

STRESS ASSOCIATED WITH BEING A STUDENT TEACHER: OPENING OUT THE PERSPECTIVE

DAVID MILLER AND EDNA FRASER

SYNOPSIS

Studies of student teacher stress have focused almost exclusively on the teaching practice placement; this has produced at best a partial picture and may have contributed to an underestimation of the pressures on such individuals. The aim of the current study was to take a more wide-ranging look at the stress and anxiety felt by primary teaching students in the course of their training. A questionnaire survey was followed up by a small number of interviews. It was found that students experience stresses of various types, both on placement and in college. The writers draw attention to high expectations, uncertainty and the emotional aspect of becoming a primary teacher.

INTRODUCTION

The stress and anxiety experienced by student teachers has attracted an increasing amount of attention over the past ten years or so. However, a brief survey of the work in the area immediately reveals that it has focused almost exclusively on the placement experience. While these findings have been very important in highlighting the pressures experienced by individuals in the classroom environment, we may be in danger of taking this helpful but incomplete picture as the whole scene. It may reasonably be asked whether school experience is not just one factor amongst many which may create stress for student teachers. Indeed, many who work in teacher education will recall examples of students who cope very well with teaching practice, but who become distressed by other factors. It is in the interests of creating a more complete picture that the current investigation considers the range of stressors experienced by student teachers in the course of their training.

Historically, studies of stress in educational settings date back to the 1930's (Leach, 1984) although many writers refer to Selye (1956) as being a pioneer of the concept. For Selye, stress was essentially a neutral physiological phenomenon; it could be either beneficial (eustress) or harmful (distress). In the literature on stress in education, as in everyday use, the term tends now to be associated with negative consequences, although it is used in different ways, and with different degrees of precision.

There would appear to be no shortage of definitions of the concept, varying from complex medical explanations concerning physiological responses, to simple one-word statements such as tension or pressure. However, in the literature on stress amongst student teachers few writers actually include a definition of the term; most tend to assume a shared understanding along the lines that stress is an unpleasant emotional state. Although rarely stated, implicit in the reports is the view that stress relates to an imbalance between environmental demand and individual resources; it occurs when the demands placed on an individual exceed that person's ability to cope. Despite the fact that such an interpretation can be criticised as being somewhat simplistic (see, for example, Lazarus, 1999) the approach has an obvious appeal based on 'common sense'. This point will be revisited later.

To further complicate matters, several studies refer to anxiety rather than stress, and some refer to both stress and anxiety, without clarifying the relationship between them. However, they seem to investigate similar phenomena, and there are also

similarities in approach. Perhaps the most obvious is a reliance on student self-report of stress or anxiety, (as opposed to clinical measures of physiological or psychological symptoms). Data are typically collected by questionnaire surveys, interviews or analysis of stress diaries. Although one may have reservations about a reliance on self-report data that are unsupported by observational accounts or medical measures, this 'person-perception' approach certainly appears to be the norm.

Despite these uncertainties about definitions and methodology, it has been possible to build up a relatively coherent picture of the stress and anxiety reported by student teachers. In the following sections the literature is considered under three headings: firstly the experiences of students on school placement, secondly the stress which has been linked to study in higher education, and finally the relationship between individual characteristics and stress.

SCHOOL PLACEMENTS

Studies have been carried out in the UK (see, for example, Hart, 1987; Grant, 1992), and also in other countries, notably the USA (Hourcade, Parette and McCormack, 1988; Abernathy, Manera and Wright 1985), and Canada (Morton, Vesco, Williams and Awender, 1997). Such studies differ in methodology and scale, ranging from the work of Morton *et al.*, whose sample comprised 1000 student teachers, to the report by Bruckerhoff and Carlson (1995), which details a case study of one student.

