Talk of Teacher Burnout among Student Teachers
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ABSTRACT
Student teachers recurrently and spontaneously talk about burnout when considering challenges of teaching. The following paper aims to address burnout from the perspectives of student teachers, as well as how they prepare to deal with the threat of burnout. There is a lack of research from a student teacher’s perspective concerning burnout. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were analysed using constructivist grounded theory. The findings reveal that student teachers engaged in a learning process related to (a) making sense of the perceived causes of burnout, and (b) constructing proactive strategies. The perceived causes of burnout were understood as individual work ethics, systemic reasons, collegial negativity and personal deficits. These perceived causes were related to strategies to protect against burnout.

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Burnout is a problem within the teaching profession that has been acknowledged and investigated in previous studies (e.g., Aloe et al., 2014; Bermejo-Toro et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Burnout and attrition are serious concerns that predict teacher shortages in a number of Western countries (Lindqvist et al., 2014), and should be considered in teacher education. In addition to the risk of experiencing actual practicum-related stress (Fives et al., 2007; Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2016), it is possible that student teachers will encounter a burnout discourse among teachers during their practicum due to the prevalence of teacher stress and burnout (Aloe et al., 2014; Beltman et al., 2011; McCarthy et al., 2016; Montogomery & Rupp, 2005). The current paper is part of a project studying student teachers’ perceptions and experiences of emotionally challenging situations in teacher education (Lindqvist, 2019; Lindqvist et al., 2017, 2019a, 2019b). In our previous analyses of what student teachers experience as emotionally challenging during teacher education, we found that they spontaneously and recurrently talked about burnout. We therefore decided to examine this theme further. Previous studies from the project focused on how student teachers and beginning teachers coped with challenging situations. They adopted coping strategies connected to (a) being part of a group, (b) changing their own approach and (c) trying to change teacher education and schools (Lindqvist, 2019). Since there is an estimated shortage of teachers, and since student teachers hear the discourse about burnout, there is an evident need to know how student teachers think and prepare to act to prevent burnout from occurring. The aim of this paper was to address the matter of burnout from the perspectives of student teachers, as well as how they prepare to deal with the threat of burnout.

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The Concept of Burnout in Teaching

Burnout is defined as including elements of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment (Fives et al., 2007; Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2016), with emotional exhaustion being the key aspect. Emotional exhaustion refers to feeling tired at work and a lack of emotional energy (Maslach et al., 2001). Depersonalisation is defined as teachers’ cynical and negative feelings and attitudes towards students and other teachers. Reduced personal achievement refers to negative feelings towards working as a teacher and decreased belief in one’s own capability to perform the work (Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2016).

Burnout is a process, and previous studies portray stages of the burnout process (Pietarinen et al., 2013) including emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of inadequacy or reduced personal achievement (Golembiewski, 1989; Leiter, 1989). Research has confirmed that emotional exhaustion is a predictor of depersonalisation and reduced personal achievement (Pietarinen et al., 2013). Burnout is thus a process that develops over time (Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2016). In a study of Swedish teachers, burnout was associated with low self-efficacy, poor school leadership, high job demands and teaching higher grades (Arvidsson et al., 2016). In an Australian study, the factor that was most likely to predict burnout related to pupils’ misbehaviour (McCormick & Barnett, 2011). In addition, Rajendran et al. (2019) concluded that secondary teachers could benefit from a reduced workload and that primary teachers could be helped by navigating the balance between family and work life.

Low teacher self-efficacy might result in teacher burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). Teachers with low confidence in their ability to assert classroom management might be more prone to experience occupational stress that could lead to emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (for a meta-analysis, see Aloe et al., 2014). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) related emotional exhaustion most strongly to time pressure, and depersonalisation to teachers’ relations with the parents. Bettini et al. (2017) found support for the suggestion that teachers’ work manageability predicted emotional exhaustion. Teacher burnout has been proven to affect health, motivation and job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Kahn et al. (2006) found that burnout and social support are determined by affectivity. According to their findings, positive social support decreased emotional exhaustion, and negative social support increased emotional exhaustion. As such, the social environment among colleagues in schools might increase burnout, whereas in some other schools the collegial social environment might have a protective effect against burnout.

