Navigating Academic Success: Exploring the Role of Self-Perceived Coping Strategies Among Pre-Service Teachers

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Navigating through the progressive field of education and teacher preparation takes a village. This village involves the combined efforts of policymakers, community stakeholders, parents, PK-12 educators and administrators, university faculty, and others, who have steered and guided the next generation of educators. Transferring knowledge, experience, and skills from current to future teachers is no small feat. With teaching comes great responsibility and privilege. The effective training involved in a teacher preparation program includes a theoretical and practical application. The collaboration between teacher education programs and in-service practitioners in the classroom is essential.

The implications for the collaborative efforts between university-school partnerships include provisions for preservice teachers to become effective practitioners in content expertise, pedagogy, and professional dispositions expected of educators. As preservice teachers enter their classroom experience and begin applying the knowledge obtained in their program, they face new challenges. They are accustomed to assignments and exams in their methods courses, which are now practical and tangible. Proactive and immediate executive action is required to tailor instruction at the moment, prioritize tasks, and address the varied needs of the diverse classroom landscape.

As teacher preparation educators, we have observed how preservice teachers employ coping strategies to navigate this transition from theoretical application to practical performance. We have noticed that preservice teachers placed in a classroom during an internship need help with skills such as planning and organization, basic computer applications, following directions, problem-solving, and consistency with overall work quality. This period of their teacher preparation program is one of the most stressful for preservice teachers within the dual positionality between the university classroom and the PK-12 classroom responsibilities and expectations.

To that end, we conducted a study to examine the self-perceived coping approaches of preservice teachers at the end of the teacher preparation program when confronted with demanding or stressful events, such as this period during their education preparation program. The study closely replicated the study by Goldman and Bell (2022) that specifically focused on another

trying period--student and faculty coping in response to COVID-19 and its impacts on academics. The study aims to understand how preservice teachers' coping strategies or approaches contribute to problem-solving and extend to more or less resilience when faced with stressful situations. As teacher educators, we were also interested in their coping strategies. Preservice teachers completed the self-reporting survey, Brief COPE (Carver, 1997), at the end of the term in their first-semester senior year when placed in a classroom setting while still taking methods courses related to their education field. This time is a cognitively and emotionally demanding semester for students at this point in their education preparation program.

The scope of this article is to understand one's approach to coping with stressful events through the framework of emotion-focused and/or problem-solving (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1985). It specifically focuses on the practical implications of coping strategies and provides recommendations for school-university partnerships to support teacher preparation effectiveness. The findings' significance will guide how higher education institutions and PK-12 partners can proactively create measures to support preservice teachers in their training.

Literature Review

Self-efficacy is the belief about one's perceived abilities to achieve specific goals. According to Bandura (1997), high self-efficacy promotes motivation and perseverance, unlike low self-efficacy. The level of actual abilities compared to perceived self-efficacy can be equivalent, inflated, or diminished. In other words, while one's perception of self-efficacy may or may not match one's actual abilities, it can lead to developing a growth mindset.

Studies have found that students excel more academically if they believe they can increase their intellectual abilities - a belief coined growth mindset - than if students think their intellectual skills are stagnant - a belief called fixed mindset (Claro, et al., 2016). Students with fixed mindsets tend to avoid situations where they might fail because these experiences undermine their sense of intelligence. In contrast, students who have a growth mindset tend to see complex tasks as a way to increase their abilities and seek out challenging learning experiences that enable them to do so. Consequently, students with a growth mindset tend to earn better grades than those with a fixed mindset, especially in the face of difficulty (Dweck, 2000).

Wiener identifies three critical dimensions of attributions: locus of causality (internal vs. external), stability (whether the cause is stable or unstable), and controllability (whether the cause is in one's control) (Weiner, 1986; 2000). He discusses how these dimensions impact emotional responses, especially in achievement settings (Weiner, 2000). His theory has applications in education, psychology, and interpersonal relationships, offering insights into how people react to different experiences (Weiner, 2000). This theory is applicable in promoting a growth mindset and improving emotional regulation in academic environments.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined stress as the result of interactions between individuals and their environment, where stressful events affect either the person's physical environment or psychological well-being. The impact of these events depends on the individual's coping mechanisms. According to Lazarus (1966), stress involves three processes: primary appraisal, where one perceives a threat; secondary appraisal, where one evaluates how to respond to the threat; and coping, where one acts on the chosen response.

