Stress Management for Student Teachers in the Practicum

Abstract

For many student teachers practicum is a source of considerable stress. If not managed effectively, high levels of stress can detract from the quality of the practicum experience. Suggestions from the literature concerning ways of reducing student teacher stress focus mostly on changes to the practicum context, structure and requirements. In contrast, this paper reports on an exploratory study which investigated
the feasibility of teacher educators assisting student teachers to manage stress associated with practicum through the development of stress management skills. The study involved an intervention program which was conducted over a six week period prior to the commencement of the student teachers' second practicum. Thirteen student teachers completed the program, which concentrated on the use of relaxation and visualisation techniques.

To ascertain the impact of the program a range of qualitative and quantitative data, including group interview transcripts and pre and post practicum surveys, was collected from participants. Although the results need to be interpreted with caution, they suggest that the intervention had a positive outcome.

The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the methodological, ethical and pedagogical issues which arose for the teacher educators who conducted this pilot stress management program.

Introduction
Practicum is a source of considerable stress for many student teachers (McGee, Oliver & Carstensen, 1994; Edwards, 1993; Fogarty & Yarrow, 1993; MacDonald, 1993, 1992; Regan, 1991; Jelinek 1986; Bowers, Eichner & Sachs, 1983; Sinclair & Nicholl, 1981). Typical stressors include heavy demands on student teachers' time and energy; completing written requirements; conforming to mistrusted practices; understanding the cooperating teacher's expectations; being evaluated; fear of not fulfilling self-expectations; establishing a positive relationship with the cooperating teacher and university adviser; and managing difficult behaviour in the classroom (Edwards, 1993; MacDonald, 1993; Sinclair & Nicholl, 1981).

Described usually as a response to a threatening or challenging situation or environment (Franks, 1994), stress may involve self doubt, anxiety, fear and anger. It is often accompanied by physical symptoms such as muscular tension, headaches and exhaustion (Fry, 1995). Although excessive or prolonged stress can impact negatively on
professional performance and role satisfaction, stress itself is not necessarily harmful. Managed effectively, stress can enhance motivation and effort, thus contributing to professional growth and development (Jelinek, 1986). By assisting student teachers to develop strategies for managing stress associated with practicum, teacher educators may be able to more effectively support student teachers' growth and development. They may also be able to alleviate the increasingly serious phenomenon of teacher burnout in the early years of teaching (Greer & Greer, 1992).

A brief review of the literature
Teacher stress is a widely recognised problem. Yet, surprisingly little attention is given in the teacher education literature to stress management programs for student teachers (Greer & Greer, 1992). In this respect, preservice teacher education lags behind preservice programs for health professionals, which commonly include stress management components (See for example, Kushnir, Malkinson & Ribak, 1994; Michie & Sandhus, 1994). In teacher education, suggested solutions for stress engendered by practicum centre on changing environmental factors in the practicum context to reduce the stress likely to be experienced. Typical recommendations include changes to practicum organisation and more explicit guidelines for all parties involved in practicum (Fogarty & Yarrow, 1993); revising expectations about the amount of written recording required of student teachers and more open discussion of ways to resolve dilemmas associated with mistrusted practices (Edwards, 1993); and reducing the number of practicum placements, increasing the time spent in each placement, and reviewing evaluation procedures (MacDonald, 1993).

Such changes to the practicum environment aim to remove, or at least reduce, previously identified key stressors. While they may be beneficial, MacDonald (1993) argues that "external stresses of the teaching practicum will always be present and that controlling internal stresses is the key" (p.417). If McDonald is correct, attempts to improve the practicum environment should be accompanied by programs to assist student teachers develop stress management skills. This paper describes the impact of a pilot stress management program for student teachers implemented by the authors.

Purpose and nature of the study
The study explored the feasibility of teacher educators assisting student teachers to develop skills to manage more effectively the stress associated with practicum through the use of progressive muscle relaxation and visual imagery techniques. The former is based on the assumption that it is impossible to be simultaneously relaxed and stressed, and that mental relaxation is an outcome of physical relaxation. The latter assumes that a relaxed state can be induced by imagining a peaceful scene (Margolis, 1987;1990). These techniques were
selected because they have been used successfully in stress management projects in other contexts (Kagan, Kagan, & Watson, 1995; Miller, 1994; Price, 1990; Carnahan, Tobin & Uncapher, 1981). As they are self induced, they require no special equipment or specialist clinicians. Furthermore, they are not time consuming and can be used unobtrusively in the practicum setting.