In addition, Mearns and Cain (2003) noted that a person’s ability to regulate a negative mood predicts active coping and less burnout. When estimating the level of teachers’ ability to regulate a negative mood, those who estimated a high ability to regulate a negative mood reported less burnout and distress independently of coping strategies or stress levels. As with coping, there are both individual components and problems in the personal and environmental relationship that affect the burnout levels of professionals in teaching and other welfare occupations such as healthcare workers (Peterson et al., 2008).

Burnout among Student Teachers

There are a limited number of studies about burnout in teacher education. Since burnout is a process that requires time, it is unlikely that student teachers will develop all the phases of burnout during teacher education. In teacher education, most emotionally challenging encounters are reported during the work placement element of the education (Lindqvist et al., 2017). Being a student teacher on a work placement involves being at the school for a limited period, which is too short to develop all the symptoms. Fives et al. (2007) state that:

[I]t seems strange to consider student–teachers to be experiencing this kind of stress. Student–teachers however, may be vulnerable to the experience of burnout symptoms as they are new to the profession and may have few or limited coping strategies on which to draw. (p. 918)
In addition, some newly qualified teachers report suffering from burnout as early as three months into their first job, and this is too short a time period to develop burnout (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). This finding might suggest that the symptoms of burnout among new teachers start to develop during their teacher education. On the other hand, other studies have found that new teachers have low levels of burnout symptoms (Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2016). Kokkinos and Stavropoulos (2016) have shown that although student teachers indicated high levels of practicum-related stress, they also indicated moderate levels of emotional exhaustion. Kokkinos and Stavropoulos (2016) confirmed that cases with elevated burnout symptoms (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal achievement) were predicted by contextual and not personal variables. Fives et al. (2007) demonstrated low levels of burnout among student teachers over time when they had been teaching on a work placement. Lower levels of all aspects of burnout symptoms were stated by students who experienced a high degree of guidance in their interactions with their supervising teacher.

When it comes to study-related burnout among student teachers, Väisänen et al. (2018) found that coping strategies including efforts to manage stress reduced study-related burnout. Even though levels of burnout are low among student teachers, burnout as a concept is widely acknowledged at schools as being an important issue to deal with. Sweden is no exception (Arvidsson et al., 2016). This means that when student teachers complete a work placement, it may be assumed that they will encounter the concept of burnout, or talk among colleagues about burnout.

**Symbolic Interactionism and the Insider Perspective**

The study focuses on student teachers’ talk of burnout, and burnout as such is presented as how student teachers experience and perceive of the phenomenon. We therefore describe a theoretical framework, consistent with the importance of taking the perspective of the insider. Symbolic interactionism is a social psychological theoretical framework that, according to Charmaz et al. (2019), offers “a lens for looking at ourselves, everyday life, and the world, not an explanatory theory that specifies variables and predicts outcomes” (p. 19). Symbolic interactionism focuses on the subjective meanings and actions that result from the ongoing co-construction and negotiation in interactional practice, and argues that people always see and make sense of reality through perspectives (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz et al., 2019; Charon, 2007). Charon (2007) defines perspective as “an angle on reality, a place where the individual stands as he or she looks at and tries to understand reality” (p. 3). It refers to people’s conceptual frameworks, which consist of interrelated sets of words that they use to make assumptions about, and to interpret and evaluate, what they are seeing (Charon, 2007). Individuals know and understand their world, categorise and make meaning of things and events, delineate boundaries and outline their relationships by naming the situations, events and things in their world (Charmaz et al., 2019). Symbolic interactionism therefore emphasises the need to examine the insider perspective in social situations in order to better understand people’s actions and social interactions (Charmaz, 2014; Charon, 2007). The current study adds to the literature on coping, stress and burnout among teachers and student teachers by examining student teachers’ perspectives on burnout, and is, as far as we know, the first study dealing with Swedish student teachers and their talk of burnout. It is important to investigate student teachers’ descriptions of how they make sense of the prevalence of burnout as well as how they prepare to deal with the threat of burnout, and the current study adds this to existing literature.

