



# **COPING BEHAVIORS AND STRESS: A CASE STUDY OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper presents the findings of qualitative research that was teacher stress, caused by environmental factors as well as individual characteristics. Major environmental factors include poor working conditions, scarcity of resources, heavy workloads, and student behaviour. Individual characteristics can include gender, age, personality, and the ability to cope. These factors lead to 30 percent of all novice teachers leaving the profession within five years, and if given the opportunity, most of these teachers share that they would not choose the profession of teaching again (Mrozek, n.d).

Recent research has shown that teachers, along with servicemen, social workers, and linguists, are the most affected by rising stress in their respective work environments. One out of three teachers report teaching as being very or extremely stressful, causing the teaching profession to have the highest annual turnover rate. Professions other than teaching have an average annual turnover rate of 11 percent, while the annual turnover rate for teachers is 15.7 percent (Mrozek, n.d). In recent years, steadily increasing costs and consequences of teacher stress has received growing concern. To reduce the negative effects stress has on teachers, more attention needs to be placed on this growing epidemic (Bachkirova, 2005).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This present study is an assessment of stress and coping behaviors among current primary school teachers of Muzaffarpur district of Bihar. Our aims to explore how teachers define stress and what the major causes of stress are for these teachers.

We also intend to investigate the strategies, both positive and negative, that these teachers implement as they attempt to cope with the identified stressors. The research will be a qualitatively driven work, with a qualitative foundation, and a quantitative sequential element. The qualitative foundation will focus on understanding the meaning of teacher stress through the perspectives of current primary school teachers at one specific school in Muzaffarpur, Bihar. The quantitative element will be a pilot sample implemented to measure the responses and coping strategies that teachers employ when stress is present in the workplace. Qualitative research designs are utilized to discover the meaning individuals attribute to a social problem (Creswell, 2007).

In this study, a qualitative design, specifically groups, will be used to explore which events current primary school teachers perceive as being stressful, why they believe these events elicit a response of stress, and what coping mechanisms teachers use to deal with their stress. Quantitative research designs generate

statistics through the use of survey research. In this study, a supplemental quantitative design will be used to measure the most frequent reactions and coping strategies employed by teachers after an episode of stress.

Quantitative findings will add to the qualitative foundation and triangulate data by providing a statistical explanation of the many reactions and coping strategies primary school teachers exhibit when presented with stress (Richards & Morse, 2002). To benefit primary school teachers, there is a need to measure the most common responses to stress and the behaviors in which teachers use to cope. We hope that by helping teachers to recognize what reactions and strategies are used most often will help teachers to more effectively handle the array of stressors that are present within the school environment. In order to measure the reactions and coping strategies, an existing survey instrument will be modified specifically for teachers from the responses gathered during the focus group. This instrument will provide a statistical analysis of the stress reactions and positive and negative coping strategies employed by teachers when stress is present in the workplace. Using a qualitative driven approach with a quantitative sequential element will provide rich and thick descriptions of teacher stress and confirmatory data so that the research questions of this study can be completely answered. A mixed method design will help better understand the needs of the target population. A qualitative approach will be emphasized in this study to reflect the voices of the participants and to extend the literature in order to suggest ways in which to alleviate stress for primary school teachers (Creswell, 2007). Groups, consistent with qualitative approach, will provide themes and ideas to modify an existing stress and coping instrument to measure participants' responses, which is consistent with a quantitative approach (Richards & Morse, 2002).

### **Theoretical Approach**

The Social Cognitive Theory will help guide this study in developing a plan that affects people, environments, and behaviors. The Social Cognitive Theory has many valuable concepts that include self-efficacy, expectations, behavior capability, reinforcement, and observational learning (Hodges & Videto, 2005).

Self-efficacy is thought to be the most significant personal characteristic for influencing behavior. Behavior capability can be shaped by providing knowledge about the recommended behavior and the skills necessary to continue it. Discovering positive role models and recognizing positive changes in others helps in discussing observational learning. Outcome expectations involve strategies that express information about the possible results of engaging in the behavior and positive reinforcement can help provide continuation of the recommended behavior (Hodges & Videto, 2005). The basic concepts of teacher stress include causes, responses, and coping strategies; all of which affect how a teacher handles stress. The objective of this proposed study is to find out how teacher stress affects primary school teachers and their environment in which they work in. The researcher also hopes to learn more about how self-efficacy and stress are connected as well as to investigate how a teacher's behavior capability and expectations affect how they cope with stress in the workplace.

