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DEPARTMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION

The Zimbabwe Bulletin of Teacher Education

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Sources and Levels of Stress Among Teachers in Zimbabwe

Regis Chireshe and John Mapfumo

Abstract

The study sought to establish levels of stress among teachers, what stresses Zimbabwean teachers and how these teachers cope with the stress. Subjects (N=165) were teachers drawn from Masvingo and Manicaland Educational Provinces. A questionnaire was used to collect data. A t-test for independent samples was used to analyse the data. The results showed that teachers have moderate stress levels. The results showed that there is no significant difference in stress levels between male and female teachers and between graduate and non-graduate teachers in Zimbabwe. It also emerged that teachers are stressed by heavy teaching loads, low salaries, student indiscipline and poor working environments. The teachers also indicated that they use more than one strategy to reduce stress. Recommendations on coping with stress were made.

Introduction

Stress is part of life. It is part of the normal fight or flight mechanism that allows people to react to threats or rise to meet challenges. Selye (1980) views stress as a good thing, which signals one's amount of coping. Daley (1979) defines stress as a condition that occurs when there is a perceived imbalance between situational demands and a person's ability to respond adequately to the demands. Zindi (2002) sees stress as the result of the experience of something the person subjectively interprets as potentially threatening. It is often associated with those uncomfortable and undesirable feelings people may hold about themselves.

Jarvis (2002) states that teacher stress is a much talked of phenomenon although there is little consensus between different professional groups regarding its etiology or how to handle it. The National Education Association (NEA)(1996) in Delisio (2001) state that the majority of teachers choose to leave the profession because of stress factors. There is one striking finding in the United States by Brownell (2003). He found out that those teachers who show the greatest efforts, are empathetic, dedicated and idealistic are the very ones who are stressed

out fastest and who tend to leave the profession. Some teachers may commit suicide. Others may lose concern for their work or just withdraw from work (Maslach, 1976). Thus, stress impacts greatly on teacher retention (Jarvis, 2002). Stress among teachers is inevitable because they are under pressure to do more in the classroom all the time. They have much to do in less time while under scrutiny. This is supported by Delisio (2001) who states that stress levels among teachers are very high because expectations are high and demands are much higher. The National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (2003) found that as a group teachers in England had severe pressures on them. However, it is important to note that there are a wide variety of demands and challenges that teachers experience, but not everyone views the same list of demands and challenges as being stressful (Gmelch, 1984).

Because teachers are the backbone of many societies, a number of studies on teacher stress have been done. For example, Travers & Cooper (1997) surveyed teachers in England and France about stress; Dussault, Deaudelin, Royer & Loiseselle (1999) looked at stress among Canadian teachers; Pithers & Soden (1998) looked at stress among Australian and Scottish teachers while Van Dick, Wagner, Petzel, Lenke & Sommer (1999) questioned teachers about stress across Germany. It is disturbing to note that not much has been done in the area of teacher stress in Zimbabwe. Researchers like Nhundu (1999) and Zindi(2002) have looked at the sources and nature of occupational stress among teachers and headmasters in Zimbabwe and the paradigms underlying stress among secondary school teachers in Zimbabwe respectively.

Purpose of the study

The study sought to find out:

- stress levels as reported or experienced by teachers (as a whole, by sex and by graduate status)
- which stress factors that teachers felt should be addressed as a matter of urgency
- stress reduction strategies used by the teachers

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were proposed:

- ? There are no significant differences in stress levels between male and female teachers
- ? There are no significant differences in stress levels between graduates and non-graduate teachers

Methodology

Design

The study used a survey design.

Sample

One hundred and sixty-five (165) secondary school teachers participated in the study. Sixty-five (65) teachers were from Masvingo Region while 100 were from Manicaland. Seventy-eight (78) were female while 87 were male. Sixty-three (63) were graduates while 102 were non-graduates. Their age ranged from 23 to 55 years. The sample was drawn from 25 rural secondary schools (15 from Manicaland and 10 from Masvingo) and 8 urban secondary schools (5 from Manicaland and 3 from Masvingo). Five (5) teachers participated in each school.

Instrument

The researchers adapted Hellriegel, Slocum & Woodward's (1989) Stress diagnostic Survey Questionnaire (see Appendix 1). The instrument had 30 items, which were categorized into 6 categories of stressors. The researchers added blank spaces to the instrument to allow respondents to record those issues that needed to be addressed so as to reduce stress. In addition respondents were asked to record their stress reduction strategies.

