

## Teacher Work Related Stress in Early Childhood Education: Some Coping Strategies

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**ABSTRACT** This paper employed a multiple case study design to establish the coping strategies used by early childhood development (ECD) teachers to cope with work-related stress. Unstructured in-depth interviews were used to obtain data from eighteen participants. Data were analysed qualitatively. Findings revealed that teachers draw from different coping mechanisms for sustenance and support in the events of stress. The teachers resorted to improvisation in order to acquire resources; relied on divine intervention from God; drew from external support systems such as the family and the church; and applied physical exertion such as gardening and strolling along the beach as ways to avert and manage stress. It was also found that some teachers resigned themselves to their fate and allowed stress to dominate with little or no alternatives on how to cope or manage stress. It is therefore suggestive that there are evidence-based training and development needs for ECD teachers that will enable them deal with numerous inevitable stress incidences. On the basis of these findings, a number of recommendations have been made.

### INTRODUCTION

Occupational stress has been of growing interest in different fields worldwide, but recent trends show a focus on teachers' work-place stress (Lazarus 2006). Onchwari (2009: 391) posits that "...stress is the non-specific response of a human body to any demand made upon it. A situation is considered stressful when the demands to cope exceed an individual's ability to cope". Stress is also a combination of physiological and psychological reactions that negatively affect individuals as a result of the conditions in their environment (Okeke and Dlamini 2013; Okeke et al. 2015; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2016). From these two views, it can be deduced that teacher's work related stress is a situation when a teacher fails to cope physiologically or psychologically with the demands of the job.

Teacher work-related stress is induced by many factors within the work place, the school and other out of school forces. Although there are debates surrounding the definition of teacher stress (Dewe et al. 2012), what is clear is that teacher stress is endemic to the teaching environment (Okeke et al. 2014). Studies in general on teachers identified the following panoply of causes of teacher stress: an unhealthy school climate; management of learner discipline; school management practices; high workload; resource constraints; redeployment of teachers; low remuneration; low status of the teaching profes-

sion; interpersonal conflicts; changes in curricula and the resultant new skills required in dealing with new curricula; physical aspects of the school environment, such as noise and poor ventilation; role ambiguity; and fear of failure (Hansen and Sullivan 2003; Hebbardt 2012; Bashir et al. 2013). These issues impact on every part of a teacher's daily work.

Cooper and Dewe (2004) note that effects of stress on people are categorised as physiological, psychological and behavioural. Physiologically, stress is evidenced by outcomes such as stomach-ache, headache, tiredness, digestion and ulcer problems, physical exhaustion, increased heart rate, sweating, chest pain, backache, and being out of breath. Psychologically, stress is marked by less visible, but equally detrimental outcomes such as anxiety, anger, depression, boredom, frustration, job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, feelings of inadequacy, among other feelings. Behaviourally, stress is shown in an individual's overall behaviour, often relating to restlessness, over or under eating, alcoholism, absenteeism, lateness and sleeping problems. If teachers are stressed they are thus affected physiologically, psychologically and behaviourally (Cooper and Dewe 2004). According to Okeke et al. (2014), the psychosocial health of teachers has significance on the calibre of care they render to learners. Hence, there is need for the teachers to adopt strategies to cope with stress. This justifies the need to research on the coping strate-

gies used by teachers in the early childhood education field.

Coping refers to how an individual deals with a stressful situation (Nayak 2008). Literature identified five broad coping strategies. These are problem-focused coping; emotion-focused coping; direct-action techniques; social and community support; and physical coping strategies (Okeke et al. 2014). The problem-focused coping necessitates that a stressed person maintains a positive outlook. Emotion-focused coping includes controlling emotions linked to the stress. Direct-action techniques of coping with stress involve doing things to release stress; for example, going to church. The social and community support strategy of coping with stress entails getting family or collegial support. In the school context support may be given by other teachers, the school principal or the support staff. Physical coping strategies include activities such as exercising, gardening or walking on the beach. It is necessary to note that some of the coping strategies used are palliative and just offer short term reprieve (Mapfumo et al. 2012). However what teachers may actually need are strategies that offer long lasting solutions to their stress.

