

Managing Occupational Stress¹

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this desktop research study was to review literature on stress management by school heads. The article is based on secondary data collected through review of studies, reports and policy documents. Key issues investigated include definition of stress and occupational stress, sources of occupational stress, effects of occupational stress, strategies to counter or minimize the effects of occupational stress and conceptual framework of occupational stress. The study findings showed that consequences of physiological effects include blood pressure, diabetes, dizziness, ulcers, heart diseases and headaches. Physiological consequences include anxiety, frustrations, fatigue, tension, boredom, irritability, threatened, depressions, low self-esteem and feeling guilt and shame. Relaxations after work, change of school environment and inducement of drugs for temporary stress 'escape' experience were also suggested to minimize head teachers occupational stress. The study also recommended that there be clear definitions of workers roles and responsibilities for school head teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Defining Stress and Occupational Stress

Stress can be viewed as an unpleasant, emotional experience associated with elements of fear, dread, anxiety, irritation, annoyance, anger, sadness, grief and depression. The emphasis is on negative implications of socially costly effects on job performance. The researchers argue that the stressors create cognitive fatigue and sap one's energy, which is essential for task performance. The challenge, which the school head teachers face, is the inability to manage the effects of the stressors on their work performance.

Kasayira et al. (2004) say stress refers to people's reactions to situations that bring demands and constraints on one's opportunities. Having too much stress over a long period of time can destroy the body's ability to defend itself against diseases. It implies that the school head teachers' reactions to stressful incidents that arise at his/her school determine their ability to deal with work matters. Job stress refers to the effect of task demands that individuals face in the performance of their duties and responsibilities (Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1977) as cited by Kasayira et al. (2004).

Occupational stress is stress that involves work. According to the World Health Organiza-

tion's (WHO) (2013) definition in Lazarus (1991), occupational stress is the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressure that are not matched with their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope. Hence, the major challenge for secondary school head teachers in general is their knowledge skills to match the work demands and pressures that are brought to them by the positions they hold. If the school head teacher's knowledge and skills can help them handle the stressors, then their work stress levels would be lowered. However, if their work knowledge and skills do not measure up to the demands of the stressors, an imbalance between these two would be the result. Such a situation may result in negative emotional experiences of stress.

Thus, Jeyaraj (2013) says occupational stress is any force that pushes a psychological or physical factor beyond its range of stability. As occupational stress takes toll on the body and mind, a variety of symptoms can result. One among such symptoms is personal and organizational inefficiency. Occupational stress can be described as a condition wherein occupation related factors interact with the worker to change (disrupt/enhance) his/her psychological or physiological conditions so that the person's mind and/or body are forced to deviate from its normal way of functioning. Depending on the secondary school head teacher's ability to handle the stressor, he/she can have his/her performance disrupted or enhanced.

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Occupational stress can be caused by too much or too little work, time pressure and deadlines, fatigue from physical strains of work environment, excessive travelling, long hours of work and having to cope with changes in the workplace (Jeyaraj 2013; Henry and Evans 2008).

Sources of Occupational Stress

Many psychological theorists have contributed much to the field of stress and occupational stress. However, most of these theorists' contribution overlap. This means that the principles proposed by one theorist tend to be the same as what other theorists suggest. Wiensiewski and Gargiulo (1997) say that some sources of occupational stress among individuals include lack of professional satisfaction and opportunities for professional growth another is lack of participation and influence in decision-making. Lack of recognition by administrators of the job they do is another source of stress resulting in professional isolation, insufficient feedback relative to one's performance and stressful interaction with stakeholders in a school. A general lack of parental support is yet another source of stress, which often leads to unrealized expectations, which become a precursor to burnout.

It is clear that school head teachers need to make efforts so that they are appreciated and rewarded by all stakeholders that is, students, workers, parents and the employers. Kasayira et al. (2004) argue that sources of stress amongst supervisors emanate from frustrations after failing to help clients and failure by senior management to appreciate the real difficulties that the professional and the client face. The tendency to deviate oneself in relation to other professionals is a potential source for stress for school head teachers. Also, lack of intrinsic job satisfaction and the feeling that they do not receive the remuneration, which is commensurate with their efforts, ultimately result in burnout. It appears that there are also certain issues and contextual factors in supervisor jobs that cause them concern, stress and eventually burnout. Suleyman (2012) argues that management of the supervisory process, time pressure, interpersonal demands, lack of professional negotiations, and the diversity of tasks required and lack of resources provided could be sources of work stress. Heavy load, long daily working hours and perception of negative work conditions can

also lead to serious sources of occupational stress (Latif and Maunganidze 2003; Latif and Maunganidze 2004).