Validity and Reliability of instrument

The instrument was pilot-tested with 14 teachers (7 from Manicaland and 7 from Masvingo) in February 2002. Pilot testing was done to clear the instrument of any unclear and ambiguous items thus validating the instrument. The instrument was re-administered to the same teachers in March 2002 and a test re-test reliability was computed. A correlation coefficient (r) of .792 was obtained. This reflects that the instrument was reliable.

Procedure

The researchers personally administered the questionnaire to 165 teachers from secondary schools in Masvingo and Manicaland Regions. The stratified sampling procedure was used to select the teachers. There was a 100 % response rate because the researchers collected the questionnaires soon after they were completed.

Data analysis

Cross tables were used to analyze the data. A t-test for independent samples was used.

Results

Table 1: Stress level by category and sex (N=165)

Category	Sex	Average score	Stress level
Role Ambiguity	F	12,5	Moderate
	M	9	Low
Role Conflict	F	15,2	Moderate
	M	13	Moderate
Role Overload-Quantitative	F	17,6	Moderate
	M	17,8	Moderate
Role Overload-Qualitative	F	15,1	Moderate
	M	14,2	Moderate
Career Development	F	17,3	Moderate
	M	18,4	Moderate
Responsibility for people	F	16,1	Moderate
	M	17,6	Moderate

The results in Table 1 show that both male and female teachers have moderate stress levels in all categories except for role ambiguity where male teachers have low stress levels but women teachers have higher stress levels.

Table 2: Stress level by category and graduate status (N=165)

Category	Graduate status	Average score	Stress level
Role Ambiguity	Graduate	8,1	Low
	Non-graduate	11,8	Moderate
Role Conflict	Graduate	11,3	Moderate
	Non-graduate	15,3	Moderate
Role overload-quantitative	Graduate	15,7	Moderate
	Non-graduate	18,8	Moderate
Role overload-qualitative	Graduate	12,2	Moderate
	Non-graduate	15,6	Moderate
Career development	Graduate	16,6	Moderate
	Non-graduate	18,4	Moderate
Responsibility for people	Graduate	14,6	Moderate
	Non-graduate	17,4	Moderate

The results in Table 2 show that both graduate and non-graduate teachers have moderate stress level except for graduate teachers who showed low stress levels on role ambiguity.

Using average scores from Tables 1 and 2 above, a t-test for independent samples was computed to determine whether there were significant differences in stress levels by sex and by graduate status. The results of the t-test are shown in table 3 below

Table 3 A t-test to determine differences in stress level between male and female teachers and between graduate and non-graduate teachers (N=165)

Variable	No of cases	t- obt	df	t-crit	Sig. Level 0.05
Sex	Male=87 Female=78	-0,42	164	1,65	Not Sig.
Graduate Status	Graduates=63 Non-graduates=102	-1,7	164	1,65	Not Sig.

At 0.05 significance level using a two tailed test, the ts- obtained for both variables (sex and graduate status) were smaller than tabulated values

Because the ts- obtained (t- values) for both variables were smaller than the tabulated values, we fail to reject the null hypotheses. In other words there are no significant differences in stress levels between sexes and between graduate status.

Table 4: Things that should be done urgently to reduce stress by sex (N=165)

What should be done	Sex	Percentage
Have clear communication	M	9(10%)
	F	15(19%)
Reduce teaching load	M	36(41%)
	F	36(46%)
Provide enough resources	M	9(10%)
	F	21(27%)
Salary increments	M	33(38%)
	F	27(35%)
Allow student punishment	M	0
	F	15(19%)
Administration to be accommodative	M	9(10%)
	F	3(4%)
Improve accommodation/ transport	M	21(24%)
	F	21(27%)

Table 4 shows that there were a number of factors that stress teachers. The most important of these are teaching load and low salaries. There was almost total agreement on these matters across the sexes. There was almost total agreement on accommodation and transport as a source of stress. Some female teachers were also stressed by student indiscipline. On the other hand none of the male respondents perceived indiscipline as a source of stress at all.

Table 5: Things that should be done urgently to reduce stress by graduate status (N=165)

What should be done	Graduate status	Percentage
Have clear communication	Graduate	9(14%)
	Non-graduate	15(15%)
Reduce teaching load	Graduate	36(57%)
	Non-graduate	39(38%)
Provide enough resources	Graduate	12(19%)
	Non-graduate	18(18%)
Salary increments	Graduate	27(43%)
	Non-graduate	36(35%)
Allow student punishment	Graduate	6(10%)
	Non-graduate	9(9%)
Administration to be accommodative	Graduate	6(10%)
	Non-graduate	6(6%)
Improve accommodation/transport	Graduate	21(33%)
	Non-graduate	30(29%)

Table 5 shows that graduate and non-graduate teachers were stressed by a number of stressors chief among them being teaching load and poor salaries. Poor accommodation and transport seemed also to stress teachers. These are the main areas which teachers want to see improved as a matter of urgency.

