

Teacher Stress: The Search for Accurate View and Remedies that Work

Ruth Reese

Arizona State University West  
College of Education  
PO Box 37100  
Phoenix, Arizona 85069

[Ruth.Reese@asu.edu](mailto:Ruth.Reese@asu.edu)

## Abstract

In large numbers, teachers are reporting high levels of work-related stress. Surveys from many countries reveal widespread concern about the effects of stress on teachers' well-being and willingness to stay in the profession. Much of the literature on teacher stress has major limitations; for example it tends to be dominated by one-time, self-report questionnaires that yield superficial or incomplete data.

Renowned stress researchers such as Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman recommend that stress be viewed as an interactive relationship between the person and the environment. This complex relationship requires that stress researchers employ more holistic, process methods. This paper explores how these qualitative methods can be used to conduct teacher stress studies that are reasonable to implement and likely to result in useful recommendations for helping teachers reduce stress.

Large numbers of teachers report high levels of stress (Jarvis, 2002). This purpose of this paper is to reflect on a search for a more accurate picture of teacher stress and effective coping strategies. Worldwide surveys reveal widespread concern about the effects of stress on teachers' sense of well-being and their willingness to stay in the profession. Compared to the general population, teachers are at risk for higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of job satisfaction (Travers and Cooper, 1993; Schonfield, 1990). Borg (1990) reports that up to one third of teachers perceive their occupation as highly stressful. In the United States, thirty-nine percent of teachers leave the profession in the first five years (Department of Education's Staffing and Schooling Survey, cited in Ingersoll, 2001a). Teacher stress can lead to alienation, apathy and absenteeism and eventually interfere with student achievement (Guglielmi and Tatrow, 1998). On a personal level teacher stress can affect health, well-being and performance (Larchick and Chance, 2002).

### **Teacher Shortage Problem: Recruitment or Retention**

After examining national and state efforts to recruit new teachers, Merrow (1999) concluded that the teacher shortage problem has been misdiagnosed. He strongly asserts that the problem is not recruitment, but retention of teachers. "Simply put, we train teachers poorly and then treat them badly-and so they leave in droves" (p.64). Quartz (2003) strongly agrees with Merrow that the best remedy for teacher shortage is to focus on retention of qualified teachers, rather than teacher recruitment. Teachers who perceive a lack of support and poor

treatment will more likely view their work as highly stressful, and high levels of stress are reported to be one of the main reasons teachers leave the profession in the early years of their career (Borg & Riding, 1991). Finding successful methods of reducing teacher stress could increase teacher retention, critical to schools' maintaining a full staff of qualified professionals.

### **Limitations of Teacher Stress Research**

Many teacher stress studies, especially those deriving their findings from one-time, self-report questionnaires, are strongly criticized for three important reasons (Jarvis, 2002, Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998, Lazarus, 1999; Perez & Reicherts, 1992; Tennen, Affleck, Armeli & Carney, 2000). First, the use of one-shot questionnaires presumes that stress is a relatively stable or fixed state as opposed to a more fluid process. Second, these one-time surveys often are administered retrospectively without considering the time lapse between a stressful event and survey responses. Third, the questionnaire approach often gathers isolated facts about stress with little guidance from relevant theories. Instead of coherent conceptualizations, arbitrary lists of stressors and possible coping mechanisms abound.

### **Definitions of Stress**

To avoid confusion of multi-definitions, Jones and Bright (2001) maintain that the term *stress* "...should be used as an umbrella term that includes a range of potentially demanding environmental stimuli and responses and other variables, such as personality factors, that influence the relationship between the two (p. 259)." Lazarus (1999) emphasizes the transactional and emotional aspects of

stress, maintaining that stress is most accurately viewed from a systemic perspective as a dynamic relationship between person and environment. In addition to Lazarus, Folkman and Moskowitz (2000) also call attention to the role of emotions, positive as well as negative, as key elements of stress.

