

Stress in Teaching: An Urgent Issue

When teachers are placed in stressful situations their priorities change. Simply surviving in the job exhausts the creative energy normally given to increasing pupils' learning.

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Irish insurance underwriters have made it known that teaching as an occupational category has come to be regarded as a very hazardous profession. A report by the International Labour Organisation finds that job-related stress is a steadily growing problem among teachers. The report discusses some of the causes and the negative consequences for both pupils and colleagues of stress experienced by teachers and concludes that "the number of studies and the amount of data on the subject indicate a very serious and growing problem which requires immediate and substantial attention... in the best interests of preserving educational quality in the classroom."

Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978) suggest that "teacher stress may be defined as a response of negative affect (such as anger or depression) usually accompanied by potentially pathogenic physical changes (such as increased heart rate) resulting from aspects of the teacher's job and mediated by the perception that the demands made upon the teacher constitute a threat to his/her self esteem or well-being, and by coping mechanisms activated to reduce the perceived threat." Whether a potential stress, such as disruptive behaviour, becomes actually stressful depends on whether the teacher perceives it as a threat to his self esteem or well-being. If, for example, the teacher is confident that he can cope with the problem himself, or that he can call in a colleague for help without any reduction in self-esteem, he is unlikely to experience stress. On the other hand, a teacher will feel stress if either of the following apply: (a) he feels he cannot cope with the demands made; (b) he thinks he could cope with them but feels that they conflict with his own higher order values. 'Higher-order' value being high academic standards which might have to be sacrificed in order to cope with a disruptive pupil. This definition also refers to coping mechanisms which when they fail to deal adequately with the problem, result in stress. Fimian (1982) proposes that "stress can be positive or negative; desirable or undesirable, and a good imbalance between the demands of the environment and the individual's capacity of responding appropriately to those demands." Further research suggests that stress exists not only in the work environment itself, but in the messages that individuals send themselves about the environmental events that occur around them. Thus perceptions of stress are highly relative phenomena that can vary from individual to individual.

Manifestations of Stress

Michael Fimian (1982) states that manifestations can also be referred to as symptoms

and divided the area into three major categories: "emotional, behavioural and physiological" which "interact with one another differently across time." An interesting observation was that when teachers are placed in stressful situations, their priorities change. In order of importance these become (a) survival training; (b) classroom performance; (c) methods on how to make an impact on students, and (d) concerns about increasing what pupils learn. Under less stressful situations these priorities become reversed, with concern for pupils receiving first priority.

Other miscellaneous manifestations of 'burn-out' in teachers are excessive use of derogatory, demeaning or abstract terminology; the total separation of job life from personal life; hiding behind impersonal bureaucratic rules; psychological distancing; deterioration of task and social performance; excessive absences; and excessive use of drugs and alcohol. Kyriacou and Sutcliffe reported that the most common symptoms of British teachers under stress were exhaustion, frustration and an awareness of stress symptoms...usually their being 'very tense.'

There are two main types of common stress responses among teachers. The first is frustration and it is associated with headaches, stomach upsets, sleep disturbances, hypertension and body rashes and in prolonged cases, depressive illness. The second is anxiety and it is associated with feelings of inadequacy, loss of confidence, confusion in thinking and occasionally panic. Cases of severe anxiety may lead to psychosomatic symptoms. Prolonged stress can lead to a nervous breakdown. Dunham (1980) has also argued that absenteeism, truancy, leaving teaching, sickness, absence and early retirement are forms of withdrawal associated with situations which become too stressful to tolerate.

Another result of a super-abundance of anxiety in a teacher is a narrowing of the perceptual field, inhibiting ingenious and creative solutions to problems and requiring the teachers to fall back on less adequate techniques, resulting in the teacher becoming defensive and intensely self-concerned.

Although many of the symptoms mentioned were found to occur in non-stressful conditions, their frequency under stressful conditions was significantly above that which would otherwise be expected.

State of Stress

The onset of stress begins slowly and usually occurs in gradual identifiable stages - except in the case of an extremely strong negative stressor (the loss of a spouse or the sudden expected loss of one's job). These stages have been identified as (1) alarm reaction; (2) stage of resistance and (3) stage of exhaustion. Collectively termed the General Adaptation Syndrome, one assumption underlying the G.A.S. is that humans, although very adaptable, have only a limited supply of adaptive energy. Unless the negative stressor has been removed, or unless the individual's perception of the negative stressor is changed in such a way that it is no longer negative, the individual will proceed through the three stages until breakdown or burn-out occurs.

