

**A STUDY OF THE CAUSES OF
TEACHER STRESS AND BURNOUT**

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I am submitting herewith a Field Study written by Michelle McDonald Corbin entitled " A Study of the Causes of Teacher Stress and Burnout". I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Education Specialist, with a major in Elementary Education.

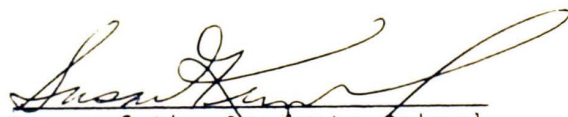

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TEACHER STRESS AND BURNOUT

A Field Study
Presented to the
Graduate and Research Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Education Specialist

by
Michelle McDonald Corbin
August 1994

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation to Dr. Al Williams, Professor of Education, Austin Peay State University, for his guidance and time given during the entire study.

Appreciation is extended to Mr. Jerome Ellis and Mr. Marlin Sholar for their valuable assistance in making this study possible.

Additionally, the author would like to thank her family for their patience during the study.

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ABSTRACT

The problem of this field study was to obtain, organize and present data of an available sample from male and female educators, and to identify the criteria within the school which produce the highest level of teacher stress.

The purpose of this study was to examine the hypotheses expressed in the following objectives:

1. To examine teacher stress and its relationship to burnout.
2. To determine copeability under stress of male and female educators.
3. To identify most common stressors.
4. To examine the possibility that stressors can be alleviated.
5. To establish the need for support groups, exercise therapy and self-help motivators.

To obtain this information, evaluative questionnaires were given to fifty male educators and fifty female educators, all of whom were Robertson County educators. One hundred responses were received and analyzed, and the data were included in this study.

Conclusions based on findings indicated:

1. Stress is compounded by undesirable working conditions.

2. Teacher's interpersonal relationships within the school can induce teacher stress.

3. Administrator's attitude toward their teachers may bring about stress.

4. Burnout is not an inevitable outcome of high stress.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Stress has become a problem to people of all walks of life. Stress affects the actions of the individual on a personal and professional level. The physical, mental and emotional well-being of each individual is influenced by the amount of stress he/she perceives in a given situation. Stress, therefore, is a somewhat subjective concept, depending on how each person perceives the situation encountered.

In the field of education, administrators often report high levels of stress, sometimes referred to as burnout. Burnout is a distinctive kind of job-related stress that inhibits the person's capacity to function effectively because the body's resources for resisting stress have become exhausted. Research indicates individuals engaged in the helping professions or human services are particularly susceptible to burnout. Recognizing the problem, school districts are paying increased attention to burnout because it diminishes the effective services of their best teachers.

Statement Of The Problem

The problem to be investigated in this study is to identify the criteria within several Robertson County schools which produce the highest level of teacher stress. These schools include Krisle Elementary, Bransford Elementary, Robert F. Woodall Primary, Springfield and East Robertson High Schools.

Statement Of The Hypothesis

The stressful situations faced by teachers are as varied as the individual. According to research there are

two sources of stress, one self-imposed and the other situational. Self-imposed stress comes not from over-work but from unrealistic expectations. Situational stress results from the demands of others, the conflict among people: the clash of values. However, teachers are encountering more problems today than ever before. For example, they must deal with student apathy, drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, high dropout rates, educational reforms, itinerant students, and dysfunctional families, to name a few. Coping with problems of students in addition to one's own problems may be a burden too heavy to bare. Add to these problems the everyday responsibilities of educating students and providing an effective learning environment and it becomes obvious teachers have to be capable of coping with a great deal of stress.

Different schools, depending on their social context and the talents and abilities of the teachers, deal with their dilemmas in various ways. The major task of the school is to find a way for teachers to become involved in eliminating stress, and to have proper emotional attitudes toward stress.

These hypothesis will be investigated in this study.

H1: Stress is compounded by undesirable work conditions.

H2: Teacher's interpersonal relationships within the school can induce teacher stress.

H3: Administrator's attitude toward their teachers may bring about stress.

