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Stress Levels of School Administrators and Teachers in November and January

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Academic Leadership Journal

Teaching today's young people is not only arduous work, but can be dangerously stressful. Anxiety due to school reform efforts, minimal administrative support, poor working circumstances, lack of involvement in school decision making, the encumbrance of paperwork, and lack of resources have all been identified as factors that can cause stress among educators (Hammond & Onikama, 1997). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and its subsequent mandated standardized assessments, family responsibilities, continuing education, low salaries, and poor working conditions can also create stress.

A certain amount of stress in education is predictable, even constructive. The exhilaration and challenges of educating children will physically cause adrenaline levels associated with stress to increase. However, educators differ radically from one another in the degree to which they are able to identify and manage stress. Stress is the physiological and emotional reaction to psychological events. Any event triggering the formerly life-saving, ancient "fight or flight" response is a stressor. Unrelieved, the cumulative, physical strain generated by psychological stress can harm the body. Stress is a consistent, exaggerated, and overwhelming sense of urgency, often coupled with frustration. The dichotomy of stress as a motivator or negative force in school contributes significantly to the emergent shortage of qualified school administrators and teachers (Goodwin, Cunningham, & Childress, 2003). According to Botwinik (2007), it is easy for an educator to become overstressed. Education and stress has seemingly now become one common bond in American society (Kiser, 2007).

To enhance educators' awareness of stress and activities designed to lower stress; we conducted a full-day seminar with six explicit goals.

- 1) Presenting research on stress and its effects on the human body and job performance;
- 2) Replaying a video produced in 2007, entitled, "How Stressed is Your School?";
- 3) Providing experiential activities that would increase participants' knowledge of stress and stress coping skills;
- 4) Conducting a group administered questionnaire during the seminar with a follow-up mail-back survey in January;
- 5) Giving the participants instructions to write a reflective summary detailing what was learned and actions to be taken as a result of attending the seminar; and
- 6) Collecting data from the surveys and reflections in order to evaluate its effect on educator stress with recommendations for future study.

The current study presents the structure and outcomes of the seminar. Specifically, we present the activities of the seminar, the data collected, the outcomes of the surveys and reflective summaries, and recommendations for future study.

METHODS

Literature Review

To review the available literature regarding school administrator and teacher stress, we searched the following databases: the Wilson OmniFile Full Text, Mega Edition; Worldcat, Education: A SAGE Full-Text Collection, Education Full Text, Educator's Reference Complete, Emerald Fulltext, ERIC,

Academic Search Elite, EBSCO Collection, JSTOR, Dissertation Abstracts, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, Academic Search Elite, Electronic Collections Online, and PsycARTICLES. We reviewed articles dated from 1933 to 2009 using the following search terms: stress, teacher stress, administrator stress, school stress, school-related stress, and school administrator and teacher stress. While we found an overabundance of information on stress, workplace stress, job-related stress, teacher stress, administrator stress, school-related stress, and student stress, we did not find a single article that compared the different levels of stress between school administrators and teachers. Through this paper, we are attempting to fill this void.

What is Stress?

In(1933)Hicks conducted a study on the mental health of teachers and found that 17% of 600 teachers were generally nervous. In(1936)Peck found that 37% of the teachers he studied had nervous symptoms. Canadian researcher, Hans Selye (1956), first pioneered the theory of stress as a non-specific response of the body to any demand made on it to adapt. Some stress is seen as being essential to promote growth; indeed, it can be “the spice of life” (Selye, 1974). Stress, according to Selye, can be either harmful or beneficial. He used the terms distress and eustress to distinguish between two types of stress respectively. Another way to look at stress is to consider it a demand made upon the adaptive capacities of the mind and body. If these capacities can manage the pressure and benefit from the stimulation involved, then stress is appreciated and beneficial. If individuals cannot and find the demand debilitating, then stress is unwelcome and unhelpful (Fontana, 1989). Although there is no single universally accepted definition of stress, Selye believed that stress is a perception, caused by being conscientious and hard work.

Educators and Stress

Educator stress is defined by Kyriacou (1987) as “the experience by a teacher of unpleasant emotions, such as tension, frustration, anxiety, anger, and depression, resulting from aspects of work as a teacher” (p. 146). Educators can be categorized into three groups depending on the way they manage stress (Mcgee-Cooper & Trammell, 1990). The first group comprises those who leave education because they are unwilling to face the pressures of the job. The second group consists of educators who experience a high level of stress but are able to carry on as educators while waiting eagerly for school vacations or retirement. The third group is progressive and well-developed educators who, though stressed, are still capable of handling stress. In-service workshops, seminars, or conferences could help educators manage their stress. Smaller, rural school district budgets often are not be able to afford such opportunities at the district level, causing educators to seek help on their own.