**Aim and Research Questions**

The aim of this paper was to address the issue of burnout from the perspectives of student teachers, as well as how they prepare to deal with the threat of burnout. In accordance with the aim, the following research questions were explored: How do student teachers make sense of and explain the
prevalence of burnout? From their own perspectives, how do student teachers deal with their worries about burnout, and prepare themselves to handle it as future teachers?

**Method**

We adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz et al., 2018; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) because it is a qualitative method designed to explore and analyse individual and collective social actions, social and social psychological processes such as socialisation, identity transformations and coping with life changes, and people’s perspectives, meaning-makings and shared understanding (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). The constructivist grounded theory, with its roots in pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, views social reality as constructed and influenced by the participants’ interactions in a process that is ongoing and dynamic. A flexible usage of grounded theory tools was important, and the analysis was not conducted in a linear fashion. The researchers were seen as co-constructers in the process (Charmaz, 2014).

**Participants and Data Collection**

This study is part of a larger research project, and a total of 67 student teachers from six Swedish universities participated. This included 52 individual interviews and four focus groups. Other analyses have been deployed in the project, with a focus on emotional challenges and coping among student teachers and beginning teachers. Guided by theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978), we focused in particular on 18 of the interviews, including four focus group interviews, to further analyse the concept of burnout. We selected the narratives where the participants recurrently and spontaneously discussed burnout. The included interview and focus group data were gathered from in total 34 participants, representing student teachers studying to teach kindergarten class to third grade (age 6–9; lower elementary school), fourth to sixth grade (age 10–12; upper elementary school), and seventh to ninth grade (age 13–15; lower secondary school). None of the participants had previously studied a university level programme. See Table 1 for the participants’ demographics.

Two of the focus groups involved student teachers who were midway through their teacher training programme and two involved student teachers during the last year of their programme. The student teachers who participated in individual interviews were due to start teaching within a year from the time when the interviews were conducted.

In total 14 individual interviews and four focus group interviews were analysed. The focus group interviews ranged from 74 to 95 min and the individual interviews from 31 to 96 min. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, as well as using a video-conferencing tool. The focus groups included 4–6 people and were conducted in an appropriate room. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview questions focused on emotionally challenging situations in teacher education that the student teachers had been exposed to, situations that they worry about in relation to working as teachers, support they thought they had received and how they thought they had handled the situation. The interviews were conducted in three different waves with slightly changed interview guides (see Appendix, Supplemental data). In Appendix (See Supplemental data), the interview guides used for the different waves are specified. In Swedish teacher education there are differences between teaching grades in terms of the amount of university teaching and subject requirements. Swedish

| Grades | Number | Age   | Male | Female | Interview guide |
|--------|--------|-------|------|--------|----------------|
| K-3    | 5      | 22–39 | 2    | 3      | B              |
| 4–6    | 4      | 23–37 | 1    | 3      | B              |
| 7–9    | 25     | 21–30 | 5    | 20     | A/C            |
| Total  | 31     |       | 8    | 26     |                |

*aInterview guide used during the interview. Interview guides are presented in Appendix (See Supplemental data).*
teacher education for elementary teachers consists of seven or eight semesters, whereas teacher education for secondary education is nine semesters long. In addition, student teachers complete 20 weeks of practical work placement distributed throughout the teacher education programme. During these periods, they have increased teaching responsibilities and work together with a supervising teacher. The longest period of work placement is nine weeks long and takes place in the last year of the educational programme.