Limitations and Procedures of the Study

This study deals with the perceptions of the criteria which produce the highest levels of teacher stress. A questionnaire survey, together with a statement describing

the general purpose of the research was presented to each respondent. The respondents were informed in writing of their legal rights and they signed an Informed Consent Statement required for research involving human subjects.

This writer administered closed form questions which permitted only certain responses in order that quantification and analysis of the results could be carried out efficiently.

Respondents were chosen by availability. All subjects were Robertson County educators from four schools in the county. These included Bransford Elementary, Krisle Elementary, Robert F. Woodall Primary, Springfield and East Robertson High Schools.

A minimal number of samples were used due to the extensive time involved in administering the questionnaires. The questionnaire was limited to the objectives and the information received was dependent on the accuracy of the respondents.

Respondents were broken down statistically as to sex, age, numbers of years teaching experience, and grades taught. Anonymity was maintained.

Definitions of Terms Used

The following definitions are provided for better understanding of certain terms used in this study:

Burnout - Physical or emotional exhaustion from long-term stress.

Stress - Mental or emotional pressure.

Self Imposed Stress - Unrealistic expectation one puts on one's self.

Situational Stress - Results from demands of others, conflict among people; the clash of values.

Assumptions

When conducting a study of this nature, certain basic assumptions were necessary. After reviewing the related literature and research studies, the findings of this study are based on the following assumptions without testing:

1. The questionnaire was a valid means of measuring the objectives.
2. All the respondents were adults and all understood the questions.
3. The anonymity of the questionnaire allowed respondents to answer questions freely and honestly without threatening repercussions.
4. All respondents had experienced stress sometime during their teaching experience.
5. The total sample population selected was represented one hundred percent by completed interview questionnaires.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A certain amount of stress in the workplace is unavoidable and even desirable: high standards motivate teachers to do their best. But stress also results when, for example, the heating and ventilating system does not work properly, when teachers are not appropriately involved in decision-making, and when there are conflicting expectations for what teachers are to do. Most of the attention to stress reduction in schools appropriately focuses on the work environment of teachers. Schlansker's (1987) research indicated "that as many as twenty-five percent of K-12 teachers may be experiencing a damaging degree of burnout" (p. 32). In her survey of teachers, five of the ten most stressful events for teachers were management tensions: "notifications of unsatisfactory performance; involuntary transfer; denial of promotion or advancement; overcrowded classrooms; and disagreements with supervisors" (p. 33).

Dudley and Welke's (1977) definition of stress is a classic. Stress is "an adaptive response in which your body prepares, or adjusts, to a threatening situation" (p. 27). How does it affect teachers? How do teachers recognize stress in their life?

The effects of stresses from work and home can be divided into those that are psychological/emotional, physical, and behavioral. Among the physical effects of stress are increased frequency of headaches, sleep disturbance, hypertension, fatigue, and tightening of muscles. Psychological/emotional effects include general uneasiness, depression, nervousness, anxiety, and loss of confidence. Behavioral effects include procrastination,

impatience with others, low productivity, absenteeism, and withdrawal from teaching (Dewe, 1986).

How does chronic stress lead to burnout? Maslach (1976) and Cunningham (1983) noted that when a multitude of stressors in the teaching profession continue without relief, the pattern of reactions described by burnout seriously damages the teacher's ability to perform his or her job; feelings become negative, attitudes become cynical, concern for students is lost, frequency of physical illness, and use of alcohol frequently goes up. Thus burnout, as the subsequent outcome of continued stress, reflects the cumulative reactions to this stress.

Burnout, a term first introduced by Freudenberger (1974), denoted the inability to function effectively in one's job as a consequence of prolonged and extensive job-related stress. The escalation and pervasiveness of burnout among members of the teaching profession has drawn the attention of educational administrators, clinicians, and academicians alike; indeed, their concern has precipitated a plethora of research on the topic.

Educator burnout is purportedly a function of stressors engendered at both the organizational and individual levels. Maslach and Jackson (1981, 1984) listed three related, yet independent components linked to stress which produce burnout: (a) emotional exhaustion-feelings of fatigue that develop as one's emotional energies become drained, (b) depersonalization - the development of negative and uncaring attitudes toward others, and (c) reduced personal accomplishment-a deterioration of self-competence, and dissatisfaction with one's achievements.

