



STRESS, WELL-BEING, AND SUPPORT NEEDS IN TEACHER TRAINING: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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Abstract

Pre-service teachers (PSTs) often experience high and escalating levels of stress during their training, which can negatively impact psychological well-being and future career sustainability. This study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design to assess the stress management and well-being needs of PSTs. Phase 1 involved semi-structured interviews with PSTs, in-service teachers, school administrators, and teacher preparation program directors (N=20) to identify key themes. Phase 2 used a national survey (N=412; valid n=282) to quantify stressors and preferred support strategies based on Phase 1 findings. Quantitative results revealed a significant increase in stress from Year 1 (M=7.10) to Year 2 (M=7.78), with $t(280)=-4.14, p<.001$. The stress scale demonstrated strong psychometric validity (KMO=0.81, Bartlett's $\chi^2=1246.38, p<.001$). Qualitative analysis identified three core stressors: classroom management anxiety, administrative/workload pressures, and emotional labor. Participants expressed strong support for integrated stress management training embedded within the teacher education curriculum, focused on self-care, emotional regulation, time management, mindfulness, and conflict resolution. Results highlight the critical importance of proactively embedding structured well-being support in teacher preparation programs to prevent burnout, build resilience, and enhance long-term professional preparedness and retention.

Key words : Pre-service teachers, Teacher stress, Well-being, Stress management, Emotional labor, Resilience training, Mindfulness, Teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is widely acknowledged as a high-stress profession, characterized by considerable emotional and psychological demands (Kyriacou, 2001). An extensive body of research demonstrates the significant toll that both training and professional practice exert on educators' well-being. Alarming, teacher attrition rates remain high globally, with chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout consistently linked to early career exit

(Dicke et al., 2014; McLean & Connor, 2015). Pre-service teachers (PSTs) face a confluence of unique challenges that may increase their vulnerability. These include the high-stakes pressure of practicum placements, rigorous academic coursework, and the complex transition from student to professional, all of which can precipitate heightened levels of anxiety, stress, and diminished well-being (Gardner, 2010).

Despite compelling evidence on the detrimental impact of chronic stress, teacher preparation programs have traditionally focused heavily on developing pedagogical content knowledge and instructional skills, often providing limited systematic support for stress management and well-being strategies (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Consequently, PSTs risk entering the profession without adequate preparation for the significant emotional labor inherent in classroom environments—managing their own emotions while responding to the needs of students, parents, and colleagues (Hargreaves, 2001). This gap in preparation underscores a critical disconnect between the realities of the teaching profession and the scope of conventional teacher education.

This research addresses a salient gap in the literature by employing a mixed-methods approach to holistically assess PSTs' self-identified stressors, current coping mechanisms, and explicit support preferences. By integrating the perspectives of multiple stakeholders such as including PSTs, in-service teachers, administrators, and program directors, the study aims to move beyond merely documenting stress levels. Its central aim is to generate actionable, evidence-based insights that can inform teacher education programs in developing targeted interventions. Ultimately, the goal is to promote psychological resilience, enhance professional well-being, and contribute to greater long-term career sustainability for the next generation of educators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research consistently shows that stress is a significant concern for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Classroom management difficulties, workload pressures, and administrative demands contribute substantially to teacher stress (Dicke et al., 2014). In PSTs, these stressors often emerge during practicum placements, where expectations intersect with real classroom challenges, leading to heightened anxiety and decreased self-efficacy.

Studies indicate that chronic teacher stress is a predictor of burnout, with emotional exhaustion being a leading factor in career attrition (McLean & Connor, 2015). Importantly, psychological resilience and well-being have been linked to improved teacher outcomes, including job satisfaction and retention. Interventions such as mindfulness and emotional intelligence training have shown promise in reducing stress and enhancing coping capacity (Klingbeil & Renshaw, 2018; Vesely, Saklofske, & Nordstokke, 2014).

Despite the significance of these findings, research exploring PSTs' self-identified support needs remains limited, particularly in large, national samples. This study therefore contributes to the field by integrating multistakeholder perspectives to prioritize intervention strategies aligned with PSTs' lived experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design to comprehensively investigate pre-service teachers' stress management and well-being needs. This approach involved two phases: initial qualitative interviews with stakeholders to identify key themes, followed by a quantitative national survey based on those findings. This design allowed for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences before generalizing and measuring the phenomena across a larger PST population, ensuring the research was both richly detailed and broadly applicable.