There are over 400 documented coping strategies (Skinner et al., 2003), broadly categorized into approach (active) strategies and evasive (disengagement) strategies. Approach strategies involve actively addressing the problem or stressor through planning, seeking support, or acceptance. On the other hand, evasive strategies involve avoiding or denying the stressor, using methods like distraction or wishful thinking. Research generally shows that approach strategies are associated with better outcomes in academic, physical, and mental health for students, while evasive strategies tend to correlate with poorer outcomes.

The post-pandemic landscape has seen a rise in mental health challenges among undergraduate students, prompting diverse coping strategies. Many students seek support from social networks, and some resort to anxiety medication (Wiley, 2024). Faculty, meanwhile, often employ problem-focused coping strategies more frequently than students (Goldman & Bell, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty prioritized supporting students, which limited their use of disengagement coping strategies (Goldman & Bell, 2022).

To support students' post-pandemic, universities have introduced initiatives such as 24-hour virtual mental health care and bringing therapy animals to campus (Morgan, 2022). Resilience training has been highlighted as crucial for students, with preferences for blended approaches combining online videos and face-to-face sessions (Ang et al., 2022). Participants in resilience training prefer mindset-based training, positivity, reflexivity, time management skills, and contextually relevant scenarios, often in small online synchronous classes to foster meaningful discussions.

Methods

Participants

The participants were preservice teachers in a mid-sized public university in the Midwest United States. Participants included (a) Block 2 elementary education majors (PK-6) at the main campus and distance sites in two metro locations; (b) Phase I secondary (6-12) pre-service teachers at the main campus site, the only location that offers secondary education; and (c) Master of Science in Elementary Education (MS El-Ed; PK-6) students enrolled in a practicum, school-based course. All participants took methods courses and fulfilled classroom experiences at a specified PK-12 placement site. Elementary education preservice teachers were placed in a Professional Development School (PDS) classroom; secondary and MS El-Ed preservice teachers were placed in a classroom with a mentor teacher at various locations. Participants consented to complete the Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) survey using a Qualtrics form during one of their methods courses at the end of the term. Participants could opt out in writing or at any point and for any reason after completing the consent form. Students who did not consent to the survey exited from the Qualtrics form.
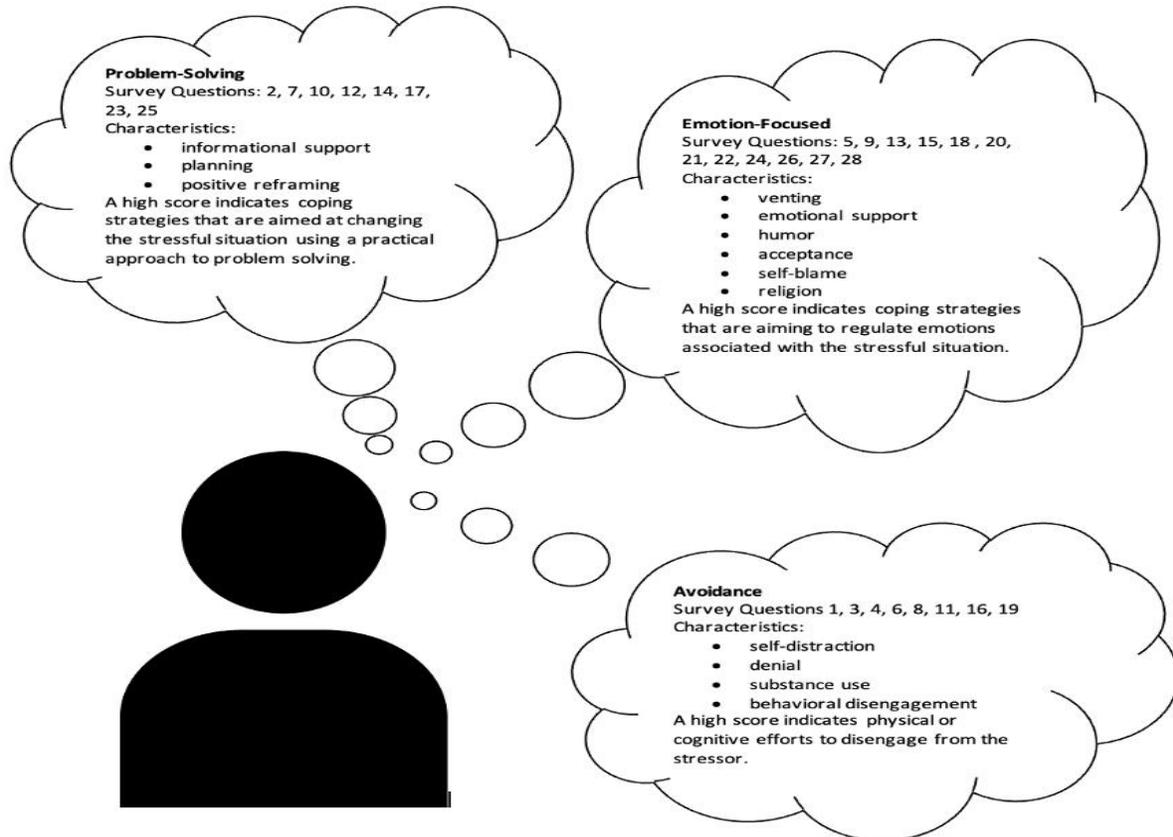
Procedures