### **Measures**

To accomplish this objective, it is critical that the researcher follows guidelines to ensure the study has validity. Validity refers to the value or accuracy of the study findings. This involves the researcher spending a great deal of time in the field, providing thick detailed description of the findings, and becoming familiar with the study participants (Creswell, 2007). Strategies such as triangulation, member checking, and administering a valid and reliable instrument will provide validity to this proposed study.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation measures validity by using multiple sources that support one another and directly address each other's findings (Richards & Morse, 2007). To provide supporting evidence from multiple sources, this

proposed study will compare previous literature published about teacher stress and implement qualitative and quantitative methodology. Reviewing and comparing existing literature can help develop specific questions, methods, environments, and data that can be used to study primary school teachers to see if the results are similar (Richards & Morse, 2007). The material for this proposed study can then be compared to published results in order to confirm the results of this study. Triangulation will also be implemented through the creation of two groups. The groups will have similar discussions about causes, responses, and coping strategies involved with teacher stress. These discussions will provide the researcher with supporting evidence found within the data to produce the underlying themes of the study (Creswell, 2007), and guide the modification of the quantitative stress and coping instrument.

### Member Checking

In member checking, the researcher requests participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2007).

To judge the accuracy and credibility of the findings, this proposed study will take data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can provide alternate language, critical observations, or alternate interpretations if needed. This method will allow the participants to reflect on the accuracy of the account. Instrument Validity and Reliability When determining if an instrument is valid and reliable, it is important to take into account Cronbach's alpha, face validity, and content validity (Crosby, DiClemente, & Salazar, 2006). Cronbach's alpha is used to determine if items in a scale are interrelated. Cronbach's alpha has a range of 0 to 1 and a score of .70 or higher is sufficient evidence of reliability (Crosby, DiClemente, & Salazar, 2006).

In this proposed study, an instrument entitled "Stress, Depression, and Coping Scale" (Chaney, Burke, & Rager, n.d) will be used. This instrument was developed by Chaney, Burke, and Rager (in review) to measure general stress, depression, and coping among seasonal farm workers. The instrument is made up of 90 items that are a combination of Likert scale questions, open-ended questions, and check-all-that-apply questions. This instrument will be modified for this proposed study specifically for teachers to measure causes of stress, responses to stress, and coping strategies. The Reliability measures are reported to be all above the acceptable .70 alpha coefficient for this instrument (Burke, Rager, & Wallen, 2008).

This instrument also has face and content validity. Face validity is concerned with how an instrument appears and whether or not it appears to measure the construct of interest (Crosby, DiClemente, & Salazar, 2006). The "Stress, Depression, and Coping Scale" has face validity because it has specific subscales that are relevant to teacher stress (Chaney, Burke, & Rager, n.d). Content validity is concerned with the extent to which an instrument represents all elements of the construct of interest (Crosby, DiClemente, & Salazar, 2006). This instrument will demonstrate content validity by measuring causes, responses, and coping strategies, all of which are essential aspects of the teacher stress phenomenon.

### Sample

For this present study, a purposeful convenience sample of current primary school teachers will be selected. A purposeful sample will allow to select participants who are familiar with the required information, are willing to reflect on the topic of interest, have the time, and are willing to participate (Richards & Morse, 2007).

Participants will be selected from Muzaffarpur's Primary School because of a large staff made up of teachers who have varying years of experience in the primary school environment. The proposes to hold two separate groups. One group will involve teachers with greater than five years of teaching experience and the second group will involve teachers with less than five years of teaching experience. This format will allow the

researcher to see a range of issues related to teacher stress. Each group will have 6 to 12 participants in order to investigate multiple perspectives and experiences, while also allowing for in-depth discussion.

Group responses will then be used to modify a quantitative teacher stress survey. This instrument will be used to measure a larger sample of primary school teachers other than the groups on topics such as causes of stress, stress responses, and coping strategies utilized.

We will select potential participants using two different strategies. In order to form the groups, the researcher will contact through the school manual/email system. This advertisement will provide potential participants with the purpose, importance, and objectives of the proposed study. We will again use the school manual/email system to select potential qualitative survey participants. All participants who respond to the email will then be given the instrument to complete in privacy.

