

Chapter # 1

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF STRESS AND SUPPORT AMONG IN-SERVICE TEACHERS AND PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aims to explore the main sources of stress and support among teachers in practice and prospective teachers, as well as the quality of their interpersonal relationships using ecomaps. Focus group interviews were conducted with 25 in-service teachers (mean age = 44.9 years, 84 % of women) and 38 prospective teachers (mean age = 23.1 years, 79 % of women) from the Pavol Jozef Šafárik university in Košice and local schools. Results indicate that teachers in practice primarily experienced stress related to workload, student behavior, administrative demands, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Prospective teachers reported stress linked to academic pressure, identity formation, and concerns about the future. Sources of support included interpersonal relationships and inner coping resources. Ecomap analysis revealed that most relationships were supportive, with a notable proportion being ambivalent, reflecting the complex nature of social interactions in education. The findings offer insight into developing targeted support strategies for current and future educators, emphasizing the importance of relational and systemic support structures in educational settings.

Keywords: stress, support, in-service teachers, prospective teachers, ecological system.

1. INTRODUCTION

Stress significantly affects teachers' effectiveness, job satisfaction, risk of burnout, attrition, and overall well-being, with consequences for student learning and engagement (Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer, 2011). Compared to other professionals, teachers consistently report higher levels of physical and psychological problems (Johnson et al., 2005; Kidger et al., 2016; Scheuch, Haufe, & Seibt, 2015; Stansfeld, Rasul, Head, & Singleton, 2009). Studies identify workload, time pressure, classroom management, administrative demands, and role ambiguity as key stressors (Kyriacou, 2001). More recent findings highlight that the Covid-19 pandemic intensified these pressures, with online teaching, blurred work-life boundaries and shifting regulations creating additional burdens. Teachers reported increased burnout, sleep and eating problems, alcohol use, career-change considerations, and worries about student welfare (Stang-Rabrig, Brüggemann, Lorenz, & McElvany, 2022; Sigursteinsdóttir & Rafnsdóttir, 2022; Minihan et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2022). These findings point to the need for updated research on teacher stress and support in the post-pandemic period.

For prospective teachers, stress arises from academic pressure, identity formation, and the transition from theory to practice. These tensions often lead to feelings of self-doubt, frustration, or helplessness (Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013). Recent studies during and after the pandemic documented heightened levels of stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms,

and uncertainty among university students preparing for teaching careers (Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, & Sasangohar., 2020; Barbayannis et al., 2022; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021).

Research shows that sources of social support, whether interpersonal, institutional, or internal, play a key role in mitigating stress (Collie, 2023). In this context, ecomaps provide a useful methodological tool to capture relational dynamics and visualize the balance between stressors and support within teachers' ecological systems (Nastasi, Borja, & Summerville, 2018; Bennett & Grant, 2016; Manja, Nrusimha, MacMillan, Schwartz, & Jack, 2021).

By integrating both in-service and prospective teachers, this study addresses an important gap in the literature, which often focuses either on novice teachers at the beginning of their careers or on generalized stress factors without differentiating stages of professional development. Examining similarities and differences across these groups provides a more comprehensive understanding of stress and support in post-pandemic educational context and can inform more targeted and context-sensitive support strategies.

2. OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is: 1) to explore the main sources of stress and support that teachers and prospective teachers experience, and 2) to examine the quality of teachers' and prospective teachers' relationships mapped through their ecosystem.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research Sample

Firstly, data from teachers were obtained as part of an international research project. In this part, four focus groups were created based on a request from Pavol Jozef Šafárik University to participate in the research. Twenty-five teachers from four schools (two primary schools, two secondary schools) in the Košice region participated. The average age of teachers was 44.9 years, with the average years' experience = 18.4 years, with a higher representation of women ($n = 21$; 84 %).

Secondly, the data has been extended with a sample of prospective teachers. Data from four focus groups of prospective teachers were obtained. Therefore, the focus interviews were attended by 38 master's degree students in teaching fields. The average age of prospective teachers was 23.1 years; 15 students completed teaching practice ranging from 32 to 40 hours. In the group of prospective teachers, there were 30 women (79 %) and 8 men (21 %).