Following an Internal Review Board (IRB) approval and informed consent, the participants completed the Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) survey. This survey consists of 28 questions asking respondents to indicate how they feel or what they do when presented with difficult or stressful events. Participants rated each item on a 4-point scale with the following ratings: 1-*I haven't been doing this at all*, 2-*A little bit*, 3-*A medium amount*, and 4-I've *been doing this a lot*.

The survey also included a section for self-reported grades to further explore a possible correlation between coping strategies and their effect on grades. However, for the practical nature of this article, the focus is solely on the preservice self-perceived selection of coping strategies. The survey questions fit into three overarching categories presented in Figure 1: Problem-Focused, Emotion-Focused, and Avoidance Coping (Novo Psych, n.d).

Figure 1

Brief COPE Survey Overarching Questions Categories

Problem-Solving
Survey Questions: 2, 7, 10, 12, 14, 17, 23, 25
Characteristics:
- informational support
- planning
- positive reframing
A high score indicates coping strategies that are aimed at changing the stressful situation using a practical approach to problem solving.

Emotion-Focused
Survey Questions: 5, 9, 13, 15, 18 , 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28
Characteristics:
- venting
- emotional support
- humor
- acceptance
- self-blame
- religion
A high score indicates coping strategies that are aiming to regulate emotions associated with the stressful situation.

Avoidance
Survey Questions 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 16, 19
Characteristics:
- self-distraction
- denial
- substance use
- behavioral disengagement
A high score indicates physical or cognitive efforts to disengage from the stressor.

Results

Data collection of survey responses utilized Qualtrics. The survey included information about the study and consent items. Upon consent, participants completed the 28 items on the Brief Cope (Carver, 1997) survey. In addition, participants completed six to eleven items about their self-reported course final grades. These items varied due to the required course differences between the programs. Responses were organized and analyzed in Excel spreadsheets. Table 1 further summarizes the responses.

