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Experience of stress among student-teachers enrolled in postgraduate diploma in teaching (PGDT): The case of Haramaya University cluster centers, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences and sources of stress among practicing student-teachers in the Eastern region of Ethiopia. A total of 112 participants were selected from the total population of 197 using stratified random sampling technique. Data were collected using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), sources of stress measure and socio demographic characterstics of participants. To suppliment the survey results, four groups of focus group discussions were conducted. The result indicated that 96% of female and 90% of male participants scored a stress level of 29 and above (out of the possible 56) indicating that they were fairly often, or very often, stressed. Though female participants showed higher level of stress than their male counterparts, the difference was not significant. Student misbehavior, inability to contact with significant others like families and relatives, and uncomfortable working environment were identified in that order as the greatest stressors. The implications of the results to teacher training institutes and other stakeholders in the teacher–training programs is discussed.

Keywords: Student-teachers, stress, post-graduate diploma.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching has been consistently ranked as a high-stress occupation with between 33 and 37% of teachers studied regularly reporting being 'very/extremely' stressed due to factors intrinsic to the teaching profession (Chan, 1998). Occupational stress in teaching is one of the factors that contribute to the attrition rate for teachers in some parts of the world (Chaplain, 2008; Kyriacou and Kunc, 2007). In the same vein, stress and workload are reported to be recurring themes explaining the withdrawal of student-teachers from teacher training programs in some countries (Chambers and Roper, 2000). Student-teachers are those candidates who are receiving training to be teachers in the future. Sometimes they are called pre-service teachers.

Other than the inherent nature of teaching as a stressful occupation (Wilhelm et al., 2000), there are several factors that lead student-teachers to stress. Within the teacher training program, student-teachers in many parts of the world have reported moderate to high levels of stress with respect to their teaching practices and practicum (Kazu, 2001; Morton et al., 1997). Having full teaching loads and other duties as experienced teachers, difficult subject combinations and managing challenging students are other factors that lead beginning teachers to stress (Gordon and Maxey, 2000; Kosnik and Beck, 2005). Beginning teachers in Italy also identified class discipline as the most challenging part of the profession (Bezzina, 2006). Hertzog (2002), Brock and Grady (1996) and Beach and Pearson (1998) also found out that student misbehavior was the major concern for pre-service teachers. Adler (1996) suggests that such concerns can override efforts to promote reflective inquiry. Malderez et al. (2007) comments that teachers many leave the profession because of inability to manage student behavior. That is why Armstrong and Savage (1990) identified classroom management as a critical skill for pre-service (student) teachers. In addition, many student-teachers fear that if they ask for assistance, they

will appear incompetent or poorly prepared (Glickman et al., 1998; Gold, 1989; Scherer, 1999).

In the current practices of teacher education in Ethiopia, students are expected to take a one year teacher's training course that enables them to teach at high schools. After they have finished this training, they will be awarded a certificate named *Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching*, hence the students-teachers are labeled as PGDT. This new teacher education program (PGDT) in Ethiopia was launched three years ago. During the training periods, the student-teachers are expected to do action research, practicum portfolio and teaching practices at the schools they are assigned to practice. These activities may be challenging to the practicing students. There are also a number of personal, environmental and professional factors that sometimes conspire to make the practicing student-teacher situation stressful and challenging.

In spite of the realities of stress among practicing student-teachers, it is rarely given considerations in the educational research. While research focuses on pedagogy and subject matter competence, the stress of these practicing students is very often neglected. The significance of the need to respond to the problem of student teacher stress lies in the evidence that stress affects teacher behavior and this in turn reduces classroom effectiveness, their learning and overall functioning. Therefore, it is deemed important to deal about the experience of stress among practicing student-teachers.

The main aim of this study was, therefore, to explore experience and sources of stress among practicing student-teachers at Haramaya University cluster centers (East and West Harerghe Zones of Oromia Regional State and secondary schools of Ethiopia Somali Regional State). The specific questions guiding this research were:

1. To what extent do PGDT student-teachers at the aforementioned cluster centers experience stress?
2. What are the sources of stress (stressors) among PGDT student-teachers in the specified cluster centers?
3. Is there a mean difference in the experience of stress based on sex, fields of study, age and geographic locations of student-teachers?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study employed descriptive survey research design. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to address the research objectives.

