

Teacher Stressors and Potential Remedies from Pre-service Teachers' and  
Cooperating Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

*This study investigated specific teaching events which participants, pre-service and cooperating teachers, found stressful. Although participants agreed on the top four stressful teaching events, e.g., student discipline problems, time management, dealing with unmotivated students, and lecturing; they disagreed on remedies. Reducing class size and payment for student teaching were indicated as priorities by cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers, respectively. The implication of the results for teacher training and teacher recruitment and retention are discussed.*

This study investigated the type of stressors cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers experience in the classroom as well as the remedies they perceive for alleviating stress. Almost 15 years ago, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 34% of teachers would not choose their current career if given the chance to decide again (1997). In addition to dissatisfaction with their salary, teachers attributed their discouragement to stress, not having the support, time, or knowledge to adequately handle stress. This concern seems to persist. In a more recent study, Marley (2009) reported that 44% of teachers had suffered from stress-related illness, suggesting that teaching may be a high stress profession. Other studies also indicated that 25-50% of beginning teachers resign during their first three years of teaching (Fleener, 2001); while 33% quit the profession during their first year (Roulston, Legette, & Womack, 2005). The effects of a stressful working conditions and low satisfaction with the teaching profession often lead to poor teacher recruitment and retention (Ridley, Hackett, Reese, & Griffith, 2002); and when unresolved stress becomes too intense in magnitude, victims may experience psychological problems (Gary & Freeman, 1988, p.6).

Clinically, Humphrey & Humphrey (1986) defined stress as “Any factor acting internally or externally that makes it difficult to adapt and that demands increased effort from the person to maintain a state of equilibrium within himself and with his external environment” (p. 2-3). In other words, the demand stress puts on individuals exceeds their resources and coping skills. Griffith & Brem (2004) also suggested personal stressors to include internal thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that make it difficult to function, situational stressors that involve specific events (e.g., concern about student fighting), and external stressors (e.g., pressure from outside sources, such as parents). Given these definitions, stress is not universal; what causes stress in one person may be easily accommodated by another. Stress is not limited to cooperating teachers who are currently working. According to Greer and Greer (1992), the highest risk for stress may come at the beginning of educators’ career during pre-service experience potentially making candidates ineffective and stunting their professional growth (Wadlington, Slaton, & Partridge, 1998).

Supporting the foregoing, an earlier study by Fogarty and Yarrow (1994), Abebe and Kitterman (2006) indicated, “Pre-service teachers irrespective of their degree of experience were significantly more stressed by their relationship with pupils than by the evaluation of the cooperating teacher” (p. 55). Furthermore, Abebe and Kitterman reported that pre-service teachers believe their experience in the classroom is more stressful than what the cooperating teachers perceive it to be. However, the sources of pre-service teachers’ stressors vary. Classroom management, formal observations, and social and emotional problems of students were perceived as primary stressors of pre-service teachers (Clement, 1999). Yet, in another study, discipline problems, time management, and selection of lesson content were found to be most stressful (Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007). Regarding remedies, according to Abebe and Kitterman (2006), both pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers perceive class size reduction and fewer lessons planning to be possible remedies for some stressful classroom events.

To summarize, teacher stress is a recognized phenomenon. What is not well investigated is whether or not veteran teachers and pre-service teachers experience similar stressors or if they have similar perspectives on what moderates their stress. The current study surveyed both cooperating and pre-service teachers to answer these questions. Stressors and stress remedies

were dependent variables; age, stress level, teaching level, geographic location, teaching field, and experience made up the predictive variables.

## Method

### Participants

Participants of the study were current pre-service teachers ( $n=42$ ) and their respective K-12 certified cooperating teachers ( $n=40$ ) in two metropolitan cities and their surrounding county schools, covering rural, urban, and suburban communities. The study was conducted during Fall 2009. Sixty four surveys were mailed to cooperating teachers, and 40 completed surveys were returned, which is a 62% return rate. Likewise, 64 surveys were mailed to pre-service teachers, and 42 completed the survey, a 65% return rate. Based on their experience, effectiveness, and degree earned, cooperating teachers were selected by their respective school administrators to mentor pre-service teachers for a full semester.