Data Analysis

Three stages of coding (initial, focused and theoretical) were used. Initial coding (Charmaz, 2014) was carried out word by word, sentence by sentence and segment by segment. Initial codes were constructed and constantly compared with data and with each other. The analysis was also guided by analytical questions (see Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978), including the following: What is happening in the data? What is going on? What are the main concerns faced by the participants in the actual situations? What do the data suggest? During the next step, focused coding (Charmaz, 2014), we used the most significant and common initial codes to sift through the large amount of data and focused on codes relating to (a) making sense of the perceived causes of burnout, in order to (b) construct proactive strategies to protect themselves against burnout in the future. The codes generated in this phase were more selective and conceptual than the initial codes. In total, 10 focused codes were generated, and after further constant comparison two codes were refuted (resistance and boundaries) and the analysis ended with eight focused codes that were further refined in the analysis. The third phase of coding, which was performed more or less in parallel with focused coding, was theoretical coding. The iterative analysis was extended, and we explored and analysed the relationships between our empirical codes using theoretical codes of causes and reactions (Glaser, 1978). During our analysis we conducted constant comparisons of clusters of codes, focused codes, interview data. Memos were also written during the analysis. Memos, notes of analytical thoughts and arrangements (Charmaz, 2014) were used to try out models and ideas. The phases of coding were not performed in a strictly linear way, but were intertwined and flexible, allowing the analysis to remain open and sensitive to data. In the analysis process, we stayed close to the data. In line with informed grounded theory (Thornberg, 2012), we used principles of theoretical agnosticism and pluralism as guiding principles in the analysis.

Findings

The student teachers recurrently reported concerns about teacher burnout, and in relation to emotionally challenging situations such as time pressure and not being able to limit their personal engagement regarding pupils’ various needs. They were afraid that this could happen to them as teachers in the future, and their main concern was to minimise the future risk of teacher burnout, which seemed to motivate them to engage in a learning process that consisted of two categories: (a) making sense of the perceived causes of burnout, in order to (b) construct proactive strategies to protect themselves against burnout in the future. The perceived causes of burnout were understood as individual work ethics, systemic reasons, collegial negativity and personal deficits and were related to different strategies (prioritisation, collegial support or self-change) to protect against burnout.

Perceived Causes

Perceived causes here refer to students’ explanations for why burnout emerged among teachers, which include four main categories: (1) individual work ethics, (2) systemic reasons, (3) collegial negativity and (4) personal deficits.
Individual Work Ethics

Individual work ethics as a cause of teacher burnout refers to an explanation of burnout as a result of not being able to sustain reasonable working conditions due to excessive ethical standards. This way of reasoning emphasises the importance of setting limits to ambition and boundaries regarding time and engagement to avoid a work situation that is considered too exhaustive. Cecilia talked about how burnout might be a result of being too engaged in the pupils and their needs.

Interviewer: Describe what you mean by burnout? What happens when you’re burnt out?

Cecilia: I think that you don’t have a good view of what’s reasonable. You haven’t decided what’s reasonable and you put it on yourself, that you’re never finished. (4–6)

Cecilia reported her fears of beginning to teach and thoughts about what she needed to do proactively to prevent burnout in the future. In discussing burnout and professional ability to engage proactively in setting reasonable work demands as a teacher, student teachers highlighted a lack of tools as the missing ingredient. Ida exemplified her work ethic concerning managing conflicts among pupils, or with pupils, as a way of managing time. Not being able to manage time was seen as an individual concern when approaching the work.

Well. I think, take one week at a time. The plan for the lessons has to be longer than that, but the challenging situations can’t be longer, because then you burn out really quickly, and I don’t intend to. (K-3)

Burnout was seen to happen when individual work ethics were not in line with professional ability, and being overtly engaged was seen as involving an elevated risk of burnout. As Lovisa put it:

We live in a country where a lot of people burn out, especially teachers, It’s very, very common that after a few years, you work too much and have to take sick leave. (7–9)

The reason for working too much relates to individual work ethics being too ambitious, and the responsibility therefore lies with the individual.

Systemic Reasons

The cited systemic reasons for burning out included viewing the profession of teaching as being inherently combined with demands and tasks that a single teacher cannot influence or control. The structure of the school organisation and working conditions for teachers were considered threats to their future mental health, and Gertrud hoped for a change at the systemic level to reduce the stressors and make the working conditions more feasible.