Participants of the study

The participants of this study were practicing student-teachers who had begun teaching in secondary schools of East and West Harerge Zones of Oromia regional States and secondary schools of Somali regional state as of October 2012. Accordingly, 112 student-teachers participants selected from the total population of 197 using stratified random sampling technique using the cluster centers as strata. On top of this, four groups of FGD participants each having 10 randomly selected members of the same sex group participated. Regarding demographic characterstics of participants, 88 (78.6%) were males, the rest 21.4%(24) were females, 71 (63.4%) from natural science stream, 41 (36.6%) from social science stream, 38 (33.9%) from West Harerghe cluster, 46 (41.1%) from East Harerghe cluster, and 28 (25%) from Somali cluster. The mean age of the respondents was 27.4 years.

Data collection instruments

Questionnaire and focus group discussions were the main data collection tools employed in the study.

The perceived stress scale (PSS)

This is a 14-item scale designed by Cohen et al. (1983) to measure the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful by an individual. Each item is rated on a 5-point answer scale ranging from 0: "never" to 4: "very often." Of the 14 items, 7 items were worded in a positive direction, so they were reverse-scored. The responses to the 14 items were then summed to create a psychological stress score. The maximium result student teachers can score is 56 (14 × 4) and the minimum score is 0 (14 × 0). The higher the score, the higher the level of stress would be. The PSS is not a diagnostic instrument, so no cut-off points are provided. To simplify discussions and to know the exact number of participants who reported certain levels of stress, participants were categorized in to three levels using visual binning technique. The levels were below average (28), between 29 and 40, and above 40.

In the present study, the *PSS* has internal reliability of .81 based on the collected data.

Sources of stress measure

This measure consisted of lists of factors that were believed to cause stress on the practicing student-teachers. The factors were chosen based on review of related literature and informal meetings with the student-teachers. The participants were asked to rank the listed factors from 1 to 15 based on severity of causing stress.

Demographics

Some demographic characterstics as age, sex, stream, cluster center were all self-reported by the participants.

Focus group discussion leading questions

Five leading questions were designed to suppliment the information obtained through survey. Example includes, "How do you describe the experiences of stress among practicing student-teachers"?

Data analysis

Percentage, mean, *t*-test and ANOVA were used to analyze quantitative data obtained through questionnaire. A thematic analysis was employed for FGDs results. This involves a critical assessment of each response and examining it using thematic interpretation (Sprinthall et al., 1991) in accordance with the

