

## **Causes and management of job stress among selected teachers in Cameroon**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper looks at the causes of job-related stress among teachers of Buea - Cameroon, and individual management strategies they employ. The study uses the chi-square test that reveals the main causes of stress among teachers are i) student indiscipline, ii) poor salary situations, iii) a sense of under-promotion, iv) heavy work load, and v) conflicting relationship with principals. The paper purports that socio-economic factors are the most important predictors of stress, followed by interpersonal relations and then by instructional problems. Individual personality differences and social support systems moderate the impact of stressors on teachers, influence their appraisal of socio-environmental demands as stressful, and determine the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the coping strategies generated to manage job stress.*

### **Introduction**

It was not until the mid 1970s that publications referring directly to “stress in teaching” began to appear in reasonable numbers (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977, p. 301). During the 1980s the number of studies reporting on teacher stress grew rapidly (Kyriacou, 1987:149; Cole & Walker, 1989:3). By the end of the 1990s the research literature on teacher stress had become voluminous (Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999, p. 10; Kyriacou, 2000, p. 6).

Human beings have many biological, social and psychological needs, which when not met could generate stress. Selye (1978, p. 5) defines stress as “any external drive which threatens to upset the organismic equilibrium.” The studies by Raschke (1985, p. 561) and Hock and Roger (1996, p. 179), indicate that the degree of stress which a teacher experiences is positively related to the degree which he/she perceives a lack of control over a potentially threatening situation. Schools are considered formal organizations (Hoy & Miskel, 1987, p. 2), and teachers are susceptible to organizational stress of role conflict and role ambiguity. Many researchers have identified sources of stress among secondary school teachers. Their findings have indicated that time pressures (Thompson & Dey, 1998) and high expectations (Gmelch et al., 1986; Smith et al., 1995) are the main sources of stress for teachers.

In many countries, the teacher’s job is often considered as one of the most stressful professions. In the last two decades, intensive research has been carried out in the USA and Europe concerning the sources and symptoms of teach-

ers' professional stress. Studies in the field of teachers' stress show that the greater part of stress is associated with the rapid pace of changes in education, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore expectations of parents towards their children's education may also be real source of stress. Survey data indicates that teaching is one of the "high stress" professions (Travers & Cooper, 1996, p. 40; Kyriacou, 2000, p. 51). Studies reporting sources of teacher stress (Travers & Cooper 1996, p. 62; Benmansour, 1998, p. 22) indicate that the main sources of stress facing teachers are: Teaching pupils who lack motivation; Maintaining discipline; Time pressures and workload; Coping with change; Being evaluated by others; Dealing with colleagues; Self-esteem and status; Administration and management; Role conflict and ambiguity; Poor working conditions.

Very little has been done on Cameroon with the goal of evaluating sources of job stress and coping strategies among secondary school teachers in particular, and in other sectors of the society as a whole (Ilongo 2003, p. 15). According to Ilongo (op. cit) the turning point in Cameroon's history accountable for the as yet mostly un-researched sources and consequences of job stress among workers in general and secondary school teachers in particular were the socio-economic crises of the early 1990s, characterized by currency devaluation. Following the latter situation, the work situation and attitudes of civil servants underwent radical changes. Teachers in all sectors experienced sharp fall in salaries and purchasing power. Some of them reacted to this situation with negative work practices like late coming, absenteeism, and *laissez-faire* attitudes. Others though, decided to face the challenge by furthering their education or engaging in parallel income generating activities. Thus teaching in Cameroon today for secondary school teachers entails experiencing high pressure due fundamentally to the consequences of the socio-economic crunch. Though contemporary research highlights the prevalence of the stress as a global and insidious phenomenon, its causal factors are likely to differ from one society to another and from one sector of human activity to another.