## Literature Review

### *Teacher Stress Globally: Empirical Support*

Teachers are among those most affected by work-related stress, and internationally, it has become accepted that stress is not only harmful to the education workforce, but indirectly affects students and the teaching and learning process in schools (European Trade Union Committee for Education 2009). The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) launched two projects regarding teacher stress that saw the improvement of expertise on work-related stress, and the implementation of an autonomous frame-work agreement on work-related stress. Through numerous interventions such as seminars, conferences and surveys, ETUCE established that the most important stressors for teachers are related to the organisation of the work and to the working conditions and working environment at school. Stress is a symptom of organisational issues and not a separate weakness with teachers. In schools, it finds its roots in the way teaching and the school as a

whole are organised. Physical aspects of the school environment, such as noise and poor ventilation, can also cause stress and should be considered when understanding teacher work-related stress (ETUCE 2009; Hung 2011; ETUCE 2012).

A study conducted in India reveals further international similarities and comparisons regarding the work-related stress of primary, middle, high and higher secondary teachers who were working in state schools. The sample for this study (Qusar 2011) consisted of 720 teachers whom were randomly selected across eight districts. According to Qusar (2011: 35),

*Age was a factor that impacted on work-related stress for teachers in India as well as school type. Qualification affected the stress teachers felt in their work. Experience and level of school affected the occupational stress of female teachers in particular. Marital status affected the occupational stress of teachers*

In India, another study by Sarmah and Baruah (2012) attempted to assess job stress level among 60 selected secondary school teachers, of which 30 were male and 30 were female. A scale was constructed for main job stressors which were directly related with the work situations and adversely affected the teachers' performance. According to these authors, the findings of their study compared with other international studies on stressors that impact teachers. The findings include:

*Overloadedness, which referred to the condition of increased level of work than detailed in the rules and regulation for the prescribed job. Role Conflict, which referred to the situation in which an individual perceives disagreement, interference or incompatible work demands in his/her job. Powerlessness, which referred to an individual not being able to control the outcome of a matter, as they did not have sufficient power to act according to his/her wish. Role Ambiguity, which referred to a role of uncertainty, which was not clearly expressed or not distinct with perceived role (Sarmah and Baruah 2012: 2).*

Interesting results were drawn from this study, including that male teachers were found to have more job stress as compared to their female counterparts. More so, the highest stress was found in the stressor role ambiguity; while the lowest stressor was overloadedness. The findings compare favourably with other interna-

tional comparisons regarding stressors and work-related stress for educators (Sarmah and Baruah 2012). Also in Australia, Burchielli and Bartram (2006) discuss a study that was undertaken in Victoria. Evidence reported high levels of stress amongst school teachers, as well as conflict within bureaucratic levels and systems. Through a case study research process, four sources of teacher stress were identified including: a unique demographic structure; high levels of bureaucratic reporting; resource inadequacy; and a values related conflict between the governing bureaucracy and the school staff (Burchielli and Bartram 2006). Parray et al. (2016) also identified sources of stress such as demands from school management, parents and society and above all, stress from the demand to upskill due to the changing societal demands.

Demographic structure was a stressor for teachers at the schools due to complex and unique student demographic structure, including disability and poverty. This required special contributions by teachers which added to their workload. Teachers felt their work was made more complex and stressful because they needed to cater for differing levels within their class, as well as differing language abilities, cultural needs and emotional complexities when facing their work in the classroom. Teachers commented that although most teachers faced these challenges within schools, these issues created stressful working challenges daily for them. Teachers experience stress in meeting the reporting requirements. The study also revealed that teachers' requirements to report on the progress of their students created a stressful work environment. Like all government schools in the area, the teachers were expected to report needs, achievements, outcomes and the like, and due to the nature of their students, it added to the workload of such requirements. Lastly, participants in the study shared concern over the stress created by professional-bureaucratic conflict, linking this to disjunction of values and expectations between the different stakeholders of the school (Burchielli and Bartram 2006: 323-324).