### Instrument

A questionnaire, Rating Pre-service Teacher Events for Stress, was used to assess teacher stress and potential remedies. Developed in 1980 and modified in 1985 by Robert Wright (New Mexico State University), the questionnaire was adapted and modified (Abebe 1993) by permission to assess cooperating teachers' experiences with stress. The modified version was field tested and implemented in 2000 (Abebe, & Kitterman, 2005). Other modified questionnaires for assessing pre-service teacher stressors were cited in: Miller and Fraser's (2000) modified version of the Academic Stress Questionnaire (ASQ) originally developed and used at the University of Wales; and Kaldi's (2009) modified version of the perception of pre-service teacher stress originally used by Bember, Brown, and Ralph (2002).

The survey assessed teachers' stress on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (low stress) to 5 (high stress). Stressful sample items are, "Time management" or "Discipline Problems". The second part of the questionnaire assessed teachers' perceptions of remedies. Teachers rated such stress remedies as "Expelling disruptive students from class" and "Class size reduction" on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent). Demographic information (e.g., age and gender) was also collected.

### Procedure

Pre-service teachers were informed during an all-day seminar at the beginning of the semester about the survey, the procedures, and the benefits of participating. In turn, they were directed to inform their respective cooperating teachers about the study. Both groups received a letter along with the survey describing the voluntary and confidential nature of the study and instructions for completing and returning the survey. No identifying information was sought and participants were provided a stamped, self-addressed envelope for returning the completed survey. Both the cooperating teachers and their mentees (pre-service teachers) completed the survey during the same semester. The responses were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

Pre-service teachers ( $n=42$ ) and cooperative teachers ( $n=40$ ) were asked to rate a set of classroom events that may be a source of stress for them and possible remedies for the events. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize cooperative teachers' and pre-service teachers' ratings of their stressors in the classroom and what they considered as stress remedies. Table 1 presents the means for Pre-service teachers' and Cooperating Teachers' Ratings of Stressors in the classroom hierarchically, one being a high stressor. Both the pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers reported being stressed by student discipline problems, time management, unmotivated students, lecturing, university/college supervisors' visit, pre-service teacher-parent relationship, inconsistent student behavior (performance), and cooperating teachers' demands.

Table 1.

*Mean Ratings of Stressors by Pre-service Teachers and Cooperating Teachers*

Stressors	Pre-service Teachers ( $n=42$ )	Cooperating Teachers ( $n=40$ )
<b>1. DISCIPLINE: Student refuses to do what he/she is told to do (is sarcastic, loud, moves about without permission, or is abusive to other students).</b>	<b>3.64 (1.14)</b>	<b>4.10 (1.17)</b>
<b>2. TIME MANAGEMENT: Finding time for effective presentation, making assignments, announcements, grading papers, meeting deadlines or other paperwork.</b>	<b>3.64 (1.08)</b>	<b>3.68 (1.10)</b>
<b>3. UNMOTIVATED STUDENTS: In spite of the pre-service teacher's efforts to challenge all students, they continue to be non-participating and unmotivated.</b>	<b>3.45 (.97)</b>	<b>3.60 (1.22)</b>
<b>4. LECTURE: Presenting content material to noisy, apathetic and uninterested students.</b>	<b>3.12 (1.17)</b>	<b>3.60 (1.28)</b>
<b>5. SUPERVISOR'S VISIT: University or college supervisor who takes notes when observing teaching to evaluate teaching ability, checks lesson plans, or reviews journals.</b>	<b>2.74 (1.25)</b>	<b>3.55 (1.24)</b>
<b>6. PRE-SERVICE TEACHER/PARENTS RELATIONSHIPS: Interacting with parents in the area of student discipline, grades or attendance.</b>	<b>2.83 (1.12)</b>	<b>3.30 (1.18)</b>
<b>7. INCONSISTENT STUDENT BEHAVIOR: Student who vacillates from a display of enthusiasm, shows feeling of inadequacy or depression same period of day.</b>	<b>2.88 (.94)</b>	<b>3.20 (1.24)</b>
<b>8. COOPERATING TEACHER: Insists that pre-service teacher teaches cooperating teacher's lesson plans; is concerned about procedures; is not in total agreement about student being placed in his/her room.</b>	<b>2.74(1.42)</b>	<b>3.05 (1.50)</b>
	<b>Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>

