The Spark is Gone: A Look Inside Educational Stressors Lending to Teacher Distress, Burnout and Coping Strategies Within a Southern Public School System

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ABSTRACT

Teacher burnout is a growing problem within the public school system. Teacher burnout has been linked to an individuals’ stress, satisfaction, and continuation in the career of education. Based upon data from the U.S. Department of Education Teacher Shortage Area list, seventeen areas were listed as having teacher shortages across grades K-12 in Alabama alone for the year 2013-2014. The U.S. Government has already projected Alabama to have teacher shortages in nine areas, K-12, for the 2014-2015 year. Because of this data on existing teacher shortage in the United States, administrators and policy makers need to understand the factors that contribute to burnout. Stressors that contribute to burnout in teaching include emotional exhaustion, a lack of professional guidance and peer support, and conflict with parents, peers, administrators, and students. Research into burnout suggests that some personality types may be more resilient to these stressors than others. The purpose of the study is to identify the educational stressors that are the predominant sources of teacher distress and burnout, discover and classify the common and persistent distressful situations in the educational environment, and develop a variety of coping strategies that can be practically implemented at the secondary school level. The sample will consist of secondary school instructors from eight public middle and high schools within Mobile County in Mobile, Alabama. A list of educational stressors will be developed from responders, from which data will be analyzed and strategies developed accordingly. A combination of demographics, life stressors, educational situations, teaching experience, and current coping strategies will be discussed within focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires so that a more current depiction of this epidemic emerges and can be dealt with to prevent the burnout rate from increasing in the future. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator will be used to determine the personality types of the subjects, and the Maslach Educators Burnout Survey will be used to identify the frequency and the degree of burnout experienced by the sample population.

 ***Key terms****:* stress, coping strategies, stressor, burnout

THE SPARK IS GONE: A LOOK INSIDE EDUCATIONAL STRESSORS LENDING TO TEACHER DISTRESS, BURNOUT AND COPING STRATEGIES WITHIN A SOUTHERN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The Spark: when you have The Spark, you can see it in others -- and you can tell when it is gone. The Spark is something you can’t explain, but you can see evidence of when it is there, and when it is not. The Spark is in a teacher's smile when he or she greets students. The Spark is there when a teacher high-fives a student who does well on a test. The Spark is still apparent within the pride and attitude of a teacher when he or she sees former students graduating and succeeding in life. There is nothing worse than seeing a teacher who has lost The Spark. The Spark is the driving force in everything we do as teachers – it is what carries us through the bad times and the darkest times. When The Spark is gone, also known as “burning out”, it's up to those around the teacher to reach out and help as soon as possible before it's too late.

The purpose of the study is to identify the reasons behind The Spark leaving educators so soon. There is importance behind taking a look at educational stressors that are the predominant sources of teacher distress and burnout, and the current coping strategies at hand. By looking at current stressors and solutions in place, we can determine the effectiveness of the strategies and then from that point develop varieties of coping strategies that can be practically implemented and perhaps be as or more beneficial to specific stressful situations at the secondary school level.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are the current top educational stressors within a southern public secondary school setting?
2. What are the current coping strategies suggested to allow teachers to deal with stressful on site situations?
3. Does the level of secondary education taught (middle or high school) have an effect on the views of common educational stressors and coping strategies?
4. Does gender have an effect on the views of common educational stressors and coping strategies
5. Does the number of years of teaching experience have an effect on the views of common educational stressors and coping strategies?
6. Are the current coping strategies in place within the school system the most beneficial for the current generation of teachers within the classroom?

**LIMITATIONS OF THE PROPOSED STUDY**

This study is limited to the eight randomly selected public middle and high schools in the Mobile County School System in southern Alabama during the academic year 2014-2015. The schools selected will be sure to cover all demographic and geographic areas represented by the school system itself. There are also limitations due to the deadlines and number of responses anticipated by teachers. The study will take place within the early parts of the spring semester, thus teachers will be taking on the tasks of spring testing preparations, second semester paperwork, and preparing for end of year tasks. Therefore, teachers may overlook the survey due to lack of time from other workplace obligations.

**KEY TERMS**

Administrator – a person whose job is to manage a company, school, or other organization (Merriam-Webster, 2014).

Coping strategies – refer to the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events. (Taylor, 1998).

Distress – unhappiness or pain: suffering that affects the mind or body (Merriam-Webster, 2014).

Eustress – the good stress that motivates you to continue working (Brock University, 2010).

Secondary school – the school division that follows elementary schools, most often encompassing grades 7-12.

Stress – a state of mental tension and worry caused by problems in your life, work, etc.; something that causes strong feelings of worry or anxiety. (Merriam-Webster, 2014).

Stressor – something that makes you worried or anxious: a source of stress. (Merriam-Webster, 2014). For this study, this specifically refers to items within an educational environment.

Teacher – a person or thing that teaches something; especially: a person whose job is to teach students about certain subjects. (Merriam-Webster, 2014).