Although there are some differences in the causal factors identified, recurrent themes in the literature include students' concerns about being evaluated by tutors, and the management of children's behaviour. For example, Hart's (1987) study of 42 student teachers identified four main factors: anxiety related to being evaluated by tutors and teachers, class control, teaching practice requirements (such as keeping the paperwork in the file up-to-date) and pupil and professional concerns (for instance, catering for individual differences). Similar factors were found to be important in a Canadian context by Morton *et al.* (1997), and in Scotland, Macintyre and Tuson (1995) also highlighted stress related to placement evaluation.

The fact that evaluation pressures figure prominently as a major source of stress may be understandable, given that student teachers are assessed more frequently and more rigorously than experienced teachers. Equally, it is not surprising that the management of pupils' behaviour is a source of stress, given what we know about the stress experienced by qualified teachers. (See, for example, Kyriacou, 1987.) In fact, Grant (1992) has argued that such pressures may affect inexperienced individuals such as student teachers more, since they are having to work with someone else's class and are trying to establish their own reputation. The reactions of the subjects in his study included emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, feeling 'persecuted, a failure, physically finished, demoralised, threatened, vulnerable, tearful and self-conscious'. Similar experiences were described by Bruckerhoff and Carlson (1995).

Hourcade *et al.* (1988) comment on 'role-reversal', where student-teachers go from "a relatively passive existence" as a student in college to being an active teacher in the classroom. One may question whether this is something of an oversimplification, given the current nature of initial teacher education courses in many institutions, but nevertheless, role-reversal may be an important issue; indeed, we may ask whether many younger teaching students (often those who begin training immediately upon leaving school) experience another type of role-reversal when they first go out on placement. Many tutors who have worked with first year students will recognise the phenomenon of young people who have difficulty in adopting the perspective of the teacher, and who tend to identify still with the pupils.

In many respects, Grant (1992) sums up school experience placements for many students:

It is clear that students on teaching practice are in a unique position. They are expected to show considerable evidence of the learning that takes place in this short period of time and to do so in a situation which contains varying degrees of uncertainty, ambiguity and, potentially, conflict. (p. 25)

THE ACADEMIC ELEMENT OF THE COURSE

The fact that student teachers experience many stressors in the school environment is well established, but it is important to remember that primary teaching students often spend only a part of their time on placement; the figure is currently in the region of 25% for those on the four-year BEd course. There may be other elements of the professional training which create stress - those elements which relate to pursuing a demanding degree course at university or college. Given the shortage of information in this area, it would be easy to overlook this aspect, or indeed to conclude that the time spent on campus creates little or no stress. However, many who work with such students would question this perspective, and indeed there is some evidence which suggests this may not be the case.

In a recent paper Sumsion (1998) discusses the experiences of two apparently successful student teachers who decide to discontinue their studies in an Australian university. Whilst this is a small sample, the account is interesting because the factors which caused negative feelings and unhappiness in this case were not limited to teaching practice; indeed, it would appear that the placement experiences were quite positive, with both individuals receiving good evaluations while in school. For both students, the workload and the wide-ranging demands were significant factors. In addition, for one of them, the attitudes of tutors and fellow students caused problems, and the author highlights feelings of inadequacy and isolation caused by such factors.

Studies which focus on the experiences of stress amongst students following different university courses provide some helpful leads. Abouserie (1994) investigated sources and levels of stress amongst 675 second-year students at the University of Wales who were following a range of courses including education. He found that students were most affected by stressors related to assessment, particularly examinations and examination results. Other important sources of stress included studying for exams, having too much to do, having a large amount to learn, having a (self-imposed) need to do well, and completing essays or projects. Abouserie also referred to non-academic stressors: for example, financial problems and a lack of time for family and friends. A study by Miller and Fraser (1998) suggested that mature student teachers may be particularly vulnerable in this respect.

Abouserie's work included a measure of the overall level of stress experienced by his subjects. Employing the Professional Life Stress Scale, (devised by Fontana in 1989) his findings suggested that many students experienced moderate or serious levels of stress, and only 12% had no stress problems. In this context, a study by Humphrey *et al.* (1998) into physical and mental health amongst students at Newcastle University (n=956) is also worthy of note. Employing the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) a valid and reliable self-completion instrument, the authors compared their data with those from a national survey, and concluded that their students were more stressed than British people generally.

