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Teacher Stress: directions for future research

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ABSTRACT *Research on teacher stress has become a major area of international research interest. This paper reviews research findings on teacher stress and suggests five directions for future research: (i) monitoring the extent to which particular educational reforms are generating high levels of teacher stress; (ii) exploring why some teachers are able to successfully negotiate periods of career reappraisal and retain a positive commitment to the work, whilst others are not; (iii) clarifying the nature of the stress process in term of two types of triggers' one based on excessive demands and the other based on a concern with self-image; (iv) assessing the effectiveness of particular intervention strategies to reduce teacher stress; (v) exploring the impact of teacher–pupil interaction and classroom climate on teacher stress.*

Introduction

In 1977 I published a review of research on teacher stress in *Educational Review* (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977). As far as I know, that was the first time the term 'teacher stress' had appeared in the title of a paper. Since then teacher stress has become a major topic of research throughout the world. The purpose of this paper is to suggest some directions for future research on teacher stress.

I first became interested in the topic of teacher stress when I started out as a teacher of mathematics in a secondary school in London in 1972. The school I joined served a disadvantaged community and as a result all teachers in the school received an enhancement to their salary, which was called a 'social priority allowance'. The intention of this salary enhancement was to reduce the high rate of teacher turnover that was typical in schools serving deprived areas. When I arrived at the school my colleagues jokingly referred to this allowance as a 'stress allowance'. This got me interested in the notion that teachers in such schools may be facing particular difficulties that were causing them to experience high levels of stress. However, when I looked for research literature on this, there was virtually nothing to be found. There have, of course, always been references made over the centuries to the fact that teachers may become upset and frustrated by aspects of their work, but by 1972 very few researchers had yet made specific use of the term 'stress' in the context of teachers and teaching.

More generally, the term 'stress' was becoming widely used in the social sciences following the pioneering work on psychological stress by Selye in the 1950s (Selye, 1956). In the 1960s studies began to appear making reference to teachers' concerns

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and anxieties, including several studies which focused on student teachers. In addition, studies of job satisfaction in teachers began to identify the sources of dissatisfaction. However, it was not until the mid 1970s that publications referring directly to 'stress in teaching' began to appear in reasonable numbers (see Coates & Thoresen, 1976; Dunham, 1976; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977). During the 1980s the number of studies reporting on teacher stress grew rapidly (Kyriacou, 1987; Cole & Walker, 1989). By the end of the 1990s the research literature on teacher stress had become voluminous (Travers & Cooper, 1996; Dunham & Varma, 1998; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999; Kyriacou, 2000).

Definitions and Models of Teacher Stress

Teacher stress may be defined as the experience by a teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of their work as a teacher. This is the definition I adopted when I first started to do research on teacher stress in the 1970s and is very much in line with the definitions most widely used by other researchers. My definition was linked to a model of teacher stress that I developed (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978a) which essentially viewed stress as a negative emotional experience being triggered by the teacher's perception that their work situation constituted a threat to their self-esteem or well-being.

However, other definitions and models of stress abound. Some researchers have used the term stress to refer to the level of pressure and demands made on an individual and have used the term 'strain' to refer to the reaction to such stress. Other researchers have defined stress in terms of the degree of mismatch between the demands made upon an individual and the individual's ability to cope with those demands. In addition, a number of researchers have focused on the notion of teacher burnout, which is seen to be a state of emotional, physical and attitudinal exhaustion which may develop in teachers who have been unsuccessful in coping effectively with stress over a long period (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999).

Researching Teacher Stress

The most widespread measure of teacher stress has been the use of self-report questionnaires. On the one hand, there are those which have employed a single item measure which ask teachers to rate their overall level of stress on a single response scale. A widely used example of this is that used in my own research, where teachers were asked to respond to the question 'In general, how stressful do you find being a teacher?' on a five point scale labelled 'not at all stressful', 'mildly stressful', 'moderately stressful', 'very stressful' or 'extremely stressful' (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978b). On the other hand, there are those which summate the teachers' responses to a list of items. An example of this is the teacher–event stress inventory, which is based on summating both the frequency of occurrence of a list of sources of stress with the degree of stress each of these items is reported to generate (Kyriacou & Pratt, 1985).