Teacher burnout – a condition caused by depersonalization, exhaustion and a diminished sense of accomplishment.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

**ANALYSIS OF TEACHER DISTRESS AND BURNOUT**

Imagine facing each day with constant feelings of anxiety, frustration and low self-esteem. When many hear this combination, they imagine someone who is depressed, walking through life as merely “surviving” it than “living” it. Immediate plans to get help for the person is the first priority on the agenda for many, upon hearing the daily struggle. However, this combination of feelings are the daily emotional wardrobe of thousands of teachers across America, yet no one rushes to get them help, as it is expected for the job description. This toxic combination, however, when left unattended to is a slow build up to what some clinicians call “burnout.” No matter what your profession, burnout is a very serious thing mentally, emotionally and physically. The condition of “burnout” usually occurs when a teacher feels highly stressed, emotionally exhausted, and cynical or uncaring about what happens to students. According to studies, most teachers experience job stress at least two to four times a day, with more than seventy-five percent of teachers’ health problems attributed to stress. It is noted by many administrators that first year teachers often come into the job of teaching ‘on fire’ for the job, but like with any fire, they burn out. So what is to be done? How can we face the problem known as “burnout” that is such a growing epidemic with todays’ teachers, and keep teachers from leaving the profession altogether? First one must understand the causes of the problem in order to fix the problem.

**TEACHER REACTIONS TO SITUATIONAL STRESS**

Teaching has become such a stressful situation as the decades have progressed. It has become so stressful that many teachers have developed health problems emotionally and/or physically. According to Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1987), teacher stress is a response syndrome of negative effects, such as anger and depression, that are usually accompanied by potentially pathogenic physiological changes that result from a teacher’s job. This is supported by the view that demands made upon the teacher is a threat to his or her self-esteem or well-being thus coping strategies must be activated to reduce this perceived threat. Stress is defined as a state of mental tension and worry caused by problems in your life, work, etc.; something that causes strong feelings of worry or anxiety. (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Stress is determined by the individual within the situation. What is deemed stress for some may not be stress for others. For a teacher, stress is caused from negative situations within the classroom or school facility that result in adverse teacher responses or behaviors.

So what are some of these stressful situations that teachers are having to face on a daily basis? Many educational stressors have been pinpointed as leading towards teacher burnout. One such stressor is the growing number of physical assaults being launched at teachers. Physical assaults on teachers are at record numbers. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center of Education Statistics, more than 900,000 were physically attacked by students in the year 2013-2014. About 250,000 had personal property damage and 500,000 had items stolen while on the job. Physical abuse is not the only form of abuse teachers must withstand daily. The growing rate of verbal abuse has risen existentially within the last decades, with no end in sight. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, during the 2007–08 school year, a smaller percentage of teachers (7 percent) were threatened with injury by a student from their school than in 1993–94 (12 percent) and 1999–2000 (9 percent), though this percentage was not measurably different from the percentage in 2003–04 (7 percent). The percentage of teachers reporting that they had been physically attacked by a student from their school (4 percent) was not measurably different in 2007–08 than in any previous survey year.

In November of 2010, the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics quietly released a report—“Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010”—indicating that 145,100 public school teachers had been physically attacked by students at their schools in the course of a single school year and that another 276,700 public school teachers had been threatened with injury by a student in that school year. The numbers were drawn from the DOE’s most recent “School and Staffing Survey” conducted after the 2007-2008 school year. The survey yielded responses from 47,600 public school teachers, and the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics used the responses of this survey sample to estimate the total number of teaches threatened and attacked nationwide. This survey, (Appendix B), includes questions such as: “Has a student FROM THIS SCHOOL threatened to injure you IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS?” and “Has a student FROM THIS SCHOOL physically attacked you IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS?” and from questions such as these, the data was retrieved that gives us the information. From the same survey that was given again in 2012, the following information was retrieved.







Here, Table 5.1 shows that 8.1 percent of all public school teachers in America had been threatened with injury by a student during the 2007-2008 school year, and Table 5.2 said that 4.3 percent had been actually physically attacked by a student. The results showed that teachers at private school—where 2.6 percent were threatened by a student and 1.9 percent were attacked—were less likely to be victimized by their students than were public school teachers. As the public school system continues to evolve, more expectations are placed upon teachers from state and local government. For this reason alone, the number of teacher attacks is not expected to diminish, due to students realizing that the teachers are being held more accountable than students for actions inside the classroom. The report also indicated that no type of public school was immune from student threats and attacks on teachers. Public-school students threatened to injure 106,200 teachers (12.1 percent of the teachers) in city schools, 83,700 teachers (7.0 percent) in suburban schools, 36,300 (7.8 percent) in town school and 50,000 (5.9 percent) in rural schools. Public school students physically attacked 50,000 teachers (5.7 percent of the teachers) in city schools, 48,900 teachers (4.1 percent) in suburban schools, 19,200 students (4.1 percent) in town schools, and 27,000 teachers (3.2 percent) in rural schools.