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it seems reasonable to argue that students following a teaching course at a university or college of education may experience similar pressures. More significantly perhaps, they may have to cope with these in addition to those which they experience on placement.

STRESS AND THE INDIVIDUAL

It is important to acknowledge the consensus amongst many writers on stress that it

is not the environment *per se* that is stressful, but the interaction between the person and the environment. Given this fact it is necessary to recognise that some individuals are more susceptible to the stressors in their environment than their fellow students. The issues which arise from studies here include biographical factors, such as age and gender, and also personality factors, such as self esteem and cognitive style.

For example, both Morton *et al.* (1997) and Abouserie (1994) found evidence that female students tended to be more stressed than males. In relation to age, the picture is not clear, although Miller and Fraser (1998) suggested that older student teachers may experience more stress during their training. Self-esteem and locus of control were found by Abouserie (1994) to relate to levels of stress; students having a high self-esteem tended to be less stressed, as also did those who had internal control beliefs. Morton *et al.* (1997) identified a trait anxiety described as a 'psychological disposition to feel overwhelmed', and this was a good predictor of overall levels of anxiety in their sample. Not surprisingly, studies of experienced teachers have also pointed to the significance of personality factors (see, for example, Fontana & Abouserie, 1993).

Clearly such awareness tends to shift the focus away from the stressors that exist in the environment towards individuals - their subjective interpretation of the situation, and the effectiveness or otherwise of their coping strategies. This is an important area to which we return later, but we are also mindful of the point made by Proctor and Alexander (1992): there are dangers in an over-emphasis on the individual, since this may lead to 'remedies' which focus on the individual's coping strategies and pay insufficient attention to the roles that the organisation and work environment play in the creation of stress. Consequently, the current study focuses on the situational factors and aims to identify the range and relative strength of those stressors identified most frequently by student teachers during the course of their training.

METHODOLOGY

The sample comprised BEd primary teaching students at a Teacher Education Institution in Scotland. Information was gathered by questionnaire survey, with forms being distributed to all undergraduates in May, 1997. In total, 392 individuals responded, representing a return of 63%. The breakdown of this was as follows (year 1 to year 4): 124, 102, 102 and 64. All but 23 of the subjects were female.

The instrument employed was a modified form of the Academic Stress Questionnaire (ASQ) devised by Abouserie, and used at the University of Wales in his 1994 study of second-year university students. This comprised a list of items relating to different aspects of student life, for example, teaching and learning, assessments and their results, and personal and interpersonal factors.

Students were asked to indicate the degree of stress experienced in relation to each item on a scale from 0 to 7, with 0 indicating no stress, and 7 indicating extreme stress. The data were analysed to investigate which of the identified stressors caused the greatest levels of stress overall. Following this it was decided to explore the relationship, if any, between the stressors and factors of age, gender and year of study.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the mean scores for the entire sample; the higher the figure the more stress perceived by the subjects. As can be seen, *assessment of school experience placement by tutors* ($x = 5.75$) was the highest stressor, followed by *unclear assignments* ($x = 5.44$), *working for assignments* ($x = 5.30$), *school experience placement* ($x = 5.12$) and *need to do well - self imposed* ($x = 5.04$). The stressors at

the bottom of the table were *home sickness*, ($x = 1.35$), *conflict with lecturers* ($x = 1.43$) and *loneliness* ($x = 1.58$).

Table 1: Student responses (n=392) to items in the Academic Stress questionnaire: mean scores, rank-ordered.