A study by Lazarus (2006) regarding occupational stress of teachers in Greece showed dovetailed aspects of other international studies regarding work-related stress for teachers. The study involved 70 general and specialist educators in Greece. The main stressors that

arose from the study were derived from interpersonal conflict, organisational constraints, workload, work-related negative affectivity and health outcomes (Lazarus 2006: 207). Interestingly in this study, it was reported that special education teachers scored higher in job stress scores when compared to general teachers. Teachers in special education seemed to carry extra burden generated from aspects of their work. These teachers reported the following as stressors in their work, "organisational structure; task characteristics, such as the lack of necessary information about what to do and how to do it; poor supervision; and low collegiality among colleagues. Participants in Lazarus (2006) study reported that these stressors had the potential to constrain teacher's performance. Teachers' work-related stress and the coping mechanisms they employ to avert, cope with and manage the stress are of vital importance if adequate support and training are to be a priority in education. Teachers are the instruments through which teaching is effective, and hence their well-being is crucial.

### Objectives of the Study

The paper attempts to provide answers to the following objectives:

1. To establish the causes and symptoms of ECD teachers' work related stress.
2. To investigate the coping strategies adopted by ECD teachers to avert work related stress.

### Theoretical Framework

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory underpinned the study. Its central premise rests on the fact that individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect and foster things that they value (Hobfoll 2001). Individuals accumulate and preserve resources so that they navigate through life challenges, which include stresses and stressors. A resource is anything that a person uses to maintain his/her well-being or to adjust to situations. External resources include one's social milieu and context, for example, a job and one's support system.

In the case of teachers, the context covers the school and support systems that include among others, family, community, school management, the District, Provincial and National

authorities. Personal resources are internal and these can be values, personality and one's self esteem. Stressful circumstances can lead to resource loss and as a result stress tends to distract an individual from his or her core business. Stress also weakens the individual physically; it also weakens an individual's resolve. This means that the individual's internal locus of control is destabilised, and sometimes completely destroyed. On the other hand, it would appear to suggest that resource gains are realised when circumstances are stress free (Hobfoll 2001; Dewe et al. 2012). In this case, teachers cope with stress when conditions change favourably and when there is resource gain.

### METHODOLOGY

An interpretivist paradigm was adopted for the study leading to this paper to establish the coping strategies used by ECD teachers to forestall stress. The interpretivist paradigm posits that meaning is constructed in social contexts and thus from participants' responses meaning is drawn (Mertens 2015). A multiple-case study design was adopted (Yin 2013) for this study. These cases allowed for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Bernard and Ryan 2010; Rule and John 2011; Creswell 2015; Yin 2013), in this case, teacher stress and coping mechanisms. A multiple case study design offered the researchers a deep understanding of the phenomenon, of teacher stress. Eighteen ECD teachers were purposively selected from centres that were also purposively chosen. The teachers were selected as they were information rich sites (Gay et al. 2011). To obtain meaningful data in-depth interviews were carried out. In-depth interviews are commonly used in research on sensitive topics such as HIV/AIDS, loss and grief, stress and child abuse (McNair et al. 2008) Data were analysed thematically. Recurrent themes were identified from transcripts (Rule and John 2011) and explanations were given with the aid of verbatim statements of participants (Patton 2015). Hence, themes identified in this study are presented in the next section.

### RESULTS

#### Case Descriptions

As indicated in the methodology 18 cases were selected from different early childhood

development centres. The centres had different characteristics. For example, ECD centre 1 had two practitioners and catered for children between 2 and 5 years. The centre is housed in a church hall and was established in 1978. It was registered and funded by the Department of Social Development. ECD Centre 2 was one teacher ECD centre for children between 18 months and 6 years. It had a single room shack. The centre was registered but not funded. ECD Centre 3 had two practitioners for children from 0 to 4 years. It comprised of three shacks, 1 for age group (0-12 months); Shack 2: for age group 1-2 years; Shack 3 for age group 3-4 years. The centre was registered and funded. ECD centre 4 was for children from birth to 5 years. Four practitioners were at the centre. The centre was registered and funded. Whereas the manager was paid by the Department of Education, the administrator received a stipend from the Department of Social Development. The centre included a brick house, with three rooms. Room 1 was Kitchen, room 2 was meant for children from birth to 2 year olds. Room 3 was meant for 3 to 5 year olds. The administrator dominated the discussions.