## **Methodology**

The research design adopted for this study is the descriptive/evaluative survey research method. This research design is descriptive in the sense that it seeks to present the causes of job stress experienced by secondary school teachers, whilst it is evaluative in attempting to determine the various management strategies teachers put in place to cope with job stress. The population for this study includes the teachers of all government bilingual and government bilingual high schools in the Fako Division in the South West Province of Cameroon. The sample for this study was made up of all the teachers of Government Bilingual High School Molyko and Government High School Bokwaongo, Buea. The purposive sampling technique was used for this study because the latter institutions are

the largest in the Buea Sub-Division, and their combined teaching population was deemed substantial for the purposes of the research.

The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire made up of 17 items for administration on teacher respondents. Most of the questions were close-ended to facilitate answering and scoring, some being open-ended for provision of supplementary information. The items in the questionnaire included personal data, student indiscipline, salary levels, sense of under-promotion, teacher workload, teacher-principal interactions, and the role of social support systems in determining the coping strategies of secondary school teachers in relation to job stress.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data is based on the responses from the questionnaire distributed to the teachers mentioned above. The first question was to find out whether teachers are stressed by students, and if they develop aggressive behaviors. To this question, more than two-thirds (81%) of the teachers admitted to be stressed by students' indiscipline, but added that they do not develop aggressive behaviors towards the students. To explain this state of things, two compounding factors, that is, social support and personality differences were used. The teachers agreed that the supportive roles of family, principal, Parents' Teachers' Association (PTA), friends, tribal meetings, political and religious activities go a long way to help them cope with job stress as indicated in the following statistics:

Firstly, 89% of teachers rely on family support; 34.5% rely on PTA support; 84% use support from friends; 29% rely on their political activities for support; 69.5% rely on religious activities for support; 62.5% use support from tribal meetings; and 81% rely on relatives for support. Thus, on the whole, teachers questioned have a strong social support base which acts as palliative strategy for managing stress. The activities, individuals and social groups which constitute the latter do not deal with the source of stress itself, in this case student indiscipline, but aim at lessening the feeling of stress that occurs through dialogue, or through physical activities aimed at relaxation for relieving tension and built up anxiety. This justifies the fact that though 81% of the teachers questioned are stressed by student indiscipline they do not develop aggressive behaviors. Psychologists use the term social support to refer to the resources that individuals receive from other people or groups, often in the form of comfort, caring or help. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that social support can improve one's psychological and physical health (Cohen & Wills, 1985, p. 345).

The second question was about the personality type of the teachers, and the following tendencies were realized from the responses of the self-appraisal exercise: 89% of teachers feel committed to their duty, 79% have confidence in the future, 29.5% fear those in authority, 22% feel abandoned, 24% feel restless, 72% work towards greener pastures, 55% are satisfied with their jobs, 72.5% set very high goals for themselves, 83% set reasonable goals for themselves, 58% engage in competitive activities, and 36.5% engage in non-competitive activities. From the aforementioned, we can deduce that the strong social support base of the respondents gives them the profiles of type B personality, that is, generally easy going, self-confident, relaxed and secure. Numerous studies indicate that people having many social ties (spouse, friends, relatives, group memberships), live longer and are less apt to succumb to stress-related illness than are people who have few supportive social contacts (Cohen & Wills, 1985, p. 352). Friends and family can bolster self-esteem, provide information, companionship, and financial and material aid.

The next question focused on whether teachers are stressed by poor salary situation and whether this leads them to become engaged in other income-generating activities. To this question, 22% of the teachers who are stressed by poor salary situation said they do nothing about it in order to supplement their monthly income. In other words, 22% of the teachers do not become involved in other income-generating activities like business, part-time classes and farming. To throw light on some possible reasons for this situation, I decided to briefly consider some personality theories, social support confounding factors, and see how they can influence teachers' coping strategies in relation to stressful conditions like poor salary situations. The humanistic perspective considers the relation between culture and the individual. For Triandis (1994, p. 20), individualistic persons and cultures give priority to personal goals and define their identity mostly in terms of their personal attributes. They strive for personal control and individual achievement, while collectivists give priority to the goals of their groups, often their family, clan, or work groups, and define their identity accordingly. By their group identifications, collectivists gain a sense of belonging, a set of values, a network of caring individuals, an assurance of security. Thus, though teachers are stressed by poor salary situation, 22% of them do nothing because there is very likely an underlying sense and need for the denial of self-realization. Most of the teachers who do nothing in relation to their salary situation justified their attitude because of lack of money to engage in business, no time and venues to engage in parallel income-generating activities. Their basic coping strategies include passivity, a sense of learned helplessness, no task-focused direct action, hoping and waiting for a better future. In this wise, social support systems and their effect on coping strategies prove more determining in relation to stress management than the apparent gravity of the initial stressor which is poor salary situation.