Stressors	Mean
1. Assessment of school experience by tutors	5.75
2. Unclear assignment	5.44
3. Working for assignments	5.30
4. School experience placement	5.12
5. Need to do well (self imposed)	5.04
6. Timing/spacing of assignments	4.92
7. Assessment of school experience by schools	4.86
8. Too much to do	4.79
9. Assessment results	4.75
10. Unclear course objectives	4.31
11. Financial problems	4.30
12. Worry over future	4.28
13. Need to do well (imposed by others)	3.95
14. Lack of time for family/friends	3.79
15. Lack of time for study	3.77
16. Lack of time for own interests	3.60
17. Amount to learn	3.54
18. Knowing what is important to study	3.31
19. Forgotten assignment	3.17
20. Family crisis	3.12
21. Making choices about career	2.82
22. Learning new skills	2.81
23. Boring classes	2.80
24. Uninteresting curriculum	2.78
25. Conflict with people you live with	2.74
26. Interpersonal difficulties	2.64
27. Conflict with college system	2.51
28. Non-assessed coursework	2.35
29. Personal health problems	2.19
30. Peer pressures	1.92
31. Problems with housing	1.81
32. Conflict with peer(s)	1.73
33. Conflict with spouse/partner	1.62
34. Loneliness	1.58
35. Conflict with lecturers	1.43
36. Home Sickness	1.35

Looking at the pattern evident in Table 1 it can be seen that those stressors which relate to the academic aspects of the student experience tend to be rated more highly than those which reflect personal or interpersonal worries. In particular it is apparent that many of the top 10 stressors relate to assessment or evaluation of students, either directly or indirectly. It is also possible to identify clusters of items. For example, numbers 1, 4 and 7 all relate to school experience; items ranked 2, 3, 6 and 9 concern the assessment within college; a cluster of items relating to time pressures can be seen with numbers 8, 14, 15, 16 and 17 (some of these relate to course experiences, but others to non-academic concerns); and motivational factors are reflected in 5 and 13. Items ranked 2 and 10 would suggest that uncertainty is an important factor.

A factor analysis was carried out on the data, employing the Varimax method with Kaiser normalisation; this produced 9 orthogonal factors which were consistent with the clusters which had been identified on a theoretical basis. This tends to confirm the view that the stress experienced by students does not have its source in one location, or in one aspect of the student teacher experience.

ANOVA was employed to investigate the relationship between students' stress levels as reflected in their AS scores and variables of age, gender and year of study. Of these only gender proved significant: the mean total score for females (n=369) was 123, and for males (n=23) 103 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that females tended to be more stressed overall than did the males.

It is interesting to compare these results with Abouserie's study of students following a range of undergraduate courses; the overall patterns of stressors are very similar, with both studies indicating the importance of academic stressors as opposed to personal and interpersonal problems (see Abouserie 1994, p. 327). In addition, the range of scores is not dissimilar, with means ranging from 1.07 to 5.56 in Abouserie's study, and 1.35 to 5.75 in this investigation. This would appear to suggest that the student teachers in this sample are affected by stress factors in a broadly similar way to students following degree courses in other disciplines.

Certainly what differentiates the individuals in the current study from many other students is the stress which is associated with placement experiences. Perhaps predictably, the three items relating to school experience placements are rated highly as stressors. However, it is important to note that these are not ranked in the first three places; other stressors, notably those related to assessment within college, are important too.

Indeed, one might reasonably argue that the most noteworthy aspect of the data is the number of highly-ranked items related to assessment or evaluation. If this is a fair interpretation, then it suggests a different perspective on student teacher stress. Although the literature discussed earlier views placement experiences as being the main focus, with assessment or evaluation as being just one component of the experience, the current data tend to focus our attention on assessment itself being a principal factor, and the placement being one of the locations where this assessment stress is experienced. In this respect student teachers may be unusual in that they have to cope with assessment in two different contexts, playing two different roles. As we shall see, there appears to be a strong personal element to this.

One noteworthy finding was the element of uncertainty which was reflected in items ranked 2 (*unclear assignment*) and 10 (*unclear course objectives*). Uncertainty has been commented upon by various authors in relation to placement experiences; however, the current findings would suggest that such uncertainty is not limited to the placement.

