Understanding the Causes of Anxiety and Coping Strategies of Student-teachers during Their Internship: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This study was intended to fulfill two purposes: 1) to identify the causes of student-teachers' anxiety, and 2) to discover the coping strategies they employed during their internship program. The participants of this study were eight student-teachers who did their internship in the 2013-2014 academic year as required by their undergraduate program in education at a faith-based International University. The phenomenological approach was employed to understand their lived experiences in relation to anxiety and coping strategies during their teaching internship. Data were collected through individual meetings, group forums, observations and individual interviews. The study discovered that student-teachers' anxiety was caused by various factors which can be grouped into three categories: preparation, classroom management and relationship. This study also identified four categories of coping mechanism employed by the student-teachers: adaptation, preparation, attitude and relationship. The findings of this study give cooperating teachers and internship supervisor insight into the experience of the eight student-teachers.

Keywords: Anxiety, Internship, Student-teacher, Cooperating Teacher, Coping Strategies

Introduction

Researchers have pointed out that anxiety has a direct impact on teachers' performance as well as on the learning environment in the classroom. Wilson (2002) suggested that a limited amount of stress can have a positive impact on motivation and creativity of teachers but excessive pressure can have a negative impact on them. It can lead many teachers to withdraw from the teaching profession (Keavney & Sinclair, 1978). Similarly, Cheung and Hui (2011) discovered that highly anxious student-teachers would not join the teaching workforce after completing their internship. Knowing that anxiety may have a bearing a teachers' longevity in the workforce, it is important to understand the causes of anxiety of student-teachers at the internship stage. The findings would inform educators and coordinators of internship programs of factors that contribute to anxiety and the possible coping strategies. In this way, student-teachers can be helped and guided so that they have a more positive internship experience.

This qualitative research study uses a phenomenological approach that aims to understand the experience of student-teachers in relation to anxiety. Creswell (2013) stated that a phenomenological study describes the meaning of experiences of each unique individual. The rationale for using a phenomenological approach lies within the belief that student-teachers are free to identify the elements that are related to "anxiety" in their personal experiences.

Literature Review

Thomas (2006) discussed anxiety of teaching as any feelings, beliefs, or behaviors that would impede on the teaching process, whether it may be the preparation, or the actual implementation. Studies have shown that anxiety does not only negatively impact relationship and performance (Keavney & Sinclair, 1978), but also serves as the main cause for teachers leaving the teaching profession (Merc, 2004; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Gardner and Leak (1994) found that approximately eighty-seven percent of the psychology professors in their study had experienced anxiety associated with teaching. While no specific research finding regarding the anxiety of elementary or secondary teachers was found in this study, it is likely that teachers at all levels experience some anxiety. This is purported by Oral (2012), who indicated that teaching anxiety is experienced at any level of teaching including at the internship stage. In fact, new teachers, or pre-service teachers, reported that they experienced anxiety more frequently than experienced teachers (Alasheev & Bykov, 2002). Furthermore, the frequency of anxious instances occurred more when comparing new teachers to those who are experienced. Finally, the anxiety is greater in the first few months of joining the teaching force (Sammephet & Wanpet, 2013).

Having established that anxiety is something that is present in the classroom, it becomes imperative for causes to be identified, as a means to mitigate and regulate anxiety. One major cause of anxiety reported by both new and experienced teachers is classroom management (Goyette, Dore & Dion, 2000; Ingersoll and Smith, 2003). Another cause for anxiety is the sense of inadequacy among teachers who were non-native speakers of English and had to use English as a medium of instruction (Merc, 2004; Numrich, 1996; Horwitz, Tallon & Luo, 2009). A similar finding was made by Takahashi (2014), who observed that anxiety increased due to teachers' insufficient English language abilities. Similarly, Klanrit and Sroinam (2012) found that non-English speaking teachers experienced anxiety when teaching English in a classroom.