However, most of the teachers' response to this question in terms of how they manage the situation reveals that they do some petty businesses like producing and selling photocopied notes to students, selling of dress items (mostly women), for example cosmetics, jewelry and inner wears to their colleagues. These unmentioned parallel and informal income generating activities highlight the fact that more and more teachers could be actively engaged in income generating activities to supplement their monthly salaries.

Question four was aimed at finding out if teachers lose enthusiasm for their work when they are stressed by a sense of under promotion. To this question, 50.5% of the teachers responded that they are never stressed by under promotion, while 49.5% are sometimes or frequently stressed by a sense of under promotion. The management strategies are split along the lines of assertiveness for 22% of teachers who seek for promotion, and learned helplessness for the 68% that lose enthusiasm for work, feel abandoned, and do nothing when stressed by under promotion. A possible reason for this attitude of learned helplessness in relation to under promotion of teachers is related to the latter's interactions with authority figures. Despite the fact that 62% of the teachers questioned claim they do not fear those in authority, the responses of those who do nothing when stressed by under promotion contradicts the preceding assertion. To this effect, all those who do nothing, though stressed by under promotion, explain their attitude by the facts that there are no objective criteria for promotion, that they have no "godfathers" to push them through, and that they will wait patiently for God's own time to be promoted. If for psychoanalysis individuation through the Oedipus complex implies confrontation of the father figure, temporary rivalry with it prior to identification to its values and development of the ego ideal, then the previously mentioned responses of might indicate possibilities of fear of father figures considered discriminating and socially castrating. Thus, the resulting learned helplessness generates a sense of fixation, whereby the individual accepts the pressure from this particular stressor without the slightest attempt to bring about change. Fixation to a sense of under promotion in this case generates procrastination, that is, projection of imagined solutions as an escape from reality based on anxious fear. Though 68% of teachers lose enthusiasm for work, feel abandoned, and do nothing when stressed by under promotion, 22% of these same teachers seek promotion. This indicates that more than one-fifth of the teachers do not lose enthusiasm for their work when they are stressed by a sense of under promotion. On the contrary, they adopt a proactive attitude of actively seeking for promotion. It is very likely that this percentage of teachers, that is, 22%, actively militates in religious, tribal and political social support groups which constitute in Cameroon lobbying groups for socio-economic evolution of teachers in particular and civil servants in particular

When asked if they are stressed by work overload and if this makes them to dialogue less with their students, the following responses were obtained: 70% of the teachers agreed that they are stressed by work overload while 30% said they were not overloaded with work and thus have enough time to dialogue with their students. Of the 70% who are stressed by work overload, 11% said they dialogue less with their students in order to cope; 30% give extra classes; 1.5% give photocopied notes; while 49% accommodate the situation. Thus about half of the teachers stressed by work overload accommodate the situation through an emotion-focused defense mechanism.