Note: 1=Low Stressor and 5=High Stressor

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to test for differences between pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers ratings of stressors. Pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers are in agreement as to the sources of their stress. There were no differences between the two groups, except for university supervisors' visits that showed significant difference,  $t(79)=-2.952, p=.002$ . University supervisors' visit (e.g., taking notes and checking lesson plans) appears more stressful for cooperating teachers than pre-service teachers.

Participants rated the remedies they find useful for addressing stress they encounter in the classroom. They indicated that reducing class size, paying pre-service teachers, increasing physical security, expelling disruptive students from the classroom, doing fewer lessons planning and grading, and increasing college supervision visits would reduce their stress. Table 2 presents the mean ratings of stress remedies by participants.

Table 2

*Means of Stress Remedies Rated by Pre-service Teachers and Cooperating Teachers*

Teacher Suggested Stress Remedies	Pre-service	Cooperating
	Teachers (n=42)	Teachers (n=40)
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Class size reduction	3.93 (1.22)	4.15 (1.02)
Payment for services for student teaching.	4.05 (1.17)	3.201 (.44)
Increasing physical security (from fights, gangs, violence).	2.86 (1.12)	3.60 (.98)
Expelling disruptive students from class	3.36 (1.03)	3.05 (1.24)
Do less lesson planning and grading of assignments.	3.45 (1.17)	2.40 (1.15)
Increase the number of visits by college supervisors.	2.17 (.96)	3.05 (1.11)

Note: 1=VERY POOR remedy and 5=EXCELLENT remedy

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to test for differences between pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers ratings of stress remedies. There were significant differences for payment for pre-service teachers [ $t(75)=2.918, p=.001$ ], security [ $t(79)=-3.193, p=.001$ ], less lesson planning and grading [ $t(79)=4.100, p=.001$ ], and increasing university supervisors' visits [ $t(77)=-3.862, p=.001$ ]. Pre-service teachers saw getting paid for student teaching and doing less planning and grading as remedies for stress more than cooperating teachers; while cooperating teachers indicated increasing physical security, class size reduction, and an increase in college supervisor's visit would reduce stress. However, both groups agreed that expelling disruptive students from class reduces stress.

A Pearson's  $r$  was conducted among stressors at an alpha level of .01 (two tailed). Discipline problems were related to many of the classroom activities. Significant positive

moderate correlations were found between discipline problems and the following classroom events (stressors), unmotivated students ( $r=.682$ ), lecture ( $r=.559$ ), university supervisors' visit ( $r=.601$ ), and pre-service teacher-student parent relations ( $r=.537$ ). Some classroom events seem to be associated with lecturing related stress for teachers. Significant positive correlations were found between lecture and student lack of motivation ( $r=.463$ ), pre-service teacher-student relationships ( $r=.453$ ), inconsistent student behaviors ( $r=.549$ ), and cooperating teachers ( $r=.506$ ). Time management issues also showed a significant positive correlation with lecturing ( $r=.469$ ) and inconsistent student behavior ( $r=.476$ ). Other significant positive correlations found were between student lack of motivation and pre-service teacher-student relationship ( $r=.410$ ), inconsistent student behavior and pre-service teacher-student relationship ( $r=.635$ ), and university supervisors' visit and pre-service teacher-student relationships ( $r=.538$ ).

Correlation results are found in Table 3.

