Academic and Practicum-Related Stress in Pre-Service Teachers: A Systematic Review

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Pre-service teachers operate within demanding teacher education environments that require them to meet rigorous academic expectations while simultaneously engaging in school-based practicum experiences. The intersection of these responsibilities frequently generates significant stress, which can adversely affect psychological well-being, learning engagement, and professional development. This systematic review synthesizes empirical evidence on academic- and practicum-related stress experienced by pre-service teachers. The findings indicate that intensive coursework, assessment pressure, time constraints, classroom management challenges, evaluation anxiety, and supervisory relationships are among the most persistent sources of stress. While similar stress patterns are evident across international contexts, structural and cultural factors—particularly within developing education systems shape the intensity and manifestation of these stressors (Harmsen et al., 2018; Othman & Sivasubramaniam, 2019). Overall, the review underscores the need for institution-level strategies to better support pre-service teachers' well-being.

KEY WORDS

Pre-service Teachers, Academic Pressure, Practicum Stress, Teacher Preparation, Systematic Review.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education programs are designed to prepare future educators for the intellectual, emotional, and practical demands of the profession (Darling-

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Impact Factor
SJIF (2025): 8.019

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Hammond, 2006). During this preparatory phase, pre-service teachers are expected to master theoretical knowledge, demonstrate pedagogical competence, and adapt to real classroom environments through practicum placements (Flores & Day, 2006). While this integrated approach is pedagogically valuable, it often results in elevated stress levels due to overlapping academic and practicum responsibilities (Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

Academic stress in teacher education is commonly associated with dense curricula, frequent assessments, performance expectations, and limited opportunities for recovery and reflection (Chaplain, 2008; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Practicum-related stress emerges from classroom management responsibilities, lesson planning demands, observational evaluations, and interactions with supervising teachers (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999; Pillen et al., 2013). When these stressors occur concurrently, they may produce cumulative strain that exceeds individual coping capacities (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Persistent stress during teacher preparation has been linked to emotional exhaustion, diminished confidence, and reduced motivation to remain in the profession (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2015). In contexts such as India, institutional constraints including limited mentoring support, overcrowded classrooms, and prescriptive curricula—may further intensify stress experiences (Kumar & Hegde, 2018; Srivastava & Dhar, 2019). Despite a growing number of empirical studies addressing pre-service teacher stress, the literature remains dispersed, methodologically uneven, and contextually fragmented (Harmsen et al., 2018).

Objectives

This systematic review seeks to integrate existing empirical findings to develop a coherent understanding of academic and practicum-related stress among pre-service teachers. The review addresses the following research objectives:

1. To study the forms of academic and practicum-related stress in pre-service teachers.
2. To analyse the coping strategies to easily cope-up with stress.
3. To explore the consequences of stress for well-being and professional development of pre-service teachers.

Conceptual Framework

Research on stress in teacher education is commonly grounded in interactional models of stress, which conceptualize stress as arising from a perceived imbalance between environmental demands and available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Within teacher education programmes, academic workload and practicum requirements constitute salient sources of demand, whereas mentoring quality, peer support, and institutional structures function as key coping resources that may buffer stress experiences (Kyriacou, 2001; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005).

Perspectives on professional identity development further enrich understanding of stress among pre-service teachers. Practicum experiences represent a pivotal phase during which individuals actively negotiate and construct their emerging professional identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Stressful encounters—such as classroom management challenges, critical evaluations, or misalignment between expectations and lived practice—may disrupt identity formation and undermine professional self-efficacy (Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013). Conversely, supportive feedback, reflective supervision, and structured opportunities for meaning-making can foster resilience, strengthen professional confidence, and support adaptive identity development (Flores & Day, 2006; Schutz et al., 2018).

Methodology

This study adopted a systematic review design to synthesize empirical evidence on academic and practicum-related stress experienced by pre-service teachers. A systematic review approach was selected to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability in identifying, appraising, and integrating relevant

research findings (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Gough et al., 2017). The review followed established guidelines for systematic reviews in education research, emphasizing structured searching, explicit inclusion criteria, and systematic synthesis of results (Moher et al., 2009).

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of education, psychology, and teacher education research and their frequent use in systematic reviews within the social sciences (Booth et al., 2016). Searching multiple databases was intended to enhance the breadth of coverage and reduce the risk of publication bias.

The search strategy included *pre-service teachers, academic stress, practicum stress,* and *teacher education*. These keywords were combined using Boolean operators to identify studies examining stress related to academic demands, practicum experiences, or both within teacher education programmes (Liberati et al., 2009).

This study broadly focused on the following inclusion criteria:

1. Empirical studies employing qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods designs
2. Studies focusing explicitly on pre-service teachers enrolled in teacher education programmes
3. Research examining academic stress, practicum-related stress, or both, within teacher education contexts

Quality Appraisal

Although the review did not exclude studies solely on the basis of methodological quality, careful attention was given to issues of research rigor during the synthesis process. Factors such as clarity of research design, appropriateness of data collection methods, sample adequacy, and transparency of data analysis were considered when interpreting study findings. This approach is consistent with guidance for systematic reviews in education and social sciences, where quality appraisal is used to inform the weighting and interpretation of evidence rather than as a strict exclusion criterion (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Gough et al., 2017).