ECD centre 5 catered for children between the ages of 2 and 5 years. The centre had four practitioners. It was registered and funded. The centre had a brick structure with two rooms; a classroom and a kitchen. It was explained that a meeting was held the previous day to discuss the teachers' experiences of work related stress. The structures were thus conveniently placed to cater for the researchers but in essence they were non-existent. All the interviewed teachers were female and had varied credentials. Respondents were coded, for example as:

TAC1 for Teacher A in Centre 1  
TBC4 for Teacher B in Centre 4  
AC2 for Administrator of Centre 2  
AC4 for Administrator of Centre 4

#### Respondents' Qualification

From their responses some teachers were under qualified. An example is TAC1 who said: *Remember we are semi-literate*. Others had the relevant qualifications such as, TAC2 who intoned: *I have a level 5 certificate in ECD so I know the importance of Early Learning*. The teachers' responses also revealed that some had served the ECD sector for a long time although

they had different reasons for joining. AC3 claimed: *I started this centre. I have been a volunteer for 17 years now. The community asked for my services.* Even after seventeen years she was still volunteering, this may show a lot of resilience on her part. TAC1 also posited:

*...job I have been doing over a period of more than 25 years. I came into this profession as a volunteer. The German sponsors tried their best to fund for our own career development. I have been to Lyceum College and I have a level 5 certificate, thanks to German sponsors.*

Lastly, TAC4 said: *firstly, I was unemployed; I had to undergo pre-school training because it was affordable.* A positive thing to note from the responses is that the teachers were willing to learn and improve themselves and capitalized on opportunities of funding for their advancement.

### Signs, Symptoms and Effects of Work Related Stress

The respondents revealed the following signs, symptoms and effects of work related stress. The teachers revealed that anger was one of the symptoms of stress. They found themselves shouting at children and were irritated by minor issues. TAC1 indicated:

*You find yourself shouting at the children. Little things irritate you. Sometimes a child might come to me for a hug. When I am stressed such things irritate me. Work related stress is more than the stress I experience at home. This has a potential to kill me*

TAC2 buttresses the above when she intones that: *Anger: Minor things irritate me.* Due to stress, TBC1 had headaches and needed solitary space. She felt demotivated. These sentiments were expressed by TBC1 who stated that: *I keep to myself. Sometimes I have headaches. I am de-motivated. Some isolate themselves, frequent headaches, shouting at children* according to AC5.

Another sign and symptom of stress according to one respondent was memory loss. TAC3 revealed that *“low memory: You just black out - sometimes you forget what was discussed in workshops. You would spend time searching for an item that is right in-front of your eyes”*. This memory loss makes one forget what is in the physical as well as the mental things. Stress was also said to cause one to snub children

when they seek attention. This was revealed in TBC3's statement:

*I ignore children when they come to me. I do try and hide that I am frustrated. Sometimes I would leave the children with the cook and go to the bathroom and cry to release the stress. What frustrates me is that every day I wake up and come here but at the end of the day I have nothing to show for it. I am a laughing stock in my family.*

Stress causes one to have a feeble mind to the extent of talking to oneself. AC4 stated that: *You speak to yourself, you are irritable, and sometimes I drink a lot of coffee.* The signs and symptoms of stress given above are physiological and psychological and call for the teachers to have some coping strategies for them not to baulk under the heavy burden of stress.

### Coping Strategies

In response to the question on how they coped with work related stress, teachers in the sample had varied strategies they employed. Some teachers revealed that they sought divine intervention from God in order to cope with stress. This is evidenced by the following responses:

TAC1: *I pray. I love children*

TAC3: *I pray too. When you have no hope, God is the only hope. I am content with the little I get.*

TBC4: *I believe in God and He gives me strength to carry on*

TAC4: *I pray for myself and these children. They cannot live in poverty for life.*

The teachers believed that God was their only hope and redeemer in their stressful situations as He strengthens them not to give up the service they rendered to children. Teachers also indicated that they depended on their families as a means of coping with stress. Responses below show the sentiments of the teachers on family support.