Teachers are purported to exhibit signs of emotional exhaustion when they perceive themselves as unable to give to students as they did earlier in their careers. Teachers

attitudes towards students, parents, and colleagues have feelings of reduced personal accomplishment. They perceive themselves as ineffective in helping students to learn and in fulfilling other school responsibilities. Overall, educators who fall victim to burnout are likely to be less sympathetic toward students, have a lower tolerance for classroom disruption, be less apt to prepare adequately for class, and feel less committed and dedicated to their work which ultimately leads to increased absenteeism and impetus to leave the profession. These elements of burnout, which stem from prolonged stress, have been empirically validated for school teachers (Farber & Miller, 1981).

Raymond Calabrese (1987) polled a sample of teachers to elicit which of their stress factors were most under the control of the principal. The teachers identified four areas: "elimination of ambiguous policies; increase in visible support; improved communications and directions; and increased positive feedback" (p. 68), three of which are directly related to the communication skills of the principal.

Although stress is typically viewed in a negative manner, it must be recognized a certain amount of stress is necessary for teachers to achieve and perform to their highest abilities. Teachers would be bored if they were forced to spend their days sitting in an easy chair. However, they also do not want to live in an overly stressful world, but need ways to live with stressful situations and find enjoyment in meeting and mastering the challenges of their rapidly changing world. Negative stress or distress is felt when a teacher perceives the demands as being beyond his or her coping abilities. Brimm (1982) noted that "feelings of insecurity, helplessness, or desperation are associated with negative stress" (p. 226).

difficult to analyze, but they may be the most important determinants of teacher feelings about self, work, peers, and school. In a large-scale study, teacher-stress was very affected by the behavior and activities of the principal (Lieberman, 1969). There is no doubt the morale and the teachers' sense of professionalism have a great deal to do with the principal's treatment of the faculty, both individually and collectively.

Stress can also result from the interaction with other teachers. Research has indicated teaching suffers from a lack of technical language (Lortie, 1975), which can create difficulty and stress for teachers. Teachers form their personal and professional repertoire by immediacy and pragmatic responses to daily demands. Consequently, even when teachers are doing a spectacular job, they are hard pressed to accurately describe the complexity of the teaching act. The tendency is to describe teaching activities, events, interactions, incidents, hearsay, and gossip.

The origins of stress, as perceived and reported by the teachers themselves, most frequently include pupil problems, difficult classes, time pressures, too much work to do, poor working conditions, inadequacies in the material working environment and in the societal status of the profession, and poor ethos of the school.

On the other hand, research (Makinen 1982) has shown that the quality of interpersonal relationships, especially with pupils, but also with colleagues and supervisors, is the strongest and most stable predictor of teachers' psychological well-being at work. Perceived work load and time pressure seem to be other important factors contributing to self-reported stress.

the strongest and most stable predictor of teachers' psychological well-being at work. Perceived work load and time pressure seem to be other important factors contributing to self-reported stress.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

A review of literature was the first step in this study. A questionnaire designed to obtain data needed to meet objectives was devised. From a sample of one hundred available educators an attempt was made to determine common stressors in the school system and their cause. Data were recorded and compiled in descriptive and statistical form.

Materials and Methods Used

A questionnaire was given to obtain data from respondents which meet specific objectives and standardized the situation to some degree. All respondents were given the same questionnaire.

A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

Subjects Used

Respondents were chosen by availability. All one hundred respondents were employees of Robertson County Schools. One half of the respondents were male, the other female. All subjects were adults.

Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was designed by the author to meet the specific objectives stated in Chapter One. As well as answering the questions pertaining to objectives, the samples responded to personal data such as age, sex, grade taught and years of experience.

The questionnaire presented a series of questions which could be answered by either a "yes" or "no" and a brief explanation after selecting one. Two remaining questions allowed open-ended answers about changes which could be made

or suggestions for improving stress or burnout.