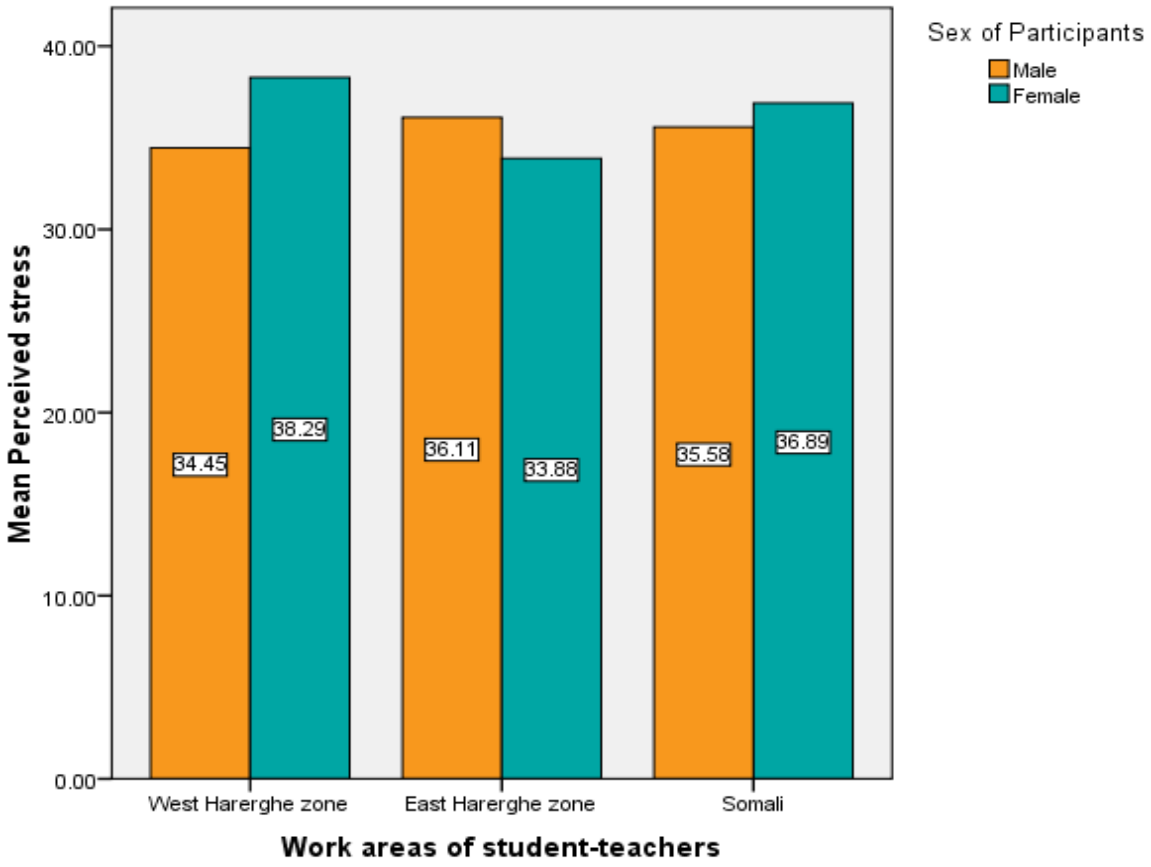

Figure 1. Mean perceived stress as a function of stress and areas of work.

objective of the study in a way that support quantitative data.

RESULTS

The mean age of participants was 27.4, SD 2.3. The majority (78.6 %) were male. On the other hand, the demographic analysis revealed that the number of student-teachers under the natural science stream (chemisty, physics, mathematics, biology and sport science) is more than that of social science stream (history, geography, civic and language) 63.4 and 36.6%, respectively.

Perceived stress

The first research question was to discover the experience of stress that practicing student-teachers report. The overall mean score of perceived stress was 35.6, *SD* = 5.6. Minimum and maximum scores were 20 and 54, respectively. Further analysis was made based on sex and cluster centers of participants.

Figure 1 indicates that females had higher mean perceived stress scores than males: 36.29 and 35.41, respectively. However, the *t*-test result showed that there was no significant difference between males and females in experience of stress.The result also indicated that stress was not significantly related to age and stream/field of study.

To know the exact number of participants who reported certain levels of stress, participants were categorized in to three levels using visual binning technique.

Table 1 indicates that 96% of female and 90% of male participants scored stress level of 29 and above (out of the possible 56) indicating that they were fairly often or very often stressed. This number is larger compared to the average perceived stress score which is 28.

Perceived sources of stress

It has been seen that practicing student teachers reported to have high experience of stress. It is also important to identify the sources of stress that challenge these participants. The following findings are about sources of stress among practicing student- teachers.

The participants in this study were asked to rank the listed stressors from 1 to 15, where an assigned rank of 1 was the most stressful and 15 was the least stressful.

Table 1. Perceived stress by count and sex of participants.

Perceived stress (Binned)	Sex				Total
	Male		Female		
	Count	%	Count	%	
Below 28	9	10	1	4	10
Between 29 to 40	65	74	18	75	83
Above 40	14	16	5	21	19
Total	88	100	24	100	112

Most students ranked student misbehavior (32.1%) as the first or second stressor followed by inability to contact with significant others like families and relatives (29.6%) and uncomfortable physical environment (27.7%). On the other hand, concern of being assessed by mentor or university instructor (8.1%) and extra-curricular activities (10.7%) were the least stressors.

These findings were consistent with the findings of the focus group discussions. For instance, supporting misbehavior as a source of stress one female focus group participant stated, "*the boys seem to bother us with their behavior much more than they trouble male teachers. They have no respect for female teachers."* Male focus group participants also demonstrated the same story. One participant said that let alone boys, even girls do not give due respect to female teachers.

Inability to contact with significant others like families and relatives was also one of the stressors for the practicing student-teachers. One focus group participant at West Harerghe center stated that:

> I graduated from Dilla University (South Ethiopia), after graduation I was assigned at Haramaya University (East Ethiopia) to attend PGDT. After PGDT I was deployed for practicum at one of the rural schools at West Harerghe Zone. During semester break (around January), I had to attend tutorial class. During summer break (July to August) I had to go back to university and finish my PGDT training. So I had no time to visit my families and relatives at Hosanna (South Ethiopia). Most of the times I think of my parents and could not concentrate on my work.