Fortunately, many studies have shown that teachers are capable of regulating these anxieties by employing certain strategies. Coping strategies are mechanisms employed by teachers, or student-teachers to help them become or maintain calm and to gain confidence while teaching. Sammephet and Wanpet (2013) found that teachers employed several techniques to cope with anxiety such as positive thinking, self-talking and calming down. Bress (2006) made similar findings which include controlling personality, behavior, attitudes, and thought in order to generate contentment in classrooms. In addition, "let-it-be" strategy was one of the techniques employed to remain calm. Furthermore, being accepting of situations also allows anxiousness to go away slowly (Bawcom, 2005). Another way of mitigating anxiety is to reflect upon incidents which incurred anxiety and strategize possible coping mechanisms (Schon, 1983).

Nonetheless, the experiencing of anxiety and the coping of anxiety should not be an experience held by student-teachers themselves. Management of anxiety should come from administrators or supervisors as well. These stakeholders can intervene and ensure that the teachers, or pre-service teachers, have a positive mindset so as to ensure a continuity in teaching practice (Norris, Larke, & Briers, 1990). This is echoed by Martin and Yoder (2000), who maintained that a student-teacher's success during their teaching practice was dependent on the supervisory climate. Having a supervisor allows student-teachers to communicate issues which may arise in their initial venture into teaching. Nevertheless, student-teachers who find it difficult to openly and freely communicate with their cooperating teachers could cause them to be anxious (DeMoulin, 1993). Student-teachers strongly believe that they must choose the right cooperating teachers who they are comfortable with and share a similar teaching philosophy. This may be considered as a type of coping strategy, since if the student-teacher and supervisor have conflicting perspectives on teaching, the pre-service period of the student-teacher may not go smoothly (Montgomery, 2000).

There are other types of coping strategies, as mentioned by Costa and Kallick (2000), such as self reflection, which may enable student-teachers to construct meaning from their work in the classroom and encourage growth and confidence. In addition, student-teachers need to remind themselves to be positive in any situation they may find themselves in.

Research Scope

Given the probability that these pre-service teachers will experience some level of anxiety, the purpose of this study is to then examine and explore incidents of anxiety prevalent in the teaching experiences. Since this study takes a phenomenological stance, the leading concern that will guide the interview will be the instances of anxiety throughout the teaching experiences. The semi-structure interview session was conducted and these questions were posed:

The leading research questions were:

1. What were the causes of anxiety during your internship?
2. How do you cope with the anxiety?

3. Supporting Interview Questions were:
4. Describe in general your days during your teaching practice.
5. Can you describe a situation which made you feel anxious during your teaching practice?
6. What other factors contributed to your anxiety?
7. What other challenges did you face during your teaching practice?
8. How did these challenges affect you?
9. Based on your experience, how did you cope with your anxiety? What strategies did you employ in coping with your anxiety?
10. If you are to advise the future student-teachers, what is your advice to them?

Sample and Research Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

Eight student-teachers from the Faculty of Education and Psychology at a faith-based International University, Central Thailand, participated in the study: five from Myanmar, two from Malaysia and one from Sri Lanka. They were all in the final year of their four-year study. The researcher assured the participants of the anonymity of their participation.

Since the purpose of this study is to understand the causes of anxiety among student-teachers and to discover the coping strategies that student-teachers employed during their internship, a qualitative method is used. Experience is a vital source of data for this study. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) proposed that everything in the world is significant and it should be understood. Furthermore, experiences have the potential of enhancing the understanding of a subject under study. Since this study is interested in the experiences of student-teachers as a means to tap into factors which may cause anxiety, a phenomenological approach is chosen. According to Leedy (1997), phenomenology seeks to understand persons' perspectives with regards to experiences garnered from an event or even an emotion. An approach that is typical in phenomenological studies is by interviewing the subjects to collect their narratives (Creswell, 2013).

Experiences of student-teachers were collected via group forums, classroom observations and individual meeting. At these appointments, open-ended interview was conducted with each sample. Furthermore, to triangulate the findings, multiple approaches were utilized to collect data (Creswell, 2013). Using different tools to yield data also gave extensive time to be invested in the field, allowed enough time to compile detailed thick descriptions of experiences, and fostered professional trusting relationship between the researcher and the participants of the study. In order to develop a degree of trusting relationship between the participants and the researcher, the researcher openly shared and discussed the purpose of the research with the student teachers. By giving them enough information about the research, they have a sense of ownership of the findings. They understood that their experiences have a direct impact on the teaching internship program. They also learned that their input can potentially improve the quality of the internship.