3.2. Research Design

This study involves two qualitative data collections. The first data collection was part of the International School Psychology Association (ISPA) research project 'Global perspectives on teachers' wellbeing and mental health following the COVID-19 pandemic.' This research sample was expanded to include prospective teachers at master's degree in teaching fields from Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice. Data were obtained from April to May 2023 (groups of teachers) and from October to November 2023 (groups of prospective teachers). The respondents were selected based on availability and participated in the research voluntarily. All the collected data was anonymized. The research was approved by the local Ethics Committee.

During the realization of focus group interviews with teachers, the ISPA international research protocol was followed, included 15 questions divided into three areas: 1) general questions (e.g., "What is well-being?"), 2) questions about stressors and support (e.g., "How

do you know when you are feeling stressed?”), and 3) questions about challenges in teaching and discipline (e.g., “What is your approach to teaching?”). After 45-60 minutes of the interview, the ecomap activity followed. This included drawing an ecomap and marking supportive, stressful, and both (supportive and stressful) relationships with suggestions from the ecomap (Nastasi et al., 2018).

In focus groups of prospective teachers, 10 questions were discussed, divided into two areas: 1) general questions, and 2) questions about stressors and support. The wording of the questions was identical to the questions in the focus group of teachers. Interviews were also followed by an ecomap activity.

In this study, the results of questions in the second area, questions about stressors and support, as well as results related to ecomaps, are presented.

3.3. Data Analysis

3.3.1. Analysis of Focus Group Interviews

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013), we applied the six-step approach to thematic analysis. First, all focus group interviews were transcribed and preliminary concepts noted. Second, an inductive-deductive coding process was conducted in ATLAS.ti. Third, codes were organized into potential themes, and in the fourth step these were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence with the data. In the fifth step, themes and subthemes were finalized and described in detail by two researchers. Finally, in the sixth step, data extracts were selected linked to research questions, and their broader implications were discussed. Data were analyzed and presented without the use of false, incorrect statements, or erroneous interpretations.

3.3.2. Analysis of Ecomaps

Ecomaps were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. For each participant, the number of relationship types, support sources, stress sources, and sources of ambivalent relationships were calculated. The stress-support index (SSI) was calculated by assigning numerical values to each relationship: 1 for support, 1.5 for ambivalence, and 2 for stress. These values were summed and divided by the total number of sources in the ecomap (Nastasi et al., 2018). The qualitative themes were then identified based on the responses provided by the teachers and prospective teachers, and the consensus of three assessors specializing in psychology (Tennant, Li, Kruger, & Leite, 2018).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Sources of Stress among In-Service Teachers and Prospective Teachers

Three main themes were identified in the group of in-service teachers, with a total of nine subthemes. The three main themes were “*work and working conditions*”, “*the Covid-19 pandemic*” and “*additional stress sources*”. In the group of prospective teachers, two themes were identified, with a total of two subthemes. The main themes were “*university*” and “*personal and professional challenges*”. Themes related to teachers' and prospective teachers' sources of stress are presented in Table 1.

Sources of stress among in-service teachers

Theme 1: *Work and working conditions* are the main sources of stress for teachers. As part of their work, they experience time pressure related to administrative work and extracurricular activities (participation in student competitions), which represents an increased burden for teachers. Furthermore, challenges such as student behavior and

motivation, as well as difficult relationships with colleagues and parents, contribute significantly to the stress faced by teachers

Theme 2: *The Covid-19 pandemic* represents a specific period during which the level of stress and workload have increased for teachers. Although the pandemic has ended, teachers continue to reflect on the challenges they faced during this period, such as technical difficulties and confusion caused by constantly changing rules. The stress associated with online teaching and the ambiguity of pandemic-related guidelines left teachers feeling uncertain and overwhelmed.

Theme 3: *Additional stress sources* of stress described factors such as work-life balance, health problems, and social and political pressures. Although these were perceived as less significant sources of stress, they still contributed to the general levels of stress of teachers. The challenges of balancing professional and personal responsibilities, dealing with health-related concerns, and managing external pressures from social and political factors added to the stress of teachers.

Sources of stress among prospective teachers

Theme 1: *University* is a major source of stress for prospective teachers. Heavy workloads, strict academic demands, frequent exams, and public presentations contribute to feelings of overwhelm. Students often experience performance anxiety and burnout, especially during exam periods, when emotional tension can lead to sleep disturbances and even physical symptoms.

Theme 2: *Personal and professional challenges* arise from both everyday responsibilities and long-term career concerns. Poor time management, procrastination, and the pressure to meet high personal standards are common stressors. Additionally, worries about their future effectiveness as teachers and how they will handle real classroom situations contribute to stress linked to their emerging professional identity.