Respondents were never threatened, contradicted, or cross-examined. Questionnaires were completed and compiled without knowledge of which survey each respondent completed.

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Ques The purpose of this data was to report findings of the study. The collection and analysis of data for the study involved four tasks. The first of these tasks was concerned with selecting, for the study, subjects who experienced some sort of stress as a result from teaching. A second major task in the study involved the construction of an instrument adequate to survey perceptions of the sample population. The third task was administering the questionnaire in order to receive adequate and complete data. The fourth task was making analyses of data received from the questionnaires.

Results of the survey are compiled and reported.

Question #1. Have you thought of quitting your educational position in the last six months? Why? Sixty percent replied no and forty percent replied they would consider quitting.

Various reasons were given.

- Near retirement age
- Too much regulation and paperwork
- Not enough help with discipline
- Need to spend more time with children
- No time for creativity and fun
- Advancing to Administrator
- Working conditions
- Pay
- Stress

Question #2. If you had your life to live over, would you be a teacher or administrator again? If not what other profession would you choose? Thirty nine percent were satisfied with their profession. Sixty one percent answered no and gave alternative professions.

- Business
- Media
- Engineer
- Accountant
- Interior decorator
- Paralegal

Vet Tech
Insurance Agent
Nurse

Question #3. Do you feel your present teaching position makes good use of your preparation, experience, and potential? Why? Forty two percent said no and listed reasons why while fifty eight percent felt confident with their position.

Lack of money hinders ability to apply better strategies for teaching.
Good ideas are not utilized.
Teaching within four walls isolates teachers.
Many have potential for more school-wide participation and leadership.
Too much time spent on mundane tasks such as paperwork.
Expertise from teachers sometimes isn't acknowledged when administrators make decisions.
Being a female hinders placement as a supervisor or administrator.
Split classes have hindered ability of children and teachers.
Teachers need to feel respected from society as other professionals and then changes will occur.
Stress alleviates boredom, however it would be great not to have so many deadlines.
Take vitamins to ensure you're getting what you don't from the sun and nature everyday outside since we're cooped up in four small concrete walls.

Question #4. Did you have any positive attitudes or hopes when you went into the teaching profession that have not yet been fulfilled? Fifty six percent admitted their hopes were not met and forty four percent were satisfied.

Parental responsibilities are too slim, so that teachers are caregivers.
Teachers don't work together.
Haven't gotten my master's degree yet because of time and money.
Thought teaching would be rewarding and I could make a difference.
Thought students would be respectful to authority and no child would be promoted socially, but would earn his/her promotion.

Children need to have a sense of community and be life long learners.

To feel I've made a difference.

Thought students would want to learn.

Having a student become a doctor, lawyer, etc.

Peers would share without jealousy.

Question #7. Do you feel burned out yourself? If so, why? Ironically, this question was split down the middle with fifty percent stating yes and fifty percent no. The reasons given for burnout are listed.

Teachers cannot compete with visual imagery students are bombarded with today.

Students want to be entertained instead of working on practicing skills.

Don't let pressure get too close, make a buffer or maintain distance from stressors.

Overcrowded classrooms.

Having to adjust frequently.

Going back to school.

Each year more and more time spent on discipline.

Poor support of administration.

Fighting government and public over educational views and salaries.

Good work goes unnoticed.

Too much to do in not enough time, especially taking paperwork home.

Question #8. If you should experience burnout symptoms, is there anyone in your school building or school system, you can go to for help? If so, who? Fifty six percent of surveyors said they had several coadjutors. Forty six percent did not.

Fellow teacher

Supervisor

Principal

Assistant Principal

Superintendent

Family Member

Secretary

Question # 9. Is being a classroom teacher your personal career goal? If not, what is your goal? Forty seven

percent reached their goal and fifty three percent replied no and their responses were tallied.

Principal/administrator
College Professor
Supervisor
Superintendent
Educational Consultant
Coach

Question # 10. What changes would make the position better?