The 2012 version of the report from the National Center of Education Statistics noted that female teachers were more likely than male teachers to be physically attacked by a student. 119,500 female teachers (or 4.1 percent the teachers) were physically attacked by a student during the school year, while 34,900 male teachers (or 3.7 percent) were physically attacked by a student. The Department of Education report did not distinguish public-school teachers from private-school teachers when reporting the total of each gender who were attacked. (In addition to the 145,100 public-school teachers who were physically attacked by a student during the school year, another 9,300 private-school teachers were also attacked by a student.) The tables below show the state ranking of teachers who were threatened and attack in the years of the surveys, last data being in the year 2007-08. Interestingly enough, Public-school teachers were more likely to be threatened in the District of Columbia, where 16.9 percent were threatened, than any other place in the United States. New Mexico was second with a percentage of 12.8 being threatened, followed closely by Maryland with 12.7 percent. (Table 5.3 below). Public-school teachers were more likely to be physically attacked in Maryland—where 8.4 percent were attacked—than in any other state. Alaska—where 6.7 percent of teachers were attacked--ranked second. Wisconsin and Minnesota tied for third with a teacher-attacked-by-student rate of 6.6 percent, as Table 5.4 below indicates. A suggestion for further research stands in this table alone, as one wonders why attacks happen more often in certain states than others. Note on this table where Alabama ranks in threats – 8.1 percent—and attacks – 4.3 percent.





Startlingly enough, these growing numbers of threats and attacks are now turning deadly. Last month, in Leeds, England, a teacher was brutally stabbed to death by a fifteen-year-old student, in front of her classroom, as she was teaching. The Daily Mirror, a news station in Great Britain, noted that Spanish teacher Anne Maguire, 61, was repeatedly stabbed in front of pupils at Corpus Christi Catholic College in on April 28, 2014. Mrs. Maguire's death, after more than 40 years teaching at the school, is thought to be the first time a teacher has been stabbed to death in a British classroom, and the first killing of a teacher in a school since the 1996 Dunblane massacre. School shootings in the United States are becoming more prominent - there have been thirty-nine incidents so far this year alone, resulting in the deaths of twelve people. One of the worst shootings in recent times was the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre which left six members of staff and twenty children dead. The Virginia Tech massacre of 2007 saw gunman Seung-Hui Cho shoot dead five teachers and twenty-seven students before turning the gun on himself. These types of teacher attacks by students are being largely attributed to inadequate security at school sites for students and teachers.

A bulk of these attacks begin with words, and in a century that boosts so much technology, the ability to say things and get them spread is as easy as clicking a button. Teachers across the world face online slander, threats, and even death threats from pupils through abusive social media messages. A survey released earlier this month in England showed that 21% of teachers had abusive or negative comments posted about them online - including one pupil who threatened to kill his teacher and invited fellow pupils to join in.

 Research has been conducted since the late 1970s to try and pinpoint the exact contributing factors that lead to the most stress for teachers. In his article “Critical Factors Related to Teacher Burnout”, Russell Cassel (2000) name the following five factors as top contributing stress factors, in order of importance:

1. Negative Image of Present School System
2. Inadequate Teacher Preparation
3. Ineffective School Management
4. Lack of Effective Home Cooperation
5. Focus on Other than Learning or Development

Self-efficacy is an attribute held very precious to most people. When one has poor self-efficacy, their daily tasks and routines show this. The state of morale you keep yourself in has a direct impact on the productivity of your life. Productivity within a school system is no different – you get out of it what you put into it. When you have leaders that lack leadership qualities running a school system, the workers, teachers for example, lose their faith in their system, giving a poor output thusly. School systems have been driving more and more towards trying the “next big and new thing” and constantly switch learning concepts before teachers and students have had time to master them. How can one show growth in a concept when the system changes the way they want it taught and tested from year to year? Concepts must have time to be laid out, taught for a period of time for mastery on the part of both student and teacher, and then assessed at the end for proper results. It is hard to say something “doesn’t work” when it wasn’t given time to prove itself. Too much of the driving force behind school systems are geared towards standardized testing, rather than testing for mastery of concepts. If allotted time to teach skills as needed without worry of the next big test and the judgmental scores that accompany it, teachers would be able to cover more and students would begin to see the reason behind the skill to show mastery.

As previously stated, when teachers begin to lose faith in their school system all together, it reflects in their level of productivity. When teachers begin to be unproductive in their daily tasks, it is apparent to the communities surrounding the schools. Parents begin to lose faith in the teachers and their competency, many using it as an excuse for problematic situations that arise within the school that may involve their child. Lack of faith in teachers has now become an alibi of sorts for the personal responsibility of students in relation to their preparation for class. It has always been said (by many teachers, in fact!) that students are a product of their environment. Usually this statement is made when referring to a lack of home training done by the parents towards the student in question. However, this same slogan mirrors back on the teacher as well. A poor teacher, with poor self-esteem and low morale will absolutely push that attitude off on his or her students. In order for any project to be effective, it is largely dependent upon the high morale and involvement of the students. When the teacher doesn’t seem to care, neither will the students. When students don’t care, problems begin to exist. Students will do what they are pushed to do, so a teacher should always expect great things and act as such within the classroom. Students today are being raised in a technology-dependent world, so they are already growing up “programmed” in a way for low productivity, because technology does so much for them. Sad to say, this low productivity mindset is also often times set forth for them by parents, teachers, and family set for them as well. Teachers must work to raise their own morale and faith in their job, so that it begins to positively reflect down the line of all impacted by them.