Some researchers have made use of measures of mental and physical ill health (such as questionnaires of general health and early retirements due to ill health), behavioural indices of stress (such as absenteeism, loss of temper and sleeplessness)

and physiological indices (levels of hormones in the urine associated with stress and levels of heart rate during lessons).

Whilst questionnaire surveys have been the most widely used approach adopted to explore teacher stress, other studies have included interview surveys, case studies and studies using physiological indicators of stress. In addition, a number of studies have used powerful statistical techniques to identify causal pathways linking the different variables involved in teacher stress (Tellenback *et al.*, 1983; Worrall & May, 1989).

The Prevalence of Teacher Stress

Survey data certainly indicates that teaching is one of the 'high stress' professions (Travers & Cooper, 1996; Dunham & Varma, 1998; Kyriacou, 2000). Questionnaires asking teachers to rate their experience of stress at work typically indicate that about a quarter of schoolteachers regard teaching as a 'very or extremely stressful' job.

One of the most interesting studies reported is that of Huberman (1993). His study was based on 160 interviews with high school teachers in Switzerland. What made his study so interesting was that he compared the ways in which teachers of differing lengths of experience viewed their working life and thereby identified some key stages and associated worries and frustrations that teachers typically seemed to experience as their careers developed. The study indicates that most teachers seem to encounter a period of self-doubt, disenchantment and reassessment, in which their concerns are either resolved with them continuing with their career as a teacher or their deciding to leave. Huberman reports that amongst the most common motives cited for leaving teaching were fatigue, nervous tension, frustration, wear and tear, difficulties in adapting to pupils, personal fragility and routine. The notion of 'wear and tear' here is also evocative of studies elsewhere which have indicated that prolonged stress can lead to teacher burnout.

The Main Sources of Stress Facing Teachers

Studies reporting sources of teacher stress (see for example Travers & Cooper, 1996; Benmansour, 1998; Pithers & Soden, 1998) indicate that the main sources of stress facing teachers are:

- teaching pupils who lack motivation;
- maintaining discipline;
- time pressures and workload;
- coping with change;
- being evaluated by others;
- dealings with colleagues;
- self-esteem and status;
- administration and management;
- role conflict and ambiguity;
- poor working conditions.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that the main sources of stress experienced by a particular teacher will be a unique to him or her and will depend on the precise complex interaction between their personality, values, skills and circumstances. As such, whilst we can highlight the most common sources of stress for teachers in

general, we must take care not to overlook the specific concerns of individuals. In addition, however, there are differences in the main sources of teacher stress between countries based on the precise characteristics of national educational systems, the precise circumstances of teachers and schools in those countries and the prevailing attitudes and values regarding teachers and schools held in society as a whole.

For example, Chan and Hui (1995) have explored teacher burnout in a study of 415 Chinese secondary school teachers in Hong Kong. They observed that previous studies of teachers in Hong Kong have indicated that one of the major sources of stress was having too heavy a workload. Many teachers in Hong Kong have been given additional duties in school guidance work as part of moves to improve the quality of guidance in Hong Kong schools. As such, in their study they looked to see whether these guidance teachers reported more stress that non-guidance teachers. Surprisingly, they found that despite the guidance teachers reporting a higher level of workload, they did not report a higher level of burnout. Moreover, they reported a greater sense of personal achievement compared with the non-guidance teachers. Presumably, guidance teachers are teachers who value this type of work As such, this study suggests that even in a context of feeling overloaded, taking on additional duties in a valued area of work need not create more stress, and may indeed enhance job satisfaction.

Coping with Teacher Stress

Individual coping strategies fall into two main types: direct action techniques and palliative techniques.

Direct action techniques refer to things that a teacher can do that eliminate the source of stress. This involves the teacher in first of all getting a clear idea of what the source of stress is and then carrying out some form of action that will mean that the demands which are causing the stress can be successfully dealt with in future or changing the situation in some way so that the demands no long occur. Direct action techniques may involve simply managing or organising oneself more effectively; it may involve developing new knowledge, skills and working practices; it may involve negotiating with colleagues, so that aspects of one's situation are changed or dealt with by others.