Table 1.
Sources of stress among in-service teachers and prospective teachers.

Group	Themes	Subthemes	Citations (examples)
Teachers	1. Work and working conditions	1.1 Time pressure, administrative burden, and extracurricular activities 1.2 Student behavior and motivation 1.3 Interactions with colleagues 1.4 Students' parents	"And for example, my stressor is that I personally don't like doing paperwork, there's more and more of it, and I always tell myself I'll do it continuously, so I won't be under time pressure later, but I never manage. This is the only minus point for me – that I can't manage this in a way that it wouldn't cause me stress. I always have it."
	2. The Covid-19 pandemic	2.1 Online teaching and technologies in education 2.2 Chaotic and unclear regulations	"Just the whole Covid situation was stressful for everyone. And very much to us teachers, because we had to learn how to teach online."
	3. Additional stress sources	3.1 Work-life balance 3.2 Health and health problems 3.3 Social and political factors	"Exactly from the government, the state, comes a message that 'tomorrow it must be done.' And that's for me something like – maybe I won't manage it, or I won't do it well."

Group	Themes	Subthemes	Citations (<i>examples</i>)
Prospective teachers	1. University		"...for me, the stressor is the given teacher, examiner..." "Exam period."
	2. Personal and professional challenges	2.1 Individual stressors 2.2 Professional stressors	"Just in general, the future – what it will be like when we're actual teachers, whether we'll even have free time. So I'm stressed about that, for example."

4.2. Sources of Support Among In-Service Teachers and Prospective Teachers

Three main themes were identified in the group of in-service teachers, with a total of five subthemes. The three main themes were “*interpersonal relationships*”, “*individual coping strategies*” and “*work and working conditions*”. In the group of prospective teachers, also three themes were identified, with a total of five subthemes. The main themes were “*interpersonal relationships*”, “*individual coping strategies*” and “*university and practice*”. Themes related to teachers' and prospective teachers' sources of support are presented in Table 2.

Sources of support among in-service teachers

Theme 1: *Interpersonal relationships* are a crucial source of support for them, particularly those within the school, family and teacher-student interactions. Relationships within the school provide emotional and professional support, especially during challenging times. In addition, family relationships provide emotional relief and guidance, while teacher-student relationships can also provide motivation and fulfillment through personal connections.

Theme 2: *Individual coping strategies* represent a teacher's hobbies which provide a mental break from their daily routines, helping them recharge and reduce stress. In addition, inner resources, including personal reflection, connection with nature, and spiritual support, offer teachers the strength to cope with challenges and maintain a sense of balance during difficult times.

Theme 3: *Work and working conditions* were also identified as a theme of teachers' support. For some of them, their work is more than just a job, it is a source of personal fulfillment. The sense of purpose is derived from teaching and interactions with students and colleagues, even during challenging moments. Despite physical exhaustion or stress, teachers find that being in the classroom energizes them and helps them overcome personal difficulties or pains.

Sources of support among prospective teachers

Theme 1: *Interpersonal relationships* play a vital role in maintaining well-being of prospective teachers. Family members, especially parents, often provide comfort, encouragement, and reminders to take care of themselves. Friends and peers help by sharing similar experiences, which reduces feelings of isolation and helps normalize stress.

Theme 2: *Individual coping strategies* of support include leisure activities, inner coping mechanisms, and comfort eating. Physical activities like running or walking help reduce tension, while routines such as hot showers or time in nature promote emotional balance. Prospective teachers also rely on self-talk, prayer, and maintaining perspective. Occasionally, sweets or warm drinks offer quick emotional relief during stressful moments.

Theme 3: *University and practice* are also a source of support, especially through positive interactions with mentor teachers and practical teaching experiences. When supervising teachers offer reassurance and constructive feedback, students feel more confident and validated, which helps reduce stress and build a sense of competence.

Table 2.
Sources of support among in-service teachers and prospective teachers.

