow the restrictive practices of some churches.
- Interviews with school heads confirmed that female student teachers excused and absented themselves from work far more than their male counterparts, which indicated that they probably had more problems. They were also more open to bring their problems to the attention of school authorities than male student teachers.

5. Recommendations

Recommendations can also be called ‘coping mechanisms’ and these assist in managing stress. However, for proper management of stress by female student teachers the college and school authorities should know the specific needs of their students as well as the causes of stress (Morton et al, 1997). These recommendations, therefore, become a response to the needs of the students to avoid stressful situations.

- According to Morton et al (1997) there is need for psychological readiness while at college. This calls for a more intensive programme during the first residential course (two terms) to conscientize the students on problems they should anticipate and educate them on how to deal with them thus preparing them psychologically. This could involve emphasis of related issues in Health and Life Skills and Professional Studies lessons and workshops that prepare them for Attachment Teaching Practice. This also calls for specialist manpower at colleges with requisite qualifications and skills to organize, manage and lead these activities.
- To establish credible counselling structures at school and colleges with able qualified personal who can be trusted and will have gone through some training and not people of questionable repute. If possible, colleges could train or higher certified counsellors as lecturers. The college should establish a proper counselling room that has proper operations and manned by qualified personnel on a permanent basis.
- Interviews with lecturers also revealed that some students continued to get inappropriate treatment from college staff because their deficiencies, which may be physical or otherwise, may not have been communicated to the college staff, especially lecturers who meet and interact with them quite often while on teaching practice.
- Continuous staff development for mentors in schools on effective mentorship.
- Introducing an allowance for mentors with students on ATP so as to motivate them.
- Reducing lesson plans to two per week.
- The college to have an open door policy to students to be free to report issues even those that involve lecturers.
- School administrations to meet teachers more often to discuss student related issues.
- To engage students in income generating projects at schools and the college, whose proceeds will go towards establishing a fund that assist the needy students, run by a committee selected by students themselves.
- Students to be taught entrepreneurial skills more seriously through before they leave college for teaching practice through subjects like National Strategic Strategies (NASS).
- Pairing students as much as possible with mentors of their opposite sexes to avoid gender-based hostility, and allow the college to recommend the change of a mentor where necessary.

- Allow students a more active role in their deployment for teaching practice.
- Continuous staff development for lecturers that will assist them to create a friendly environment first before supervision or assessment to avoid panicking which will enable student teachers to operate at their best.
- The college to have a deliberate policy to identify students with problems and assist them.

6. Conclusion

The observations made in this study can be indicators towards a much bigger problem involving student teachers. It is hoped that this study will go a long way in educating the reader on the vulnerability of the female student teacher on Attachment Teaching Practice, and will assist in creating a more student friendly college.

The knowledge gap

The recommendations given in this study are certainly far from being exhaustive as intervention strategies to reduce stress among female students on Attachment Teaching Practice. This is a challenge for further research in the area.

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