In order to explore further this concern, and other issues raised by the questionnaire data, it was decided to conduct a small number of interviews with students (n=12). Because of the numbers involved, and the fact that the participants

were not selected as a representative sample (having volunteered to participate) it would be unsound to generalise from the comments. Nonetheless, the responses are worthwhile insofar as they provide some illustrative material, and suggest possible issues for consideration. In a semi-structured situation, views were sought on a range of issues; these included the particular aspects of school experience which they found most stressful, experiences of stress beyond the school placement, the role played by assessment in the creation of stress and examples of uncertainty experienced on the course. The responses provided helpful material; some of this was consistent with issues identified in the literature, but there were noteworthy aspects which pointed towards factors not widely reported.

Placement experiences

Comments from students related to the pressures of the placement experience, in particular the heavy workload and the uncertainties which can make or break a placement. Many referred to the effort involved and the sacrifices made to gain the best possible grade. Family, friends and other interests have to take second place:

Basically your life's on hold for 6 weeks when you're out.

One element which was reflected in the responses was the uncertainty which surrounds the placement experience.

There are many uncertainties: the relationship with the teacher, the children's behaviour - it's also a matter of luck with the tutor you get.

The questionnaire data had indicated that assessment by the visiting tutor was more stressful than assessment by school staff. Comments from interviewees pointed to the limited 'snapshot' view which the tutor takes away from an hour or so in the classroom:

It [the observed lesson] can be the best or worst hour of your whole experience, but you're going to be judged solely on this hour ... the teacher is judging you over the six weeks.

Assessment by the tutor is much worse. The teacher sees you taking on board things and developing, but with the tutor it's such a short period of time.

On some placements, the fact that students receive visits from two different tutors can help to overcome this problem, and provide a more complete view of the student's development. However, this in itself can create extra uncertainties:

A lot depends on which tutors you get. Sometimes the two tutors' views vary and you get mixed messages. There is a big stress factor - you put your life and soul into it to get your A - but then another tutor has got different criteria. It's very personal - you act on the advice of one tutor, and another marks you down.

In fact, the differences in views held, and in criteria applied by different tutors were to reappear in another context.

Stress within college

The main issue raised by the respondents here concerned the workload, and in particular the assessment elements. The volume of work (as distinct from the academic level) was commented on frequently, and particularly the number and the timing of assignments. In some years of the course students felt there was no 'breathing space' between assignments, and the situation was exacerbated by

the fact that they often had unassessed tasks to carry out in addition to the formal assessments:

It's like a conveyor belt - getting one bit out of the way, and saying, now what's next?

There are no slack periods to get myself organised for the next bit. The assignments are spaced out, but there are all these other tasks - presentations and things to do.

Some students recognised that such a pattern affected the quality of their work:

At times you feel burnt out - like at this time of year! I've just handed in an assignment, but know I'd have done it better earlier on in the term.

I was so annoyed afterwards [ie when the script was returned] when I saw how many spelling mistakes and referencing errors I'd made - it was because I was so stressed out.

The uncertainty, previously identified in relation to placements, seemed also to be a significant factor in relation to assignments:

There are some very ambiguous assignments handed out.

Uncertainty is a big thing - uncertainty about what is expected for tasks.

It would appear that in some cases the problem relates to the wording of tasks, and one might reasonably expect students to seek clarification from tutors. Comments from interviewees though indicated that speaking to tutors did not always resolve the problem, and sometimes they received different messages from different people:

It's worse when everyone has been to see tutors and got different messages - it's clear that even tutors can't agree.

Such a situation may be more likely to occur when synoptic assignments are set (that is, where a given assessment task attempts to sample students' abilities or performance across a range of different learning experiences), and where tutors with different subject specialisms offer different perspectives on a given assignment task. A problem then develops when students who have sought advice from tutors get together to compare notes, and become aware of differences; this clearly results in greater uncertainty, and feelings of anxiety. Some students identified the role of the informal networks in this process:

The grapevine doesn't help. People are not sure, so they talk a lot about it - mixed messages circulate.