For purposes of clarity in this paper, *stress* will be used as an umbrella or organizing term as proposed by the above scholars in the field. Therefore, the term, *stress* should not be used to refer only to cause (external stimuli or stressors) or effect (responses or reactions) variables, but rather as a general description of a field of study that consists of stressors, appraisals, responses, emotions, personality variables, and the relationship among them.

### **Narrative Methodology in the Study of Teacher Stress**

In contrast to the survey approach, Lazarus (1999) advocates employing naturalistic, process-oriented methods. What is needed, he claims, are methods that capture the processes involved in stress, emotions and coping. He recommends multiple methods over one method of data collection, and currently places strong emphasis on use of narratives as an essential method for studying stress. More specifically he recommends using a clinical interview method similar to that used by psychotherapists to capture a person's experience as closely as possible to the actual time of occurrence. Additionally, he favors combining these naturalistic, clinical interviews with physiological and behavioral measures to create a complete methodology.

### **Other Process Methodologies**

In addition to the narrative approach, other qualitative methods have the potential to yield data vastly richer than a questionnaire approach. The literature highlights four

types of process methods: daily diaries; ecological, momentary assessments; electronic interviews; and emotional narratives (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Lazarus 1999; Lazarus, 2000; Snyder, et al. 2000 Tennen et al. 2000).

Each method captures detailed processes in slightly different ways. A daily diary approach, for example, utilizes a structured diary in which participants write on a daily basis. Ecological, momentary assessment asks the person to respond as soon as possible during or after a stressful event. An electronic interview gathers data at random intervals. Finally, an emotional narrative is "... a dramatic plot or story which describes the provocation of an emotion and its background... and how [the stress story] progressed and turned out" (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). Proposing that stress is best studied as a holistic, ongoing process, Tennen's research group utilizes "daily-process" research, with the claim that it "offers fresh opportunities to link psychological theory, research and practice" (Tennen et al., p.626). Using this technique, researchers track fluctuating processes such as appraisals, emotions, and coping behaviors close to their real-time occurrence. All of these methods ask respondents to record their thoughts, feelings and methods of coping with a stressful event as close to real-time as possible and with minimum distortions. Although distortion can still occur, researchers who use these methods assert that more complete, accurate and useable data result from these types of approaches. With a fuller perspective on teacher stress, recommendations grounded in sound research will be more likely to help teachers reduce stress.

### **How Teachers Cope with Stress: What is Known**

Although each teacher has a unique personality and therefore will find some idiosyncratic coping methods for negotiating stress, two key stress reduction strategies

are recommended in current studies. First, social support appears to be one effective means of reducing stress (Griffith, et al., 1999; Punch and Tutteman, 1996, Schonfeld, 2001). Having close, trusting relationships with colleagues boosts teachers' ability to alleviate negative emotions and reduce stress responses. Second, Roger and Hudson's (1995) work on controlling negative emotions demonstrates that reducing emotional rumination also improves teachers' ability to alleviate stress. Other studies have found that taking direct action to solve problems and using relaxation techniques have helped reduce stress (Kyriacou, 2001). However, studies recommending these techniques tend to have methodological limitations, thus evidence for their usefulness is weak.

### **Conclusion and Next Steps**

Schools are facing a crisis retaining experienced teachers, and stress is a major reason why teachers leave the profession. Finding effective, practical ways of reducing stress can help to solve the teacher shortage problem. Considering all the ways to study stress, it appears that the best way to approach it is by using a process approach, getting, if you will, "a movie of stress," rather than a snapshot, or one-shot approach. Using these methods to systematically investigate how teachers successfully cope with stress, researchers can find effective coping strategies grounded in actual teacher behavior. As a repertoire of studies accumulated over time, researchers could state with confidence: These are the main ways that x-number of teachers got stressed; these are the ways they coped; and after watching the whole process from beginning to end, here are recommendations for other teachers.

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