Fimian describes these stages, the first being when the person "first becomes aware of the occurrence or presence of the negative stressor." There is the realisation that one has become extremely nervous, irritable, has frequent headaches or exhibits some other low-

key symptoms of stress. The second stage to be associated with active coping strategies. "Active coping strategies" refers to taking some action whether negative or positive. Mikhail notes that there are two options through which the teacher can respond; (1) they flee or escape the situation (such as procrastination, avoiding the issue or ignoring the problem) or (2) they take the option of "grit their teeth and bear it" which seems to lead to "passive coping." In passive coping nothing is done about the problem either because the person has chosen to act or for the reason that the person does not know how to deal with the problem through lack of knowledge about coping skills. In this type of coping situation the problem is identified but not dealt with - it is the symptoms which are dealt with. Psychological mechanisms such as denial or avoidance are now compounded by physiological 'coping' measures such as alcohol or drug abuse.

In the final stage the individual no longer has the psychological or physiological resources left to continue coping. In a state of complete exhaustion, the individual may not even worry about his or her physical or mental health. Despondency and various degrees of depression set in. Some typical manifestations of this extreme psychological and physical "low", states Fimian, would be psychosomatic illnesses; hysterical symptoms; hypochondria; extreme cases of insomnia; clinical depression; ulcers; backpains and migraine headaches.

Sources of Stress

Studies to date have used, in the main, questionnaire and interview methods to identify sources of stress, producing reported sources of stress as perceived by teachers themselves.

One such study carried out by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978) involved 257 teachers in medium-sized mixed comprehensive schools in Britain. The teachers were asked to rate 51 sources of stress in response to the question "As a teacher, how great a source of stress are these factors to you?" on a five point scale labelled 'no stress' to 'extreme stress'.

Hierarchy of Stress Factors in Teaching

1. Pupils poor attitude to work.
2. Trying to uphold/maintain values and standards.
3. Poorly motivated pupils.
4. Covering lessons for absent teachers.
5. Too much work to do.
6. Lack of time to spend with individual pupils.
7. Individual pupils who continually misbehave.

Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1973).

Within this survey of the principal components of stress, it is interesting that four factors together accounted for 52% of the total responses. These four factors (with the most common reported incidence in brackets) were as follows;

1. 'Pupil misbehaviour' (noisy pupils, difficult classes, difficult behaviour problems).
2. 'Poor working conditions' (poor career structure, poor promotional prospects, inadequate salary, shortage of equipment).
3. 'Time pressures' (not enough time to do the work, too much work to do, administrative work).
4. 'Poor school ethos' (inadequate disciplinary policy of school, lack of consensus or minimum standards, attitudes and behaviour of headmaster).

It is reasonable to assume that other factors such as salary, class size, teacher autonomy, perception of standards and teacher pre-service and in-service training will also influence the teacher's work environment and his or her perception of stress situations.

Strategies in Dealing with Stress

As earlier stated coping mechanisms can be either positive or negative. There are mechanisms which when applied can alleviate the stress and its effects ("real cures"), and others which compound it ("false cures"). When the false cures are adopted the result is that the stressful situation becomes worse and a vicious circle is set up. This vicious circle is related to the second stage in the state of stress - the stage of resistance in which psychological mechanisms such as dulling and denial are used for the purpose of avoiding the problem.

Coping mechanisms from the positive point of view, referred to in the literature as stress reduction techniques, real cures and methods of alleviating stress are not dealt with in any great detail.

However, one researcher states that "improved communication and shared power in the organisation can also reduce stress" (Iwanicki 1983). Another method was a series of in-service courses where participants would be invited to take more responsibility for the means they use to relate to themselves and to others. Such "learning situations" dealt with counselling and interpersonal skills, assertiveness training, non-verbal communication, values clarification and the management of stress. The focus of such courses was to work at one's behaviour and "examine or explore new ways of behaviour". Some participants describe "a range of incidents that teachers experience as stressful and show that habitual responses to stressful situations tend to be ineffective, unplanned and potentially damaging to personal relationships". For example, with particular reference to punishment they found "it is a grossly inefficient tactic." Some success in maintaining the smooth running of the institution may result, but the ensuing stress for the teacher is reported to be high. The legacy of the punishing approach for the person using it was listed as damage to interpersonal relations, alienation, anxiety and personal suffering." An explanation from the authors for such a situation is that "lacking encouragement from outside or inside the profession, poorly equipped by training and with little time to search out alternatives for themselves, teachers overlook the possibility of exercising discipline in a more creative way."

These courses, organised by the University of Nottingham, the authors claim, achieve

their aim by facilitating "the use of more creative responses to the experience of stress and to disruptive events seen to cause it." They also claim that an in-service course of this nature enables teachers to change their behaviour in a way that reduces stress.

In presenting techniques for dealing with stress the Consumer's Association publication is most comprehensive. Suggestions are made for self-directed help as well as help from outside agencies such as counselling, hypnotherapy, and help for specific problems like alcoholism, drug dependence etc.

The most recent circumstances in Ireland of drastic cuts within our educational provision forbode greater stress within an already stressful occupation. Stress limits must be recognised and as a matter of urgency coping techniques must be developed. It is up to us to protect professionally our energy and resources. A future generation might depend on it.

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