“Teaching is the profession that teaches all other professions” – Author Unknown. This quote holds so much value – a job such as teaching should never be looked at lightly. Teachers are responsible for all the doctors, lawyers, and presidents of tomorrow. One would assume, then, that such a crucial job gets lots of training and preparation to ensure maximum potential results. However, with so many teachers dropping out of the profession within the first five years, teacher training and preparation for the job that lies before them becomes a suspect. As previously mentioned, this is the golden age of technology in the classroom. Every day, a new piece of equipment is invented that can do something bigger, better, stronger with a tinier computer chip to house it all. At times, however, teachers begin to feel like a person stranded in a raft in the midst of the largest ocean – all the water around them but not a drop they can drink. Computer literacy skills are something we expect every student to have, yet many teachers don’t have it themselves because they grew up without computers! It is frustrating to veteran teachers to have equipment that students know how to use moreso than they. This fact lends to the problem mentioned earlier that students lack faith in the abilities of their teachers, because they can do something their teacher cannot. It is disheartening to be give learning tools that are supposed to invoke such a positive change within the learning environment, only to be given no preparation on how to make use of them effectively.

Numerous teachers are leaving the profession because they are tired of the unprecedented and unrealistic demands that are being made upon them. Due to state and federal restrictions and guidelines, many institutions have lost some of the great management strategies that allowed for such success in the past. The addition of such concepts as Common Core and No Child Left Behind, spread across the nation have restricted the learning environment to the maximum level. Goals are set for all students at all schools that, when implemented, are unrealistic to actual student learning abilities. To mainstream students who have been tested and shown can’t perform on grade level into regular classes, then test them as if they are on regular grade level mentality is disheartening to both student and teacher alike. By mainstreaming some of the most severely handicapped, it reduces the learning level to that child’s ability level so as to include them in the process. Many teachers have not had the appropriate training for teaching such students in their formal educational training. Educational rules and goals should not be set on an overall level; goals should be set after careful deliberation of the student population ability of the system in question, with the input of any parties within the system that will be involved. Being part of the solution allows one to feel ownership in the process, as they are involved in the decision making. Opinions are seen as valued, since input was asked rather than rules dictated from the “powers that be” that haven’t been inside a real classroom setting since they were students.

Many schools in school systems all across the country lack appropriate support from the students’ home environments. In the past, organizations such as PTO/PTA (Parent/Teacher Organization/Association) that helped involved parents from the community in the school activities. Too often, parents are too busy to get involved in the education of their children, especially post-elementary school years. Times are still hard for many, economically, so it is not uncommon to find parents working two and three jobs, so the children have to raise themselves before and after school hours. Discipline is one area that is greatly lacking in support from the home front. Parents today are treating their children as mini-adults, rather than as adolescents. This fact has had a negative impact on behavior patterns in students, because they get away with things at home that they get reprimanded for at school. Then, when confronted by teachers and administrators, a great influx of disrespect flows from the mouths of the students, as respect is not being taught. When parents step back and fail to become involved in the discipline problems of their children, allowing only the school to deal with the problems, the foundation is there for the problems to continue in the future. Often times, when discipline problems happen at school it is a reflection on similar problems that do or will happen within the community post-school hours. Students begin to realize that the only people who have issues with their behavior are the same people who legally can’t do much more than put them in alternative placement situations and or suspensions, which many see as mini-vacations throughout the year. In order to have a more conducive learning involvement, the key point is that parents need to be continually involved in the development of their child, academically and behaviorally, to ensure positive progress.

 Focus on learning is a battle that teachers have been fighting for years. Now, with technology as convenient as the pocket on a child’s pants, it is difficult to get students to focus on things they see as non-necessary at this point in their life. However, it is hard to practice this preaching within the classroom when school systems’ don’t abide by the same principles. On a daily basis, valuable instructional time is interrupted by announcements, ice cream and snack sales, yearbook signings, club events, faculty/student ball games, and so much more. Focus in schools is being place on things other than what is most important – the education of students. From a system standpoint, the focus has shifted from what is best for the education of the students to what is the most cost-efficient for the system. In the Bible, 1 Timothy 6:10 states: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many grief.” This scripture verse holds so many truths – too often when people are driven by money, the end results are tragic. You get more headache than happiness when things are done for the wrong reason. In order for optimal learning, classrooms need to center around smaller class sizes, and teachers should not be paid based upon assessment results. Just the opposite is happening, however, in school systems across the nation. Thirty to forty students are being placed in one class, rather than another teacher be hired, to help save the system money. In class sizes this large, discipline, education, and emotional issues are bound to rear their ugly heads, as the teacher has almost zero control due to being outnumbered.