Palliative techniques do not deal with the source of stress itself, but rather are aimed at lessening the feeling of stress that occurs. Palliative techniques can be mental or physical. Mental strategies involve the teacher in trying to change how the situation is appraised. Physical strategies involve activities that help the teacher retain or regain a sense of being relaxed, by relieving any tension and anxiety that has built up.

Studies of how teachers cope with stress (see for example Borg & Falzon, 1990; Cockburn, 1996; Benmansour, 1998) indicate that the most frequent coping actions used by teachers are:

- try to keep problems in perspective;
- avoid confrontations;
- try to relax after work;
- take action to deal with problems;
- keeping feelings under control;
- devote more time to particular tasks;

- discuss problems and express feelings to others;
- have a healthy home life;
- plan ahead and prioritise;
- recognise ones own limitations.

As can been seen, this list reflects the mix of direct action and palliative techniques described earlier. A particularly interesting study was reported by Griffith *et al.* (1999), who conducted a questionnaire survey of 780 primary and secondary school teachers in London. Their data indicate that both the presence of social support and the use of effective coping behaviour can affect the teacher's perception of stress. Their findings highlight the importance of recognising that a teacher's perception of the demands made upon him or her is itself influenced by the degree of stress being experienced and that social support and successful coping can create a virtuous circle whereby the same 'objective' situation can begin to appear to be less demanding to the teacher.

What Schools Can Do to Reduce Teacher Stress

As well as individual coping actions that a teacher can take, a number of studies have highlighted the importance of working in a school where a positive atmosphere of social support exists (Sheffield *et al.*, 1994; Punch & Tuetteman, 1996). This enables teachers to share concerns with each other, which can lead to helpful suggestions from a colleague that the teacher can implement or action by colleagues that resolves the sources of stress. Often, simply sharing problems or engaging in some social activity with colleagues during break periods can effectively help dissipate the feelings of stress.

Teachers and senior managers in schools also need to give thought to the way in which they may be creating unnecessary sources of stress through poor management. For example, a senior manager can set unrealistic targets for the completion of certain tasks or fail to communicate adequately with others, which then gives rise to avoidable problems.

A very important development in reducing teacher stress comes from the need to think more in terms of what characteristics make for healthy organisational functioning and then to develop individual and organisational practices to come into line with these, so that staff stress can then be reduced almost as a by-product of this (Rogers, 1996; Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Education Service Advisory Committee, 1998). Characteristics of a healthy school are:

- good communication between staff;
- a strong sense of collegiality;
- management decisions based on consultation;
- consensus established on key values and standards;
- whole school policies in place;
- role and expectations clearly defined;
- teachers receive positive feedback and praise;
- good level of resources and facilities to support teachers;
- support available to help solve problems;
- policies and procedures are easy to follow;
- red tape and paperwork is minimised;
- additional duties are matched to teachers' skills;

- building environment is pleasant to work in;
- senior management makes good use of forward planning;
- induction and career development advice is given.

In addition, some schools are able to make counselling services available to members of staff who are experiencing high levels of stress. An important innovation in the UK has been the establishment of a telephone 'helpline' for teachers, called 'teacherline' (TBF, 2000; see also their website at www.teacherline.org.uk). This service, which is funded by the government, local education authorities and teacher unions, enables any teacher to receive free telephone counselling for stress-related problems.

The Effectiveness of Teacher Stress Workshops

Over the years a number of teachers have taken part in in-service workshops aimed at helping them to reduce their level of experienced stress. Such workshops typically focus on helping teachers to develop a mix of direct action and palliative techniques and also helping teachers individually and the school as a whole to develop methods of working which will minimise the occurrence of unnecessary sources of stress. A common feature of such workshops is training in the use of relaxation exercises as a palliative technique. Roger and Hudson (1995) have argued that a key feature in prolonging the experience of stress is a tendency for emotional rumination, which serves to maintain the feelings of tension and upset engendered by the source of stress. They have thus pointed to the need to help individuals develop greater 'emotion control' by terminating such rumination and thereby enabling palliative techniques to be more effective. However, the most important thing to recognise about effective coping strategies is that each teacher has to discover what strategies work best for them.