Occasionally individuals chose to avoid this situation by refusing to discuss assignments with the larger group, believing that the 'grapevine' itself is the problem:

It's the informal networks ... they exaggerate fears; fears are fed upon in college.

The emotional experience

During the course of the interviews the strong emotional element which seemed to accompany students' experiences on the course was highlighted. This was most apparent when discussing school experience placements:

When you get in the door [at night] you just burst into tears, because you're so drained - you're on a complete emotional roller-coaster.

Apart from the normal pressures of the classroom environment, it became clear that there was another factor here: many students interpreted negative feedback on their classroom performance as being personal criticism of them as individuals.

It's hurtful. You get over it after a few days ... it's your teaching skills - yes - but it's *you* that's being attacked.

I took it all personally ... I didn't want to go back. It's a personal thing - if you don't get the best mark you feel a failure.

Some students, despite being physically affected, were able to maintain a sense of perspective on the whole experience:

I was physically sick for two days before it - the demands are so great. In some ways I could cope because I am a strong person - I could look at myself and say 'this is happening to me' and I could do something about it. But some people can't do that.

Others found their self-esteem and motivation suffered greatly:

You know your self-esteem will suffer. You know you'll be criticised, even though you're putting your all into it.

It's very difficult to motivate yourself if you've had bad feedback - to pick yourself up again. It's very much like it's an attack on you - I actually passed, but I spent a week pulling myself apart afterwards.

The message was quite consistent from those interviewed, but it does raise the question of why students take the evaluation of their teaching skills so personally. At a very basic level, it may simply be that when individuals have put as much effort as possible into their performance, and have (in many cases) had to make sacrifices to do this, they are particularly sensitive to criticism. At times there is even a feeling of helplessness:

What else can I do? I go in at 8.00. I go home at 6.00. I eat my tea over the computer, and don't get to bed till late.

But apart from this very natural response, there is another possible explanation which relates to the culture of the developing primary teacher. A significant factor may be the model of a teacher which is presented to the students, fairly consistently, throughout the four years of the course. From the first few days of year 1, even those students who do not arrive with a sense of vocation begin to be aware of the expected personal commitment to the values of primary teaching. They learn that becoming a teacher is much more than learning a set of technical skills; the notion of teaching as a moral endeavour is strong, and they are expected to embody the values and beliefs of primary education. For many, their personal and professional identities begin to merge, (see Nias, 1989 for a discussion of this); once this process has begun, criticism directed at professional competence can become interpreted as a criticism of the individual herself. (In an interesting parallel, this phenomenon is also identified by Jeffrey and Woods (1996) in relation to experienced teachers who were involved in an OFSTED inspection.)

Providing the demands are seen as realistic and achievable, individuals may feel able to cope, but if we add into the equation the fact that there are very high expectations of individuals, then the risk of *personal* failure becomes very real. Unfortunately, some students commented upon what they saw as the unrealistic expectations of certain tutors:

College creates an unrealistic ideal of what a primary teacher is ... then you feel a failure because you don't achieve it.

Some supervising teachers were also seen as being over-critical:

The class teacher had such high expectations of you. She made you feel you couldn't cope, no matter how hard you tried. You are always trying to be the best you can - but you're falling short.

It was suggested by some students that the current emphasis on self-evaluation and reflection actually contributes to the problems experienced, since students were constantly being encouraged to critically analyse their performance:

You do a lot of reflecting on issues. You pick up all the negative points - and it's hard to focus on the positive ... it's demoralising.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The analysis of the questionnaire data indicated that these students face a variety of stressors, experienced in two different locations while fulfilling two different roles. In addition to the stressors which are experienced on placement, we must consider those which are related to the academic part of the course. This leads us to suggest that previous studies of student teachers may have underestimated the overall levels of stress experienced.