In short, the data collection and triangulation were conducted in the following steps:

1. Teaching observation (general observation)
2. Individual meeting (general discussion)
3. Group meeting (general discussion)
4. Interview - main data collection (open-ended questions)

Data analysis

The researcher employed a thematic approach in analyzing the data. Thematic analysis was used to identify regularities or patterns among categories (Shank, 2006). This analysis involved examining and identifying themes within the data that were important to the description of the causes of anxiety and coping strategies. Furthermore, to enhance credibility and transferability of this research, two people familiar with qualitative research were requested to review the research study. Creswell (2013) stated that peer review, or a *critical other*, is crucial and it must be in place in order to keep the researcher honest.

Creswell (2010) also stated that participants' checking is an essential part of the process of trustworthiness of research study. He suggested that researchers allow the participants or any individuals closely related to the study, to have the opportunity to assess the accuracy of the data and interpretations of the data.

The researcher reported the research findings to the participants and asked for their feedback before the dissemination of the research findings. Lastly, based on the feedback received from the participants, the researcher revisited the data to confirm his analysis and interpretation.

The data were analyzed and grouped carefully. Subgroups were assigned under the three categories of the causes of anxiety as well as under the coping strategies of student-teachers. The following are the main categories that were discovered in this study:

A. Causes of Anxiety
   1. *Teaching Preparation*
   2. *Classroom Management*
   3. *Cooperating Teachers*

B. Coping Strategies
   1. *Adaptation*
   2. *Preparation*
   3. *Attitude*
   4. *Relationship*

Findings and Interpretation

A number of factors contributed to student-teachers' anxiety. They were grouped into three categories in order to understand the pattern of the causes of anxiety experienced by the eight student-teachers.

Causes of anxiety identified among the student teachers

The student-teachers' perceptions of sources of anxiety in internship varied from individual to individual. When asked to describe their normal teaching days, one student-teacher said, *"Nothing much, just nervousness every time I was teaching."* Another student-teacher explained, *"Overall it is okay. My days are quite busy with preparation for teaching such as preparing lesson plan and teaching materials and finding resources."* Another student-teacher admitted, *"Sometimes I got so nervous and cannot focus with my teaching. I have less sleep and worry too much.*

Category 1: Preparation

Language Proficiency

English language proficiency seemed to be a common source of anxiety among the student-teachers, particularly among those whose English is not their home language. The investigation showed that they were concerned about their English language competence especially in the area of grammatical correctness and pronunciation. The following are excerpt from the interview.

Extract 1: *"…………….. I am well aware that my language is not good enough, I mean when speaking Standard English. I am Ok with the content of the lesson but I always worry about my ability to speak well to the students."*
Extract 2: *"The kids learn and know better than me because they are in an international school and use a lot of English."*
Extract 3: *"I also sometimes become anxious about my ability to speak in front of the students. English is not my first language. I sometimes pronounce the words wrongly and there are terminologies that I need to learn."*

Teaching planning

Planning and preparing for instruction is the best way to ensure that lesson is implemented well. Student-teachers acknowledged the importance of good preparation. However, since the student-teachers were new to the process of preparing lesson plan and locating materials and resources, they spent huge

amount of time to do these. This increased the student-teachers' level of anxiety. Two student-teachers said:

> **Extract 4:** *"Making lesson plan and redoing it over and over is stressing."*
> **Extract 5:** *"I spend a lot of time preparing my lesson plan and I need to do so many research and read so many things while I am doing my lesson plan, It is so much work……………."*

Teaching Performance

Student-teachers were concerned about selecting the best teaching strategies for their teaching. They indicated that they needed time to learn to use effective techniques in teaching. One student-teacher said:

> **Extract 6:** *"I'm teaching in K2 about the rhyming words, but no one got it. Even the classroom teacher also said that she hasn't done it before, so that made me so upset." I feel nervous and starting to repeating it over and over again.*

Category 2: Classroom Management

The student-teachers described classroom management as the act of managing their classroom to ensure that distracting situations were avoided and that students' behaviors were controlled. Since the nature of activities in the classroom environment was unpredictable, student-teachers shared a common frustration.