Less paperwork
More money for the classroom
Lower pupil teacher ratio
Cleaner rooms
Available materials and supplies at times needed
Shared decision making
Group opportunities to exercise
Praise from administrators
Team teaching opportunities
Widening the scope of interaction among staff and principal
Acceptance of new/creative ideas
Less unpaid activity
More control and less interference
Free time for planning
More technology
Better parenting skills
Inservices on how to deal with stress

Question # 11. Any additional comments or suggestions to alleviating stress?

Too much time is wasted on discipline, motivating and teaching values rather than skills.
A workout gym would be nice. Exercise really helps.
Positive support and a pat on the back to colleagues would be beneficial.
Administrators should not show favoritism.
Leaving work at school instead of bringing it home and receiving help from a pastor, husband/wife and principal really helps.

Chapter 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this chapter was to present a summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The problem of this investigation has been to obtain, organize and present data of an available sample of male and female educators who experienced some type of stress or burnout. Stressors and their causes were compared.

Summary

Various stressors were reported to cause teacher stress. Ones which were most prominent include: administrative attitude, teacher's interpersonal relationships within the school, parental support and student attitude.

Conclusions

Although many of the conditions which create stress are beyond the teacher's control, it is possible to cope successfully with both the symptoms and the disease itself. In a study done by Maslasch and Jackson in 1991, it was determined burnout is not an inevitable outcome of high stress. Facing the problem, monitoring stress, developing a repertoire of coping strategies and cultivating stress hardiness are all key ingredients in a program for controlling stress and avoiding burnout.

The researchers mentioned three overall factors which seem to contribute to stress hardiness: (1)commitment - "the tendency to be involved in (rather than alienated from) many aspects of one's life" Jenkins (p. 64), (2)challenge - "the belief that change, rather than stability, is characteristic of life" Freudenberg (p. 161), (3)control - believing and

acting "as if one is influential (rather than helpless) in the course of events in one's life" Cunningham (p. 47).

To meet these demands, the individual teacher, as well as school districts and teacher-training institutions, needs to plan for and respond intelligently to the stress syndrome. Intervention in the first stages of stress is the key to avoid the ending exhaustion or burnout.

Recommendations

Numerous recommendations were made concerning methods for improving teacher's ability to cope with stress. These include methods that have a direct impact on the source of stress, such as improving teacher status. Another approach is utilizing social support from others to increase the individual's tolerance for stress. A third involved helping the individual to make some changes in interpretation, behavior, or other response to the stressor. The change might be exercising, changing diet habits, relaxing, or having realistic expectations.

Most importantly, teachers must be aware of the sources of stress within their profession in order to protect the quality of their own lives and to positively affect the working relationship they have with their students.

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APPENDICES

Composition Of The Sample

Analysis of Respondents

Respondents were chosen by availability. Ages ranged from twenty to sixty-one which represented a wide range. An equal number of males and females were chosen in order to control bias. Years of experience ranged from zero to twenty-five years. Representatives from kindergarten through twelfth grades were found. Four administrators were also surveyed.

AGE

20-25	(13)
26-30	(13)
31-35	(4)
36-40	(11)
41-45	(9)
46-50	(0)
51-55	(1)
56-61	(1)

SEX

Male - 50
Female - 50

YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

0-3	(19)
4-7	(19)
8-13	(15)
14-17	(20)
18-25	(24)

GRADES TAUGHT

Kindergarten	- 13
First Grade	- 11
Second Grade	- 10
Third Grade	- 9
Fourth Grade	- 12
Fifth Grade	- 12
Six-Eighth	- 19
Ninth-Twelfth	- 10
Administrator	- 4

APPENDIX B
Questionnaire
TEACHER BURNOUT AND/OR STRESS

Age _____

Sex _____

Number of years teaching and/or administrative experience?

Grades Taught? (Circle the one or ones applicable)

K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 Administrator

School _____

Please circle your answers!

Yes No 1. Have you thought of quitting your educational position in the last six months? If you circled "Yes" please explain why.

Yes No 2. If you had your life to live over, would you be a teacher and/or an administrator again? If you circled "No" what other profession(s) would you choose?