 Resilience is defined as a mode of interacting with events in the environment that is activated and nurtured in times of stress (Grotberg, 1997) from Tait (2008)\*\*\* The epidemic of teacher burnout tends to have more of an impact on those with the least resilience. This could include both novice and veteran teachers, as how one interacts with environmental events isn’t entirely directly related to number of years taught. Melanie Tait points out through her article “Resilience as a Contributor to Novice Teacher Success, Commitment, and Retention”, that novice teachers have a large amount of resilience during their first year, it only seems to taper off as the years go on. New teachers go into situations wanting to make a change in the lives of students, that they go above and beyond when facing any issues. This level of enthusiasm is great for teaching, yet giving 150% all day, every day can eventually be wearing on the mind and body, especially for a novice teacher in the field. A study was conducted in Canada that linked almost 18% of new teachers being at risk of leaving the profession by their second year of teaching (McIntyre, 2003). Novice teachers face the problem of being in a new environment being confronted with new situations not having to have dealt with prior to the first day. No college level institution can prepare a teacher for the reactions that happen for the first time, in a teacher’s first solo classroom. At times, this pressure of constant new-ness become overwhelming, leading to quicker burnout and leaving the field of these teachers. Colleges may make mistakes, at times, and send students out to learn in educational environments that are not realistic to the actual settings where jobs will open up. Preparing future educators by using realistic situations in realistic teaching environments is the only way to help them cope with the shock factor of such things. It is never advisable for a teacher to hear a child tell her “No, forget you, I’m not doing a thing!” in an intimidating voice for the first time, for it to be in a classroom setting when he or she has no help or support.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

When teacher burnout does being to occur, certain signs become evident in the lives of those teachers. Robert Veninga and James Spradley developed a five-step pattern that, if not corrected, ends in burnout (Hamann, 2000). The “Honeymoon” stage is the first stage of the burnout process. This stage is characterized by actions such as loss of enthusiasm, loss of job satisfaction, and loss of energy. The next stage is known as the “Fuel Shortage” stage, which leads to symptoms such as job inefficiency, fatigue, and/or increased use of alternative outlets (drinking, smoking, drug use) as means of escape. The third stage is met with symptoms such as chronic exhaustion, physical illness, anger and depression. This stage is known as the “Chronic Symptoms” stage. At this third stage, teachers begin to show withdrawal from others, they begin getting ill and missing more work, and their overall attitude towards students, parents, friends, family, and coworkers begins to change for the negative. The fourth stage, the “Crisis” stage, the problems faced by the teacher become more prominent, and the teacher begins to fixate on those issues. Exaggerated illness and anger are dominate in daily routines now for the teacher that reaches this stage. The final stage of teacher burnout is known as the “Hitting the Wall” stage. At this point, the level of stress has become critical to the wellbeing of the teacher. Symptoms of professional incompetence, impaired judgment in situations, accompanied by physical and psychological dysfunction are attributes in the life of the teacher. Ultimately, when a teacher reaches this cycle of stress, withdrawal, and burnout from their job, everyone suffers.

**PHYSIOLOGICAL RESULTS**

In addition to mental health, physical health is also considered as a contributing factor to teachers leaving the profession early. Impaired phonation represents the most characteristic teachers' physical disorder because it is directly related to their specific occupational demands when teaching. According to a number of studies at the BioMed Center of Public Health (2006), which were aimed at identifying which occupational groups were at an increased risk of suffering from occupational voice disorders, teachers were found to be particularly vulnerable to developing such problems. A study showed that compared to a control group, teachers were significantly more likely to report having six voice symptoms, among which hoarseness was the most frequent, and five related physical discomfort symptoms (tiring, effortful, ache, uncomfortable and rough). Probably because of their occupational environment, characterized by permanent contact with people and particularly with children, this same study opened the door to the idea that teachers could be at a higher risk of developing infectious diseases by documenting a significant increased risk of Hepatitis A infection in Israel among kindergarten staff and teachers in comparison to the general population. Surprisingly enough, an association was even made between school teaching and mortality from autoimmune diseases.

 Stress is a natural part of life, and is expected when there is any form of human interaction. To expect a stress-free life is unrealistic – it will never happen and it is impractical to think it will. The idea now it to determine the best way for people to cope with stressful situations, specifically in the classroom for this case. When so much stress is left, unattended to, it begins to affect a teacher’s health. A person’s health is not dependent upon the occasional crisis situation or emotional upheaval, but rather on the prolonged, unrelieved state of worry and anxiety that people feel they cannot escape.

RESEARCH IN THE IDENTIFICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL COPING STRATEGIES AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

**CURRENT SUGGESTED COPING STRATIGIES**

Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events. Two general coping strategies have been distinguished: problem-solving strategies are efforts to do something active to alleviate stressful circumstances, whereas emotion-focused coping strategies involve efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events. Research indicates that people use both types of strategies to combat most stressful events (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The prevalence of one type of strategy over another is determined, in part, by personal style of coping, meaning some people cope more actively than others. Prevalence of one strategy over another is also determined by the type of stressful event. People typically employ problem-focused coping to deal with potential controllable problems such as work-related problems and family-related problems, whereas stressors perceived as less controllable, such as certain kinds of physical health problems, prompt more emotion-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

An additional distinction that is often made in the coping literature is between active and avoidant coping strategies. Active coping strategies are either behavioral or psychological responses designed to change the nature of the stressor itself or how one thinks about it, whereas avoidant coping strategies lead people into activities (alcohol or drug use for example) or mental states (withdrawal for example) that keep them from directly addressing stressful events. Generally speaking, active coping strategies, whether behavioral or emotional, are thought to be better ways to deal with stressful events, and avoidant coping strategies appear to be a psychological risk factor or marker for adverse responses to stressful life events (Holahan & Moos, 1987). Broad distinctions, such as problem-solving versus emotion-focused, or active versus avoidant, have only limited utility for understanding coping, and so research on coping and its measurement has evolved to address a variety of more specific coping strategies.