Kings Langley Stress Study of Work Related Stress

The staff at Kings Langley Secondary School, near Watford, England volunteered to take part in a world-first scientific investigation into work related stress among staff for Teachers TV. Hermione Cockburn and a team of scientific experts descended on their school for a week to monitor and evaluate the stress levels of the workforce attempting to answer the question; how stressed is their school? This video focused on the science of stress, looking at DNA testing, pedometers, and a multi-million dollar vest that allowed scientists to monitor the educators’ vital signs in real time. Stress experts Dr. Mark Hamer and Professor Terry Looker joined Hermione. Together, they watched the school staff at work to see how their bodies respond to the demands of their jobs (Cockburn, 2007).

Holmes-Rahe Scale

In 1967, the Holmes-Rahe Scale (HR) was created to measure stress in our lives. The scale shows forty-three life events that produce stress. Units of stress are assigned to each of the life events. The units range from a high of 100 for the death of a spouse to 11 for minor violations of the law (Hanson, 1994). The survey was developed through the examination of 5,000 medical records linking stress to illness. The survey reliability of +0.118 was established in 1970 through a study of 2500 sailors (Wikipedia, 2009).

Hanson Strong/Weak Choice Scales

The Hanson Strong Choices (HSC) and Hanson Weak Choices (HWC) scales each contain ten items. The first item on each scale is related to family genetics which the individual has no control. The remaining nine items on each scale are within the power of the individual to accept or reject through their life style. An example of an item on the weak choices scale is eating foods with the wrong calories, low in fiber, with a disproportionate balance of fats, proteins, vitamins, and minerals contributing to individual stress. The related item on the strong choices scale is eating foods high in fiber with a proper balance of fats, proteins, sufficient vitamins, and minerals, which can help, alleviate stress. Each individual has the opportunity to control his/her diet either exacerbating or reducing stress levels.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning can be generally defined as the process by which a learner creates meaning from direct experience (Luckner & Nadler, 2002). Experiential or action-oriented activities assist the development of cooperative skills, trust, pride in one self, and feelings of achievement. Experiential learning is a student-centered approach in which participants are engaged in critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making within contexts that are personally relevant to them. It also involves following-up the learning activity with structured opportunities such as reflection and the application of newly developed ideas and skills. In our case, as researchers, doubling as seminar presenters, are acting as facilitators rather than controllers of learning. It is our goal as researcher-facilitator to create and maintain an atmosphere where participants feel supported and challenged. At Camp Aldrich, experiential learning occurs when participants are vigorously involved in "real life" activities, reflecting upon activities, using critical analysis skills to obtain useful knowledge, and then integrating new understandings into their daily lives.

Reflective Summary

Reflection is a moment of relaxation to rethink one's main concerns to create a balance in one's existence. Time and energy that is spent in reflection can lead to judgment, which can lead to action (Moody, 2005). The purpose of writing a reflective summary paper is to demonstrate a basic understanding of the main ideas and concepts covered in lecture or seminar. Reflective summaries can connect the materials discussed or read with personal experiences, thinking further about the implications or roots of the idea, concept, or phenomenon under consideration.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this study was to provide empirical evidence on the different levels of stress between administrators and teachers during November and January. A sample of thirty-five educators assembled at the Camp Aldrich Conference Center in Great Bend, Kansas, for a one-day seminar entitled "School-Related Stress Management: Finding the Silver Lining." We presented research about stress and its effects on the human body. The video entitled, "How Stressed is Your School? –

Proramme 5 was shown intermittently throughout the day to support the research being presented. After the conclusion of the video presentation, we asked the participants to voluntarily complete three replicated surveys, the HR, HSC, and HWC during the seminar and then repeat the process in January. The seminar concluded with experiential activities designed to increase participants' understanding of school-related stress, coping mechanisms, and constructive lifestyle choices. Within one week of the seminar, we collected data from the reflective summaries. We sought to discover other similar individual perceptions of the same phenomenon. Patton (1990) reported that "the researcher, then, comes to understand the essence of the phenomenon through shared reflection and inquiry...as they also intensively experience and reflect on the phenomenon in question" (p. 72). We sought out themes and addressed each one. From both surveys, we collected data to identify the level of stress in relation to the variables.

