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Published online: 19 Feb 2020.

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Student-teachers' emotionally challenging classroom events: a typology of their responses

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ABSTRACT

Direct interaction with students operates as the main source of teachers' job satisfaction as well as a cause of feelings of distress. Teaching student-teacher appropriate coping strategies might make direct interaction with students a source of greater job satisfaction. A typology has been developed of student-teachers' responses to stressful classroom events in secondary education with four types of coping: "Varying", "Being annoyed", "Problem-solving" and "Avoiding" varying along two underlying dimensions: avoidance-approach and calmness-agitation. The coping types particularly differed in the way student-teachers approached, tolerated, avoided or ignored the classroom event, how agitated they were and the length of the coping response. Implications for teacher education are discussed to support student-teachers with more approach-coping strategies instead of avoidance-coping strategies.

Introduction

In teacher education programmes, student-teachers gain their first autonomous teaching experiences. While students regard the teaching practicum as the most valued part of their teacher education programme, they also consider it to be the most stressful (Kaldi 2009). Student-teachers are most concerned about daily hassles in class, mostly related to poor student discipline. Yet they also consider direct interaction with students as the main source of their job satisfaction and reason to enter the profession in the first place (Pillen, Beijaard, and den Brok 2013). This paradox could imply that feelings of stress do not so much result from the events themselves but from inadequate responses to classroom events. The way student-teachers respond to stressful classroom events may be directed at managing or altering the problem which is causing the distress (problem-focused coping) or at regulating the emotional response to the problem (emotion-focused coping; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Gustems-Carnicer, Calderón and Calderón-Garrído (2019) reported that student-teachers showed more avoidance-coping strategies than approach-coping strategies, with a focus on cognitive avoidance, emotional discharge and seeking alternative rewards, whereas both Lindqvist (2019) and Authors (2000) found that student-teachers showed a variety of activities in coping with distressing teacher education situations, which can be labelled as either approach or avoidance coping.

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In teacher education, student-teachers should be taught to respond to classroom problems with appropriate strategies making direct interaction with students a source of greater job satisfaction. To be able to initiate training in the use of appropriate response strategies in teacher education programmes, this study aimed at the development of a typology of student-teachers' responses to stressful classroom events.

Method

Participants and data collection

The participants were 27 student-teachers (18 females and all 26 years of age or younger) from a one-year graduate teacher education programme in the Netherlands, which prepares teachers for secondary education after four or five years of subject matter studies. They were in the middle of their second school practice period of six months, in which they carry full responsibility for some classes and are supervised at a distance by a co-operating teacher and a university supervisor.

Video recording was used to analyse the student-teacher's coping responses and stimulated-recall interviews provided data about the nature of the classroom events and the student-teacher's appraisal of the events. In all, 306 classroom events and an equal number of responses were analysed.

Classroom events

In a stimulated-recall interview – which was held immediately after the lesson that was video-taped, each student-teacher was asked to mention about 10 events from the particular lesson, which had required their attention. These events were selected for the interview and while watching the video fragments new events were added. While watching a video fragment of an event student-teachers were asked to assess what was at stake in each event and what they had intended to do. Each interview lasted about one and a half hours. Students' misbehaviour of individual students or the whole class was with 43 per cent the most reported stressful classroom event.

Student-teachers' coping

One lesson of each student-teacher has been videotaped. Each event lasted between about ten seconds and five minutes, and consisted of, on average, eight actions of the student-teacher (in total some 2,300 actions). Each action was coded on two dimensions based on Admiraal, Korthagen and Wubbels (2000), who developed an analytical framework of coping responses on the basis of a commonly used distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping made by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The first dimension of student-teachers' coping – avoidance-approach – refers to the intensity of student-teachers' cognitive and behavioural effort to control or eliminate stressors. The second dimension – the calmness-agitation – refers to the degree of tension the student-teacher arouses in the interaction with the students. Each response was summarised with a mean score and standard deviation in scores on both dimensions, resulting

in four variables. To check the reliability of this scoring procedure, 90 randomly selected responses were coded by a second observer with an agreement in scores of 84 per cent.

Cluster analysis with the Ward-method (cf., Everitt et al. 2011) was used to cluster student-teachers' responses, based on the four scores M Approach, SD Approach, M Agitation and SD Agitation. The results of this cluster analysis were optimised with the nearest centroid sorting technique. In order to evaluate the stability of the typology, we compared the typology into four clusters with a typology of 50 percent of the data, which was randomly chosen. The value of the Rand measures and corrected Rand measure was 0.90 and 0.77, respectively, which met 0.70, which is commonly set as minimum (cf., Morey and Agresti 1984)

Results: typology of coping responses

In Figure 1, we present the cluster centres of each of the four types. In the description of the typology, we also used other information, such as extreme scores on both coping dimensions, the number of actions within each response, the duration of responses and the subjects' perceptions on their responses as stated in the interviews.

Type 1: varying (N = 127)

This type of coping response was characterised by average mean score on both dimensions and relatively high standard deviations. This means student-teachers combined problem-focused actions and teaching activities ignoring the problematic classroom event. Student-teachers' coping actions mostly included a combination of disciplinary actions, waiting, instructing, asking and inviting students. In general, these responses were relatively long and related to almost all kinds of classroom events.