Classroom Order

Some student-teachers felt very comfortable executing classroom rules but some expressed their concern about classroom management. They felt frustrated when they discovered that what they learned about classroom management in class may not always work in an actual classroom setting, as shown in the following extracts.

> **Extract 7:** *"I am not confidence with my classroom management. It is hard to control the kids most of the time."*
> **Extract 8:** *"There are some factors that can contribute to my anxiety, managing students' behavior in the classroom. I learn from the courses I took but sometimes there are not always relevant."*

Self-Confidence

Student-teachers felt that since they were not the main teachers of the class, the sense of authority in implementing the teaching plan and disciplining students was not fully realized. The following are some concerns regarding their lack of self-confidence.

> **Extract 9:** *"I am afraid that the students would say negative things about me."*
> **Extract 10:** *"I want to look like a real teacher but students do not see me, only as a student teacher."*
> **Extract 11:** *"I feel that a few student look at me like I'm not a teacher.*
> **Extract 12:** *"…. sometimes they are nice and sometime they misbehaved. When they so quiet sometime I ask myself "maybe there is something wrong with me".*

Category 3: Cooperating Teachers

Student-teachers suggested that in order to have a successful and meaningful teaching experience, they need to have a sound working relationship with their cooperating teachers. Cooperating teachers were in an excellent position to provide personal direction to the student-teachers. Student-teachers expressed that the first few weeks of their classroom experience were always difficult.

Communication

Student-teachers' inability to openly and freely communicate with their cooperating teachers has caused

them a lot of anxious moments. One student-teacher regretted that she was not brave enough to talk and share her struggles with her cooperating teachers. Two student-teachers said:

Extract 13: *"Sometimes I got so nervous and cannot focus with my teaching. I have less sleep and worry too much. I become shy and try to solve the problem on my own. I wish I have the courage to share my problem with my cooperating teacher."*
Extract 14: *"I worried about what the advisor thinking about me."*

Expectation

The student-teachers admitted that their anxiety increased when they cannot meet their cooperating teachers' expectation. Two of them said:

Extract 15: *"I'm doing something but it is not accepted. Sometimes the teacher said it to me, "ok you can"," for science or math class, let them observe more and do more research."*
Extract 16: *"I feel upset because I feel I'm not being able to teach and the teacher was there looking at me too.......... I feel guilty because I did not do well in that part and it caused me uncomfortable feeling."*

Possible Coping Strategies

Student-teachers revealed that they experienced many challenges that caused anxiety during their internship. The following were strategies employed by the student-teachers in overcoming challenges during internship.

Category 1: Adaptation

Interruptions and disruptions are the norm in classroom setting. Therefore, a flexible attitude is really important to take control of various situations. Student-teachers felt that they needed to be flexible and open for change. They discovered that they had so much to learn because teaching in a classroom setting was different from what they had prepared for.

Adapting to Change

Student-teachers wished that they had learned to adapt to situation quickly. Being able to adapt to change would speed up the adjustment period. One student-teacher said:

Extract 17: *"I changed according to the situation. I don't think that taking internship is stressful, and if I think I can't do something, I do not hide it. I need to be open with other and ask for help."*

Being Reflective

Student-teachers learned to be more reflective when they encountered challenges during their teaching practice. They engaged in a process of reflection to formulate new strategies and improve the situations. Two of them said:

Extract 18: *"I do my reflection because I may forget what had happen on that day."*
Extract 19: *"I tried to be attentive to everything that happens in the classroom."*

Category 2: Preparation

Student-teachers discovered through their experience that preparation was a crucial key to reduce anxiety. They learned that their anxiety increased when they were not prepared well.

Making Holistic Preparation

The student-teachers learned that holistic preparation was an important key to face challenges. One student-teacher said:

Extract 20: *"Prepare yourselves, mentally, spiritually, physically and emotionally, because many things will happen in the class. In my class sometimes students will vomit and poop poop or what, you need all of your strength to try to and not just teaching."*

Being Well Prepared for Class

All the student-teachers agreed that seeking guidance from their cooperating teachers was important. The following extract is an evidence of the importance of being prepared.