## Data Analysis

This present study will attempt to analyze stress and coping behaviors among primary school teachers. The independent variable in this case would be coping behaviors and the dependent variable would be stress. In order to analyze these two variables, a quantitative survey will be administered to a target population of primary school teachers at one specific school in Muzaffarpur, Bihar. The survey will be available online for participants to complete during a three week time frame. The target population will consist of 40 current primary school teachers. Demographic information such as gender, race, age, years experience in K-2 setting, and type of degree held will be included in the quantitative survey. The sample population is made up of 38 females and 2 male teachers. The target population age range is 23 —57 years old, and the years experience ranges from 1 year to 31 years. Of the 40 teachers included, 27 hold a Bachelors degree and 13 hold a Masters degree.

Data analysis will begin during the two group sessions. A research assistant will serve as the moderator by asking questions and stimulating discussion using an outline prepared by the researcher. The researcher will serve as the observer by taking notes on non-verbal responses such as hand gestures, facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. During each focus group, an audiotape will record participants' verbal responses. Data transcription will occur immediately following the focus group sessions so that the material is new in the researcher's thoughts. These written transcriptions will consist of the material from the group discussions so that the researcher is able to interpret the verbal responses in order to discover the trends, recommendations, opinions, and feelings of the groups (Hodges & Videto, 2005). Using an audiotape to record the group discussions will help organize the participants' responses, allows the researcher to review the transcription to ensure accuracy, and will allow the researcher to transcribe the information accurately, which will provide written evidence of participants' words.

We will read over the written transcripts in their entirety several times in order to submerge himself into the data. This will allow the researcher to get a sense of the interviews as a whole before breaking them into smaller parts (Creswell, 2007). As the researcher is reading the transcripts, he will write memos in the margins. Memos are short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that are important to the researcher (Creswell, 2007). The researcher will move from reading to describing, classifying, and interpreting the transcripts. This process is referred to as coding. During the coding process, the researcher will describe in detail, develop themes, and provide an interpretation of the transcripts (Creswell, 2007). These codes will represent core concepts, central categories, or themes related to teacher stress (Crosby, Di Clemente, & Salazar, 2006). Every code used will be defined and kept in a Code book, which is a complete description of every code and how it relates to the research. Coding of the transcripts will provide the researcher with the information necessary to develop a quantitative survey instrument.

The data results from the quantitative survey will be analyzed using SPSS software, descriptive data, and chi-square tests. The SPSS software helps connect data to effective action by drawing reliable conclusions

about current conditions and future events. Using predictive analytics, SPSS can be a helpful tool in recommending proper coping mechanisms for primary school teachers. Descriptive data will be used to evaluate how scores on variables such as the mean, median, standard deviation, range, and frequency are distributed (Crosby, Di Clemente, & Salazar, 2006). These variables can be helpful in showing which stressors have the biggest impact of stress on primary school teachers. Chi-square tests shows the significance of certain variables have on a target population (Crosby, Di Clemente, & Salazar, 2006). In this proposed study, chi-square tests will show the significance stress has on primary school teachers and whether or not the teacher's age or the grade level they teach is a predictor of stress.

The data will be presented as a written discussion with accompaniment of figures resulting from the quantitative instrument. The data will be presented using themes, a textual description, and a structural description. Themes will result from the researcher taking important statements and grouping them into larger units. A textual description will explain what happened and includes actual experiences from study participants. A structural description explains how the experience happened and will include a reflection on the setting in which the phenomenon was experienced (Creswell, 2007). Representing the data using themes and textual and structural descriptions will provide a complete description of the information and allow the real meaning of the teacher stress phenomenon to be discovered.

### **Characteristics of the "Primary School Teacher Coping Behaviours"**

The researcher recruited participants to complete the "Primary School Teacher Coping Behaviours Survey" by sending out a flyer through the Primary School email distribution list in October 2015. The advertisement yielded a sample of 33 participants from the target population of 40 current teachers at Primary School in Muzaffarpur district of Bihar. Participants who responded to the advertisement were provided with a link to complete the survey through Survey Monkey. Participants were able to complete the survey in privacy during a three week window in November 2014. Participants who completed the survey were between 24 to 56 years of age (Figure 1). Of the 33 participants, 93% were female, 67% held a Bachelor's degree, and 10% were lateral entry. Participants in the sample also ranged in number of years experience in K-2 setting from 1 to 28 (Figure 2) years and overall teaching experience ranged from 1 to 28 years. The "Primary School Teacher Coping Behaviour Survey" is made up of 77 items that are a combination of open-ended, multiple choice, check-all-that-apply, and Liker scale questions. The "Primary School Teacher Coping Behaviour Survey" addresses demographic information, stress/anxiety, mental stress, life satisfaction, task stress, supervisory support, peer support, illness symptoms, and coping with stress. The survey allowed the researcher to explore such items as what participants most associate with stress at work, what causes the most stress at work, and the level of stress participants have experienced at work over the past six months.