Stress is a multidimensional phenomenon that, once reaches a harmful level, must be reduced. In order to reduce stress in life, changes must occur in some way. A reduction in stressful environment is the out many teachers go with, when they leave the profession. Several techniques have been developed over the years to help cope with stress, so that job dismissal is not the escape sought. Girdano and Everly (1979) believed that, for educators, the holistic or universal approach to stress management is the best option. The holistic approach operates on many levels, on both external and internal situations, to combine several different techniques to achieve the ultimate goal of stress relief.

One such coping strategy implemented by school systems are stress programs. These are meetings held weekly or monthly that allow for teachers to get help needed to relief workplace stress. Workshops on stress, after-school exercise classes and recreational activities are some of the things offered through these programs. The research read repeats the following as ways to cope with stress in both the home and workplace environment.

1. Exercise - exercise is recommended as a great stress reliever for all job types, especially teachers. Running, walking, yoga – all are examples of forms of exercise that are known to be great releasers of stress.
2. Find a balance in life – keep work at work, and enjoy home time when you are home. A major issue is that so many teachers are having to take home mountains of paperwork. They feel they must take it home, or risk falling behind. This is true, in many cases. These teachers need to gain a mentor teacher who has found ways around this problem, and learn from that.
3. Learning to say “no” is a great strategy being encouraged to teachers to help cope with feeling overwhelmed. Often times, novice teachers take on many tasks to help themselves get involved in their new school. One must be careful not to take on too much, because they will begin to drown in the responsibilities of the numerous jobs. It is important to know the symptoms of when stress is overwhelming you, and know your own limits. When you have reached that point, change your reaction to the stress into a more positive way or remove yourself from the situation.
4. Learning to relax by identifying events in life that are stressful and eliminating them or converting them into positive situations is another coping strategy.
5. Allowing yourself to take needed mental health days within the year. Mini-vacations are sometimes the perfect solution to allow one to escape the problems stress causes. Massage/spa days, fishing trips, beach days – all provide great outlets for relaxation rather than stress.
6. Get enough sleep! Too many teachers are overly exhausted from worry and stress. Make a point to get eight hours of sleep a night to help eliminate irritability the next day.
7. In the moment, breathing exercises can be done to help calm you down and allow for a clear, fresh mind for thinking.

Friedman and Rosenman (1974) advise the following procedures to help cutdown on stress:

1. Plan some idleness everyday
2. Listen to others without interruption
3. Read books that demand concentration
4. Learn to savor food
5. Avoid irritating, overly competitive people
6. Plan leisurely, less structured vacations
7. Have a place for retreat at home
8. Concentrate on enriching yourself
9. Live by the calendar, not the stop watch
10. Concentrate on one task at a time

If none of the following strategies work, professional help from doctors will be the next advised strategy. Some strategies offered through professional help are:

1. Group problem solving
2. Professional support groups
3. Interpersonal skill training
4. Human potential groups
5. Professional counseling
6. Changing careers

Notice that even through professional help, leaving the job is listed as a last resort if no other coping strategies are successful.

**STATEMENT OF RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS**

In this proposed research study, I hope to see what the current educational stressors are within a southern public school system, along with the current coping strategies suggested and see if they are the most beneficial for the stress-related situations. I believe the research will show new educational stressors that differ from years past, due to the ever-changing world we live in that is driven by technology and changes in the educational system of our nation. Due to these same changes, the coping strategies put into place in years past will need to be updated to match the ever-changing society in when teachers are having to work. Hopefully, the data obtained will expose demographic links to teacher burnout and the study will emphasize the attention that school system and building level administrators should focus on helping teachers avoid burnout.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

**PARTICIPANTS**

 Four middle schools and four high schools in Mobile, Alabama will be selected at random, ensuring to cover all demographic areas represented by the city. All faculty and staff at the selected schools will be asked to complete the Teacher Stress Survey during the spring semester of the academic year 2014-2015.

 A total of 800 surveys will be sent to the selected schools, 100 per facility. As previously stated, the schools will demographically and geographically represent the area of Mobile County, Alabama. This will be done so that the data reflects a diverse financial bases, student population, administrative and teaching methodologies, and degree of community involvement within the educational programs at the facilities.