According to the raw data, the preservice teachers selected a rating of 1-I *haven't been doing this at all* for most items in the Avoidant category. These included avoidant coping strategies such as denial, substance abuse, and behavioral disengagement. However, most participants indicated that self-distraction coping is a coping strategy that they utilize, with a rating of 3-*A medium amount.*

For Emotion-Focused coping strategies, participant raw data varied. Most selected responses were distributed on a spectrum between all ratings but tended to concentrate between ratings of 2-*A little bit* and 3-*A medium amount*. Religion was rated at a 1-I *haven't been doing this at all* most of the time; however, it was also scored at a 4-I've *been doing this a lot* as the subsequent most utilized coping strategy. Venting and Humor were rated at a 2-*A little bit.* Items about Self-Blame were equally split between the ratings of 2-*A little bit,* and 4-I've *been doing this a lot*. Use of Emotional Support and Acceptance were both rated with a score of 3-*A medium amount.*

Most participants rated Problem-Solving coping strategies on the higher end of the scale at ratings of 3-*A medium amount*, and 4-I've *been doing this a lot*. Preservice teachers selected Active Coping as a strategy with a rating of 3-*A medium amount.* Use of Instrumental Support, Positive Reframing, and Planning received ratings of 4-I've *been doing this a lot.*

The most selected responses per type of coping strategy indicate that they utilize Emotion-Focused coping strategies *a medium amount* (n=243), Avoidant strategies *a little bit* (n=242), and Problem-Focused strategies *a medium amount* (n=221).

Table 1

Frequency of Responses to Survey Items [a]

Type of Coping	Questions Categories	Ratings			
		1	2	3	4
Avoidant	Self-Distraction, items 1 and 19	3	33	50	47
	Denial, items 3 and 8	78	40	8	7
	Substance Use, items 4 and 11	94	25	13	2
	Behavioral Disengagement, items 6 and 16	67	55	8	3
Total		**242**	153	79	59
Emotion-Focused	Use of Emotional Support, items 5 and 15	2	26	58	47
	Venting, items 9 and 21	15	59	40	19
	Humor, items 18 and 28	12	44	33	41
	Acceptance, items 20 and 24	3	31	54	44
	Religion, items 22 and 27	46	29	20	37
	Self-Blame, items 13 and 26	8	43	38	43

Total		86	232	**243**	231

Problem-Focused	Active Coping, items 2 and 7	1	25	61	47
	Use of Instrumental Support, items 10 and 23	4	23	49	57
	Positive Reframing, items 12 and 17	8	24	57	44
	Planning, items 14 and 25	1	28	54	49
Total		14	100	**221**	197

[a] Raw data from the survey

Discussion

The raw data presents several patterns of coping strategies utilized by preservice teachers. While this discussion relies on raw data and inferences are not adequate based on this data, these provide a glimpse into potential practical implications for teacher educators, mentors, and university-school partnerships. It is essential to approach the training of professional educators in a holistic manner--one that encompasses the skillful navigation and balance of content, pedagogy, and dispositions.

Most preservice teachers do not employ Avoidance as a coping strategy. This revelation is encouraging as future professionals should demonstrate a proactive and ethical disposition. Participants rated Denial, Substance Use, and Behavioral Disengagement at a 1, which indicates that preservice teachers do not engage in those coping strategies. Only one coping strategy, Self-Distraction, was rated higher with a rating of 3, indicating that preservice teachers utilized it a medium amount. Overall, preservice teachers do not avoid the tasks and work presented as a way to cope with stress.

There were mixed responses to Emotion-Focused coping strategies. However, most of the responses for the majority of the questions received a rating of 2, indicating that the preservice teachers have employed a particular coping strategy a little bit. Religion was the least utilized coping strategy, with ratings mostly at 1; Venting and Humor received ratings of 2. The category of Self-blame had split ratings between a rating of 2 and 4. Half of the preservice teacher sample indicated they blamed themselves only a bit, and the other half had been self-blaming a lot. Use of Emotional Support and Acceptance were scored at 3, meaning that most preservice teachers utilized these coping strategies a medium amount. While preservice teachers' responses indicated using a variety of Emotion-Focused coping strategies, the selection and application of these strategies were not prevalent among the sample.