Accommodation also implies that 50% of teachers stressed by work overload do not adopt task-oriented management strategies like giving extra-classes and giving photocopied notes, but revert to negative escape defense mechanisms. The aforementioned situation can be justified by two possible reasons. Firstly, the nature of social support could be either emotional, that is, comforting, caring, advising, or instrumental, that is, effectively providing needed materials or financial assistance to reduce stress generated by work overload. Thus if 84% of the teachers affirm that their friends are very supportive in reducing stress, then this could be that the type and nature of their support might be more emotional for a situation that needs instrumental help, that is, seeking for means of effectively and practically relieving the workload pressure for stressed teachers. In this same light, Cohen and McKay (1984, p. 347) propose that the type of support (e.g. emotional, instrumental) which will be most effective in a particular situation depends on the stressors acting in that situation. In other words, different stressors create needs for different types of support, and that the type must match the recipient's needs in order to be effective (Jackson, 1992, p. 56).

The accommodating attitude of teachers in relation to work overload, 49%, can be explained by the fact that their strong superego element generated by a solid social support network leads on the part of the individual teacher to an exaggerated sense of duty consciousness, beyond and above the weight of the workload experienced. Furthermore, duty consciousness is reinforced by a guilt complex which represses any effort at conscious reappraisal and positive management of the situation of work overload through task-oriented coping strategies. Thus, a wrong type of social support from friends, and learned helplessness due to exaggerated sense of duty consciousness can explain why 49% of the questioned teachers simply accommodate work overload.

On the other hand, the finding that teachers stressed by work overload do not necessarily dialogue less with their students can be reappraised. If we consider that 11% of teachers dialogue less with their students, that 1.5% of them give photocopied notes to students, and that 49% of teachers accommodate work overload, certain deductions can be made. Firstly, photocopied notes imply that

teachers have insufficient time to manage and complete course syllabuses and programs. On the basis of time constraints, it is evident that selling photocopied notes is a compensatory coping mechanism against work overload generated stress. This implies that the teachers involved in this practice will not have enough time to dialogue with their students. If this is the case, then the 49% of teachers who accommodate stress generated by work overload are very likely passive and resigned to this situation, implying less enthusiasm to engage in constructive dialogue with students.

On the basis of the aforementioned analysis, instead of 11% of teachers who dialogue less with students when stressed by work overload, we might have a new hypothetical scenario through which in addition to the just mentioned percentage one would add the 49% who accommodate work overload, and the 1.5% that give out photocopied notes, in a new total of 61.5% of teachers who dialogue less with their students when stressed by work overload.

When asked if teachers are stressed by conflicts with principals and if this leads them to systematically seek to change their career, the following responses were obtained: 58% of teachers say they are never stressed by their relation with the principal, while 42% declare they are stressed. In relation to the management strategies adopted by the 42%, 52.5% state that they seek reconciliation through dialogue, 2% say they seek transfer, 35.5% say they avoid contact with the principal, and only 0.5% say they change career.

Furthermore, 73% of the questioned teachers say their principals are either supportive or very supportive. This latter figure corresponding to close to two-thirds of the teachers questioned indicates ambivalence in the teachers' perception of the principal as representative of social authority, especially as 35.5% of the teachers manage stress related to their principals through avoiding contact. Avoidance is a compromise escape defense mechanism which I think is the result of two forces that interact through the anxious ego complex. These are on the one hand respect for hierarchy and authority, expressed through the appraisal that the principal is a positive social support medium (73%), while on the other hand 35.5% of the teachers avoid contact with the principal when the latter becomes a source of stress. At the same time 52.5% of the teachers seek reconciliation through dialogue, which is a task-focused coping strategy in case of conflict with the principal. Thus, teachers questioned exhibit bipolarity in coping with stress resulting from their interactions with their principals, that is, coexistence of effective and ineffective management strategies.

Furthermore, if 52.5% of the 42% of teachers stressed by their relationship with the principal seek reconciliation through dialogue, and slightly over one-fifth of the teachers say the principal is not supportive, then the impulse towards recon-

ciliation could be based more on fear and not at a sincere effort at compromise. This fact can be reinforced by the fact that close to 30% of the teachers fear those in authority. Thus the effort towards reconciliation could veil underlying fear, helplessness and anxiety, complexes which become the main focus of the task-focused management strategy of seeking reconciliation with the principal. In other words, reconciliation could be less a management strategy against conflicting relationships with the principal, and be more a strategy to contain and manage teacher felt fear, anxiety and helplessness vis-à-vis persons representing social authority.