The (limited) qualitative data have suggested some ways in which uncertainty is created and how it develops, despite well-intentioned attempts to dispel it. Such uncertainty plays a central role in the creation of stress because it can undermine the belief of individuals that they are in control of their own progress. The link between locus of control and levels of stress in educational settings is well established (Fisher, 1994) and this would appear to be a central issue. Obviously, a degree of uncertainty in the teaching environment is unavoidable, and indeed managing this is one of the biggest challenges facing any teacher. However, this makes it particularly important to ensure that extra uncertainty is not created by the way the course is presented and managed.

In terms of practical changes, one important step would be to address the element of luck which students believe to be an inevitable part of 'crit' visits; this would help to ensure that the evaluation of teaching performance is perceived as being more realistic and objective. Morton *et al* (1997) are not the first to suggest that 'an evaluation philosophy is worth developing to assure students of a fair, objective and psychometrically sound evaluation.' This will not be easy, of course; most tutors who have been involved with the evaluation of students on placement are very aware of the inherent difficulties when trying to be objective, (or more realistically, fair) while taking into account a wide variety of contextual variables. Certainly we would not wish to understate the difficulty of such a task; however, the clarification and sharing of expectations, and greater consistency of approach by tutors would be suitable starting points.

Building upon the positive partnership agreements which often exist between schools and teacher education institutions, it may be worth thinking about how schools can be involved in addressing these problems. One possibility is the development of complementary assessment of student teaching performance. According to this model, school staff and tutors would assess different aspects of a student's performance, and the evaluations would be combined to provide an overall teaching mark. Such an approach has merit in that essentially tutor and teacher are seeing the student's performance in different ways; to employ a simplistic analogy, we could contrast the tutor's snapshot with the teacher's video recording. However, there is more to it than this, since teacher and tutor both have background knowledge which inevitably influences judgements about the merit of a student's performance. School staff are better informed about, and possibly more influenced

by, the contextual variables; they have more opportunity to witness personal and professional growth, and generally have a more complete picture of how the student fits into the day-to-day life of the school. Quite naturally (and indeed, helpfully) their evaluation of the student's performance reflects such knowledge.

On the other hand, the tutor may be particularly interested in how the students are able to articulate their thinking and to justify teaching and learning in terms of currently accepted theory. Tutors may also have an overview of how students are performing relative to their peers, or to some other benchmarks. Both perspectives are legitimate, but both are undoubtedly limited; by combining the two a more complete picture may be created. Importantly, in terms of reducing stress, students should be involved in the development of such a scheme, in order to help ensure their perceptions of validity are taken into account.

In relation to academic studies too, attention should be paid to the dangers of ambiguity and uncertainty, particularly in relation to assessment. Decisions made about assessment policy inevitably reflect many issues related to course aims, structure and content; however, perhaps the issues raised in this study (some of which relate to the reliability and validity of assessment) should also be considered when deciding upon strategies. Certainly one possible area for critical scrutiny is the use of synoptic assignments, particularly when tasks are of a cross-curricular nature, and are marked by lecturers with different academic specialisms. A final point in relation to the reduction of ambiguity, given the inevitability of informal student networks, would be for course teams to review carefully the documentation and support offered to students.

Tutor attitudes are obviously of central importance. In fact the hegemony of teacher educators is worthy of investigation, because of its effects on how students interpret and internalise their roles; as we have suggested above, this may be a factor that influences levels of stress. In practice, informal discussions with colleagues would appear to indicate that some tutors consider stress and burnout as inevitable - even desirable - consequences of the process of becoming a primary teacher: something akin to a rite of passage perhaps. Therein may lie the greatest danger, and tutors might benefit from greater knowledge about the stress currently experienced by their students. Most importantly, they should be helped to develop a greater awareness of the emotional risk involved to the individual student, the threat to self-esteem and personal identity.