Secondary school head teachers face many challenges in their daily performance. They have to manage time, interpersonal relations, and the staff under their control, the unsupportive community, curriculum workloads and the unpleasant environments. Going through such an array of activities on a daily basis becomes a serious source of stress for a secondary school head teacher.

Cartwright and Cooper (2002) cited by Barkhuizen and Rothman (2011) developed the asset (An Organizational Stress Screening Tool), which measures an employee's potential exposure to stress and to recognize additional factors such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which serve to speed up or moderate the stress levels experienced at work. According to this model, the sources of stress commonly reported in literature can be classified in terms of eight different stressor categories. These categories need to be understood from the occupational stress perspective. These include work relationships with colleagues and supervisors. The school head teacher should be ideally in good books with his or her subordinates and also with his/her supervisors. Work progress at the institution should not be hindered greatly as it becomes a source of stress on the school head teacher. It is important that a school administrator receive support from colleagues and supervisors. During his/her course or execution of duty there is need for support from others. Absence of such support becomes potential sources of occupational stress. Work-life imbalance often interferes with the personal and home life of an individual. School head teachers are often vulnerable to such scenarios. Mostly the teachers' work interferes with the individual as most of the time head teachers carry work to their homes. Instead of head teachers getting home and relaxing with their families, they still get engaged with schoolwork. Thus their stress levels are exacerbated by work overloads. Unmanageable workloads and time pressure do affect and stress secondary school head teachers in the day-to-day execution of their duties. School head teachers have to plan for their lessons, plan to supervise other teachers, plan to handle issues from communities around the school and entertain visitors from outside the

school communities. These many roles can become a great source of stress. Fear of job loss is yet another source of stress. If secondary school head teachers fail to plan to meet all the said requirements they could be dismissed from work. Imagining oneself being fired from work becomes a great source of stress for such a school head teacher. School administrators are just implementers of policy but have no input in these policies especially on how the ministry wants the tasks performed. This means school head teachers have no control on policy issues.

Any lack of these resources results in the school head teachers stressed. Pay and benefits, which have to do with financial rewards that work brings, can become an occupational stressor. Employees perform work according to the employer's standards but at the same time there is need to be equally remunerated. Aspects of the job itself are a potential source of stress on the school head teacher. Job aspects include the individual commitment to the organization and the organization's commitment to the individual. This implies that there has to be good relationship between the employer and the employee and many other stakeholders who do influence systems in the job sector. Absence of these will result in the school head teachers being stressed.

Studies by Blix et al. (1994) cited by Barkhuizen and Rothman (2011) show that stress among supervisory staff is an international phenomenon. The authors argue that researches conducted in the United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia and New Zealand identified several stressors, which are associated with stress and which have been alluded to and discussed elsewhere in this paper by the writer. Secondary school head teachers may be stressed by lack of transport. Many times school head teachers are summoned to the regional offices by their provincial inspectors at short notices. The head teachers' stations would be so many kilometers from the provincial center and hence the need for transport. Naturally, lack of such resources to travel to district and provincial offices becomes a source of stress for the school head teacher.

Howarth et al. (1981) came up with three categories of stressors with respect to occupational stress. These are physical environment, task and psychological, and organizational environment. Environmental factors include excessive

noise or complete silence, excessive heat or cold, poor glare or illumination, extremes of humidity and atmospheric pollution. The environment may end up stressing the school head teacher who spends most of the time in one environment. The school may be near industries where the noise of machines disturbs the peace and silence around the school head teacher's office. The heat from the environment becomes a source of stress for the school administrators too. A lot of atmospheric pollution due to smoke emitted from industries may affect the school head teacher. Task and psychological stressors include unreasonable production targets, repetitive work, restricted social contacts and skills requirements and lack of appropriate workers abilities. All these factors stress the school head teacher. Such occupational stress is compounded by a lot of work to be met within unrealistic time frames. For school administrators, that would be a great source of stress. Also, skills, which are not matched to one's abilities, one's position in the hierarchy, one's roles and responsibilities, lack of one's chances of promotion, too much or too little work and little scope of initiative are sources of stress. School head teacher's professional qualifications could also be a source of stress especially if they hold inferior qualifications, which do not help them perform their work efficiently.