Type 2: being annoyed (N = 101)

This type of coping response was characterised by high mean score on Agitation and average mean score on Approach-Avoidance. Both standard deviations were quite high. This means student-teachers hesitated to either approach or avoid the classroom event, arousing at the same time tension in the relationship with students. Student-teachers' coping actions mostly included listening, waiting and short disciplinary actions in an unfriendly way. This type of coping included quite long response and was especially related to the classroom events with misbehaviour of the whole class.

Type 3: problem-solving (N = 30)

This type of coping was characterised by high mean scores on both dimensions and low standard deviations. Generally, it refers to short disciplinary actions with a combination of inviting, checking and criticising students and listening to their response. This type of coping was relatively more related to classroom events dealing with difficulties in organising class.
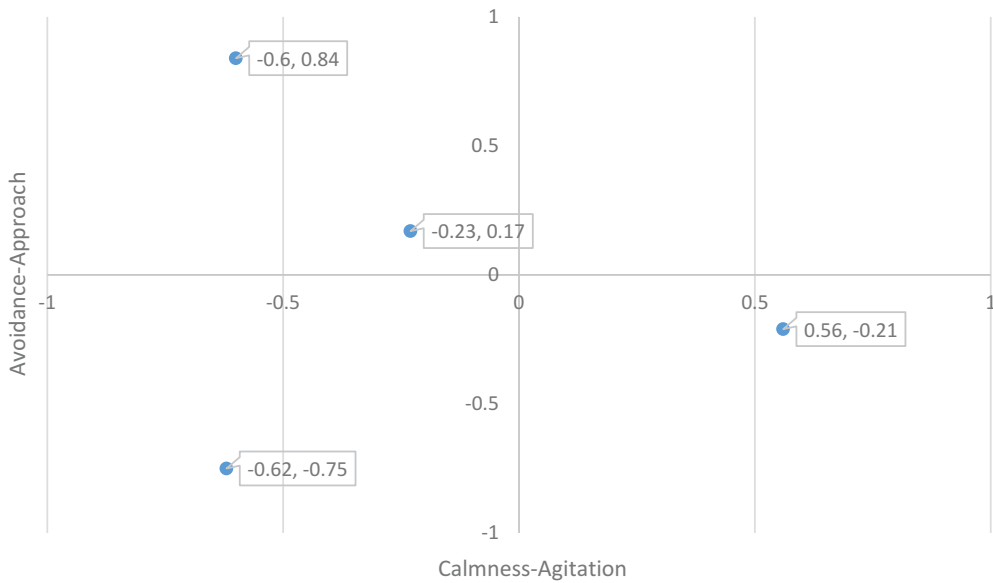
Figure 1. Cluster centres of Varying (−0.23, 0.17), Being Annoyed (0.56, 00.21), Problem-solving (−0.60, 0.84) and Avoiding (−0.62, −0.75).

Type 4: avoiding (N = 41)

This type of coping was characterised low means scores and low standard deviations on both dimensions. Generally, student-teachers continued their teaching (instruction, arranging the classroom environment and organising class) and ignored the classroom problem. In general, this type of coping included long responses and was related to all classroom events, but relatively more to events dealing with particular on-task behaviour of students, such as a comment or a question.

Discussion

These four types of coping response can be positioned on one dimension commonly distinguished in the coping literature: approach-avoidance (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). One type (Problem-solving) is positioned relatively high on approach, two types (Varying and Being annoyed) scored in the middle and the fourth type (Avoiding) is placed relatively high on Avoidance. Both more extreme types (Problem-solving and Avoidance) represented the least frequently applied coping response. This finding adds to previous research on student-teachers' coping, which reported that student-teachers focussed on either avoidance strategies (Gustems-Carnicer, Calderón, and Calderón-Garrido 2019) or problem-solving strategies through searching for the help of supervisor, mentor of co-operating teacher (Pillen, Beijaard, and den Brok 2013). In the current study, student-teachers mostly applied a combination of approaching and avoiding the particular stressful events, either intentionally and carried out with confidence (Varying) or unintentionally and showing their agitation (Being annoyed). Especially the latter type of coping might be related to the student-teachers' transformation from learner-teacher to beginning teacher.

In general, only Being annoyed responses led to negative feelings of student-teachers. They not only wanted to perform more approach coping, they also recognised negative effects on the learning climate in class. Practising more approach coping instead of avoidance coping, in simulations, role-play or micro-teaching might be a way to prepare student-teachers on the actual teaching practice. Their peers as well as expert teachers could model activities of approach-coping responses. This might help student-teachers to move from emotion-focused behaviour without resolving the emotionally challenging situations to overcoming or resolving these challenges. Support from their colleagues and administrators in this move echos the importance of building a supportive, encouraging and collaborative community, either during teacher education or as inservice teachers in school.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Wilfried Admiraal (Leiden University) is full professor Teaching and Teacher Education and director of Leiden University Graduate School of Teaching. His research interest combines the areas of teaching and social psychology in secondary education and teacher education.

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