Group	Themes	Subthemes	Citations (examples)
Teachers	1. Interpersonal relationships	1.1 Colleagues and school management 1.2 Family 1.3 Pupils	"...for me it's very important that I have people around me, not only at home but also at work, who know how to listen to me, who know how to support me when I'm sad, even praise me – whether colleagues or the leadership. I think it's very important that when you do something, you see the feedback..."
	2. Individual coping strategies	2.1 Hobbies 2.2 Inner sources and spiritual support	"...read some books or go for a walk outside, change the activity for a while. Not to stay in that cycle..."
	3. Work and working conditions		"But I realize that even when I get up in the morning and I'm tired and I go to work – but once I'm with the students, it actually energizes me, boosts me, I function somehow, even just fine on a Friday during the seventh lesson. And then I get home – and that's it."
Prospective teachers	1. Interpersonal relationships	1.1 Family 1.2 Friends and classmates	"...conversation, rest, and maybe when it comes to the conversation, it always calms me when I realize that others, like my classmates or friends, are dealing with the same thing I am."
	2. Individual coping strategies	2.1 Hobbies 2.2 Inner sources and spiritual support 2.3 Food	"I go running. And the more nervous I am, the more I run." "...a hot shower." "...to replenish sugar, so I get some energy..."
	3. University and practice		"...it really calms me when the examiner calms me down, tells me it's no big deal, that it's okay, and then it's just like nothing. That everything's fine. So the stressor then becomes something positive for me."

4.3. Quality of In-Service Teachers' and Prospective Teachers' Relationships

Table 3 presents an overview of the types of interpersonal relationships mapped in the ecosystem of in-service teachers and prospective teachers, categorized as supportive, stressful, or ambivalent.

Among both groups, the majority of relationships were identified as supportive (60.4 % among teachers and 58.7 % among prospective teachers, indicating a generally positive social environment. Ambivalent relationships, representing mixed or uncertain feelings, accounted for 29.6 % in both groups, suggesting that nearly one-third of interactions are perceived as helpful and challenging at the same time. Stressful relationships were less frequent, reported by 10 % of teachers and 11.7 % of prospective teachers.

The Stress-support index (SSI) values were similar between groups: 1.24 for teachers and 1.23 for prospective teachers, indicating that both groups operate within a relatively supportive social network, with only moderate levels of relational stress.

Table 3.
Types of relationships and Stress-support index.

Group	N	Supportive relationships n (%)	Stressful relationships n (%)	Ambivalent relationships n (%)	SSI
In-service teachers	159	96 (60.4 %)	16 (10 %)	47 (29.6 %)	1.24
Prospective teachers	351	206 (58.7 %)	41 (11.7 %)	104 (29.6 %)	1.23

Notes: SSI – Stress-support index

In Table 4 is presented the distribution of supportive, stressful and ambivalent relationships across various themes identified in the ecomaps of teachers and prospective teachers. The themes include people, places, activities, things, values, pets, events, faith, and others.

The first theme, *people*, was a frequent source of supportive and ambivalent relationships. Teachers reported 37 supportive and 24 ambivalent relationships, while prospective teachers noted 45 supportive and 33 ambivalent relationships, indicating the complexity of interpersonal connections in educational environments.

The theme *activities* emerged as another major source of supportive relationships in both groups, particularly among prospective teachers (n = 68). However, it also included a notable number of stressful (n = 18) and ambivalent (n = 23) relationships, indicating that engagement in activities (e.g., hobbies, sports, relaxation routines) serves as a key support mechanism, though it may also be linked to pressure or conflicting emotions.

Places were identified as meaningful relational contexts, especially for prospective teachers, who reported 36 supportive and 22 ambivalent relationships. For both groups, *values* and *faith* were recognized as internal sources of support, with no reported stress. Interestingly, *events* (e.g., parental meetings) were mentioned only by teachers and were associated with stress. This may reflect the formal and often evaluative nature of such events in a teacher's professional environment.

Table 4.
Types of relationships by identified themes in the ecosystem.

Themes	In-service teachers			Prospective teachers		
	Supportive n	Stressful n	Ambivalent n	Supportive n	Stressful n	Ambivalent n
People	37	3	24	45	1	33
Places	19	2	10	36	14	22
Activities	19	3	9	68	18	23
Things	3	0	0	13	1	4
Values	5	2	1	26	6	19
Pets	3	0	0	12	0	2
Events	5	5	2	0	1	0
Faith	2	0	0	6	0	1
Others	3	1	1	0	0	0

5. DISCUSSION

This study provides an in-depth exploration of stressors and sources of support among in-service and prospective teachers, with particular attention to the post-pandemic context and show that while both groups experience high levels of stress, the nature of their stressors and coping strategies differs.