Researchers Positioning

We approached this study with perceptions about the issues as we examined them. We believed that school administrators suffer more stress than teachers do. We both have firsthand knowledge of stress as former administrators and teachers with more than five decades of cumulative experiences. The research questions flowed from our knowledge and consciousness as researchers with a practitioner's mindset demanding that we become extremely engrossed in the research questions under investigation. Our individual contributions made this research paradigm ideal for our study. We have experienced stress having lived with the perceptions of stress as we tried to understand them.

The emphasis in this study, however, was not to examine or substantiate our personal perceptions, but to explore the levels of stress of all educators using survey and reflective summaries. It was through this lens that materials for the seminar were prepared, the research conducted, and the data collected and analyzed. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do the levels of stress differ between administrators and teachers in November and January?
2. How do the levels of stress differ between male and female educators in November and January?

METHODOLOGY

We conducted this research study at a rural, western-Kansas university. The researchers collected quantitative and qualitative data in three formats: a combination of three group administered questionnaires, the same three questionnaires as mail-back surveys, and written reflection statements. Participation in the study was voluntary. We gave copies of the questionnaires to each participant as described below. They were provided sufficient time to review and fill out each survey. Every participant was provided a index card to record his/her HR scale score (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), HSC scale score, and HWC scale score (Hanson, 1994) . Next, each participant was asked to record years of experience as an educator, whether they were an administrator or classroom teacher, and provide a 4-digit number that could be used as identifier for the follow-up surveys in January. We asked each participant to write a reflective summary of the seminar's activities and return by email within one week of the seminar.

We mailed the second round of surveys to every seminar participant during the second week of January 2009, approximately two months after the seminar. Each participant received an introduction letter, copies of the surveys, and a stamped addressed postcard. We asked the participants to fill out the surveys again; record their individual scores, their 4-digit code, gender information, and return it.

We analyzed the data from the surveys to identify the level of stress in relation to the demographic variables. We utilized the following formula to obtain a final score (Overall). [Overall = HR - (HSC + HWC)]. According to Hanson (1987), "The higher the net score (in a positive direction), the better you are doing at harnessing your stresses, and the less likely you will be to have serious heart attacks, ulcers, or other health crises to cause inefficiencies at work" (p. 107).

We asked the participants to write a reflective summary describing their seminar experience. Next, we instructed them to return the summaries within a week of the seminar. Once all participants (N=34) returned their documents, an intensive review of the summaries was conducted. The data revealed five emerging themes that captured an acceptable account of contextual circumstances and educational norms.

RESULTS

Participants

Since 1973, graduate students consisting primarily of classroom teachers and administrators have been attending a series of Saturday workshops on key relevant hot topics known as Camp Aldrich Seminars. Educators, chiefly from Western Kansas, participate in the seminars for a variety of reasons: either to pursue a Master's Degree in Education for college credit or for licensure renewal. Many participants come just to see old friends or make new ones. We invited participants from all school sizes to attend; however, most participants come from smaller rural school districts located in the Western part of Kansas. The Saturday seminars combine hands-on activities with intensive studies of current educational topics. One of the many benefits of attending these seminars is the collaborative relationships between the researchers and students that establishes mutual respect, trust, and appreciation among the individuals involved, requiring a willingness to learn from each other through formal and informal means (Mouradian, Mechanic, & Williams, 2001). We believe we are successful in obtaining these relationships with educators who attend the seminars. Participants from the November 2008, "School Related Stress Management: Finding the Silver Lining Seminar," served as the study group for this investigation. The study group consisted of thirty-four participants (N=34) averaging almost seventeen years of educational experience. Nine participants were administrators (N=9), while the remaining twenty-five were classroom teacher (N=25).

Group Administered Questionnaire

Of the 35 questionnaires distributed in November, one could not be used as the participant completing the initial questionnaire did not indicate job classification and was not included in the data collection (N=34). This provided a 97.14% response rate. Of the 34 (97.14%) who responded, 9 (26.47%) were administrators and 26 (77.23%) were teachers. The following charts identify the mean scores of the 34 participants.