TAC3: *I have a supportive family who help me with fundraising. Yes my children always check on me and help us on where to get funding and sponsors*

TCC4: *Our Families are also supportive.*

Apart from family support, teachers enjoyed collegial support as a way of coping with stress. Responses to this effect include the following:

AC5: *We cope because there is some remuneration, no matter how little it is. Jobs are scarce, so we have no other options. Prayer sustains us. We motivate each other.*

TAC2: *I have a supportive coordinator. As ECD centres we belong to a forum so the coordinator of the forum, listens to my problems and helps where she can.*

Although there were hardships and stressors relating to remuneration, they motivated each other. This collegial support propels them further into working with children. In addition, support comes in the form of colleagues listening to the teachers' challenges and offering assistance.

Teachers also embarked on visiting other schools to learn what they were doing so as to reduce stress. TAC2 acknowledged this when she said: *"I also visit other schools to find out how they cope with working with young children"*. Instead of suffering in silence, the teachers sought help from colleagues in other schools and capacitate themselves in dealing with stress. The teachers depended on their church members for support in dealing with stress, for example, TAC2 intimated that: *"My church also supports me"*.

Another coping strategy teachers adopted was improvisation. TAC4 intoned that:

*Stress kills so I don't allow that devil to play tricks with me. I take things as they come. At the moment I recruited a volunteer teacher who is so willing to learn. Together we develop the school material that is displayed on the walls. Some of the work has been done by children. I manage to cope with stress caused by the lack of resources by using old stationery to make children's portfolio.*

TAC4's response suggests that the teachers sometimes have to improvise, looking at alternative solutions, such as developing teaching and learning materials from scrap material. By seeking extra help, TAC4 averted a stressful situation from taking its toll and gave room to a productive one.

Operation gqogqa (going from house to house) is a stress coping strategy employed by one teacher. That was another form of parental support. TAC2 said:

*Operation gqogqa is also my coping strategy. Going from house to house helps me air my frustrations with individual parents and at the same time it gives me a space to educate other*

*parents on my job and the kind of support I need from them.*

It seems Teacher AC2 got stress relief by confronting individual parents to express her grievances and at the same time to conscientise them on the support the early childhood educators need. Some ECD teachers relieve stress by engaging in physiological activity to cope with stressful situations. For example, some teachers took up strolling on the beach; do gardening; and drinking coffee as their hobbies. According to TBC3: *I pray, I work in the garden as that gives me a chance to be alone to think.* TBC4: *I also work in the garden to release stress.* AC4: *You speak to yourself, you are irritable, and sometimes I drink a lot of coffee.*

Teachers also revealed that they drew from intrinsic motivation to cope with stress. One of the driving forces that propelled them to continue working with the ECD children was their love for those children. To support this claim, TBC1 noted *"When we do not have teaching materials, we go around asking for recycled paper. I love children and that keeps me going.* This was also supported by a similar statement from TAC2,

*I love children and what I do. So I will never close this centre. I opened it because I saw the need. Children were loitering in the streets and there are parents who understand the role of a day care centre and I don't want to disappoint them.*

Also a statement by TAC4, which noting, that *"not being registered does not put me down. I am waiting patiently for the day that I will be registered and funded like other pre-schools"*, gave support to the claims. Patience as a virtue was also instrumental in helping teachers to cope with stress. These inert drives or reserves seem to provide the necessary fuel to keep the teachers going relentlessly despite encountering challenges in procuring resources. Teachers also fall back on experience to cope with stress. TAC4 briefed that *"we are used to this mess. With God we survive. Also experience does help"*.

