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Filipino teachers' stress levels and coping strategies

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Abstract: The world in which we live and work in is surrounded by challenges. How well a person handles challenges can enrich one's life, since it is stimulating and renewing. But when a person faces challenges poorly, this response precipitates to a state of stress that is potentially dangerous to his performance and wellness.

A total of 100 teachers in Metro Manila were asked to fill up questionnaires. Descriptive statistics were used to find the stress level, vulnerability to stress, and the most common sources of stress, and the most common sources of stress and coping strategies of teachers. Statistical analysis using t-test and multiple regression on the different stressors and coping strategies were done with the variables in this study.

A compilation of stressors and coping strategies collected in this study was intended to help teachers and would-be teachers to brace up for factors that could cause stress in their workplace and possibly affect classroom performance, especially the teacher-student relationship. It also came up with the teachers' personal recommendations to lessen sources of stress in their workplace. Implications of the study point out to various ways teachers deal with stressors. Teachers in the study apply either direct action or use palliative techniques. Teachers may also be made aware of other coping strategies for stress other than those mentioned here like seeking outside help when needed and to learn stress management techniques. The study gives insight to school administrators on where they can help alleviate stress in the workplace.

Key Words: teacher stress; coping strategies; stress levels; stress vulnerability

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers have been a central force in the facilitation of learning, playing a vital role in education and care of students, who are to become

the leaders in the future. While teaching has been found to be one of the most important jobs of a country, it is also one of the most stressful jobs compared to other occupations (Adams 2001). It is therefore important to attend to teachers' welfare. This is because teachers do not only teach content,



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they also motivate and encourage students, trying to be up-to-date, and expected to be accountable, to come to class prepared, to be skilled in assessment, and to positively interact with students, parents, co-teachers and administrators, all in their quest to facilitate learning.

Many things in the life of a teacher are challenging. How well he/she handles challenges can enrich one's life, since it is stimulating and renewing, but on the other hand, when a person faces challenges poorly, this response precipitates to a state of stress that is potentially dangerous to his/her performance and wellness. Some teachers feel 'used up' at the end of a working day, emotionally drained, sick, burned-out, overworked and underpaid. And others can feel alienated from their school, from their co-teachers or from administration (Abaci, 1995).

Too much stress among teachers might lead to poor physical, mental and emotional state of teachers and possibly affect teacher performance, teacher-student relationship and/or consequently, student performance as well. It is therefore necessary to quantify stress and identify potential areas of concern, so there can be necessary environment or personal changes to improve stressful situations. In cases where it is not possible change the stressful situation, persons should learn stress management techniques to reduce or eliminate the harmful effects of prolonged exposure to stress.

This study aimed to identify the stressors that affect teachers in Metro Manila, the physical ailments they experience that could be symptomatic of stress, and their coping behaviors. Such compilation of stressor and coping strategies could help teachers and would-be teachers to brace up for factors that could cause stress in their workplace, and could give administrators ideas as to what to focus on so as to lessen stress of teachers in schools and on how to help teachers manage stress.

Stress is defined as a constraining force or a state of both mental and emotional tension that a result of reacting to difficult unpleasant, demanding circumstances or exterior pressures or factors. Stress. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary* (11th ed.). Retrieved April 21, 2017 from <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/stress>. It is an excessive physical and/ or mental demand on the capabilities of one's mind and body (Joseph, R. 2000). Physical or mental stress can be positive or it can also be negative and harmful, and this body reaction of a person can be described in three stages: (1)

Alarm reaction stage when the body identifies and reacts to stress and release hormones to help defend against the stressor; (2) Resistance stage when the body continuously resists the stressors; and (3) Exhaustion stage – when the body and mind can no longer adjust to resist the stressor, leading to physical and/or mental exhaustion (Truch, S. 1980).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study sought to answer the following questions about teacher stress: (1) What factors do elementary and high school teachers perceive to cause them stress?; (2) What physical ailments do they experience that are symptomatic of stress?; (3) What are their coping strategies; (4) Are there significant differences in the kind of stressors, and coping strategies among (a) public and private school teachers; (b) male and female teachers; (c) teachers with different number of years of teaching; (d) elementary and high school teachers; (e) single and married teachers? and (5) What recommendations they have for relieving stress in the workplace.

Convenience sampling was used with teacher participants in a teacher training program. A total of 100 teachers in public and private schools in Metro Manila were asked to fill up questionnaires. Descriptive statistics were used to find the stress level, vulnerability to stress, and the most common sources of stress, and the most common sources of stress and coping strategies of teachers. Statistical analysis using t-test and multiple regression on the different stressors and coping strategies were done with the variables in this study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Factors that cause stress to the teachers

The five most common sources of stress for these teachers are as follows: (1) having too much paperwork (52%); (2) high cost of living (51%); (3) insufficient salary and other money concerns (46%); (4) oversized classes (43%), and (5) being too busy (including simultaneous activities as being enrolled in school, being employed, parenting, community service, and so on 32%). Having too much paperwork can be a consequence of having oversized classes.



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Other most common sources of stress stem from monetary concerns. For the most common sources of stress, public school teachers find most stressful the problem of insufficient salary and oversized classes. The other most common sources of stress, being too busy and having too much paperwork, equally affect teachers of any age, civil status, years of experience, and whatever level or kind of school (public/private) they teach in. The study also has a list of other less common sources of stress that particularly affect certain groups of teachers as the different variables in this study.