Figure 1 presents a summary of the data gathered from the first survey in November 2008. Five sets of bar graphs present the data collected, analyzed, and compared. The blue bars are a summary of information for administrators and the red bars are a summary of information for teachers. The first set of data, EXP, is the average number of years participants have been involved in education. The data indicate that both subgroups average about seventeen years. The second set of data, HR, shows a difference of 36.95 points indicating the administrators had fewer stress-related life events. The third set of data, HSC, reports a difference of 65.11 points indicating the administrators are making more

strong choices. The fourth set of data, HWC, shows a difference of 24.58 points indicating the administrators are more making fewer weak choices. (Note: all scores on this scale are negative, thus a smaller negative number is better). The fifth set of data, [Overall = HR - (HSC + HWC)] show a difference of 144.33 points indicating the administrators are under less stress the teachers in November.

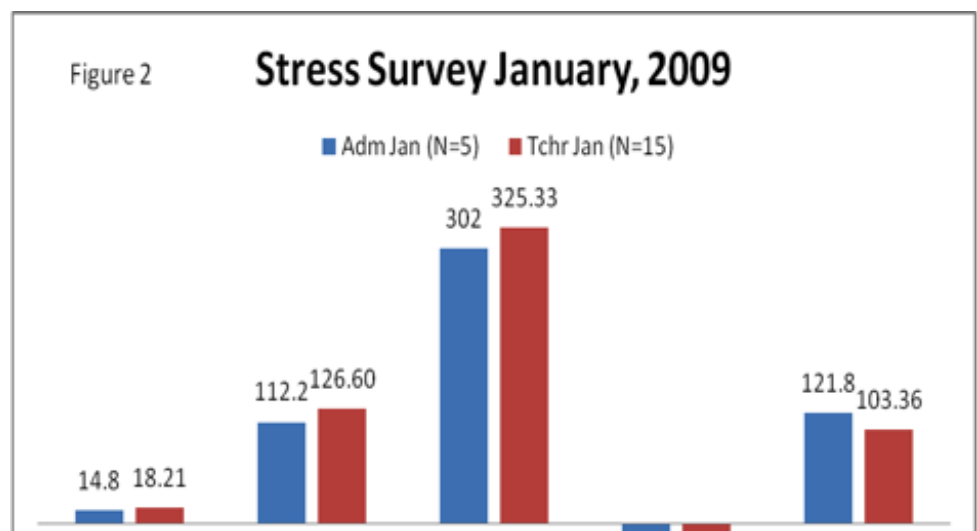
Mail-Back Survey

Of the 34 surveys that were mailed in January, 9 were not returned by the due date. This provided a 73.52% response rate. From the 25 (73.52%) who responded, 5 returned postcards could not be used as the ID number provided could not be matched up with the November survey. Data was collected from the remaining 20 (58.82%) returned surveys. Of the 20 (58.82%) who responded, 5 (25%) were administrators and 15 (75%) were teachers. Of the 20 (58.82%) who responded, 10 (50%) were male and 10 (50%) were female.



Figure 2 presents a summary of the data from the second survey in January. EXP shows the administrators have 3.41 fewer years of experience than the teachers do. HR shows a difference of 14.4 points, indicating the administrators are experiencing fewer stress-related life events. HSC shows a difference of 23.33 points, indicating the administrators are making fewer strong choices. HWC shows a difference of 16 points, indicating the administrators are making fewer weak choices. Overall difference of 18.44 points indicates the administrators are under less stress than the teachers are in January.

Figure 3 presents a comparison of data (N=5) for administrators from the November to January surveys. EXP shows the administrators have 14.8 years of experience. HR shows a difference of 35.2 points, indicating the administrators are experiencing more stress-related life events in January. HSC shows a difference of 56 points, indicating the



administrators are making fewer strong choices in January. HWC shows a difference of 32 points, indicating the administrators are making more weak choices in January. Overall shows a difference of 123.2 points, indicating that administrators are under more stress in January than November.



Figure 4 presents a comparison of data (N=15) for teachers from the November to January surveys. EXP shows the teachers have 18.21 years of experience. HR shows a difference of 10.4 points, indicating the teachers are experiencing fewer stress-related life events in January. HSC shows a difference of 36 points, indicating the teachers are making more strong choices in January. HWC shows a difference of 37.33 points, indicating the teachers are making fewer weak choices in January. Overall shows a difference of 83.73 points, indicating the teachers are under less stress in January than November.