## DISCUSSION

Signs and symptoms of stress identified in this paper are generally in agreement with those by Kyriacou (2001), Govindasamy (2010), Chireshe and Shumba (2011) and Hebbardt (2012) as indicated in the Introduction. Teach-

er burnout is an example of the symptoms (Rey et al. 2016). Chikutuma (2013: 69) points out that ECD teachers need to be enthusiastic about their work and should “go beyond the physical and financial challenges”. As such they need to draw strength from intrinsic reserves so as to cope with stress. Extrinsic motivation symbolised by money, good infrastructure and availability of teaching resources does not sway the intrinsically motivated teachers to desire these luxuries. The teacher is the one that translates educational philosophy and objective into knowledge and skills and transfers them to students in the classroom through the act of teaching and learning. Classroom climate is important in teacher motivation. If a teacher experiences the classroom as a safe, healthy, happy place with supportive resources and facilities for teaching for optimal learning, he/she tends to participate more than expected in the process of management, administration, and the overall improvement of the school (Ofoegbu 2004). To reduce stress it is also suggested that there should be a fit between the motivational style of the worker and the perceived job demands in the work place (Bhuin 2016).

Respondents mentioned a plethora of coping strategies, but as indicated by Mapfumo et al. (2012) teachers do not seem to focus on proactive coping skills but focused on reactive ones. In the current paper glimpses of proactive coping skills were, however, reflected by teachers. For instance, one teacher indicated that she had to employ another teacher to assist in teaching and in the production of resource material rather than resigning and not taking action. Being proactive helped the teacher to relieve stress. Findings reveal that teachers enjoyed support from their families. According to Nayak (2008), this falls under the broad strategy of social and community support of coping with stress. Family support cushions an individual from the harsh effects of stress. In support of this assertion, Ahrabi and Akbari (2015) argue that individuals who are supported by others or believe there is support they can receive from others and have confidence in the support always confront their stress resolutely. This aligns with the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory whereby support from other external systems helps the teachers to avert stress (Hobfoll 2001; Dewe et al. 2012). Hence, this strategy of coping with stress can be

used by ECD teachers to alleviate work related stress.

The present study also revealed that visiting and collaborating with other schools was a coping strategy employed by some teachers. This was information seeking and can be classified as positive coping. As the teachers sought information, they equipped themselves to counter stressful situations. In concordance, Chaturvedi and Purushothaman (2009) suggest that positive coping is related to one’s well-being. By engaging in positive coping, the teachers (in this case) are kept busy and may not dwell much on a stressful situation but rather on the productive task at hand. The same could also apply for the visits made to the families (Operation Gqogqa). Although the mission of this visit is confrontational, the former aims to learn more from their colleagues about ways of combating stress.

Literature also indicates that effective coping strategies help alleviate the damage caused by stress and poor stress management may result in early debut of burnout (Mapfumo et al. 2012). There is need, therefore, for the teachers to be aware of coping strategies that would enhance coping with stress. For instance, if teachers adopt avoidance coping which includes denial and suppression of feelings (Chaturvedi and Purushothaman 2009), they might even aggravate the stress they aim to avert, reduce or manage.

## CONCLUSION

From the findings of the paper, it can be concluded that ECD teachers face many causes of teacher work related stress. They resultantly exhibited signs and symptoms commensurate with stress. Teachers employed a number of coping strategies to deal with stress. Teachers draw from both internal and external resources to cope with stress. They resorted to improvisation in order to acquire resources; relied on divine intervention from God; drew from external support systems, such as family and church; and applied physical exertion such as gardening and strolling along the beach as ways to avert stress. It was also found that some teachers just resigned to fate and allowed it to take its course and had no clue how to curb stress. There appears not to be a well-coordinated approach to coping with stress on the part of the teachers. It is therefore suggestive that there are evidence-

based training and development needs for ECD teachers that will enable them to deal with numerous inevitable stress incidences.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommendations can be drawn from the findings. Teachers should have access to psychosocial support services such as counselling. They need palliative support to reduce emotional discomfort so that they can engage in direct action techniques to cope with stress. Corrective measures should be given on the sources of ECD teacher work-related stress. Prevention, intervention and postvention strategies need to be put in place to curb the effects of teacher stress. For example, they need to implement a policy on work related stress for teachers. As such, professional development workshops need to be given to conscientise and equip teachers on teacher stress causes, signs and symptoms and coping strategies. Teachers should be periodically assessed on work-related stress so that early signs should be dictated and treated before they get worse.

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