I hope that there will be change up ahead. You don’t want to start a profession and start working with the prospect of, or an expectation of, burnout right away. You hope that there will be better working conditions. (Gertrud, K-3)

In addition to the perceived need for better working conditions, including decreasing teachers’ administrative tasks and social work in order to reduce the risk of teacher burnout, Pia also highlighted the complexity of having to individualise teaching in line with all the needs of the students as a part of the stressful working conditions that need to be addressed. This was an impossible task for Pia, and the structural conditions of dealing with up to 30 students each lesson seemed impossible.

Pia: I think it’s both, but I can’t do anything about the work tasks. I can only control how I react personally. But I think you’re expected to adjust to every student.

Interviewer: Yes.

Pia: And at the same time, you have 30 students, and that, that isn’t humanly possible, it isn’t possible. We’re required to have more teaching time, we’re required to have more formative assessment. And schools are starting to compete with each other, which results in pressure on your pupils to get good grades. (7–9)

Pia also focused on societal, systemic competition among schools and the pressure of having high-achieving students. Student performance was considered to be the teacher’s responsibility, and as a
consequence, the failure of students related to teachers’ poor performance. The challenge of having low-achieving students was seen as contributing to burnout, and created a fear of failure as a teacher, which could also lead to burnout.

**Collegial Negativity**

Collegial negativity here refers to student teachers’ experiences of interacting with teachers who talked about other teachers or the teaching profession in a negative way. It was considered as unsupportive and contributing to teacher burnout. Richard discussed how colleagues despised a teacher suffering from burnout, and he considered this to be a part of the problem that could evoke burnout.

Richard: Like, meetings and such. They talked about people who had suffered from burnout, and no, that felt only bad.

Interviewer: How did they talk about it, or how did it come up?

Richard: No, well, they talked a lot. “Will she come in today or is she burnt out?” It felt like they were a mob, in a way. It was no big deal for them that she suffered from burnout. It felt more like they thought she was lazy. (K-3)

The excerpt portrays a collegial discourse of attributing burnout to personal deficits. Richard distinguished this lack of collegial support as part of the reason for teacher burnout. In addition, Linn encountered teachers who expressed negative attitudes toward their own profession in terms of stress and poor working conditions, questioned her choice of becoming a teacher, and predicted that she would burn out as a teacher.

According to Linn, collegial negativity affected what she believed it was possible to achieve. She linked it to passivation, demoralisation and burnout. Encountering cynicism and teachers who displayed dejection and poor teacher efficacy was considered part of a negative school culture that was unhealthy and, in the long run, contributed to the risk of teacher burnout.

**Personal Deficits**

A common way to explain burnout was to attribute it to personal deficits. Personal deficits refer to personality flaws and poor coping skills. This included being overly sensitive, not being able to regulate emotions or not being able to handle demands. Tina discussed burnout in relation to the amount of work she thought she had to put into her studies, and concluded that when she compared herself to other students, there must be something wrong with her.

But sometimes you feel, they squeeze so much into a term and then I think it’s their intention that you should be able to manage this. And then I can’t manage. Is there something wrong with me then? Well, then you should manage. I think that’s frustrating. (Tina, focus group 7–9, middle of the programme)

In a similar manner, Mats discussed how he was worried about burnout, since he was afraid of the amount of work he thought teachers had to do. In contrast to Tina, who tried to identify with the student teachers who managed their workload, Mats identified with people who never recovered. His worries about being able to recover were due to the way he related his personal deficits to being able to overcome adversity.

Mats: Then I will burn out.

Interviewer: Are you worried about that?

Mats: Yes, I am very worried about that. Because when I burn out, will I be able to recover from that? Because there are people who don’t. (7–9)
Student teachers viewed different personal deficits as reasons for burnout, including low expectations of recovery.

**Proactive Strategies**

The proactive strategies related to ways in which student teachers discussed how they could protect themselves against suffering from burnout. Thus, proactive strategies here refer to student teachers’ conceived ways of handling and regulating symptoms of burnout. The proactive strategies had sometimes not yet been tested in challenging situations.

**Prioritising**

One way of dealing with perceived burnout risk was to prioritise work tasks, according to the student teachers. Beth thought about trying to maintain a strategy of checklists, and taking breaks as a conscious way of being able to prioritise.