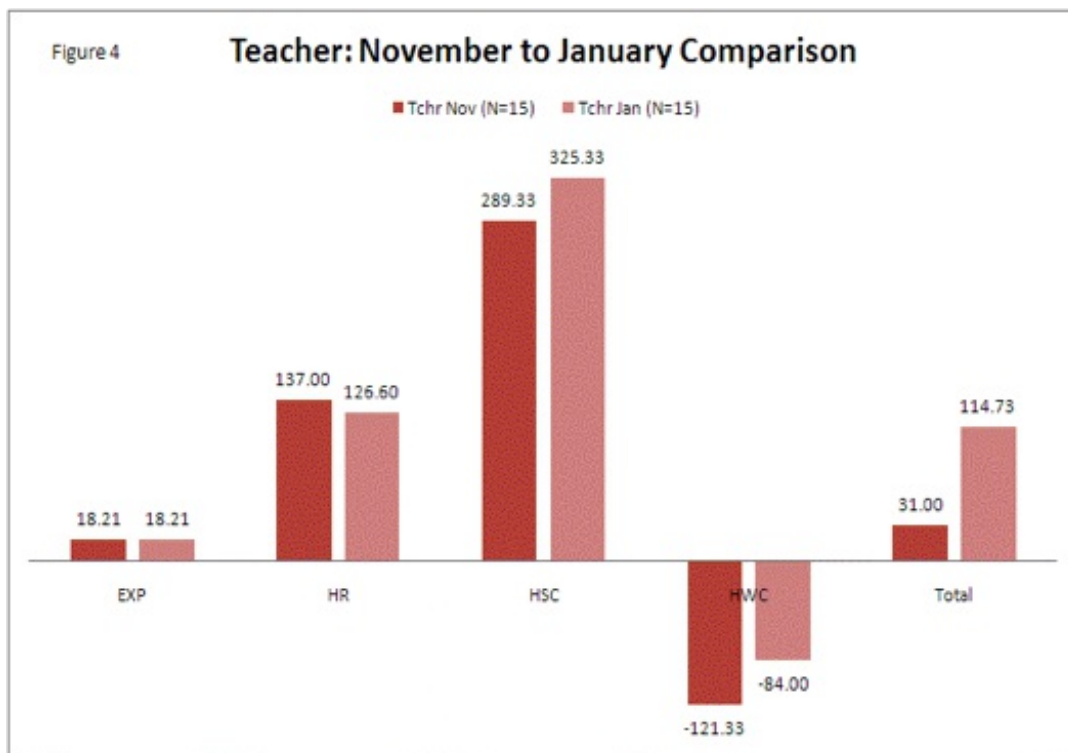
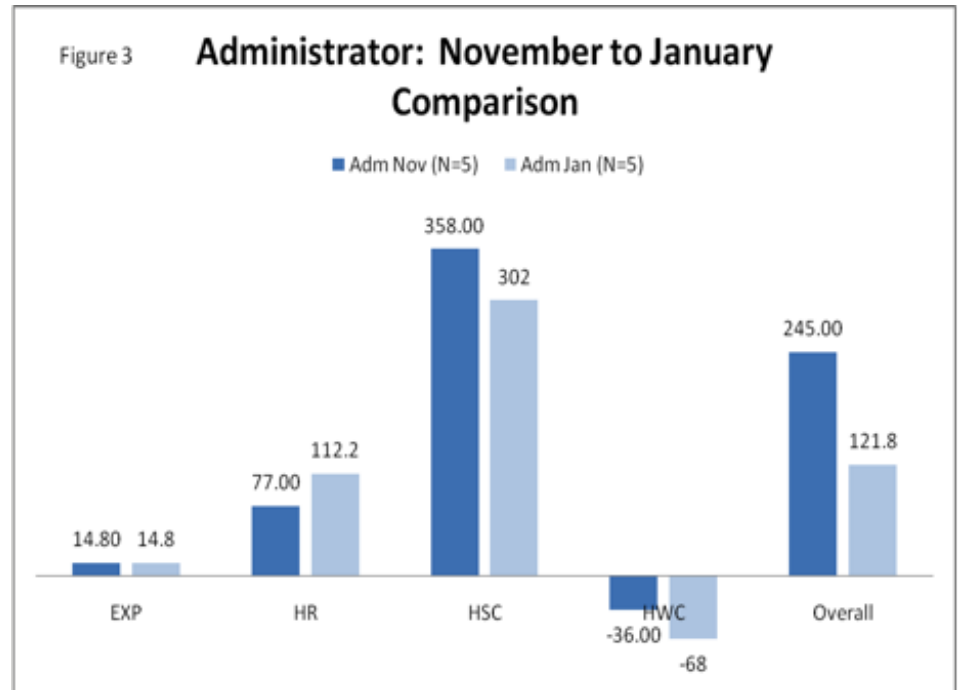