Research Design

This study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design to comprehensively investigate the stress management and well-being needs of pre-service teachers (PSTs). This two-phase approach was selected to first gather rich, contextual insights from key stakeholders through qualitative interviews. The findings from this initial phase were then used to inform the development of a second, quantitative phase involving a national survey. The sequential design allowed for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences and perceptions, which were subsequently quantified and generalized to a larger population, ensuring the research questions were addressed with both depth and breadth.

Phase 1: Qualitative Component

Participants and Procedure: The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with a total of twenty (N = 20) participants to capture multiple perspectives within the educational ecosystem. The sample consisted of eight (8) pre-service teachers (PSTs), six (6) in-service teachers, three (3) school administrators, and three (3) directors of teacher preparation programs. Interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of the primary stressors faced by PSTs, the coping strategies currently employed, and their recommendations for potential support and intervention strategies. All interview sessions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy for analysis.

Data Analysis: The transcribed interview data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach with an inductive coding process. This involved repeatedly reading the transcripts to identify, code, and analyze recurring patterns and themes related to stress experiences, coping mechanisms, and support needs, without imposing a pre-existing framework.

Phase 2: Quantitative Component

Participants and Instrument: Building on the themes identified in Phase 1, a quantitative online survey was developed and distributed nationally to PSTs across Canada. From an initial yield of 412 responses, a cleaned dataset of 282 valid responses was analyzed, comprising 138 PSTs in their first year and 144 in their second year of training. The survey instrument included Likert-scale items designed to measure the intensity of anticipated stressors and the perceived usefulness of existing support strategies. It also contained items assessing preferences

for the delivery methods of stress management training (e.g., workshops, online modules, integration into core curriculum) and collected basic demographic information.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize overall stress levels and support preferences. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare mean stress scores between first-year and second-year PSTs. Furthermore, to assess the validity and suitability of the stress scale for factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were employed.

ANALYSIS

Data analysis followed the study's sequential design. Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically to identify core stress and support themes. Quantitative survey data were analyzed statistically, using descriptive statistics, t-tests to compare stress between program years, and psychometric tests to validate the stress scale, integrating insights for a comprehensive understanding.

Validity test

Table 1 *Validity of Stress Scale*

Measure	Value	Interpretation
KMO Measure	0.81	Sampling adequacy – Meritorious
Bartlett's χ^2	1246.38	Significant
df	190	—
p	< .001	Factor analysis appropriate

Table 1 indicates the validity assessment confirms the stress scale is psychometrically sound. A KMO value of 0.81 indicates "meritorious" sampling adequacy, and a significant Bartlett's Test ($\chi^2 = 1246.38$, $p < .001$) shows strong item correlations, justifying the use of factor analysis.

Discriptive Profile

Table 2 *Descriptive statistics of stress among teacher trainees*

Year	Sample Size (n)	Mean Stress	SD	Min	Max
Year 1	138	7.10	1.44	4.26	9.70
Year 2	144	7.78	1.32	5.48	10.00
Overall	282	7.45	1.39	4.26	10.00

Table 2 indicates the data show stress increases with training progression. Year 2 trainees ($M=7.78$) reported significantly higher stress than Year 1 ($M=7.10$), with an overall mean of 7.45 across 282 trainees, confirming stress is prevalent and escalates during preparation.

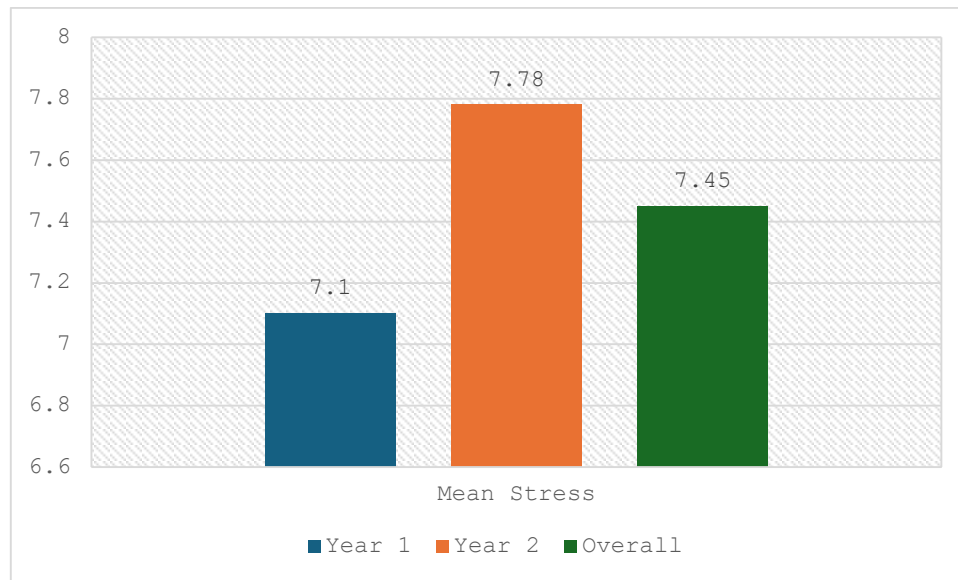


Figure 1 Descriptive statistics of stress among teacher trainee

T Test

Table 3 Independent Samples t-test Comparing Stress Levels Between Year 1 and Year 2 Teacher Trainees