Extract 21: *"I felt more confident when I am prepared for the class. I prepared by talking to the homeroom teacher and getting some advice from her, preparing and knowing the content and materials well, getting feedback from the homeroom teacher and implementing those changes."*

Category 3: Attitude

Thinking Positively

The student-teachers realized that they could be in any unexpected situation and that they needed to stay positive. They understood that those challenging experiences were there to teach them.

Extract 22: *"I helped my classroom advisor as much as I can do without complaining. I have to understand that the classroom advisor has a lot of work and need of help. Listen to the teacher rather than feeling unwanted."*
Extract 23: *"For higher grade, you must think then you can teach them, especially about language. Because many student teacher have problem about their English language when they going to teach in international school."*

Category 4: Relationship

The relationships between student-teachers and cooperating teachers varied, complicated and delicate. As the trust relationship developed, the student-teachers experienced greater sense of belonging and acceptance.

Developing Good Relationship with Cooperating Teachers

Cooperating teachers are often very influential in the development of student-teachers as they have the most contact and communication with the student-teachers. Student teachers viewed collaboration with the cooperating teachers as a positive way to increase their confidence and effectiveness in the classroom. Despite that, it may take time to build relationships and foster mutual understanding. One student-teacher pointed that in order to be successful, the student-teachers must choose the right cooperating teacher. The extracts below exemplify the claim.

Extract 24: *"It takes time to get to know the cooperating teachers but she usually help me to get through the teaching practice."*
Extract 25: *"I'm not thinking to give up because I know the teacher will support me. The teacher is open with me and also I realize that we have the same mind about the school."*
Extract 26: *"If you can, choose a good homeroom teacher."*
Extract 27: *"It took time to get to know my homeroom teachers but I had a good relationship with the homeroom teacher and I showed that I enjoyed working with her.*
Extract 28: *"get to know your classroom teacher during the preparation week.*

Developing Positive Relationship with Student

Student-teachers discovered that a positive relationship with their students is important to foster positive learning experiences in the classroom.

Extract 29: *"I put them into groups, going to student personally, and then try to have conversation and build a relationship with them. 90% work."*
Extract 30: *"I loved my students."*

Findings of the Study

Table 1 shows the number of student-teachers who experienced different types of anxiety. Almost all student-teachers experienced anxiety from various factors. The result shows almost all of the student-teachers were anxious when preparing for their lesson. Language level of proficiency and classroom management were the next common causes of anxiety for this particular sample. This is followed by communication with cooperating teachers, cooperating teachers' expectation for student-teachers, and teaching performance. There were at least four student-teachers who cited lack of confidence as a cause of anxiety.

Table 1: Causes of Anxiety Experienced by Student-teachers
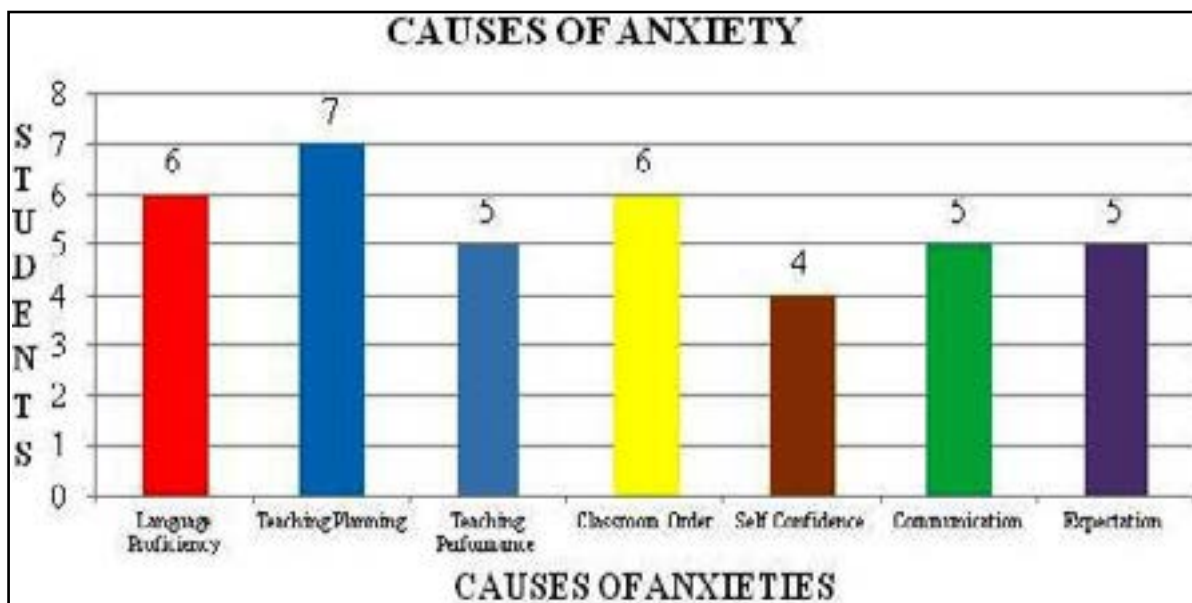