Figure 5 presents a November to January comparison of data from Charts 3 & 4. EXP shows the administrators have 4 fewer years of experience than the teachers. HR shows an administrator increase, but a teacher decrease in stress-related life events. HSC shows a decrease in making strong choices by administrators, but an increase in making strong choices by teachers. HWC shows a increase in making weak choices by administrators, but an decrease in making weak choices by teachers. Overall shows the administrators are under less stress than the teachers.

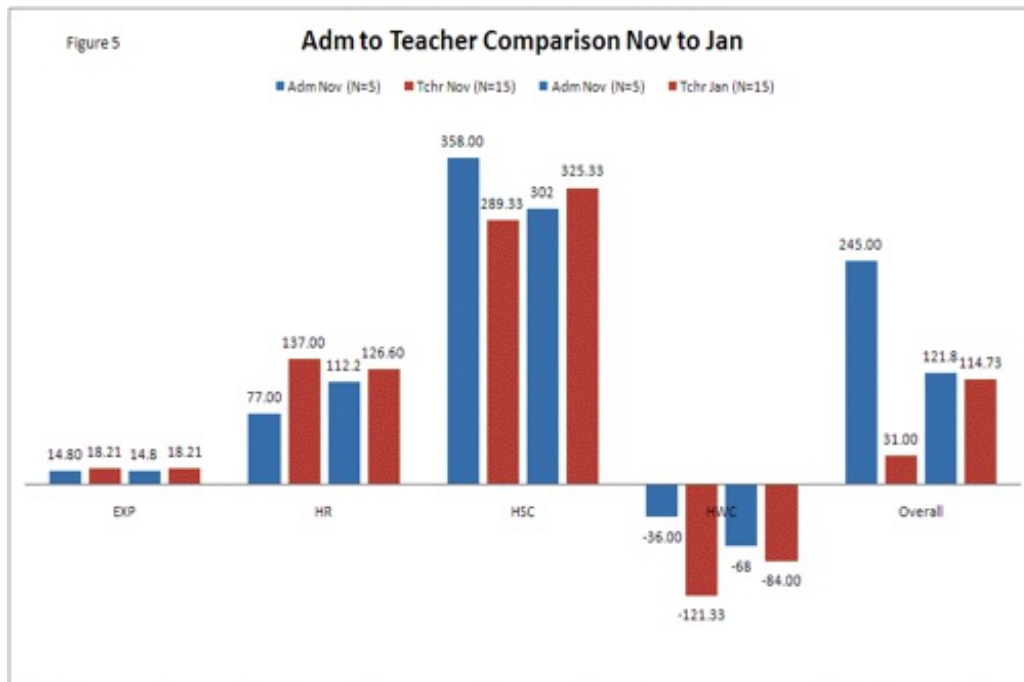
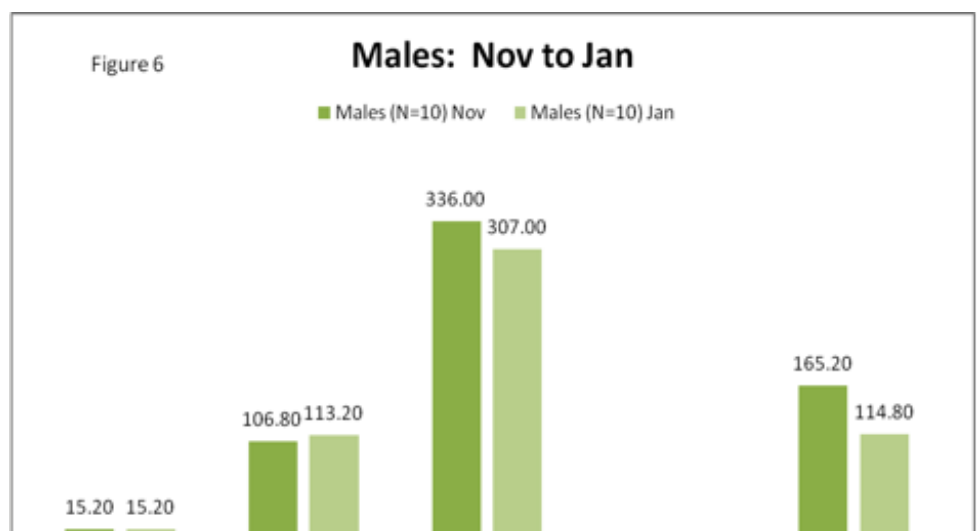