Context
The study was undertaken with early childhood student teachers from Macquarie University who were enrolled in a semester-long 200 level Guided Practice unit. The unit involved three contact hours per week and a practicum component consisting of a two week block, undertaken in a setting (long day care, preschool or K-2) of the student teachers' choice. The practicum immediately followed the three week mid-semester break. Prior to the break student teachers had attended seven weeks of classes. It was the second practicum for most student teachers. Their first practicum, also of two week's duration, had been undertaken in a preschool six months previously.

One of the researchers coordinated the 200 level Guided Practice unit. She also lectured in the unit, coordinated the practicum, and taught one of the five tutorial groups. The other researcher, an experienced stress management consultant, had major teaching responsibilities in a 100 level Guided Practice unit undertaken by most student teachers the previous year. As such, she was well known to the student teachers but, at the time of the project, did not teach or assess them.

Research design
The study involved a group of 13 student students with whom the program was implemented and a contrast group with whom the program was not implemented.

Selection of participants
The researchers explained the project to all student teachers enrolled in the 200 level Guided Practice unit at the first mass lecture. They sought volunteers for the implementation group and negotiated an agreement with the remaining student teachers to become members of the contrast group if required. The researchers assured all student teachers that they were free to withdraw from the project, at any time, without fear of academic repercussions.

The implementation group
Of the 130 student teachers enrolled in the unit, 17 volunteered to join the implementation group. Subsequently, two student teachers withdrew following the first session because timetable changes made attendance difficult, while another withdrew after the second session for undisclosed reasons. A third student teacher attended the pre practicum stress management sessions, but deferred her practicum for some months due to illness. She was not included in the analysis.
because of the extended interval between the intervention sessions and her practicum. In effect, therefore, the implementation group involved 13 participants.

The participants ranged in age from 18 to their mid forties. They had varied reasons for joining the project. For many, their previous practicum had been extremely stressful and they anticipated that their next practicum would be similarly stressful. Some were finding other aspects of their lives highly stressful. Others wanted to revisit techniques learned in previous stress management programs they had undertaken, while a number were motivated mainly by curiosity.

The contrast group
Each member of the implementation group was matched with a contrast group member. Matches were made on the basis of the level of stress experienced in their previous practicum, and the setting (long day care / preschool / K-2) in which they were undertaking their current 200 level practicum.

Nature of program implementation
The implementation group participated in a weekly lunch time session of an hour's duration for six consecutive weeks prior to the mid semester break. Sessions were held in a carpeted tutorial room and, to accommodate timetable variations, were conducted during two lunchtimes each week. Student teachers attended in groups of six and eight. Each session incorporated guided relaxation and visualisation practice; graphical representation of thoughts and feelings about experiences associated with practicum, stress and the relaxation / visualisation process; and group discussion of related issues.

The researcher with experience in stress management consultancy took a more active part in the sessions. She guided the relaxation and visualisation segments and conducted the group discussions, while the researcher who coordinated the unit (and practicum) purposefully kept a low profile to avoid inadvertently intimidating student teachers. Her role was to assist where needed, and involved mainly note-taking.

To supplement the pre practicum sessions, participants were encouraged to practice at home the relaxation techniques introduced in the weekly sessions. To assist their practice, the student teachers were given an audio tape, recorded by one of the researchers, of a guided relaxation and visualisation of the type used in the sessions. The participants met with the researchers for a final session following the practicum, to discuss their practicum and their perceptions of the impact of the pre practicum relaxation sessions.

Data collection
As advocated by Abbott-Chapman (1993) and Robson (1993) quantitative
and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative data were obtained from pre and post practicum survey responses and qualitative data from transcripts of group discussions conducted during the pre practicum sessions. Formal psychological stress tests, such as those used by Pithers & Fogarty (1995), Russell (1992), and Carnahan et al (1981) were not undertaken, as measures relating specifically to practicum, rather those measuring general levels of anxiety, were required.