3.2 Physical Ailments Symptomatic of Stress

A frequency count of the most common physical ailments the teachers in this study complain about are as follows: (1) fatigue (71%), (2) aching neck and shoulder muscles (41%), (3) lower back pain (39%), (4) sleep disturbances and insomnia (34%), and (5) migraine headaches (22%) and menstrual distress or irregularities (22%). Complaints on aching neck and shoulders and lower back pain are associated with the nature of the work.

3.3 Coping Strategies of the Teachers

Most teachers find (1) watching television an effective way of relieving their stress (64%); so with (2) window shopping at malls (57%), (3) watching sports on television (43%), (4) going to movies (38%), and (5) doing deep breathing and relaxation exercises (34%). Although the method mentioned are positive, most of them are sedentary.

Among the most common coping strategies teachers resort to, many more male than female teachers and more elementary rather than high school teachers watch television. Window shopping and watching movie is mostly done by young and single teachers (incidentally those with less teaching experience).

3.4 Differences among the teachers

Multiple regression showed significant differences in the following: married teachers

experience the following stressors (with the levels of significance p showed in parenthesis): difficulty in parenting (p 0.002) and pregnancy (p 0.004). On the other hand, single teachers find lessened harmony in dating relationships (p 0.018), conflict with a faculty member (p 0.014) and floods (p 0.007) more stressful than married teachers do. Between male and female teachers, the only difference in stressor is the change in personal habits specially among males.

Between young and old teachers, younger teachers have these a more stressful: getting married (p 0.030), pregnancy (p 0.026), beginning a new dating relationship (p 0.003), lessened harmony in a dating relationship (p 0.026), and time management problems (p 0.031). Older teachers find more stressful the high cost of living (p 0.016).

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Between elementary and high school teachers, the latter find stressful the presence of unpleasant co-workers in the school (p 0.014).

Between teachers in private and public schools, private school teachers find stressful: change in eating habits (p 0.042) and incompetent superiors, bosses or teachers (p 0.001). Public school teachers find stress in insufficient salary and other monetary concerns (p 0.036), over-sized classes (p 0.032) and too many non-teaching delegated duties (p 0.035).

Between teachers who are new in the field and those who had many years of teaching experience, these were the significant differences: Teachers with longer teaching experience find stress in the death of a family member (p 0.047). This result may well be more related to age than with teaching experience. Teachers with shorter teaching experience find stress in the following: time management problems (p 0.022), floods (p 0.010) and overcrowding (p 0.007).

3.5 The Teachers' Recommendations

Teacher's personal recommendations for relieving stress in their workplace include both



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environmental and physical changes in mental attitudes. Specifically, air conditioning, enough work space, summer vacation, learning to be contented with what you have, avoiding conflict with co-workers, daily prayer, decreasing tension especially with superiors, sharing encouraging words with each other, being humane and understanding individual differences, discipline, enough facilities which are accessible, a spacious faculty room, well-ventilated room, clean and orderly place, less paperwork, and to stop gossiping about co-teachers.

Other activities that teachers find helpful for relieving stress are prayer, listening to classical music, dancing, singing, reading wholesome books, and going to church.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Factors that elementary and high school teachers perceive to cause them stress are a combination of work-related (too much paperwork, oversized classes, further studies, non-teaching duties, incompetent superiors), personal factors (relationships, age-related, i.e., stages in life, death in the family, etc.), and economics (insufficient salary, high cost of living). Their stress levels and vulnerability to stress were relatively high.

Their most common coping strategies are passive entertainment like watching television or going to the movies. Window shopping is also a common de-stressor. Although the method mentioned are positive, most of them are sedentary.

4.1 Implications for Curriculum Planning and Teaching

The teachers can deal with the sources of their stress in various ways. They can apply (1) direct action, actively dealing with the source of their stress like controlling the work environment or improving their workplace in terms of increasing workspace, air-conditioning, and maintaining cleanliness. Teachers can (2) seek outside assistance. They can also request the school administration to decrease class size, take steps to lessen noise and air-pollution in the school, lessen paperwork, and practice division of work among themselves. Teachers request for seminars on stress and stress management, time management, management of finances and the like.

Teachers can also use techniques like (3) having a strong mental state, accepting the source of

stress and mitigating its emotional experience. They can have a prayerful attitude and be contented with what they have; start a (4) very good support system like having more unity among themselves, love and respect one another, lessen or eliminate gossip and intrigue among them, be more humane and understanding of individual differences,. Teachers can also have (5) a healthy physical state, living a more active lifestyle like getting more involved in physical activities, exercise, sports, choosing to take a flight of stairs instead of the elevator, doing more chores that require active body movement, and doing breathing exercises and relaxation. Other stress relieving activities could include dancing, music and art. These can be done individually or by group. The administration can come up with regular programs and facilities that would provide these opportunities. Other policies and guidelines in work and improvement of teacher-teacher and teacher-administration relations could also help.

4.1 Implications for further research

One probable research area that can be explored is the possible relationship of stress level, vulnerability and cultural backgrounds, or attendance of teachers in seminars that deal with stress management.

Finally, it is hoped that collaborative efforts among researchers, teachers, curriculum planners and administrators will be done to enable the education system to make use of and build on what has been discovered by studies like this about Filipino teacher stress factors and coping strategies, in order to improve teacher education curriculum.

It must be born in mind, however, that the ultimate beneficiary would be the student. With happier, less stressed teachers, there would be a more positive teacher-student relationship and a healthier and more conducive learning environment.

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