Variable	I Year	II Year	t-value	df	p-value
Stress Mean	7.10	7.78	-4.14	280	<0.001
SD	1.44	1.32			
Mean Difference	-0.68				

Table 3 indicates the independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in stress levels between Year 1 and Year 2 teacher trainees, $t(280) = -4.14, p < 0.001$. Year 2 trainees reported a significantly higher mean stress score ($M = 7.78, SD = 1.32$) compared to Year 1 trainees ($M = 7.10, SD = 1.44$), with a mean difference of -0.68.

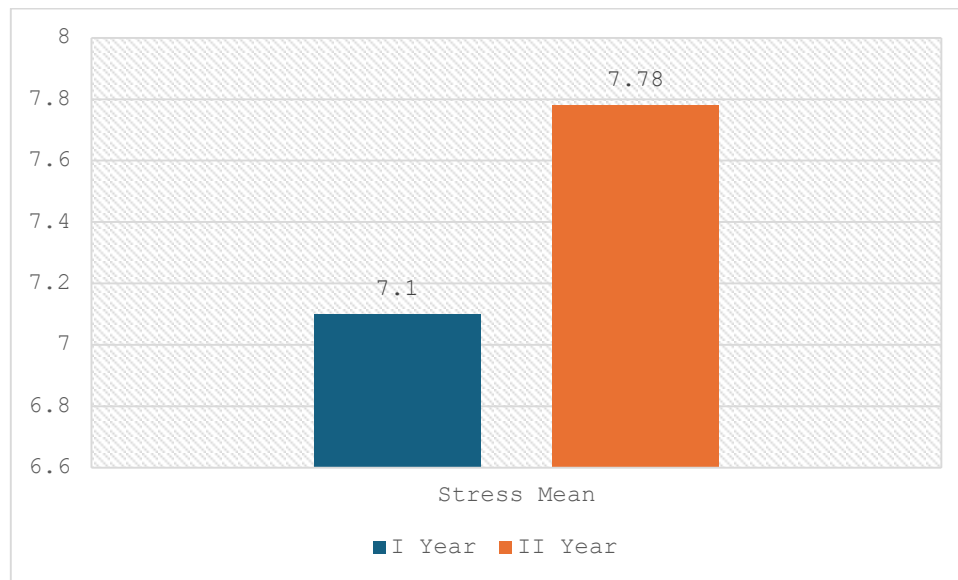


Figure Stress Levels Between Year 1 and Year 2 Teacher Trainees

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data was conducted to identify core patterns in participants' experiences of stress and well-being. Using an inductive approach, transcripts were systematically coded to uncover recurring concerns and shared perspectives. This process yielded five central themes that provide an in-depth, narrative understanding of the challenges pre-service teachers face, how they currently cope, and their explicit preferences for institutional support, thereby contextualizing the quantitative findings.

Classroom Management Stress

This theme captures the intense anxiety pre-service teachers (PSTs) feel about maintaining order and fostering a productive learning environment. PSTs expressed worry over disruptive student behavior, enforcing rules, and keeping students engaged. This stress often stems from the gap between theoretical classroom management strategies learned in coursework and the unpredictable, real-world dynamics of an actual classroom during practicum placements. The fear of losing control or failing to establish authority was a recurring concern, directly impacting their confidence and perceived readiness for the profession.

Administrative and Workload Pressures

This theme highlights the overwhelming burden created by the competing demands of teacher training. PSTs reported feeling stretched thin by the combination of rigorous academic coursework, lesson planning, assignment deadlines, and the responsibilities of their practicum placements. The sheer volume of tasks—often with overlapping timelines led to feelings of being constantly behind and unable to perform any single role effectively. This pressure was compounded by the high expectations of both university programs and mentor teachers, creating a pervasive sense of being overwhelmed.

Emotional Labor

Emotional labor refers to the psychological effort required to manage one's own emotions and respond appropriately to the emotions of students, mentors, and others. PSTs described the strain of having to project confidence, patience, and enthusiasm even when feeling anxious, frustrated, or insecure. This included navigating sensitive student interactions, managing personal stress during observed evaluations, and investing emotionally in student success. The theme underscores that teaching is not only an intellectual and managerial job but also an emotionally demanding one, for which many PSTs feel unprepared.