Pre and post practicum surveys
To enable the key stressors of practicum for this cohort of student teachers to be identified, all student teachers enrolled in the unit were asked to participate in a related tutorial task. The task required them to recall their previous practicum(s) and to represent in any way they chose (for example by drawing, writing, mind mapping) their experience of practicum. They then listed the most rewarding and the most stressful aspects of their previous practicum(s). When those aspects identified as most stressful were collated by the researchers, they were found to be almost identical to those identified by Edwards (1993).

A survey consisting of 30 items derived from these key stressors was subsequently developed (See Appendix 1). Student teachers used a four point scale to identify the extent to which they found aspects of practicum stressful. They completed the survey twice. Prior to the 200 level practicum, they indicated the extent to which they had found aspects of their previous practicum stressful. Following the 200 level practicum, they indicated the extent to which they had found their 200 level practicum stressful. The measure was reliable, with a Cronbach alpha of .88 for the pre-test and .93 for the post-test.

Group discussions
Each session involved at least one group discussion. Student teachers were asked about their perceptions of practicum, their awareness and understanding of stress and their experience of the relaxation and visualisation process. They were also invited to comment on aspects of their graphical representations, undertaken during the session. Discussions were audio-taped using two strategically placed tape recorders to overcome difficulties associated with identifying individual student teachers' voices. Transcripts were supplemented by notes taken by the researcher not involved in the discussion. Although the use of the student teachers' graphical representations as an additional source of qualitative data was considered, the lack of guidance in the research methodology literature concerning the analysis of such representations mitigated against their inclusion at this stage.

Data analysis
Data collected from the 13 participants were analysed as follows:
Survey responses
The 4 point rating scale used by the participants to indicate the extent to which they found aspects of their practicum stressful was used by the researchers to assign a numerical value to the amount of stress experienced. In other words, those items ranked (1) or not stressful by participants were assigned 1 point. Similarly, those items ranked (4) or highly stressful were assigned 4 points. Thus a numerical score for each category on the survey, as well as a total score for the amount of stress experienced by each student teacher was obtained. An analysis of covariance, using SPSS, was undertaken with the post-test stress score as the dependent variable, the group (implementation and contrast) as the independent variable, and the pre-test stress score as the covariate.

Transcripts of group discussions
Using constant comparative techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), transcripts of group discussions were analysed for evidence of student teachers' responses to the pre practicum sessions, their self awareness of their reactions to stress, their response to potentially stressful situations which arose during the practicum and their perceptions of the impact of the intervention program on their ability to manage stress effectively.

Results
The quantitative analysis indicated that the intervention made no significant difference to the levels of stress experienced by the participants. However, the qualitative analysis suggested otherwise. The key findings arising from each form of analysis are presented below.

Survey responses
There was a reduction in the level of stress experienced by both the implementation and the contrast groups (See Figure 1). There was little difference between the groups on the pre-test, (implementation group X = 83.75, sd = 13.94; contrast group X = 80.75; sd = 13.17). However, the difference between the groups was greater on the post-test (implementation group X = 62.92T, sd = 16.38; contrast group X = 69.33, sd = 15.81). The analysis of covariance indicated that the difference was not significant (F = 2.70; p = .11).

Transcripts of group discussions
Initial responses to the relaxation sessions were mixed. Several student teachers reported feelings of discomfort. For some, the
discomfort was physical, and related to the hard floor surface and unpleasant air-conditioning drafts. For others, particularly those with no prior experience of relaxation techniques, the process was also emotionally uncomfortable. These student teachers variously described feelings of uncertainty about what to expect; vulnerability; unease at the resurfacing of strong feelings of resentment, anger and fear associated with past experiences; and anxiety about becoming "too relaxed" or falling asleep.

Many student teachers with no prior experience of the guided relaxation and visualisation process found it hard, initially, to "let go" of stressful everyday events and experiences. Typical comments following the first session included: I felt stressed when I came in ... it was very hard to just let go (Janine); My mind wandered. I was thinking about things I had to do (Francess); I had great difficulty relaxing. I think it will take a few sessions to learn to let go (Antoinette). Nevertheless, some student teachers with no previous experience of the process were surprised by its positive impact. Rachelle, for example, described how in the first session, Thoughts kept intruding and I thought 'This isn't working at all'. But I tried to stick with it and I kept trying to visualise, and when I came out of it, I realised that it really did work and that I was feeling less stressed. Most student teachers with previous experience of relaxation techniques were more readily able to let go their preoccupation with everyday events and were able to stem their flow of thoughts about these events.