But I hope to be able to have the same strategy as I have now. That you draw up, like, checklists; this is what I must do, and then I can take a break. I still feel like it will be hard to have enough time and I'll have to stop [producing checklists, authors’ note] because you won’t have time to do everything at once. At the same time, I know that’s important if you don’t want to have a breakdown in the first year. (Beth, 4–6)

Another reaction was to use working hours to the full extent and do the work at school, not at home, to allow for planning, structuring and assessment. Arriving early before students or staying late when students went home was seen as a prioritising action to avoid interruptions in order to protect against burnout.

I have thought I’d get there early in the morning to do part of my work. And stay at the school, to be able to have free time at home. But you choose that yourself / … /To have most things done by the time you start the day, having all your copies made so you don’t have to run and do it at break time. (Jenny, K-3)

In line with prioritising having a personal life, Catrin suggested the importance of being disciplined about prioritising and not letting the work dictate all the conditions in life.

And then I feel, maybe not stress, but you have to have self-discipline. / … /, that I have to prioritise my own life to be able to manage this occupation. (Catrin, 4–6)

Being able to prioritise was seen as a means of protection against burnout. A special strategy of prioritising was resisting, which refers to deliberately choosing not to do certain aspects of the work as a teacher. Ella described this in relation to the fact that it is a teacher’s duty to make sure all the students achieve the required learning goals.

Everyone might not reach all the stated goals, or that you reach the goal. And it’s like, of course you should strive for that, but it feels a little hopeless that you won’t reach that. It’s a balancing act, should I burn out and fight until I bleed? (Ella, K-3)

Similarly, Lotta voiced concerns about administrative duties and thought she needed to take things less seriously and be selective about what to do as a teacher. In this way she resisted taking part in all the required school meetings, and chose to prioritise what she believed was important.

Lotta: I don’t know, but the thing I’m most worried about is time. Having enough of it both at work and at home. I don’t want to burn out in the first year.

Interviewer: Do you think there is a risk that you will?

Lotta: Absolutely, absolutely.

Interviewer: How come?

Lotta: Because there’s so many administrative tasks, and we have to teach and plan, you’re required to have conferences with teachers, you have teacher team meetings. There’s a lot to do apart from the lessons. The lessons are like breathing spaces, that’s how I felt when I was on my work
Lotta discussed having difficulties acting for change in the way she wanted. She defined what she thought was better practice in teachers’ work, and thought about influencing the teachers at the school, but resisting common practice was thought to be strenuous.

**Collegial Support**

Feeling collegial support was seen as a source of protection against burnout. Here, support is defined as being a part of a team, or a dyad, of teachers that support each other in all aspects of a teacher’s work. Even so, the lack of support also plays a significant role in proactive strategies to avoid burnout, where student teachers discussed a lack of support as a determining factor for burnout. In the excerpt below, Cecilia discussed burnout.

Interviewer: Are you afraid of that?
Cecilia: Yes, especially prior to the last period of work placement,/ …/ There was quite a long gap between the last and second to last periods of work placement and then you read a lot about how you should work, and what you should do, so I felt, well, will I even be able to work as a teacher, will I be able to convert this into practice? What will it be like, what will it be like to start work? I haven’t even done a plan for a whole term. How will I be able to lead a class from grade four to grade six? But when I got there and saw how the teachers in this class did the job and how it worked, it works. I know how, I see, I can be stern. My confidence as a teacher has grown a lot. (4–6)

Cecilia was calmed by her work placement. She felt reassured that she could carry out the duties of a teacher with the other teaching staff backing her up. Ida described how talking to colleagues could alleviate stress. “That’s when you need colleagues that you can talk to if something happens. So, I still think you should have good colleagues”. (Ida, 7–9). Furthermore, Pia reported how she had witnessed teachers whom she thought would eventually burn out and wished she could have supported them better, even though this meant more strain on her.