Coping Strategies

This theme summarizes the ways PSTs currently attempt to manage their stress, which were largely found to be informal, reactive, and self-directed. Common strategies included seeking casual support from peers in their cohort, engaging in self-education (like listening to teaching-related podcasts), and practicing sporadic self-care activities. The absence of formal, structured, or universally taught coping mechanisms within their programs was notable. This reliance on peer networks and personal initiative suggests that while resilience exists, it is not systematically developed by their training institutions.

Support Preferences

Perhaps the most actionable theme, this reflects a clear and strong consensus on the desired form of future support. Participants across stakeholder groups (PSTs, in-service teachers, administrators, and program directors) advocated for structured, proactive, and integrated training within the core teacher education curriculum. They emphasized moving beyond optional, one-off workshops to mandatory modules that build competencies in areas directly linked to their identified stressors: emotional regulation, time management, mindfulness, conflict resolution, and sustainable self-care. This preference signals a demand for institutional responsibility in fostering well-being as a core component of professional preparation.

Discussion of Findings

This study provides a comprehensive, mixed methods understanding of the escalating stress experienced by pre-service teachers (PSTs) and their corresponding support needs. The quantitative findings confirm a significant and meaningful increase in stress as trainees progress from Year 1 ($M = 7.10$) to Year 2 ($M = 7.78$) of their program, aligning with the literature that identifies the practicum as a period of heightened anxiety and real-world challenge. This escalation underscores that stress is not a static condition but intensifies with greater professional responsibility and exposure to classroom complexity.

The qualitative themes offer a nuanced explanation for this quantitative trend. The primary stressors identified—Classroom Management Stress, Administrative and Workload Pressures, and Emotional Labor—form a triad of demands that converge during training. The anxiety over disruptive behavior highlights a critical gap between pedagogical theory and practical application, while the overwhelming workload reflects a structural issue within

teacher education programs. Most poignantly, the theme of emotional labor reveals an often-overlooked dimension of preparation: PSTs are required to perform significant psychological work for which they receive little formal guidance. The Coping Strategies theme further emphasizes this institutional gap, showing that PSTs rely on informal peer support and self-directed learning rather than on evidence-based techniques systematically taught within their curriculum.

Crucially, the Support Preferences theme directly addresses this gap by providing a clear mandate from stakeholders. The strong consensus for structured, curriculum-embedded training in emotional regulation, mindfulness, time management, and conflict resolution offers a direct blueprint for intervention. This preference moves beyond treating well-being as an optional adjunct and reframes it as a core professional competency necessary for sustainability. These findings collectively argue that teacher preparation must evolve to explicitly equip PSTs with the psychological tools to manage the very stressors the training process induces, thereby fostering resilience from the outset of their careers.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the study's findings, here are the Conclusions presented in clear points:

1. **Stress is Prevalent and Escalates:** Pre-service teachers (PSTs) experience high and significantly increasing levels of stress as they progress through their training, with Year 2 trainees reporting notably higher stress than those in Year 1.
2. **Stressors are Multifaceted:** PST stress arises from three core, interconnected sources: anxiety over classroom management, overwhelming administrative and workload pressures, and the unacknowledged psychological toll of emotional labor.
3. **Current Coping is Informal and Insufficient:** PSTs predominantly rely on informal, self-directed, and peer-based coping strategies, indicating a significant gap in structured, institutional support for building resilience and well-being.
4. **Strong Demand for Integrated Support:** There is a clear and strong consensus among all stakeholders that effective support must be proactive, structured, and embedded directly into the core teacher education curriculum, rather than offered as optional workshops.
5. **Teacher Education Programs Need to Adapt:** The findings underscore an urgent need for teacher preparation programs to systematically integrate training in stress management, emotional regulation, mindfulness, and time management to equip PSTs with essential skills for long-term career sustainability.
6. **Investing in Well-being is an Investment in Retention:** Proactively addressing PST well-being during training is a critical strategy to reduce burnout risk, enhance professional preparedness, and improve long-term teacher retention.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Integrate well-being into the core curriculum with mandatory modules on stress management, mindfulness, and emotional regulation.
2. Provide dedicated support during practicums through workshops and reflective sessions to address real-time classroom stress.
3. Establish formal mentorship networks connecting PSTs with peers and experienced teachers for ongoing support.
4. Frame resilience as a core teaching competency and allocate specific resources (funding, staff) to well-being initiatives.
5. Conduct longitudinal research to evaluate the long-term impact of these supports on teacher retention and burnout.

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