## Discussions

This study highlights the possibility of individual differences affecting both teachers' reactions to stressors and the strategies they generate to manage with the latter. In effect all teachers are not affected by stress in the same way. This is a function of certain factors. Job satisfaction and control determine individual differences in relation to job stress. Workers who report being satisfied with their jobs do not suffer from harmful effects of stress. In my opinion, even though 55% of the teachers questioned are satisfied with their job, while 89% feel committed to their duty, these apparent indices of job satisfaction should be analyzed in context. As said earlier, strong social support systems which reinforce a sense of duty consciousness when correlated with coexisting ones of non self-fulfillment like feelings of abandonment, losing enthusiasm for work, could be indicative of a more complex situation than that which seems apparent. In other words, when teachers say they experience job satisfaction and are committed to their duty, this could present only part of the picture, which could include underlying feelings of frustration in relation to repressed feelings of non self-fulfillment.

Secondly, the higher the job demand, and the lower the control over these demands, the higher the measures of stress (Fox, Dwyer & Ganster, 1993, p. 294). A three year study of 72 postal workers in the Netherlands confirmed that lack of control over their jobs was a significant source of stress (Carayon, 1995, p. 36). In this paper, the incidence of lack of control of teachers can be exemplified in the case of the latter who do nothing when stressed by under promotion, and explain their attitude by saying they do not master criteria for promotion, that they lack the necessary social network to foster their individual cases. Thus the teachers in this study claim they have no control over promotion, a fact which increases their stress levels.

Thirdly, personality factors have been related to ability to tolerate stress. This relationship is particularly apparent with *Type A* and *Type B* personalities. Friedman, Meyer and Roseman Ray (1974, p. 42) classify people as intense, *Type A* or



as laid back, *Type B*. *Type A* people are very competitive, always on the go, hard driving, demanding perfection, ambitious and workaholic. *Type B* people are non-competitive, relaxed, in control, easygoing, understanding, confident and leisure loving. In my opinion, some of the questioned teachers portray but “*pseudo Type B*” personality traits, in the sense that the impressions they give of apparent job satisfaction, not engaging in competitive activities, not feeling restless, can be more of a veiling of self actualizing tendencies that are repressed by an external locus of control. The latter is characterized by waiting and hoping in anxiety and learned helplessness for external sources of relief from stressors. By analyzing theories on social support and personality in relation to the answers of teachers questioned for this study, the researcher was led to propose the following theoretical stress perception and stress management model, limited in scope to the area of study, that is, the Buea Sub-Division of Cameroon. The psychoanalytic, trait and humanistic perspectives on personality form the basis of a model I wish to propose, though with certain modifications of the latter.

The conceptual basis of this theoretical model is a strong superego, a duty conscious complex stemming from a social support system that determines a group-focused orientation in self definition, life tasks, coping methods, morality, relationships and attributing behavior. In relation to the aforementioned concepts, allegiance is primarily to the group entity which highlights interdependence, the need to maintain connections, accommodate to reality, duty-based morality, harmony based relationships and behavior that reflects social norms and roles. This collectivist model of values is borrowed from Hofstede, (1980, p. 53), and Triandis, (1994, p. 45). Thus from social support based on esteem, belongingness and love needs, a strong superego complex is generated which prescribes the fundamental idea of duty to the group. In other words, the only way the individual can feel secure, safe and really out of danger even in the pursuance of physiological needs, is by satisfying the fundamental needs of affiliation with others, be accepted as belonging to them, to culminate in a sense of achievement and competence through gained group approval and recognition.

From the basic triangle of the model arises the middle belt of the ego complex which is the impulse for striving towards uniqueness. The ego complex is anxiety ridden because it is the crossroads of two diametrically opposed forces, that is, allegiance to group or duty consciousness, and individuation or the right to express and experience the sense of uniqueness.