The majority of student teachers became more comfortable, physically and emotionally, with the process and reported greater ease in "letting go" of their flow of thoughts as the sessions continued. For example, Amanda commented in the second session: Last week I didn't really know what was going on, whereas this week I was more comfortable with what I was doing and I was more able to focus on how I was feeling, rather than on what I was supposed to be doing. Similarly, Naomi noted in the third session: Today, I found it quite different, especially from the first time. Before, my head has always hurt from lying on the carpet because the floor is so hard. But today, as soon as I started to relax, I felt as if my head was melting into the carpet. I know what I'm doing now, and my body is beginning to adjust. The student teachers' ability to relax fluctuated markedly with external pressures, however.

As the semester continued, this uneven development became increasingly noticeable. As the pressures of assignments mounted, student teachers commented that relaxation became more difficult. In the sixth week, this became especially evident. When a major test was scheduled immediately after one group's relaxation session, five of the eight student teachers in this group decided not to attend the session. They claimed that they would be unable to relax if they came to the session and felt that last minute study would be more beneficial.
Although student teachers doubted their ability to relax in the face of stressful situations, most reported positive experiences when they participated in relaxation sessions. Some referred to feelings of strength: I found myself going into myself rather than into the external world. I got in touch with the part of me that was calm and coping with everything (Linda). Others referred to a sense of freedom: It's like getting control of your feelings and emotions; feeling them building up and letting them go (Penelope). Some spoke of a sense of security: I felt very secure. I felt that if I could just lie there for the rest of my life it would be great! (Amanda, laughing). A number of student teachers experienced a sense of detachment: There were no worries, no pressures, nor regrets (Lianna); It's as if I'm in a little bubble, like a void (Penelope). Yet others described feelings of tranquillity - I went to a place where there were no worries. There was peace and light and nothing else (Frances). A sense of replenishment was also mentioned: It felt like my body had really given itself time to focus on itself and to recuperate (Naomi).

The relaxation process was less positive for some student teachers, however. Of the thirteen participants, three continued to feel uncomfortable about some aspects. Janine and Antoinette were perturbed by sensations of physical numbness. Antoinette commented: I get to the stage where my hands have absolutely gone...I don't like to feel that relaxed. I'm obviously not feeling safe with being that relaxed. Collette was discomforted by the feelings of vulnerability: I find it difficult to let things wash over me, because I feel vulnerable. I find it difficult when my mind isn't busy with things because then I find myself thinking about things which are troubling me. For Collette, "working through" stressful situations was more valuable than relaxation. She explained: I don't know whether it's just my perception of relaxation, but I don't think that it's just a matter of 'going with the flow'. I think you have to work through things. I think that, for me, I would need to work through what is stressing me before I could release that stress. In balance, however, despite the continued discomfort associated with the process, these student teachers found the process beneficial.

Prior to the 200 level practicum, all participants reported a number of benefits including enhanced self awareness and understanding; greater self confidence; a more positive and balanced outlook; awareness of a wider range of alternatives for managing stressful situations; an ability to step back from the immediate situation; heightened energy levels; deeper concentration; greater productivity; willingness to be more open with others; and better interpersonal relationships. They also perceived that, in comparison to their peers who had not participated in the sessions, they remained much more relaxed: The sessions leading up to the prac definitely helped, because that's
the time when
you panic most. That's when you really start to get anxious about prac
because
everyone is talking about it. The sessions really helped me to stay
calm before the
prac started ... the people who didn't participate were a lot more
tense and a lot
more unsure than we were (Penelope).
Student teachers appeared to particularly value this period of pre
practicum "calm".

Following the practicum, student teachers reported experiencing
considerably less stress in the 200 level practicum compared to their
previous practicum. They were able to cope with potentially stressful
situations more easily:
You learn to look at a situation before you enter it and you learn to
determine whether it's
going to be a taxing situation. And if you sense that it is going to be
stressful, you can
prepare yourself more for it. You calm yourself down before you go into
the situation
and you look at things with a much clearer frame of mind. You can get
in touch with
your feelings, and that makes them a lot calmer, and easier to deal
with (Naomi).
They attributed their ability to manage more effectively potentially
stressful experiences, in part, to their participation in the stress
management program.