IMPACT AND EFFECTS OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Howarth et al. (1981), Manning et al. (2002) and Barkhuizen and Rothman (2011) argue that occupational stress can bring out four categories of effects. These are physiological effects, psychological effects and emotional effects, behavioral and cognitive effects, and other health effects.

By physiological effects, as cited by the above authorities, are increased catecholamine secretion, increased corticosteroid activity, increased blood glucose levels, increased heart rate and blood pressure, dryness of mouth and throat and dilation of pupils. Such effects have implications on the work performance of a secondary school head teacher. The school head's physical health would have been affected and most of his/her time is spent seeking medication. He/she becomes incapacitated thus compromising their work. Psychological or emotion-

al effects of occupational stress include such stressors as anxiety, frustration, fatigue, tension, boredom irritability, threats, depression, low self-esteem, guilt, shame and aggression.

It can be observed that the abovementioned feelings do not make secondary school head teachers perform to their expected maximum. All the listed psychological feelings make school head teachers fail to perform to their maximum in their jobs. Instead the school head teachers would be aggressive, rough and uncompromising. Through behavioral and cognitive effects, the following factors may arise including, excessive eating, drinking or smoking, drug taking, impulsive behavior, lack of concentration, forgetfulness, trembling, nervous laughter, impaired speech, excitability and restlessness. If a school head teacher happens to be affected by any one or all of the behavioral factors mentioned above, the school would suffer in the process. If school head teachers become perpetual drug abusers because of stress they cease to be model teachers. Such head teachers may forget to submit their work on time. They may also not concentrate on their work as would be stipulated by their job description. A combination of such behavior effects make secondary school heads fail to perform their work effectively. Ultimately school standards would go down.

Health effects, which might affect stressed school head teachers, include migraine headaches, neurosis, ulcers, cardiovascular diseases, sweating, dizziness, amenorrhea, diarrhea, psychoses, psychosomatic disorder, dyspepsia, nightmares, weaknesses, frequent urination and asthma. Thus the school head teacher's health comes under threat. Occupational stress results in the school heads becoming liabilities to their profession because of their health. Occupational stress would often send head teachers to visit doctors for medication more than they can be at their stations.

Whilst the occupational stress factors discussed above do affect the school heads as individuals, however, the consequences do have ripple effects on other stakeholders. Students and staff members find it difficult to work with such stressed school heads. Giles et al.'s (2001) study on teacher supervisor responses to occupationally stressed school heads concluded that recipients of the school head teacher's intended services end up losing the benefits of their work. This sentiment was supported by Jeyaraj (2013)

who says that symptoms of stress take a long time to erupt. Once they erupt in an individual they not only affect the individuals concerned but also their coworkers through strained interpersonal relations and this ultimately affects the student's education. If a school head teacher is medically diagnosed to have been affected by one or all of the effects of stress cited above, school supervision would suffer. It is a foregone assumption that the moment school supervision lacks the person who suffers the most is the learner.

Cunningham (1983) cited by Jeyaraj (2013) argues that the impact of occupational stress on secondary school head teachers is emotional and attitudinal exhaustion, which shows itself in physical illness. Also, a decrease in job satisfaction and subsequent poor performance have been linked to the effect of occupational stress. The sentiments given above by Cunningham (1983) were also shared by Cooper and Cartwright (1994). The authorities argue that job stress has specifically been associated with job dissatisfaction, physical ill health, increased smoking, alcohol consumption, drug abuse and coronary heart diseases and poor psychological well-being. Doyle and Hind (1978) cited by Barkhuizen and Rothmann (2011) added that occupational stress becomes a major determinant of the overall quality of an individual's life including his/her family life. It goes without saying that the effects of occupational stress on school head teachers include among other issues impaired work performance, low faculty production, an increase in absenteeism from work and job dissatisfaction.

In a study conducted by Maran et al. (2015), male officers showed traits of anxiety that influenced the way they perceived the difficulties associated with their role and their professional context. They reacted to an increase in stressors by adopting coping strategies such as self-blame and negation. On the one hand, they blamed themselves for their unease (for instance, attributing this to their inability to deal efficiently with the situation) and on the other, they tried to diminish the sense of responsibility by denying that the problem existed.

One of the generally discussed products of occupational stress in literature is the concept of burnout. Barrick (1989) cited by Suleyman (2012) argues that the linkage between stress, job satisfaction and job environment is critical

to the study of burnout. Burnout consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishments. By emotional exhaustion Maslach et al. (1996) refer to the feeling of being emotionally overextended, tired and fatigued. An individual may become depersonalized, which refers to the tendency to develop negative, cynical, callous or detached attitudes towards the people with whom one works. The third component of burnout according to the cited authorities above is reduced feeling of personal accomplishment derived from jobs where employees often evaluate themselves negatively. It is clear that the result of burnout on school administrators is ineffective work performance. Friedman's (2000) studies on teacher supervisors' performance found out that the effect of burnout on teacher supervisors is a sharp decline in self-efficiency.