The theoretical model of stress perception and management among Buea Sub-Division secondary school teachers has three main poles, made up of duty consciousness, ego anxiety and self denial. Ego anxiety utilizes ineffective defense-focused management strategies in relation to stress generated by duty consciousness, ego anxiety, and self denial pressures, in the forms of passivity, that

is, resignation to the latter tension. Secondly, the resigned ego through learned helplessness reinforces self-denial and generates compromise defense mechanisms like rationalization, projection and reaction formation.

Furthermore, through passivity, the stressed ego develops the façade of a *pseudo-Type B* personality, that is, one characterized superficially by a semblance of non-competitiveness, relaxation, easygoing and understanding attitudes, self-confidence and apparent job satisfaction. The *pseudo Type B* personality attributes are underlain by the pressures of self denial, or the repressed, unfulfilled urge to experience and express uniqueness. Each urge to assert the ego's rights to uniqueness, that is, sense of independence, discovering and expressing one's uniqueness, come under the double onslaught of group allegiance and ego anxiety.

Following the preceding analyses, the present research and the results gotten from the questionnaire can be explained using the proposed theoretical model. Firstly, all axes of the model are interconnected. In this wise, the perception by each secondary school teacher of the degree of stress generated by student indiscipline, low salary, under promotion, work overload and conflict with the principal, is a function of the relative extensity and intensity to which duty consciousness, ego anxiety and self denial determine his or her personality. In like manner, the associated management strategies generated to manage stressors, either task-focused or defense-focused techniques will also be a function of the relative pressure exerted on each person by a sense of duty, ego anxiety or becoming unique.

A point of importance is that a particular defense mechanism arises from this model, which we can term passive-aggressiveness. In other words, since the need for uniqueness is stifled by an overriding duty consciousness, the escape mechanism of repression reinforces self denial and the fear to assert the ego's rights to uniqueness. The compromise resulting from this situation is a semblance of passivity since assertiveness has temporarily failed. But then this impression of resignation through *pseudo Type B* personality still has the repressed energy to assert the self. The fusion of passivity and repressed assertiveness generates passive-aggressiveness in behavior. Thus social support is the theoretical base of this model, and it is characterized by duty, group consciousness.

The impulse towards individuation is anxiety ridden since it comes under the pressures of both duty consciousness and the need for self affirmation. It is the relative pressures and strengths of these opposing forces that determine the management strategies that the ego puts in place to offset stressors. The pressure of the strong superego base toward conformism to group consciousness represses the impulse towards self actualisation, which is veiled behind escape

defense mechanisms that include repression, regression and fantasy. Thus each of the given hypothetical situations of this study is variously appraised by each individual teacher on the basis of the relative strength of the duty consciousness, ego anxiety and self denial triple complex. This theoretical model is thus the modest contribution of this researcher to educational psychology, with a scope that covers only the secondary school teachers of the Buea Sub-Division.

## Conclusion

Results of the statistical analyses of this paper highlight the fact that no two individuals are similar in terms of job stress perception and management strategies for stress management. The research came out with two confounding factors, that is, personality differences and social support systems which also influence both the teachers' perception of student indiscipline, salary conditions, under promotion, work overload, internal problems with the principals, and whether or not he or she will manage with these stressors through aggressive behavior, engagement in income generating activities, become demotivated, dialogue less with students or seek to change career. The sources of personality differences include *type A* or *type B* personalities, job complexity, hardiness, locus of control, self esteem, negative affectivity, type of occupation, gender differences, social support network, personal belief system among other factors.

The paper reveals that teachers utilized both effective and ineffective management strategies to cope with the stress they face at their job side. It has been argued that no two individuals can perceive, appreciate and manage stress in the same manner. This is a function of the fact that the direct and buffer role of confounding factors like social support and personality differences influence the heterogeneity of subsequent responses to job stress.

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