However, other factors were also involved:
I felt a lot more confident and therefore a lot less stressed, but it's
hard to
put my finger on exactly what has contributed to that. I feel as if
I've come
a long way since last year, and I attribute some of that to the stress
management sessions, but I also put it down to more experience (Linda).

As well as greater confidence and additional experience, other factors
were seen to contribute to lower stress levels. These included
familiarity with the university's expectations, greater theoretical
knowledge, the opportunity to select their preferred setting in which
to undertake their practicum and less prescriptive curriculum
guidelines for the practicum.

A number of unanticipated benefits arose from involvement in the
project. In particular, participants referred to the opportunity to
talk with peers and lecturers in a non-threatening context. As Naomi
commented, I enjoyed the sessions a lot. I enjoyed being part of a
group and being able to discuss my concerns. It was valuable for me to
realise that other people experienced stress, too. The student
teachers contrasted the group discussions with tutorial discussions: Tutorial groups are too big to have discussions like we've had here - I never open up in a tutorial group (Frances). They especially valued the confidentiality within the group: What I liked was that we could be totally honest, and know that it wouldn't go beyond the door (Robyn). The collegial support generated by the sessions seemed particularly important to the participants.

The student teachers also found that they could incorporate the stress management strategies introduced in the sessions into their work with young children. They noted that the use of these techniques assisted in managing children's behaviour:

- Relaxation strategies help young children learn some self control.
- Energy levels can escalate and escalate! A period of calm is really important because it gives children a break, physically and mentally, and it brings the energy level and volume to a more manageable state for the teacher. (Penelope).

Many student teachers expressed interest in further developing their use of relaxation and visualisation techniques in future practicums, as they seemed to impact positively on children's self control, self awareness and self esteem.

Discussion
The findings need to be interpreted with caution. It could be argued that, overall, they suggest that the pre practicum stress management sessions helped to reduce the stress experienced the student teachers during practicum. However, a number of methodological, ethical and pedagogical issues arose from the study and warrant discussion.

First, the use of qualitative and quantitative methodology provided a broader range of perspectives than would have been otherwise possible. However, at times these perspectives seemed inconsistent. The lack of statistical significance, for example, did not support the qualitative data which reported generally positive outcomes.

This inconsistency can be explained partially by the small number of participants. This reduced the likelihood of a significant change despite a greater change in the mean stress experienced by the implementation group compared to the contrast group. The successful completion of a practicum in itself may also reduce stress levels, however. A challenge for future studies, therefore, may be to distinguish between the effects of successful completion of practicum and the impact of stress management programs in reducing levels of stress. In hindsight, this issue could have been addressed in this study by undertaking an additional survey after the completion of the stress management program and prior to the beginning of the practicum.
Second, the qualitative data may have had a positive bias. Student teachers were encouraged to respond frankly in group discussions. Yet the possibility that they tailored their responses to suit the perceived interests of the researchers cannot be ignored - especially as one of the researchers held a position of considerable power in the Guided Practice unit in which the student teachers were enrolled.

Third, the study highlights inherent difficulties involved in attempting to compare individuals' experiences in different practicum contexts. Because of the uniqueness of the individual, the practicum placement, and the dynamics between individual and placement, comparisons between the experiences of different student teachers in different placements need to be interpreted with caution.

Fourth, the student teachers' graphical representations, undertaken as part of the relaxation and visualisation sessions, yielded potentially rich and powerful data. Because of the lack of guidance in the research methodology literature concerning the analysis of such data, however, it was decided not to include their representations in the analysis. An important direction for further investigation is to develop techniques for analysing data of this nature.

Ethical issues also arise, particularly in relation to the participants' vulnerability. In some instances the relaxation and visualisation process uncovered and exacerbated previously unresolved issues which required specialist counselling. Such reactions highlighted the need for sensitivity to the participants' psychological well being throughout the study and the need for back up support services. The need for confidentiality was also highlighted, even when this led to a conflict of interests for the researchers.