Table 3

*Intercorrelations among Teachers' Stressors*

<i>Stressors</i>	<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Time Management</i>	<i>Lack of Motivation</i>	<i>Lecture</i>	<i>Univ. Super. Visit</i>	<i>Pre-service teacher-student relation</i>	<i>Pre-service teacher-Parent Relation</i>	<i>Inconsistent Student Behavior</i>	<i>Cooperative Teacher</i>
<b>Discipline</b>	--	.314**	.682**	.559**	.601**	.422**	.537**	.375**	.222*
<b>Time Management</b>		--	.238*	.469**	.244*	.292*	.232*	.476**	.313**
<b>Lack of Motivation</b>			--	.463**	.367**	.410**	.410**	.373**	--
<b>Lecture</b>				--	.383**	.453**	.453**	.549**	.506**
<b>University Supervisor visit</b>					--	.422**	.538**	.348**	.294**
<b>Pre-service teacher-student Relationships</b>						--	.353**	.635**	.272**
<b>Inconsistent student behavior</b>							--	--	.409**
<b>Coop Teacher</b>									--

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

It appears student discipline problems permeate teachers' experiences in the classroom. Student discipline problems interfere with lecturing; and dealing with discipline problems in the presence of a university supervisor and cooperating teacher is stressful for pre-service teachers. In addition, addressing student discipline problems with students' parents seem to result in a

strained relationship between the pre-service teacher and parents. Further, when time management is an issue for pre-service teachers (a stressor), so is dealing with unmotivated students and student-teacher relationship.

A Pearson's  $r$  was conducted among stress remedies at an alpha level of .01 (two tailed), and results indicated that there was a moderate positive significant correlation between reducing class size and increasing physical security ( $r=.516$ ) and reducing class size and pullout services ( $r=.343$ ) for dealing with stress. Those who said reducing class size reduces stress also said that increasing physical security and reducing pull out services, which they saw as disruptive, reduces stress. A low positive relationship was found between payment for student teaching and less lesson planning and grading for reducing stress ( $r=.390$ ); and between paying pre-service teachers and the need for less university supervision ( $r=.408$ ). Those who said payment for student teaching reduces stress also said that less planning and grading and less university supervision reduce stress.

The next question to be answered was whether or not there is a relationship between the type of stressors and remedies. A Pearson's  $r$  was conducted among stress remedies at an alpha level of .01 (two tailed), results indicated that there was a moderate relationship between college supervisors visit (stressor) and reducing college level supervision ( $r=.307$ ). Moderate positive relationship was also found between preparing for the unexpected (stressor) and reducing pull out services ( $r=.305$ ), preparing for the unexpected and more college supervision ( $r=.303$ ), and pre-service teacher-student parent relationship (stressor) and parent involvement ( $r=.319$ ).

To determine whether stress level, type of stress, and stress remedies differed as a factor of age and years of experience, a series of independent sample tests (one tailed) were conducted. Results showed that pre-service teachers reported higher stress than cooperating teachers as a factor of age and experience,  $t(80), 2.877, p. 002$ .

## Discussion

This study investigated pre-service teachers' and cooperating teachers' stressors in the classroom as well as remedies they may deem useful for dealing with stress. Discipline problems were found to be primary stressors for both pre-service teachers and cooperative teachers, which is consistent with the literature (Male, 2003). The literature shows that classroom discipline is regarded as one of the major problems teachers face (Lewis et al., 2005). In another study, 90% of teachers said that the greatest challenge they face was student behavior problems (Feyten & Hine, 1998). Discipline problems not only results in stress for teachers, it also affects their teaching; teachers have to attend to discipline problems that cannot be ignored, rather than focusing on educating students (Abidin & Robinson, 2002). It is not surprising then that teachers in this study found lecturing to be stressful.

It is also not surprising that pre-service teachers' relationship with students' parents is correlated with parent involvement; good pre-service teacher-parent relationship encourages parent involvement. It is also possible that discipline problems may put teachers and parents at odds, which may discourage parent involvement. Most importantly, the relationship between parent involvement and student academic achievement is well understood. For example, in a

meta-analysis of 41 studies examined by Jeynes (2005), parent involvement, as a whole, was found to have a relationship with a child's academic achievement, and this was true for both boys and girls and children from majority as well as ethnic minority groups. Overall, pre-service teachers at all levels, elementary, middle, and high schools, reported "parent involvement" as a remedy for stress, except those in rural areas. This may suggest that challenges do exist for those pre-service teachers assigned to the urban and suburban settings.