There’re a lot of people who call in sick all the time. You can see, now I think this colleague is going to burn out soon, or how will we handle this person being gone for months, or you haven’t gotten any information, substitutes come and go, and you try to relieve people when you see they’re stressed, but at the same time it’s hard. You don’t have a lot to give, since you’re running at 110% all the time. (Pia, 7–9)

Pia discussed helping as a preventive strategy she wanted to apply to provide better support for future colleagues. Efforts to seek collegial support were then a way of dealing with the risk of burnout, and the student teachers recognised the need for interdependence among teachers.

**Self-Change**

Some student teachers discussed how they might have personal deficits, habits or approaches that would eventually lead to burnout, and therefore had a need for self-change, which refers to efforts to change themselves, their habits and their own perceived ways of handling the stress inherent in the teaching profession. Nina described a reaction that was thought of as effective among student teachers who talked about burnout. They discussed changing their own teaching ideals. In essence, this meant student teachers accepting that their initial performance might not be perfect.

Nina: My worry is that I’ll have a breakdown, burnout. And that might be stupid to say when I’m 24 years old, but you …
Interviewer: How will you handle that?
/ … /
Nina: Well, I think that first and foremost, maybe, I will have to improve myself. Realise that you can’t be perfect in all situations, that you can’t do everything 110 percent all of the time. (Focus group, 7–9, end of the programme)
Nina discussed setting limits to her engagement. Kajsa discussed something similar, where teachers seemed to be afraid of students and the processes of depersonalisation of the students.

Kajsa: And the teacher that had the class was about to call in sick and burn out, and then they found out that the student was coming back and the class teacher said, “No, I’m not coming into school on Monday. I can’t take this” and then another teacher says, “No I don’t dare being in the hallway, I’m so afraid of the students.”

Interviewer: How do you react, hearing something like that?
Kajsa: I start crying. That’s my reaction, and then since I had this supervising teacher who was on sick leave during the time I was there, I got another supervising teacher that I talked to, who was very good, who tried to say, you don’t have to take responsibility for everyone’s problems. I can, like, if you feel it’s very challenging to be a teacher, then you can think that. It doesn’t have to mean I think that too. (Focus group, 7–9, end of the programme)

Kajsa thought the cause of burnout was connected to teachers’ negative attitudes and concluded she did not have to be like the teachers she met. In essence, student teachers feared burnout and if their own deficits were the cause of burnout, they were responsible for changing themselves in order to be protected against burnout.

Lovisa: To be able to work with oneself and learn what your boundaries are, how you handle things. I think that’s very important because, I mean, we live in a country where every other person suffers from burnout, especially among the people working as teachers. It’s very, very common that, after a few years, you work too much and have to be on sick leave, so I think, even if doesn’t sound very nice, I still believe that as a young person you learn where your boundaries are in order not to suffer in the future. I mean, it’s a pretty long working life you’re supposed to have. You have to manage these 40 years in a healthy way I think. Not only physically, but first and foremost mentally. It’s really important.

Interviewer: Yes, are you worried about that sort of stuff to do with time and burnout?
Lovisa: I’m actually really worried. (7–9)

Knowing yourself and how you deal with the risk of burnout was therefore seen as being of paramount importance in order to be protected against burnout when starting to teach.

A Grounded Theory of How Student Teachers Deal with Burnout Risk

Student teachers face teacher burnout during teacher education, in particular when they are at schools. In hearing the discourse of teacher burnout, they also encountered and constructed ways of explaining why some teachers suffer from burnout. Together, these experiences made student teachers aware of the risk of ending up in teacher burnout themselves in the future. Their main concern was therefore to minimise the risk of future teacher burnout, which in turn seemed to evoke a basic learning process of figuring out why burnout happens (constructing perceived causes) in order to be able to develop proactive strategies to protect themselves against burnout in the future. Thus, they created ways of both explaining the cause of burnout (individual work ethics, systemic reasons, collegial negativity and personal deficits) and dealing with burnout risk (prioritising, collegial support and self-change). The strategies for handling potential teacher burnout were, in other words, proactive and had sometimes not yet been tested in real situations. The strategies were not connected to a specific perceived cause but were rather a consequence of encountering talk of burnout. In conclusion, preparation for becoming a teacher also included trying to figure out how to endure a future profession full of elevated stress, with the potential risk of burnout as a looming threat, which created a need to distinguish common sense strategies to meet the demands.