Yes No 3. Do you feel your present teaching and/or administrative position makes good use of your preparation, experience, and potential? If you circled "No" explain how you could best serve the school system.

Yes No 4. Did you have any positive attitudes or hopes when you went into the teaching profession that have not yet been fulfilled? If you

circled "Yes" what were these attitudes and hopes?

Yes No 5. Is "Teacher Burnout and/or Stress" a problem (or a potential problem) in your school building?

Yes No 6. Is there anything you can do to help alleviate this problem?

Yes No 7. Do you feel burned out yourself? If you circled "Yes" what do you think are the causes of your burnout and/or stress?

Yes No 8. If you should experience burnout symptoms, is there anyone in your school building or school system, you can go to for help? If you circled "Yes" who is that person? (No names, please, just say, fellow teacher, principal, superintendent, etc.)

Yes No 9. Is being a classroom teacher your personal career goal? If you circled "No" What would you like to attain in education?

10. What changes would make the position better for you?

11. Any additional comments or suggestions to alleviating stress?

I have read the Austin Peay State University Policies and Procedures on Human Research and agree to abide by them. I also agree to report to the Human Research Review Committee any significant and relevant changes in procedures and instruments as they relate to subjects.

Shelli Clouten

Student Signature

August 1994
Date

Student research directed by faculty should be co-signed by faculty supervisor.

Leon Sitter

Faculty Signature

APSU/AA/AA/5123 (Rev. 2-84)

PPM Form 2:002:a

The purpose of this study is to obtain, organize, and present data, and to identify the criteria within the school which produce the highest level of teacher stress.

please respond to the statement on the following page. Questions one through nine require a yes or no response and a further explanation of why on each. Questions ten and eleven are subjective.

Your responses will be confidential and at no time will you be identified nor will anyone other than the investigator have access to your responses. The demographic information collected will only be used for purpose of analysis for my Education Specialist Degree.

Your participation is greatly appreciated. Please review survey again before you leave to make sure no answers are left unanswered.

Thank you for your time.
Michelle McDonald Corbin

AUSTIN PEAY STATE UNIVERSITY
CHECKLIST FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

TITLE A STUDY OF THE CAUSES OF TEACHER STRESS AND BURNOUT_____

FUNDING SOURCE _____

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR MICHELLE CORBIN DEPARTMENT
EDUCATION

SPONSOR (if student research) AUSTIN PEAY STATE UNIVERSITY_____

1. Give a brief description or outline of your research procedures as they relate to the use of human subjects. This should include a description of the subjects themselves, instructions given to them, activities in which they engage, special incentives, and tests and questionnaires. If new or non-standard tests or questionnaires are used, copies should be attached to this form. Make notation if the subjects are minors or "vulnerable" (i.e. children, prisoners, mentally or physically infirm, etc.).

Teachers involved in this research project will be from Robertson County who are teaching in the following schools: Krisle Elementary, Bransford Elementary, Woodall Primary, and Jo Byrns Schools. These teachers will fill out a questionnaire given at a faculty meeting. A cover sheet will accompany the questionnaire furnishing detailed directions.

2. Does this research entail possible risk to psychic, legal, physical, or social harm to the subjects? Please explain. What steps have been taken to minimize these risks? What provisions have been made to insure that appropriate facilities and professional attention necessary for the health and safety of the subjects are available and will be utilized?

Questionnaires will not have names of the person completing the form included.

3. The potential benefits of this activity to the subjects

and to mankind in general outweigh any possible risks. This opinion is justified by the following reasons:

Teachers must have an awareness of their most severe stressors and an ability to have proper emotional attitudes toward stress.

4. Will legally effective, informed consent be obtained from all subjects or their legally authorized representative?

Yes

5. Will the confidentiality/anonymity of all subjects be maintained? How is this accomplished?

No names will be given on questionnaires. Also, when administering the questionnaire sheets will be taken up at random.

6. Does the data to be collected relate to illegal activities? If yes, explain.

No

7. Are all subjects protected from the future potentially harmful use of the data collected in this investigation?

How is this accomplished?

Yes. No names are used and forms will be seen by myself only.