### Discussion

In this study, teachers reported that not only student discipline is stressful, it is also related to problems with teaching and learning (e.g., lecturing). One area that needs to be explored for addressing student discipline problems and at the same time reduce teacher stress is consulting with other professionals who have expertise in dealing with student behavior problems. Given that discipline problems are most stressful for teachers, it appears teachers need more support from other professionals, such as school psychologists, social workers, and school counselors to address discipline problems.

One model that is currently used for addressing academic and behavioral needs of students, Response to Intervention (RtI), is a three-tier data-based approach for addressing behavior problems. First, students are screened for behavior problems, and effective research based education and interventions are implemented in the classroom. For students who do not respond positively in Tier I, a more intensive small group or individual intervention, Tier II and III, follow (Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, and Lathrop, 2007). The mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists) can be extremely helpful to teachers in the RtI process.

Participants in this study found time management stressful, which was corroborated by other researchers (e.g., Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007). It may be helpful to pre-service teachers if teacher training institutions as well as school districts offer time management skills training. Regarding remedies for relieving stress, pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers agreed that reducing class size and expelling disruptive students from the classroom would reduce their stress. Given the current economic crisis, the likelihood of reducing class size is nonexistent; and expelling students is not a good option for the individual student and society in the long run. Expelling students increases the likelihood of school dropout and involvement with the justice system (Tobin and Sugai, 1999). Instead, better support in the form of effective counseling would have a positive outcome for teachers and students. For instance, school psychologists can conduct functional behavior analysis to understand the function of student behavior problems and design school wide, classroom wide, group, or individual intervention as indicated.

In addition, pre-service teachers saw getting paid for student teaching, doing fewer lessons planning and grading, and increasing university supervisors' visits as remedies for stress more than cooperating teachers. On the other hand, cooperating teachers indicated increasing physical security would reduce their stress more than pre-service teachers. These differences may be due to experience; cooperating teachers may have learned the importance of physical security from experience, and they may also be more efficient in lesson planning and grading because of their experience. For the pre-service teachers, getting paid for student teaching offers them the financial freedom to devote more time to student teaching, which also may reduce stress. In

other words, getting paid for student teaching will lessen the need for another paying job during student teaching. As far as university supervision is concerned, pre-service teachers may want more of it for guidance due to familiarity with the university supervisors. After all, the university supervisors are professors which pre-service teachers have studied under. Moreover, university supervisors are supposed to be a positive influence in the classroom rather than add to the stress of the pre-service teacher or the cooperative teacher (Wadlington, Slaton, and Partridge, 1998).

Furthermore, because pre-service teachers reported higher stress level than cooperating teachers and difficulty keeping a positive relationship with other staff members; it is important that there is a support system for them in place during student teaching as well as during the first few years of their teaching experience. Mentoring, pairing a new teacher with effective and experienced teacher, is an example of a support system for new teachers (Boreen et al., 2009); and pre-service teachers may benefit from similar support. The cooperating teacher is in effect a supervisor, an evaluator, and the pre-service teacher may not always feel comfortable to disclose stressors for fear of negative evaluation.

### Implications

This study highlights pre-service and cooperating teachers' assessment of stressors in the classroom and what they think can reduce their stress. Results of the study update the dated literature in this area; and it makes a unique contribution, because it compared pre-service and cooperative teachers' self-reported classroom experience. The information gleaned from this study can inform teacher training and school districts. Despite some limitations, such as self-report is suspect to social desirability and the sample is relatively small, the study has important implication for teacher training institutions and school districts; it raises a few critical questions: For example, are cooperating teachers prepared or trained to effectively mentor pre-service teachers into the profession? As suggested by the pre-service teachers' wishes for fewer lessons planning and grading, do they fully understand the expectations for the role of the teacher? Will pre-service teachers benefit from targeted education prior to student teaching for dealing with student discipline problems, time management, and stress management? Future research may want to answer such questions.

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