### **Findings: Coping Behaviours**

Analysis of the focus group interview data and the results from the "Primary School Teacher Stress and Coping Survey" revealed three major themes related to how participants cope with stress. in a primary school environment. The following sections will examine findings associated with these themes, the participants' perceptions of negative, positive, and neutral coping strategies, and the influences that have affected these perceptions.

### **Summary**

Past research generally has been limited to only identifying sources and consequences of stress for teachers. There is a need to further understand why these sources of stress affect teachers and why they choose particular responses to stress. Considering why particular sources of stress affect teachers will allow the health educator to suggest positive stress management programs and coping mechanisms that can be made within the

organizational structure of schools that will lessen work-related stress. Understanding why teachers respond the way they do to stress can allow for adaptive strategies to be used in order to help teachers address and cope with stress. This literature explains in detail the most common coping strategies used by teachers; however, this literature does not clarify why teachers choose particular coping strategies. There is a need to investigate the reasons as to why teachers choose particular coping strategies as a way of handling stress. Understanding why these strategies are used will provide teachers with the opportunity to better understand how to cope with stress and provide the tools and resources for effective stress management programs designed to alleviate attrition and all present in chapter two of this study.

During, this study, several primary themes emerged from the data that relate to the participants' experience with stress at school. These themes included unrealistic expectations, documentation, and administration for causes of stress and negative, positive, and neutral coping strategies for coping with stress. This chapter fourth explored themes and various subthemes to gain a more in-depth view of the participants' experiences of stress, and how stress affects teachers in a primary school setting.

The teaching profession can be a stressful occupation. Most teachers would agree that daily interactions with students, parents, and co-workers and the constant demands of teaching often lead to overwhelming pressures and challenges, which ultimately elevates to stress. The participants recognize several causes of stress: unrealistic expectations, paperwork, and administration; however teachers feel that the rewards of student achievement outweigh the negative effects these causes have on them. Stress management techniques should be targeted at health education programming appropriate for primary school teachers. In order to provide suitable programs, it is important that researchers first understand the major causes of teacher stress. In addition, it is important to include follow up, long-term evaluation so that the impact can be maintained over an extended period of time.

## Conclusions

As the presence of stress among teachers continues to rise, there is a growing need to develop and implement effective educational programs that target primary school teachers, the stressors they encounter, and the coping mechanisms that they require. To do this, educators must have an understanding of the target population. Gaining insight into the perceptions and experiences of current primary school teachers is an important part of planning and developing these types of programs. The purpose of this mixed method study was to recognize and investigate the stressors that affect primary school teachers. This study also identified the coping behaviors that these primary school teachers use in response to these stressors. To accomplish this, the researcher held two group interviews, which included 12 primary school teachers. The participants were residents of Muzaffarpur district who currently work at Muzaffarpur's Primary School. Each group interview was approximately 45 minutes long and included ten open-ended questions. All participants had at least one year of teaching experience and were between the ages of 24 and 55.

We also administered the "Primary School Teacher Stress and Coping Survey" to 33 participants. The participants were also residents of Muzaffarpur who currently work at Muzaffarpur's Primary School. The "Primary School Teacher Stress and Coping Survey" was made up of 77 open-ended, multiple choice, check-all-that apply, and Likert Scale items. All participants who completed the survey had at least one year of teaching experience and were between the ages of 24 and 56.

The researcher used a mixed method design as the theoretical framework for this study. The primary philosophy behind this approach was that one method alone would not provide a complete answer to the research questions. This mixed method study was qualitatively driven, had a qualitative foundation, and had a quantitative sequential element (Richards & Morse, 2002). The qualitative foundation allowed this study to focus on understanding the meaning of teacher stress through the perspectives of current primary school teachers, while the quantitative element was used to measure responses and coping strategies that teachers

employ when stress is present in the workplace. The use of a mixed method design in this research study provided insight into the many facets of participants' occurrences of stress, including causes, reactions, and coping strategies, while also providing a statistical explanation of the many reactions and coping strategies primary school teachers exhibit when presented with stress. This information may permit health educators to develop programs that will address these occurrences of stress. This information may also increase their knowledge regarding reactions and, coping strategies as they relate to the experience of stress for primary school teachers. Researchers, educators, health behaviorists, and more importantly current primary school teachers who are interested in discovering what factors may improve stressful situations at school can use the findings of this study to inform their efforts.

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