Based on preservice teachers' perceptions, they utilize Problem-Solving strategies the most, and participants' responses clustered at the higher end of the rating scale. This data was surprising as it starkly contrasted observations in the university classroom. Active Coping, Positive Reframing, and Planning categories received scores of 3 and utilized a medium amount. The

Use of Instrumental Support received scores of 4 by most preservice teachers. They appear to rely on specific support to cope with stressful situations.

Overall, the survey data can provide opportunities for higher education institutions and university-school partners as they respond and proactively create measures to nurture and retain preservice teachers. The following are recommendations based on the survey data.

Recommendations

This article aims to explore how preservice teachers cope with stressful events using emotion-focused and/or problem-solving strategies (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1985). The recommendations focus on the lower end of the rating scale of 1-*I haven't been doing this at all* and 2-*A little bit,* as well as on the higher end of the rating scale of 3-*A medium amount*, and 4-I've *been doing this a lot* based on preservice teacher scoring for Emotion-Focused and Problem-Focused coping strategies. Most preservice teachers do not utilize Avoidant coping strategies and appear focused on addressing work and tasks as a professional rather than avoiding them. This section emphasizes the practical implications of these coping strategies and offers recommendations for school-university partnerships to enhance the effectiveness of teacher preparation. The significance of the findings will inform higher education institutions and PK-12 partners on how to proactively support preservice teachers during their training.

Recommendations for improvement based on the 1-I *haven't been doing this at all* rating focus on the areas of Religion, and 2-*A little bit, Venting, Humor, and Self-Blame, all in the* Emotion-Focused coping category. We turn our attention to these categories not because they are effective but because preservice teachers need various options to cope with stress.

1. Effective match with an experienced mentor teacher. Consider preservice teachers' and mentors' interests, personalities, and professional goals and experience.

2. View Self-Blame not as a negative but as self-responsibility. Learn to discern between things within one's control and things outside of one's control. Coach preservice teachers on how to use problem-solving, such as planning and instrumental support, to be more proactive and to responsibly address a situation before it becomes stressful.

3. Allow space for preservice teachers to express their frustrations. Listen, but also allow them to provide solutions by guiding them and seeking to find what is within their control. Demonstrate that everyone makes mistakes, including faculty and mentors, and there is a time and a place for humor during breaks and within appropriate settings.

Recommendations specific to 3-*A medium amount* and 4-I've *been doing this a lot* focus on the area of Use of Emotional Support, Acceptance, Self-Blame, all Emotion-Focused coping strategies, Active Coping, Positive Reframing, Planning, and Use of Instrumental Support, all Problem-Solving coping strategies.

1. Continue to identify and strengthen beneficial university services provided to students, such as mental health counseling, food pantry, faculty mentorship, and peer support.

2. Reinforce preservice teachers' ability to plan and actively address stressful situations through praise and conversations with students during mentor conferencing. Identify these as strengths.

3. Acknowledge their ability to identify areas for growth and improvement. Provide constructive feedback but also emphasize the importance of responsibility rather than self-blame. Allow them time and space to identify growth areas and provide possible pathways to improve.

Limitations

The small sample of students from a mid-sized public university in the Midwest includes limited diversity in demographics, consisting primarily of Caucasian students. The article's discussion focused only on the raw data, and further inferences about it are limited. In addition, collecting additional data over time and expanding the study parameters should include a more diverse sample of preservice teachers.

Conclusions

In conclusion, preservice teachers utilize several patterns of coping strategies when presented with stressful situations. They self-reported that they do not avoid the tasks and work as a way to cope with stress. There were mixed responses to Emotion-Focused coping strategies among the sample of preservice teachers. While preservice teachers' responses indicated using a variety of Emotion-Focused coping strategies, the selection and application of these strategies were not prevalent among the sample. Preservice teachers utilize Problem-Solving strategies the most based on their perceptions. They appear to rely on specific support to cope with stressful situations. University-school partnerships must identify and continue to provide the necessary support for preservice teachers to continue using Problem-Solving strategies that will guide their success.

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