Issues of trust continued to arise after the completion of the project. For example, in a subsequent practicum, one of the researchers was required to make an "at risk" advisory visit to a former participant to decide whether that student teacher should pass or fail her practicum. A stressful situation under any circumstances, it was especially difficult in this instance given the intimacy, openness and trust which had been established between participant and researcher during the period of the intervention.

Despite the complexity of these ethical issues, the researchers greatly valued the opportunity to work collaboratively with student teachers. They gained insights which would not have been obtained otherwise into student teachers' experiences of practicum. Moreover, the student teachers' frank accounts of their practicum experiences provided a valuable basis for refining practicum requirements and organisation, and for the inserviceing of university advisers and cooperating
teachers.

A number of student teachers successfully used relaxation and visualisation techniques with children. Their experiences suggest that relaxation and visualisation techniques may be potentially useful strategies for establishing a calm and positive classroom atmosphere. Thus, it could be argued that consideration should be given to including these techniques in components of preservice programs concerned with the development of teaching strategies. They may well complement those strategies more typically associated with classroom and behaviour management. Indeed, the use of relaxation and visualisation techniques with children is the focus of one of the researcher's PhD project.

Because of its intensive nature, the stress management program cannot continue as an unfunded project. Possible alternatives suggested by student teachers included offering an expanded version of the sessions as an elective to count for credit, or as an extra curriculum option for which the researchers would receive a teaching allocation. They also recommended the formation of practicum support groups consisting of student teachers from different years to enable peer mentoring. They were sceptical of the researchers' suggestion that tutorial groups might partially fulfil this function. Their reaction suggested that student teachers do not necessarily perceive tutorial groups as supportive. It also suggested that tutorial content may be determined more by the concerns of teacher educators than those of student teachers.

Conclusion
The apparent success of this pilot stress management program suggests that teacher educators should consider the provision of similar programs to assist student teachers manage more effectively the stress associated with practicum. Although generic stress management programs are typically offered by university counselling services, they are unlikely to offer the specialised understanding of practicum which teacher educators with expertise in stress management techniques can provide. It appears that stress management programs of the type described in this paper may well be a powerful adjunct to continuing efforts to make practicum more "participant-friendly".

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References


Sinclair, K., & Nicholl, V. (1981) Sources and experiences of anxiety

Appendix 1

Items from Survey

Please indicate the extent to which you have found the following situations stressful in your previous practicum. For each item, please circle the most appropriate number.

1 not stressful
2 slightly stressful
3 moderately stressful
4 highly stressful

Personal / Professional Adequacy
1 2 3 4 Meeting required standards / fear of failing
1 2 3 4 Fear of the unknown (eg. will I "get on" with my cooperating teacher/adviser?)
1 2 3 4 Fear of making "mistakes"
1 2 3 4 Coping with nervousness / lack of confidence
1 2 3 4 Coping with tiredness
1 2 3 4Managing prac and other commitments (family, work, assignments etc)
1 2 3 4Communicating with other staff
1 2 3 4Communicating with parents

Workload
1 2 3 4Keeping my folder up to date
1 2 3 4Preparing resources
1 2 3 4Insufficient time to complete all that is expected of me

Planning
1 2 3 4Writing observations
1 2 3 4Relating observations to theory
1 2 3 4Thinking of appropriate, enjoyable and interesting activities
1 2 3 4Writing and evaluating plans
1 2 3 4Plans not working

Cooperating teacher
1 2 3 4Being watched by the cooperating teacher
1 2 3 4Being evaluated by the cooperating teacher
1 2 3 4The cooperating teacher using methods opposed to my philosophy / IEC philosophy
1 2 3 4Insufficient support from cooperating teacher
1 2 3 4Feeling unappreciated / used by / "in the way" of the cooperating teacher
1 2 3 4Establishing a positive relationship with cooperating teacher

1 2 3 4Being asked to do tasks beyond my current competency
1 2 3 4Contradictory advice from cooperating teacher and adviser

Adviser
1 2 3 4Being visited by adviser
1 2 3 4Being evaluated by adviser
1 2 3 4Being intimidated by adviser

Children
1 2 3 4Managing children's behaviour
1 2 3 4Communicating with children
1 2 3 4Holding children's interest

Other
1 2 3 4_________________________
1 2 3 4_________________________
1 2 3 4_________________________