**INSTRUMENTATION**

 The instrument to be used for this research study is the researcher developed Teacher Stress Survey (see Appendix A). The survey format will be used because it provides the best way to gather all the needed demographic information, educational stressors, items of distress for teachers, distressful situations, current coping strategies, as well as allotting for suggested coping methods for the future. Participants will be asked to complete this survey, which has been divided into five parts: (1) demographic information, (2) list of educational stressors and degrees of discomfort, (3) participant description of a distressful educational situation on site, (4) description of a coping strategy currently used on site to reduce the stressful situation, (5) alternative coping strategies that could be used in the future to relieve the distress in the above mentioned distressful situation.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

The study was designed to ascertain the predominant educational stressors at the secondary level, identify educators’ distressful situations on site, list coping strategies currently used in the distressful situations, and develop new coping techniques that could be implemented to alleviate the distress in the distressful situations. The participants who will supply the data will be teachers at four middle school facilities and four high school facilities within a southern public school system during the academic year of 2014-2015. Participants will be sent the aforementioned survey to complete by a predetermined date. The researcher will collect and analyze the data. The researcher will go into the schools and hold focus groups with those willing, based upon responses to survey questions. Interviews and observations will also be conducted to gather in-depth information in reference to all points of educational stressors listed through the survey. All participants will be given the results of the study via an emailed report. This report will consist of the analysis of the data that was provided and suggestions for coping strategies’ implementation within their coordinating situation.

**PROCEDURE**

 On January 2nd, 2015 surveys will be distributed electronically to the faculty at schools who elected to receive them in this fashion. On January 5th, 2015, surveys will be distributed on site to those schools who elected to complete them during a set faculty meeting. School Board and administrative approval for such surveys will be gained in November/December 2014 so that there are no hindrances of delivery in January. Mobile County Public School System will unblock any firewalls linked to accepting an email from an outside source so that ease in opening the attachment will be there. Paper-based copies of the survey will be delivered in office, for administration to pass out via mailboxes or at a meeting. A return envelope will be provided for ease in return to researcher. Schools selected will be given a return date of March 20th, 2014 as a final due date, with a reminder going out to all facilities on March 2nd, 2014 both electronically and in the form of a memo to be announced to the staff. When the deadline has been met, the researcher will gather all the data and analyze it as best fit. Questions included on the survey allotted for further research by way of volunteerism for focus groups and interviews. The research will gather and process all closed and open-ended responses and categorize the information. The survey should provide insight as to what the top educational stressors and their coping strategies are presently in the eyes of the participants, information which will aid in further research on the subject matter.

 Once the top educational stressors have been identified, the information will be recorded to include in final report. From this point, emails and/or letters will be sent out to the participants who elected to partake in a focus group and/or interview about the subject at hand, notating the date and time of the meeting. Special concern will be taken to ensure the educators don’t miss any more of “their time” after school hours as already happens, thus the researcher will make arrangements with the school system to allot for this to count as professional development within a workday. During these focus groups, time will be taken to hear about the current distresses within the educational environment and how they are dealt with. Ideally, there will be three groups: middle school faculty, high school faculty, and a mixed group of both. This way the researcher can compare results of these focus groups along with survey responses to answer the question on if middle and high school educators pinpoint the same situations as educational stressors.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

TEACHER STRESS SURVEY

Teacher Stress Survey

The University of South Alabama

R. Mudrich

I am requesting your voluntary participation in the completion of this survey entitled “Teacher Stress Survey”. The purpose of this survey is to aid in the identification of educational stressors that are the predominant sources of teacher distress and burnout within the school system. It is also going to exhibit common and shared distressful educational situations and illustrate a variety of coping strategies that can be implemented at the secondary level. If you decide to participate, please answer as many of the items as you are able to answer. About 30 minutes of your time is what it will take to complete this survey. All data received will be treated with anonymity and confidentiality. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 Rachel M. Mudrich

 Researcher

1. Demographic information
2. Level of Assignment
	1. \_\_middle school b. \_\_high school c. \_\_ both
3. Type of Assignment
	1. \_\_full time classroom instructor b. \_\_part time classroom instructor

c. \_\_ substitute/interim position

1. Grade level of Assignment
	1. \_\_6 b. \_\_ 7 c. \_\_ 8 d. \_\_ 9 e. \_\_\_ 10 f. \_\_ 11 g. \_\_ 12
2. Total years in full time teaching experience
	1. \_\_\_\_ years
3. Has the full time teaching experience been continuous (Unbroken by any non-teaching years)
	1. \_\_\_\_\_yes b. \_\_\_\_\_no
4. Was your original entrance into a career field as a teacher?
	1. \_\_\_\_\_yes b. \_\_\_\_\_no
5. Do you plan to remain in teaching for the remainder of your professional career?
	1. \_\_\_\_yes b. \_\_\_\_no c. \_\_\_\_ don’t know
6. Do you have major extracurricular responsibilities? (Coaching, fine arts, clubs, etc)
	1. \_\_\_\_yes b. \_\_\_\_no
7. Is the majority of your teaching assignment in the major area of your subject preparation?
	1. \_\_\_\_yes b. \_\_\_\_no
8. Are you currently in a tenured position?
	1. \_\_\_\_yes b. \_\_\_\_no