Directions for Future Research

Given the vast literature on teacher stress, it is no mean task to highlight areas for future research. However, I would suggest five of these:

(1) There will certainly always be a need for studies to continue to explore the prevalence of teacher stress, the sources of teacher stress and the coping actions used by teachers. Such studies are needed to update our data in this field and to explore trends and changes. In particular, it can alert us to changes in schools that are generating high levels of stress that need to be addressed. Certainly, in many countries schools have undergone periods of rapid change affecting teaching methods, the content of the school curriculum and assessment procedures. Changes in how the quality of teachers' work is monitored have also occurred. As such, the ability to cope with change has become increasingly important if teachers are to cope successfully with the demands made on them. Particular research is needed on the stress generated by coping with change, so that such research can provide governments and policy makers with an ongoing critique of how various educational reforms impact on teachers' experience of stress.

(2) Perhaps the most interesting aspect of teacher stress that requires research attention is the part that successful coping with stress plays as a teacher's career develops. The seminal work of Huberman (1993) focused attention on how teachers

often face a mid-career crisis which involves them having to reassess their career aspirations. Similarly, the study of Cherniss (1995) explored reasons why some teachers are able to avoid burnout. There is little doubt that one of the major problems facing the teacher profession is the large number of teachers who decide to leave the profession after only a few years of service and those who continue but who become disaffected. Studies of teachers who have been teaching between five and 10 years, may serve to highlight the features that may explain why and how some teachers are more able to successfully negotiate periods of career reappraisal and retain a positive commitment to the work.

(3) There are still aspects of the stress process that require further attention for a fuller understanding to occur. In particular, an important distinction needs to be made between stress triggered by difficult or excessive demands being made on a teacher (e.g. having to mark too many scripts within a day or dealing with a pupil who persistently refuses to behave) and stress being triggered by concerns linked to one's self-image (e.g. being overlooked for promotion or not being allocated an important task). These two types of trigger may often overlap; for example, having to deal with a pupil who misbehaves may not only be very demanding but may also undermine one's self-image. Nevertheless, there is a need to more fully understand whether the stress process may differ in certain ways in relation to these two types of triggers and the implications any such differences may have for coping actions.

(4) Research is also needed in the area of assessing the effectiveness of particular intervention strategies to help teachers and schools reduce teacher stress. The work of Roger in the area of training people in emotion control seems to be of particular importance (Roger & Hudson, 1995). They argued that stress can often be induced and sustained unnecessarily by a propensity to ruminate over events, sometimes working oneself into a state of annoyance or upset hours or days after the event concerned has occurred. Effective emotion control enables teachers to direct their thinking to future events and tasks in a more productive manner. Similarly, research on action that can be taken by senior managers in a school to reduce teacher stress is also needed. In this area I would highlight the need for more research on the way aspects of school leadership and school organisation impact on teachers. A supportive leadership style which takes account of ways in which feedback to teachers on their performance needs to be encouraging may do much to mitigate teacher stress. In addition, organisational arrangements which can minimise the occurrence of unnecessary pressures on teachers may also help mitigate teacher stress. Research on such features is needed to clarify how such intervention strategies can be made more effective.

(5) Finally, a relatively neglected area of research to date has been the impact of teacher–pupil interaction and classroom climate on teacher stress. The point has often been made that teacher stress can sometimes undermine teachers' feelings of goodwill towards pupils and lead teachers to overact with hostility towards pupils when pupils produce poor work or misbehave. This, however, is only part of the story. Research is needed to further explore how a classroom climate is established and maintained and how levels of teacher stress and pupil stress may affect teacher–pupil interactions. In some cases a positive classroom climate may serve to act as a buffer in preventing teacher stress and pupil stress occurring. We need to know more about how and why external demands and pressures on teachers and pupils may undermine positive teacher–pupil interaction in some classes but not in others.

Conclusion

Research on teacher stress has established itself as a major area of international research interest. As we look towards future research we need to consider directions of research that are likely to be of particular importance or productive. It is hoped that the suggestions made in this paper will aid such reflection.

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