For in-service teachers, workload, administrative demands, student behavior, and lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were the most salient stressors. These results align with earlier research on role overload and classroom management (Kyriacou, 2001; Shernoff et al., 2011), but they also echo recent studies showing that working conditions continued to deteriorate after the pandemic, with increased classroom disruptions and declining trust between teachers, parents, and school leaders (Baker & Koedel, 2025). Psychological consequences are also well documented: in large surveys, up to three-quarters of school staff reported moderate to severe stress, with high rates of anxiety, depression, and intentions to leave the profession (Cavallari et al., 2025). At the same time, in-service teachers in our study drew on professional maturity, using colleagues, pupils, and families as relational support while relying on hobbies, spirituality, and nature as internal resources. Seeing teaching itself as a meaningful and energizing activity reflects resilience, though it coexists with chronic systemic stressors.

Prospective teachers, in contrast, described stressors more directly linked to academic demands and identity formation. They reported pressure from examinations, evaluations, and practicum performance, together with uncertainty about their readiness for future teaching roles. These stressors reflect the developmental tensions of early professional socialization (Pillen et al., 2013) and are consistent with studies documenting heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms among university students during and after the pandemic (Son et al., 2020; Barbayannis et al., 2022). Our findings show that their coping strategies were more situational, such as comfort food, exercise, or peer reassurance, reflecting a repertoire that is still emerging. Importantly, prospective teachers perceived the university both as a stressor and as a source of support, particularly when mentoring and constructive feedback were available. This resonates with recent qualitative studies emphasizing the importance of embedding stress-management, mindfulness, and self-care training into teacher education programs (Zito et al., 2024).

The ecomap analysis highlighted further contrasts. In-service teachers identified specific professional interactions, such as meetings with parents, as ambivalent sources of both support and stress, reflecting the evaluative nature of such encounters. Prospective teachers, however, emphasized “places” and “values” as important supportive anchors, indicating their reliance on broader environmental and personal resources outside of professional practice. Both groups reported predominantly supportive networks, but the relatively high proportion of ambivalent relationships points to the complexity of social interactions in education and the need to strengthen positive ties.

Overall, the comparison demonstrates that while both in-service and prospective teachers share vulnerability to stress, the underlying mechanisms differ. In-service teachers face systemic and chronic stressors tied to workload and organizational demands, but they benefit from established support networks and professional identity. Prospective teachers, on the other hand, struggle with transitional and identity-related stressors and rely on less developed coping strategies.

The methodological approach, combining focus groups with visual mapping, provided a layered understanding of how stress and support manifest in different ecological domains, fulfilling the call for more context-sensitive research in psychology.

5.1. Limitations

The qualitative design and geographically limited sample restrict generalizability. Participants were selected by availability, and group dynamics of focus interviews may have influenced openness of responses. Findings may also reflect the post-pandemic context and time during the school and academic year in which data were collected. Despite these limits, strengths lie in the combined research approach, focus groups, and ecomap analysis. Including both teachers and prospective teachers offers a unique comparative perspective across different stages of the teaching trajectory.

5.2. Future Research Directions

Longitudinal research should examine how perceptions of stress and support evolve during critical academic periods and career transitions (from training to the early years of practice). Cross-cultural studies are also needed, as research across different countries may reveal both specific and universal sources of stress and support, offering broader insights into how educational and social contexts shape teachers' and students' experiences. Quantitative approaches should complement qualitative findings by analyzing links between stressors, support systems, and contextual variables. Finally, future research should consider how individual characteristics (e.g., gender, age, teaching experience, personality) interact with institutional and contextual factors in shaping stress and coping.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of differentiated interventions for in-service and prospective teachers. For in-service teachers, support should target systemic and organizational changes. Reducing administrative burdens, strengthening collegial collaboration, and ensuring access to mental health resources are essential. School leaders play a pivotal role, and leadership training should emphasize autonomy-supportive, relational, and emotionally responsive practices, which improve teacher well-being and reduce turnover intentions.

For prospective teachers, interventions should be embedded in teacher education programs. Structured mentoring and constructive feedback during practicum can ease performance anxiety, while training in stress management, resilience, and self-care can strengthen coping.

While both groups experience stress, their stressors and resources differ. Tailored interventions, systemic reforms for practicing teachers and developmental support for future teachers, are crucial for safeguarding well-being, strengthening professional identity, and reducing attrition. Addressing these distinct needs can foster more resilient and fulfilling careers in teaching.

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