11. Have you ever held an administrative position above the level of department chairperson?

 a. \_\_\_\_yes b. \_\_\_\_no

12. Highest earned degree

a. \_\_\_\_ Bachelor’s b. \_\_\_\_\_Master’s c. \_\_\_ Ed.S d. \_\_\_Ph.D

 13. Age

 a. \_\_\_\_ years

 14. Sex

 a. \_\_\_\_male b. \_\_\_\_female

 15. Marital Status

 a. \_\_\_single b. \_\_\_\_ married c. \_\_\_ divorced d. \_\_\_\_separated

e. \_\_\_widowed

16. Do you feel distressful because of certain professional stressors in the educational environement?

 a. \_\_\_ not at all b. \_\_\_ seldom c. \_\_\_ sometimes d. \_\_\_ frequently

 e. \_\_\_ constantly

**B. If you feel distressful, please rate the following educational stressors, using the following scale for all items. Mark each one according to the amount of discomfort you currently feel or have experienced in the past.**

 1. Little to no discomfort

 2. Moderate discomfort

 3. Extreme discomfort

 4. Does not apply

Stressors Degree of Discomfort

17. Class size 1 2 3 4

18. School policies 1 2 3 4

19. Lack of parental support for teachers 1 2 3 4

20. Student apathy, inattention 1 2 3 4

21. Administrative pressure 1 2 3 4

22. Conflicts with other faculty members 1 2 3 4

23. Conflicts with custodial staff 1 2 3 4

24. Conflicts with office personnel 1 2 3 4

25. Conflicts with counseling and guidance department 1 2 3 4

26. Assigned duty (bus, car, lunchroom, morning) 1 2 3 4

27. Conflicts with student’s parents 1 2 3 4

28. Inadequate class time for teaching 1 2 3 4

29. Student behavior problems 1 2 3 4

30. Inadequate communication between departments 1 2 3 4

31. Student ignorance of subject matter 1 2 3 4

32. Decline of decision-making power in the classroom 1 2 3 4

33. Decision-making power of the School Board in conflict with teachers 1 2 3 4

34. Serving as an evaluator of students 1 2 3 4

35. Being evaluated 1 2 3 4

36. Involuntary extracurricular assignments 1 2 3 4

37. Fear of acts of violence 1 2 3 4

38. Fear of vandalism 1 2 3 4

39. Inadequate salary 1 2 3 4

40. “Moonlighting” to supplement salary 1 2 3 4

41. Mainstreaming of special needs students 1 2 3 4

42. Inadequate inservice programs 1 2 3 4

43. Inadequate preparation time 1 2 3 4

44. Teaching in other that prepared area 1 2 3 4

45. Fear of legal action 1 2 3 4

46. Fear of job loss 1 2 3 4

47. Feeling locked in a job routine 1 2 3 4

48. Involuntary transfer to another school 1 2 3 4

49. Involuntary reassignment in grade/subject 1 2 3 4

50. Involuntary addition of subjects to be taught 1 2 3 4

51. Involuntary deletion of subjects to be taught 1 2 3 4

52. Dominant teacher unions/associations 1 2 3 4

53. Weak teacher unions/associations 1 2 3 4

54. Accountability (student competency testing) 1 2 3 4

55. Accountability (teacher competency testing) 1 2 3 4

56. Legislative mandates 1 2 3 4

57. Administrative turnover 1 2 3 4

58. Teacher-administrator conflict 1 2 3 4

59. Uncomplimentary view of education (media, etc) 1 2 3 4

60. Lack of teaching supplies and/or equipment 1 2 3 4

61. lack of administrative support 1 2 3 4

62. Professional disillusionment 1 2 3 4

63. Future of education in general 1 2 3 4

64. Excessive work hours devoted to school 1 2 3 4

65. Self-imposed stresses (perfection standards) 1 2 3 4

66. Age group peer success 1 2 3 4

67. Changing educational methods/philosophies 1 2 3 4

68. Increased amount of paperwork 1 2 3 4

69. Increased role expectations 1 2 3 4

70. Lack of financial support for school programs 1 2 3 4

Other – Please list stressors not named and to what degree of discomfort you feel towards them

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4

71. Do you believe that you have ever ben physically ill due to professional distress?

 a. \_\_\_ yes b. \_\_\_ no

72. Do you believe that you have ever been mentally ill due to professional distress?

 a. \_\_\_ yes b. \_\_\_ no

73. How many sick days have you taken to date? (This year)

 \_\_\_\_\_ days

74. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group on this topic? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

75. Would you be willing to participate in an interview on this topic? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

If you prefer to do either of the above via email, or wish to receive results of the study, please provide email: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for completing this portion of the survey. Please go to the final section.

C. Please describe, in as much detail as possible, a common and persistent distressful educational situation in which you were involved in your school environment.

D. Please describe the coping strategy (strategies) that you used to reduce or eliminate the distress in the situation that you previously described.

E. How well did your coping strategy (strategies) work in the situation?

 a. \_\_\_ successful b. \_\_\_moderately successful c. \_\_\_ unsuccesful

F. In hindsight, what more appropriate or better coping strategy might you have used to reduce the distress in the situation that you have described?

APPENDIX B

SCHOOL SURVEY ON CRIME AND SAFETY

FROM NATIONAL CENTER OF EDUCATION STATISTICS