From the point of view of course managers, there is a temptation to look for quick solutions - a module or two that can be incorporated into the course - and there are many worthwhile possibilities. Stephenson (1995) suggests work on self-management skills and relaxation techniques. Esteve (1989) outlines several techniques, including one called Stress Inoculation Training; this is a process of gradually building up the student's ability to cope with stressful experiences by controlled exposure to potentially threatening situations. Particularly interesting is Abouserie's (1994) suggestion of enhancing levels of self-esteem as a way to help students to cope. However, although the incorporation of such materials into the teacher education curriculum is to be encouraged, by limiting a response to such provision we are in danger of focusing on the symptoms and ignoring the cause. The way forward has to be based upon a greater understanding of how this stress is created, not simply reducing its effects.

Finally, a statement from one of the interviewees would appear to highlight the question of motivation. The individual concerned was known to be conscientious, and widely believed to be enthusiastic about the course and about teaching. But she left with the words:

I made a promise to my mother before she died that I'd finish the course - so I'll do that. But as for enjoying it ...

Having worked with primary teaching students for many years, we are inclined to the view that, in practice, it may be the most conscientious students who are at greatest risk: those who have internalised the role of the primary teacher and who try to live up to the ideal. At the risk of oversimplification, it may be the best that suffer most.

It may be significant that work with experienced teachers has indicated a similar phenomenon; in their study of teachers undergoing inspection, Jeffrey and Woods (1996) point out that the more professional and dedicated the teachers were, the more they seemed to suffer emotional distress. What this does, of course, is to raise again the issue of individual differences in response to stressful situations. Although the current study has helped to identify situational stressors - events and experiences on the course which students tended to find most stressful - in order to move forward in our understanding it may be necessary to change our approach, and look more carefully at the meaning which specific events have for individuals.

According to Lazarus (1999) the process of appraisal is central to this; this is effectively an individual's perception of his or her ability to cope with a given situation, and there are two elements to consider here. A primary appraisal essentially considers the question 'is this worthy of my attention and mobilising my resources?' It is bound up with values, goal commitments and beliefs, and focuses on the possibility of harm, threat or challenge. A secondary appraisal asks 'what can be done to cope?'; it relates to issues of confidence and self-efficacy. From this perspective, it is not difficult to appreciate why individuals differ in the way in which they experience stress. Significantly, a focus on appraisal should allow greater understanding of the ways in which *potentially* stressful situations in teacher education cause *actual* emotional distress.

CONCLUSION

In essence, this study has helped us to open out the perspective on student teacher stress, by moving beyond the partial picture painted by previous studies which looked at placement experiences alone. It suggests to us that student teachers may be under more pressure than was previously thought. The interviews have highlighted some important factors, in particular uncertainty and the emotional intensity of the experiences, and have raised some important questions about the ways in which students experience their courses.

We believe the focus should now shift towards a critical examination of the complete teacher education experience from the perspective of the student, concentrating on emotional aspects and subjective interpretation. As Sumsion (1998) suggests:

[...] an understanding of student teachers' emotional frames of reference and their epistemological perspectives might assist teacher educators to become more sensitive to students' emotional well-being. In turn, this might alleviate some of the emotional distress which can accompany learning to teach (p. 245)

Moving from a generalised or 'common-sense' view of stress to a clearer focus on individual appraisal should allow us to do this more effectively.

Teacher educators, in common with most professionals today, are under increasing pressure to 'produce the goods'; this currently means ensuring individuals can demonstrate the government's competences for beginning teachers in the classroom. Even from that limited perspective we should be asking whether the stress and anxiety experienced on our courses encourages the development of competent, caring and reflective teachers - or whether individuals succeed despite it.

To us, it seems self-evident that increased understanding of student-teacher stress will help us to 'improve the product'. But, as educators ourselves, we must remember that our courses may have an effect on students far beyond the development of pedagogical skill; their personal identity and sense of self-worth may be very vulnerable. If teaching is a moral endeavour then there is a moral issue for us here too.

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