Kasayira et al. (2004:10) summarizes the stages one goes through until the stage of burnout as follows: 1. Initial enthusiasm optimism and energy- Setbacks are perceived as challenges and are not met with renewed efforts. Problems are shred and staff morale is high. 2. Stagnation: No-one volunteers to do extra duties without rewards. More time is spent on thinking about any other personal business than thinking about the job. 3. Universal frustration: Individual members of a team may find themselves falling out over relatively trivial issues rather than being completely occupied with the job 4. Apathy in the face of any problem: Workers may go through the motions but they are emotionally dead to their open activities that are now regarded simply as necessary evil to pay the bills. By this time the worker feels literacy depersonalized.

ATTEMPTS TO COUNTER OR MINIMIZE THE EFFECTS OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Under this section of the study, the writer focused on the process of fitting the job to the individual and the individual to the job. If the individual and the job fit into each other perfectly, then society would have gone a step further towards curbing the occupational stress impact on school administrators. Howarth et al. (1981) argue that occupational stress may be dealt with more efficiently either by changing the actual demands inherent in the situation or by chang-

ing the person's perception of them. Thus, stress in the workplace can be reduced by for example, altering the physical reality of the person's environment. This is fitting or matching the individual to his/her environment or job.

Tytheleigh et al. (2005) came up with the following suggestions, like provision of work resources. School administrators need to be discouraged from being negative about the local community with whom they work. The community's suggestions and input with regard to school development need to be embraced and fused into those of the school administrator. If a school administrator passively resists the community's suggestions there would be conflict between him and the community resulting in the school head being stressed. Occupational stress would be reduced if the school head teachers are furnished with all their work requirements. Such requirements would include stationery for him and his or her staff members, suitable infrastructure with well-furnished and usable machinery like vehicles for school errands and such other equipment.

STUDIES ON OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Studies by Blix et al. (1994) cited by Barkhuizen and Rothman (2011) conclude that stress among supervisory staff is an international phenomenon. These authors argue that studies conducted in the United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia and New Zealand identified several stressors associated with stress among supervisory staff. They include work overload, time constraints, and lack of promotion opportunities, inadequate management skills, inadequate resources and funding, and negative interactions with students.

In educational settings, demands placed on supervisors often results in occupational stress (Sulleyman 2012). The author conducted a study on job related stress amongst supervisors working for the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in North Cyprus. Twenty-nine out of thirty-four supervisors took part in the study. In this study it was concluded that the levels of occupational stress among education supervisors was found to be moderate. Their emotional and burnout levels and personal accomplishments were found to be moderate. Also, their levels of depersonalization were found to be low amongst these supervisors. In another study,

Barrick (1989) concluded that although studies of job efficiency and job satisfaction among teachers and principals provide meaningful data on job satisfaction, little is known about occupational stress for supervisors.

Kriacou (2000) argues that one of the most important findings of all these studies is the fact that the general stress levels are similar in most countries. In India in Madurai District, a study by Jeyaraj (2013) showed that local council schoolteacher supervisors had more occupational stress levels than government schoolteacher supervisors. Jeyaraj (2013) conducted another study to determine the occupational stress levels of government schoolteacher supervisors and local authority higher secondary school teacher supervisors living in different sociocultural and economic situations. One hundred and eighty five local council school supervisors and one hundred and twenty government schoolteacher supervisors participated in the study. The results showed that teacher supervisors who reported greater stress levels were less satisfied with their work.

In South Africa, studies by Barkhuizen and Rothmann (2011) show that discussion on occupational stress among educational supervisors have been a topical issue over the past four decades dating back to the early 1970s. Nhundu (1999) of Zimbabwe reveals that the last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of research studies on occupational stress among educational personnel. The author involved a sample of ninety-five head teachers in his study who showed that they experienced relatively high levels of administrative stress occupationally. The study also revealed several demographic characteristics and school variables, which influence the perceptions of situations, which cause stress.