Table 6: Strategies teachers use to reduce stress by sex (N=165)

Strategy	Sex	Percentage
Social support	M	21(24,1%)
	F	48(61,5%)
Physical activities	M	33(37,9%)
	F	18(23,1%)
Entertainment	M	12(13,8%)
	F	30(38,5%)
Supportive attitudes	M	12(13,8%)
	F	24(30,8%)
Self management	M	15(17,2%)
	F	12(15,4%)
Intellectual stimulation	M	18(20,7%)
	F	39(50%)

Table 6 shows a number of strategies that teachers used to reduce stress. More female teachers seem to use social support and intellectual stimulation strategies while a number of male teachers use physical activities. Female teachers seemed also to value supportive attitudes and entertainment as stress reduction strategies.

Table 7: Strategies teachers use to reduce stress by graduate status (N=165)

Strategy	Graduate status	Percentage
Social support	Graduate	18(28,6%)
	Non-graduate	51(50%)
Physical activities	Graduate	9(14,3%)
	Non-graduate	39(38,2%)
Entertainment	Graduate	0
	Non-graduate	6(5,9%)
Supportive attitudes	Graduate	12(19%)
	Non-graduate	24(23,5%)
Self management	Graduate	12(19%)
	Non-graduate	12(11,8%)
Intellectual stimulation	Graduate	15(23,8%)
	Non-graduate	39(38,2%)

Table 7 shows that teachers (graduate or non-graduate) used a number of strategies to reduce stress with more non-graduates using social support and intellectual stimulation strategies while a fair number of graduates used social support strategies. None of the graduate responses saw entertainment as a stress reduction strategy.

Discussion

The results of this study show that all teachers experience moderate stress levels. This is related to Zindi's (2002) finding that the majority of teachers experience mild and moderate stress levels. However, studies in other countries for example, Australia and Scotland revealed that teachers experience high stress levels (Pithers & Soden, 1998). The same observation was arrived at by Schamer and Jackson (1996) who

found that teachers tended to be affected by burnout (the extreme result of stress) more than any other public service professionals. This difference in stress level could be attributed to the availability of stronger social support in Zimbabwe than in the countries where the studies above were reported. The importance of social support as a stress reducing strategy was supported by Griffith, Steptoe and Cropley (1999) who found out that high stress levels among teachers were associated with low social support.

The t-test showed that there are no significant differences between sexes and between graduate status in stress level. This finding contradicts Zindi's (2002) finding that there are significant differences in stress levels between sexes. Zindi found out that male teachers were more stressed than female teachers because of their African traditional roles, which gave them more responsibility than females. However, in today's world, there is gender equity hence the equitable distribution of responsibilities between males and females leading to both sexes experiencing equal stress levels.

This study also found that women were stressed by some role ambiguity in their work. This may be because the roles played by men are clearer than those played by women in our schools today. Mapfumo (1982) found that Senior Women saw themselves as less influential in school administration than Senior Masters even if both groups occupied the same hierarchical level.

The finding on graduate status versus stress level is different from that found in Britain. Jarvis (2002) found out that British graduate teachers had significantly more negative beliefs about teaching than non-graduates.

Although all teachers in this study showed moderate stress levels, male teachers and graduate teachers showed low stress levels on role ambiguity. This may be because in a male world men may feel that they are in control of their own destiny and are therefore less prone to being stressed. It is also possible that in an educational world that is increasingly acknowledging graduates and their status graduate

teachers feel more assured in terms of their future than those who are not graduates.

The results also show that the chief stressors of teachers were low salaries, heavy teaching loads and poor accommodation and transport. This is related to Travers & Cooper's (1997) finding that in British high schools workload, poor status and poor pay were the most stressors among teachers. Male & May's (1998) finding also further illustrates work overload and excessive working hours as teacher stressors. The above finding means that teachers are stressed by different things. This confirms Jarvis' (2002) argument that teacher stress is reliably associated with a number of variables.

The teachers in this study indicated that they were stressed by role overload (a number of competing roles within their job). This finding confirms Pithers & Soden's (1998) view that role overload is a stressor for teachers. The National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (2003) in England also points out that role overload is a major cause of teacher stress.

It also emerged that teachers were stressed by matters to do with student discipline. This finding is related to Lewis' (1999) revelation that classroom discipline is a significant source of stress. Lewis states that teachers are stressed by being unable to discipline pupils in the way they would prefer. Thus, the role of maintaining discipline becomes a stressor. Stress from indiscipline may be escalated if children in the school are behaviourally disordered. Carter (1994) working in the United States cited the work of Pullis who reported that inadequate discipline policies of the school were the leading stressor for teachers irrespective of sex.