DISCUSSION

The demographic characterstics of paricipants indicates that there is still a huge gap between male and female high school teachers. This implies that even if the ministry and regional education offices are trying their best to increase the number of female-teachers in secondary schools, the gap is not yet narrowed. On the other hand, the number of student teachers under the natural science stream is larger than student-teachers in the social science stream. This indicates that the new teacher education program (PGDT) is training secondary school teachers in line with the government strategy of 70 to 30 higher education in take, that is, 70% of university intake would be in Science and Enginnering and the remaining for Social Sciences.

Perceived stress

The level of stress did not differ between the sexes. Other studies show sex difference in experiences of stress. For example, studies like Cohen and Janicki-Deverts (2012) who used the same scale to measure trends of stress from 1983, 2006 and 2009 among the US population depicts that females experience significantly higher level of stress compared to males. The reason for the difference could be that in the present study the participants are all young university graduates with mean age of 27.4, SD 2.3. The participants had many similarities than differences. However, in Cohen and Janicki-Deverts (2012) study, the participants were very diverse in terms of age, socioeconomic status, race, education level and others. Generally, it can be said that the practicing student-teachers experience high level of stress irrespective of sex, age,stream or work areas. The fact that the majority of the participants scored stress level above the average score signifies that teaching is one of the professions that are highly stressful. The magnitude of responsibilities and demands like daily lesson planning, assessing students, practicum related activities, curriculum meetings and managing student behavior make teachers to feel overwhelmed.

Perceived sources of stress

Participants mentioned student misbehavior as the most common sources of stress. This is not astonishing. These days, student-misbehavior appears to be the topic of discussion among teachers, principals, and parents all over the world. Beginning teachers in Italy also identified class discipline as the most challenging part of the profession (Bezzina, 2006). Most of our students action research title is about student misbehavior. This is also another indication that misbehavior is a concern to practicing student-teachers. Student misbehavior and inability to manage it may force teachers to leave the

profession.

Inability to contact with significant others like families and relatives was ranked as second sources of stress by the participants. This happens due to the fact that student-teachers are assigned to the teacher training program immediately after graduation.

This is not surprising as most of us have passed through ceremonies and parties after graduation. Parents, relatives and the graduates themselves like to enjoy together after graduation. Graduation is one of the most memorable experiences in one's life. In Ethiopia, parents start to save money long before their children graduate. The PGDT program has a very tight time schedule. As one of the students reported, students directly moved to training institutions without any break. This (the time schedule) has to be thought about in the future.

Uncomfortable working environment stressors like shortage and absence of water, electricity, climate and food, were the third stressor for all participants. The participants also raised it many times during the focus group discussions. One of the reasons for reporting poor working environment as sources of stress could be student-teachers expectation. One of the FGD participants stated that the officials from the Ministry of Education and universities told them that they would be assigned to towns where better facilities are avaliable; however, the reality was that they were sent to very remote areas. The other reason could be cultural difference. Most of the student-teachers assigned to eastern part of the country are highlanders. What is right for the practicing teachers' may not be right for the students and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

From the findings, it can be concluded that many practicing student-teachers report high levels of stress. The experience of stress did not significantly differ based on sex, age, fields of study, and geographic locations of student-teachers. Student misbehavior, inability to contact with significant others like families and relatives, and uncomfortable working environment were identified to be the greatest stressors in that order.

IMPLICATIONS

Student-teachers cannot be expected to produce their best work and achieve the objectives of their schools until they have completely adjusted to the work they have to do, the environment in which they are to work, and the colleagues with whom they have to work. It is therefore important to give the student- teachers the best possible start in the teaching profession starting from registration up to practicum activities and teaching practices in schools. Awareness of the problems experienced by student-teachers and addressing such needs improves quality teaching and confidence to the practitioners themselves. The present findings have important implications to different stakeholders in general and teacher training institutes in particular. First, classroom management skill should be highly stressed by training institutions during pre-service teachers training. Second, schools should provided induction programs to student-teachers right from the beginning. The induction needs to include, among other things, school culture, administrative services, work allocation, job requirements and the overall environment of the working area (both physical and social environment). Finally, previous study on guidance and counseling practices of high school students revealed that many schools did not have professional guidance and counselor (Alemu, 2013). Therefore, training institutions,schools and other stakeholders need to design psychological support systems, like assigning school guidance and counselor and training mentors in psychological support skills to adress practicing student-teachers stress.

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