In a study conducted by Maran et al. (2015), male executives exhibited operational and organizational distress, using religion as a coping strategy. Male officers exhibited organizational and operational distress and implemented adaptive planning strategies. Female non-commissioned officers exhibited the same operational and organizational distress but used an active venting coping strategy, and they also used the self-distraction strategy more than male officers in the same sector. Male non-commissioned officers and male and female patrol police officers

exhibited both organizational and operational distress.

From the above-cited studies, one can conclude that occupational stress as a phenomenon has many negative implications on the administrative life of a school head teacher. The negative implications affect the head teachers physiologically, psychologically, and behaviorally.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Occupational stress manifests itself specifically from conditions in the workplace, which might cause initial stress in an individual or aggravate the stress already present from other sources. Borg (1990) perceives teacher supervisor's occupational stress as negative and potentially harmful to their health. In educational settings, the view of threat to school supervisors could be based on the following aspects of their job circumstances that professional demands are made on him/her.

Secondly, that he/she is unable to meet or has difficulty in meeting these demands. Finally, that failure to meet these demands threatens his/her mental or physical wellbeing. The three job components discussed above constitute the interaction between the worker and the job demands of his/her work.

A useful model for understanding how the work environment affects individual health and wellbeing was provided for by Levi (1996). The model consists of the following components, namely, stressors, appraisals, stress and diseases.

Stressors are aspects of the working environment that cause stress for the individual. Appraisals are the way a stressor is appraised, which would differ between individuals depending on the personality, customs and attitudes. Stress results when the stressor interacts with the individual's appraisal of it to create/induce emotional behavioral and physiological reactions. The abovementioned reactions would lead to diseases, which may result in individuals suffering illness and death, which might come through suicide, diseases of the heart and blood vessels or cancer. According to Levi (1996), extreme stress is aversive to employees that such workers are far more likely to get involved into accidents whilst at work than workers in low stress jobs.

CONCLUSION

Information got from literature show that sources of stress are quite many especially in relation to schools head teachers. Schools head teachers are stressed by teachers' unprofessional conduct, extra workload and other responsibilities and inconsistencies of policy issues. Also discussed in this article were the impact/effects of occupational stress. Literature showed that head teachers are impacted upon physiologically and psychologically. Consequences of physiological effects include blood pressure, diabetes, dizziness, ulcers, heart diseases and headaches. Physiological consequences include anxiety, frustrations, fatigue, tension, boredom, irritability, feeling threatened, depressions, low self-esteem and feeling guilt and shame. Relaxations after work, change of school environment and inducement of drugs for temporary stress 'escape' experience were also suggested to minimize head teachers occupational stress.

Still on source of stress findings by the researchers reveal that extra workload and responsibilities are a source of occupational stress for head teachers of secondary schools. School head teachers were found to be overburdened by work responsibilities. It is argued that their core business is to teach and mark the learner's written work but their workload expects them to supervise other teachers, host visitors, attend to learner's problems, monitor the school's health standards, supervise non-teaching staff and supervise the handling of school funds and their uses. Another aspect of stress discussed under source of occupational stress is the issue of policy inconsistency and other miscellaneous issues. Many head teachers of secondary schools complained that they were stressed because of lack of material support to effectively lead the schools. They also complained that policies on promotion are not consistent. Many head teachers complained of a lack of promotional opportunities, lack of appreciation by bosses, inadequate remuneration and lack of feedback among other issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the findings of the study, the researcher proposed the following recommendations:

- ♦ Another strategy, which reduces occupational stress, is the adoption of a participa-

tive leadership style. The approach involves as many juniors as are possible to resolve stress-producing problems. Such delegation of their work should reduce a lot of their stress.

- ♦ There is need to reduce work stress on school administrators, and policymakers and curriculum designers need to monitor the workload assigned to secondary school head teachers. It should be recommended that during their years of training, head teachers and teachers need to be made aware to understand and be notified of stress awareness.
- ♦ Head teachers should be given opportunities to participate in decision-making activities affecting their jobs as a way of reducing their workplace stress.
- ♦ There is need to improve channels of communication and to reduce uncertainty about career development on the part of school head teachers.
- ♦ A continuity education program by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education on the subject of coping with stress at workplaces should be organized for schools head teachers to benefit from. Through such programs, school supervisors could be made aware of the problems associated with stress and burnout and how they affect them. Workshops and seminars could offer opportunities to share the warning signs and indicators of stress and burnout.
- ♦ Further researches could be conducted on the impact of work stress on female teachers, special subject teachers or on teachers taking examination classes.

NOTE

1. This article was extracted from a Masters Thesis submitted to Midlands State University by M Mberwere and supervised by Mr E Gudyanga.

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