This study revealed that teachers use a number of strategies to reduce stress. No single teacher indicated the use of one strategy. This is supported by Gmelch (1984) who found that most teachers use more than one way in which they handle stress. This is related to Selye's (1976) point that no one has really found one approach or ready-made formula for dealing with stress that works well for everyone. The strategies the teachers indicated they use to reduce stress in this study

includes: social support (e.g. visiting relatives, talking to friends); physical activities (e.g. walking, exercises); supportive attitudes (e.g. praying); self-management (e.g. sleeping, drinking beer); intellectual stimulation (e.g. reading magazines) and entertainment (e.g. watching television). Thus the teachers in this study could have indicated a moderate stress level and not severe or profound levels because of the use of these strategies. Carter (1994) reports on stress reduction strategies used by teachers in the United States, which could be useful to teachers in Zimbabwe as well. These include: allowing teachers to engage in more collaboration, receiving more workshops and in-service courses which are relevant to their work and building better communication and decision-making involvement with administrators.

Although the individual strategies by teachers could be working to reduce stress, their success depends on other factors like one's personality, the environment one is working in and the part played by one's authorities.

Recommendations

The study recommends that the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture reduce teachers' stress by increasing their salaries, reducing their teaching load and reducing the teacher pupil-ratio. There is need to improve teachers' accommodation and transport. School administrators should also give their teachers a warm, friendly and supportive environment to minimize stress. Teachers should be allowed by authorities to discipline misbehaving students. Teachers themselves should take it upon themselves through further education and other means to increase their efficacy which in turn reduces their stress that may result from their inability to teach effectively and to control students. Further research on teacher stress is also recommended. The research should include variables, which were not addressed in this study. These include type of school, teachers' age, marital status, teaching experience and levels taught and perhaps the effect of internal personality characteristics on stress levels.

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Appendix 1

Stress Diagnostic Survey (Adapted from Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodward, 1989)

Thank you for accepting to take part in this study. Obviously the results will be kept absolutely confidential but they will also be very useful in helping you and us to think about our jobs and what they cost us in terms of stress.

Biographical data

Please fill in the following sections

Sex _____ Age _____ Profession _____

Position _____ Experience _____

Qualification _____

Instructions

Please fill in the questionnaire below. Show how often each condition described is a source of stress to you.

Write 1 if the condition described is never a source of stress.

Write 2 if the condition described is rarely a source of stress.

Write 3 if it is occasionally a source of stress.

Write 4 if it is sometimes a source of stress.

Write 5 if it is often a source of stress.

Write 6 if it is usually a source of stress.

Write 7 if it is always a source of stress.

Part A

1. My job duties and work objectives are unclear to me _____
2. I work on unnecessary tasks or projects _____
3. I have to take work home in the evening or on weekends to stay caught up _____
4. The demands for work quality made on me are unreasonable _____
5. I lack the proper opportunities to advance in this organization _____
6. I am held accountable for the development of other employees _____
7. I am unclear about whom I report to and or who reports to me _____
8. I get caught in the middle between my supervisors and my subordinates _____
9. I spent too much in unimportant meetings that take me away from work _____
10. My assigned tasks are sometimes too difficult and or complex _____
11. If I want to be promoted I have to look for a job with another organization _____
12. I am responsible for counseling my subordinates and or helping them solve their problems _____
13. I lack the authority to carry out my job responsibilities _____
14. The formal chains of command is not adhered to _____
15. I am responsible for an almost unmanageable number of projects _____
16. Tasks seem to be getting more and more complex _____
17. I am hurting my career progress by staying with this organization _____
18. I take action or make decisions that affect the safety or well-being of others _____
19. I do not fully understand what is expected of me _____
20. I do things that are accepted by one person and not others _____
21. I simply have more work to do than can be done in an ordinary day _____

22. The organization expects more of me than my skills and or abilities provide ____
23. I have few opportunities to grow and learn new knowledge and skills in my job ____
24. My responsibilities in this organization are more for people than things ____
25. I do not understand the part which my job plays in meeting the overall organizational objectives ____
26. I receive conflicting requests from two or more people ____
27. I feel that I just do not have time to take an occasional break ____
28. I have sufficient training and /or experience to discharge my duties properly__
29. I feel that I am at a standstill in my career ____
30. I have responsibility for the future (careers) of others ____

PART B

Draw up a List showing those things that **MUST** be done as a matter of urgency to reduce stress in your work place.

- _____
- _____

PART C

Different people use different methods to cope with their stress. List below the strategies, which **YOU** use to reduce stress.

- _____
- _____
- _____

Thank you.



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