Table 2 indicates various coping strategies that student-teachers had employed and recommended. Adapting to change and lesson plan preparation were the highest coping strategies identified among them. Holistic preparation, positive thinking and good relationship with cooperating teachers were effective strategies to decrease anxiety. Having a positive relationship with their students in the class enhanced a positive teaching experience among the student-teachers. Student-teachers also experienced that being reflective and responsible with their assigned tasks can decrease the possibility of becoming over anxious.

Table 2: Coping strategies that student teachers had employed and recommended.
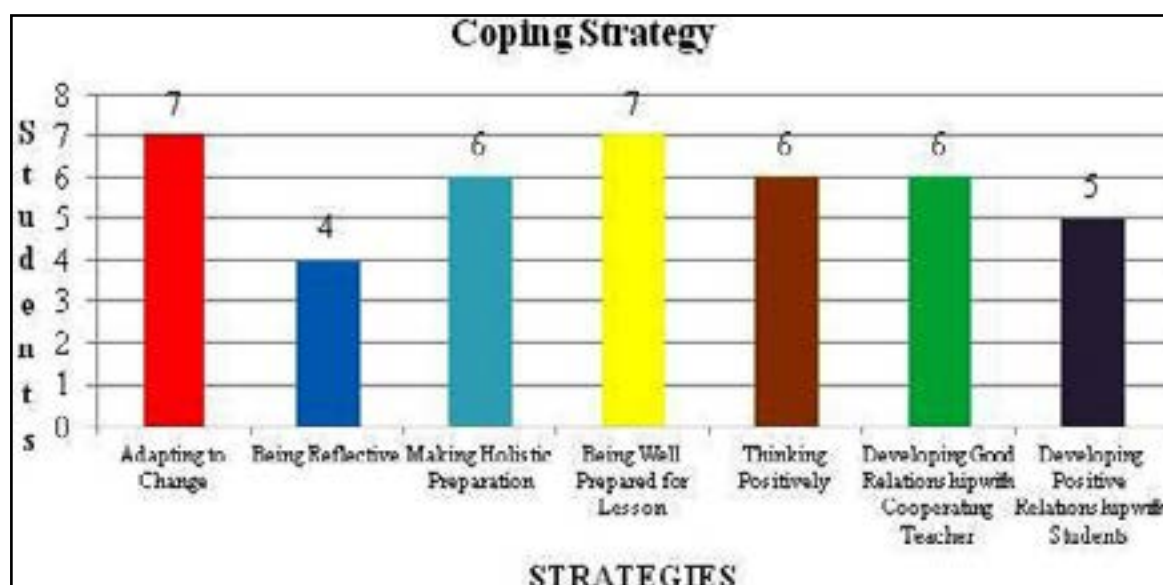
Discussion

The lack of English language proficiency was identified as one of the causes of anxiety among the student-teachers during their teaching internship especially for the student-teachers who spoke English as their second language or foreign language. This finding concurs with that of the literature whereby a sense of inadequacy among student-teachers may be a cause for anxiety, especially among non-native speakers of English who are teaching in English (Merc, 2004; Numrich, 1996). This finding also confirms the finding that was made by Takahashi (2014) that anxiety increases when teachers have insufficient English language abilities.