Data Synthesis

Given the methodological diversity of the included studies, a narrative thematic synthesis approach was employed. Narrative synthesis is particularly appropriate when studies vary in design, measures, and analytical approaches and when statistical meta-analysis is not feasible (Popay et al., 2006). Findings were organized into recurrent themes related to academic stressors, practicum-related stressors, institutional and supervisory influences, emotional consequences, and coping mechanisms. Patterns of convergence and divergence across international and Indian contexts were examined to identify both shared and context-specific stress experiences, in line with comparative synthesis approaches recommended in qualitative evidence integration (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Ethical Considerations

As this study was based exclusively on previously published research, it did not involve direct interaction with human participants and therefore did not require formal ethical clearance. Nevertheless, ethical research practices were upheld by accurately representing original findings, avoiding misinterpretation, and appropriately citing all sources. Such practices align with ethical guidelines for secondary research and systematic reviews (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018; Moher et al., 2009).

Findings

Academic Stress Factors

Academic stress was primarily attributed to intensive coursework, overlapping deadlines, examination pressure, and limited time for independent learning (Kyriacou, 2001; Misra & Castillo, 2004). Several studies noted that academic demands often intensified during practicum periods, creating role conflict and cumulative

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SJIF (2025): 8.019   151

fatigue (Pillen et al., 2013; Klassen & Durksen, 2014). Performance-oriented assessment systems emerged as a consistent contributor to stress across contexts, particularly where grades were closely linked to progression and professional evaluation (Struyven & De Meyst, 2010). Pre-service teachers frequently reported difficulty balancing theoretical assignments with practicum preparation, leading to chronic fatigue, anxiety, and reduced well-being (Reddy et al., 2018).

Indian studies highlighted examination-centric curricula and competitive grading systems as dominant contributors to academic stress, often exacerbated by limited access to academic counselling and mentoring support (Deb et al., 2015; Kumar & Bhukar, 2013).

Practicum-Related Stress Factors

Practicum-related stress was commonly associated with classroom management challenges, instructional planning demands, evaluation apprehension, and supervisory relationships (Veenman, 1984; Klassen & Chiu, 2011). In resource-constrained contexts, additional stressors included inadequate mentoring, high pupil–teacher ratios, and insufficient instructional materials (Avalos, 2011). Many pre-service teachers experienced role ambiguity during school placements, particularly regarding expectations and responsibilities, which contributed to emotional strain and uncertainty (Beijaard et al., 2004).

In hierarchical educational contexts, including India, supervisory relationships were frequently reported as particularly stress-inducing, with limited opportunities for dialogue, reflective feedback, or negotiation of expectations (Kumar & Prema, 2016; Singh & Richards, 2020).

Institutional and Supervisory Factors

Institutional policies, inadequate practicum preparation, insufficient mentoring structures, and unclear assessment criteria were found to exacerbate stress among pre-service teachers (Flores & Day, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2014). Conversely, studies consistently emphasized that supportive supervision, clear communication, and structured practicum orientation significantly reduced stress levels and facilitated professional learning (Hobson et al., 2009).

Emotional and Personal Stressors

Across studies, pre-service teachers commonly reported emotional exhaustion, self-doubt, fear of failure, and diminished self-efficacy (Schutz et al., 2018; Pillen et al., 2013). Declining motivation and professional confidence were particularly evident during practicum experiences where emotional support and feedback mechanisms were limited or absent (Hong, 2010).

Consequences of Stress

Elevated stress levels were associated with anxiety symptoms, emotional exhaustion, reduced teaching confidence, and uncertainty regarding long-term career commitment (Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). However, several studies also identified mitigating factors such as peer collaboration, reflective practices, and supportive supervision, which moderated stress experiences and enhanced coping capacity and professional resilience (Flores & Day, 2006; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

Discussion

The synthesis confirms that academic and practicum-related stress is a widespread and persistent feature of teacher education. The consistency of reported stressors across diverse contexts suggests that structural characteristics of teacher preparation programs particularly assessment practices and practicum organization play a decisive role in shaping stress experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Pillen et al., 2013).

Contextual conditions, however, influence the intensity and expression of stress. In developing education systems, institutional limitations such as large class sizes, limited mentoring, and resource constraints frequently compound existing academic and practicum demands (Agbenyega & Deku, 2011; Sood, 2019). The predominance of cross-sectional research designs restricts insight into how stress develops and fluctuates

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over time, underscoring the need for longitudinal and in-depth qualitative studies to capture stress trajectories and meaning-making processes among pre-service teachers.

Limitations

The review is limited to English-language peer-reviewed studies and may not fully capture regional scholarship. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, culturally responsive interventions, and the examination of stress in relation to professional identity development and retention outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Academic and practicum-related stress represents a substantial and enduring concern within teacher education, with clear implications for pre-service teachers' psychological well-being, professional learning, and future career engagement. Effectively responding to this challenge necessitates coordinated action at the institutional level, alongside supportive pedagogical approaches and sustained scholarly attention. This systematic review contributes to the teacher education literature by synthesizing previously fragmented findings into an integrated framework that captures the interrelated academic, practicum, institutional, and emotional dimensions of stress.

The accumulated evidence highlights that interventions focused solely on individual coping strategies are insufficient. Instead, there is a pressing need for institution-wide reforms that address the structural conditions generating stress, including misaligned curricula, high-stakes assessment practices, and inconsistent practicum support (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Pillen et al., 2013). By emphasizing coherent program design, formative and supportive assessment systems, robust mentoring arrangements, and explicit integration of well-being within teacher preparation curricula, institutions can create environments that foster resilience, professional self-efficacy, and sustained commitment to teaching.

Consequently, addressing academic and practicum-related stress should be understood not merely as a matter of individual adjustment, but as a strategic investment in the quality, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability of the future teaching workforce.

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