Discussion

It seemed odd that student teachers, who have limited experience talked about burnout before even starting to teach. We have, in this study, revealed some of the processes that could be used to explain why the concept of burnout is vividly present among student teachers. As an affective concept, the
way student teachers use and understand the concept of burnout is relevant when understanding how they need to learn to cope in the teaching profession during teacher education. The current analysis further corroborates the work of Kokkinos and Stavropoulos (2016), in which student teachers seemed to experience burnout first hand in their work placement. There could also be a depersonalisation tendency in talking about the discussions about some teachers, involving negative attitude towards teachers (Maslach et al., 2001). Even so, coming into contact with the work placement can give rise to or diminish fears of burnout in the teaching profession. It is interesting to note that the student teachers in this study displayed different reactions to the talk of burnout. Their reasoning leads them to take measures to protect themselves against burnout. In this way it could be argued that by encountering the concept of burnout, they are better prepared to deal with the complex landscape of teaching. On the other hand, it could also be argued that the affective nature of burnout might mean that encountering the concept of burnout makes it more likely that the student teachers will be at greater risk of burnout (Kahn et al., 2006).

Our findings suggest that student teachers become aware of and start to worry about teacher burnout during their teacher training, which in turn seems to engage them in a learning process of constructing perceived causes and generating strategies to deal with them as future teachers. The starting point is their social understanding of themselves in the school environment, and their inner perspective guides their actions (Charon, 2007). Since burnout is a rather common condition among welfare occupations (Arvidsson et al., 2016; Peterson et al., 2008), including the teaching profession, it might be of value to include aspects of burnout and its prevention in teacher education to address, support, teach and guide student teachers in this learning process. Since the process takes time (Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2016) burnout might be counteracted if detected in teacher education. Primarily, it could be incorporated when following up on work placements during university courses. This could possibly be carried out as a direct implication, in a seminar including information about how burnout is characterised, and also in order to give the student teachers another view of the causes of burnout, and not only the causes formulated in schools.

In addition, it might be wise to reduce the workload of new teachers. Fagerlind Ståhl et al. (2018) showed that high demands are associated with a risk of burnout. They showed that increased support or better possibilities for action do not have a positive effect on the number of people suffering from burnout. Instead, fewer demands must be deployed. Also, there are more female participants than male participants included in the study, and this might have an impact on the results. However, there are more female teachers than male teachers working in schools and the sample is therefore congruent with the teaching population. It is also congruent with the fact that more female teachers than male teachers report higher level of stress linked to workload and pupils’ misbehaviour (Klasen, 2010). Our study raises some concerns regarding this important notion. The student teachers’ reactions focus on their ability to protect themselves against the demands, either by not doing their best or by prioritising, but also by looking inwards and engaging in self-change. Teacher education could help student teachers to formulate reasonable demands to place on the school leadership, when the talk of burnout starts to become a burden, or if they start to notice symptoms of burnout. There is a tendency to view the problem as something each individual is responsible for combating without collective action. This could be compared to Jones’ (2016) study showing that long-term urban teachers sometimes overlook chaotic circumstances to sustain themselves in the profession. Collective action could include receiving support from colleagues, although relying on this is problematic since colleagues are both a source of support and sometimes the cause of emotional challenges (Löfgren & Karlsson, 2016), as exemplified in the perceived cause of collegial negativity.

**Limitations**

The current study has limitations that should be considered when reading the findings. First, the data contain no performative data, only interview data. Secondly, although student teachers talked about burnout spontaneously in some of the interviews, other interviews did not include talk of burnout.
The present findings are based on interview data from a particular and limited sample of student teachers located in Sweden, the transferability of our findings could be discussed in terms of pattern recognition and context similarity (Larsson, 2009). Furthermore, grounded theory as a research method is not designed to paint a complete picture of the phenomenon. Our contribution should be considered as an interpretative portrayal (Charmaz, 2014). As such, we do not wish to portray a universal truth, but a grounded theory that is valued for its contribution to the dialogue about burnout among teachers.

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