One possible measure to mitigate anxiety in situations where students need to use a second language to teach is to allow these student-teachers more opportunities to develop their speaking and teaching confidence by engaging in more microteaching in an authentic setting. In addition to that, student-teachers need to learn to prepare lesson plans and teaching materials so they could increase their level of confidence in using English in the classroom.

Another point worth noting is that student-teachers indicated that their anxiety increased when they were not prepared well for the class. Moreover, being in a new school environment and working with a new curriculum were stressful to them. They had to adapt to lesson plan formats which may vary from what they have learned. This finding agrees with the previous studies that indicate new teachers experience anxiety more frequently than experienced teachers (Sammephet & Wanpet, 2013). The student-teachers themselves suggested a number of coping strategies regarding the preparation of lesson plan: 1) to prepare ahead of time. 2) To communicate with the cooperating teacher to ensure the accuracy of lesson plans.

Another source of anxiety is the failure to implement and/or execute classroom rules that have been set. Lack of self-confidence and experience had been identified as the causes of classroom management anxiety. As such, student-teachers struggled to apply the theoretical and principles of classroom management they have learned in a real classroom setting. To mitigate this anxiety, student-teachers indicated that positive communication with the cooperating teachers should be developed to enhance their confidence in executing and implementing classroom management techniques. Student-teachers also learned that developing good relationship with students is crucial in enhancing their confidence. However, students took time to accept them as a teacher-in-charge in the classroom.

Student-teachers had also found that they need to adapt to new environment. They need to be able to remain calm and believe that they have the capability to teach and help the students in the classroom. Furthermore, they realize that they need to spend time to self-reflect upon the classes they have taught. This is a vital finding as previous studies have suggested that constructing meaning through reflection was found to increase growth and confidence (Costa & Kallick, 2000). In such, teacher education programs can add a reflection component to the internship by providing student-teachers the opportunity to reflect on their teaching behavior. In this way, student-teachers have the chance to evaluate their teaching and develop their

confidence in decision making. When they reflect on their teaching experiences, they have the opportunity to identify what is significant in their classroom experiences. In this way, it decreased their levels of anxiety when they look at their teaching in perspective.

Finally, another measure to decrease levels of anxiety is to establish a conducive rapport with other co-teachers. Cooperating teachers are often the most influential keys in the development of student-teachers. As studies have indicated (Norris, Larke, & Briers, 1990; Yoder, 2000), it is found that supervisors and cooperating teachers leave an impact on how student-teachers perceive teaching practice, which, in turn, may influence a student-teacher's decision to remain within the profession in the future. Furthermore, various coping strategies had been identified regarding the relationship between student-teachers and their cooperating teachers. Collaboration with the cooperating teachers could increase student-teachers' confidence and effectiveness in the classroom, similar to other studies where student-teachers and their supervisors or co-teachers maintain a positive and harmonious relationship (DeMoulin, 1993; Montgomery, 2000).

Limitations

Although the findings cannot be generalized, the study has helped the researcher to understand the causes of student-teachers' anxiety during their internship and identified coping strategies that could be helpful to student-teachers in dealing with internship anxiety.

There are several limitations of this study. First, only eight student-teachers participated in this study. In the future, a similar research should aim for more participants until saturation point is reached. Second, the majority of the student-teachers came from non-English speaking background. They may have not been able to express themselves fully due to their language limitation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings have revealed various types of anxieties and an array of coping strategies pertinent to the context of this study. The discovery of the causes of anxiety would allow teaching internship coordinators, internship supervisor, curriculum coordinators as well as the advisors of the student-teachers to make better decisions and guidance in preparing student-teachers for internship and give better support to student-teachers. Future student-teachers also will be benefited from this study as they are more aware of possible challenges they may encounter during their teaching internship.

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APPENDIX A

Consent Form

I…………………………………………agree to participate in the research study "Understanding the causes of anxiety and coping strategies of student-teachers during internship: Phenomenological Study.

1.1.1   The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

1.1.2   I am participating voluntarily.

1.1.3   I give permission for my interview with [name] to be tape-recorded

1.1.4   I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

1.1.5   I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

1.1.6   I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

1.1.7   Please tick one of boxes:

(   ) I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview
(   ) I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

Signed…………………………………….   Date……………….