Figure 6 presents a November to January comparison of men's (N=5) stress levels. EXP shows the administrators have 15.2 years of experience. HR shows a difference of 6.4 points, indicating the males are experiencing more stress-related life events in January. HSC shows a difference of 29 points, indicating the males are making fewer strong choices in January. HWC shows a difference of 15 points, indicating the administrators are making more weak choices in January. Overall shows a difference of 50.4 points, indicating that males are under more stress in January than November.

Figure 7 presents a November to January comparison of women's (N=10) stress levels. EXP shows the females have 19.67 years of experience. HR shows a difference of 4.4 points, indicating the females are experiencing fewer stress-related life events in January. HSC shows a difference of 55 points, indicating the females are making more strong



choices in January. HWC shows a difference of 50 points, indicating the females are making fewer weak choices in January. Overall shows a difference of 109.87 points, indicating that females are under less stress in January than November.

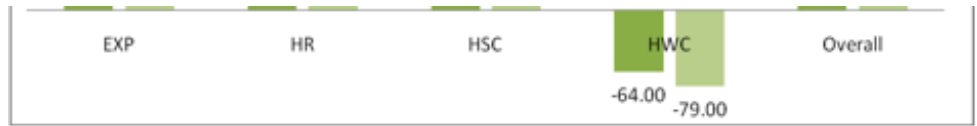


Figure 8 presents a gender comparison of the data (N=20; 10 males and 10 females) for the November surveys that match the January survey respondents. EXP shows the males have 4.47 fewer years of experience. HR shows a difference of 30.4 points, indicating the males are experiencing fewer stress-related life events. HSC shows a difference of 59 points, indicating the males are making more strong choices. HWC shows a difference of 62 points, indicating the males are making fewer weak choices. Overall shows a difference of 161.4 points, indicating the males are under less stress than the females in November.

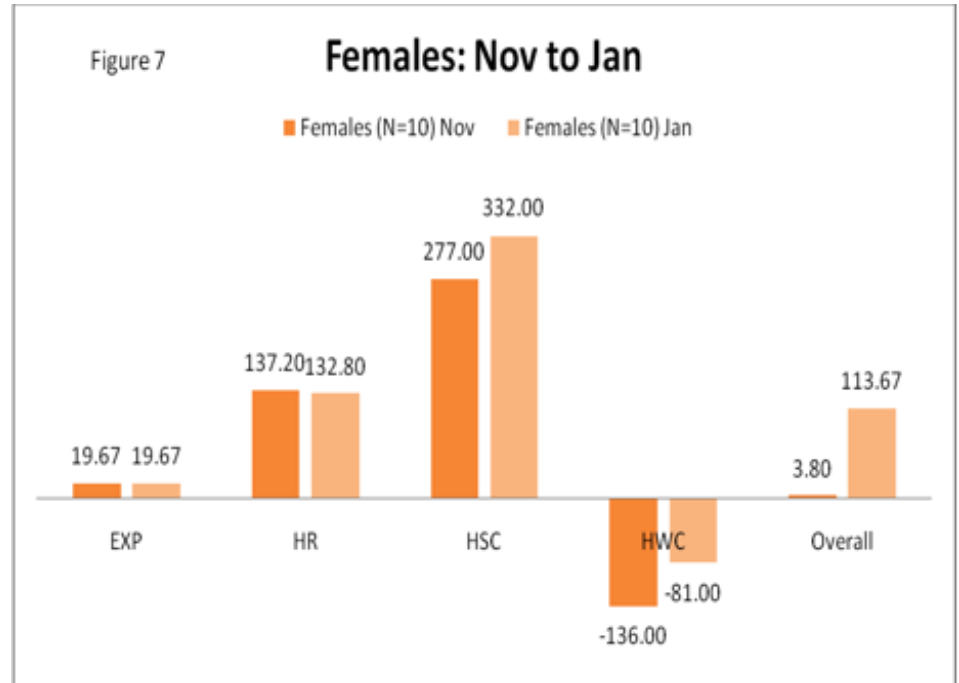
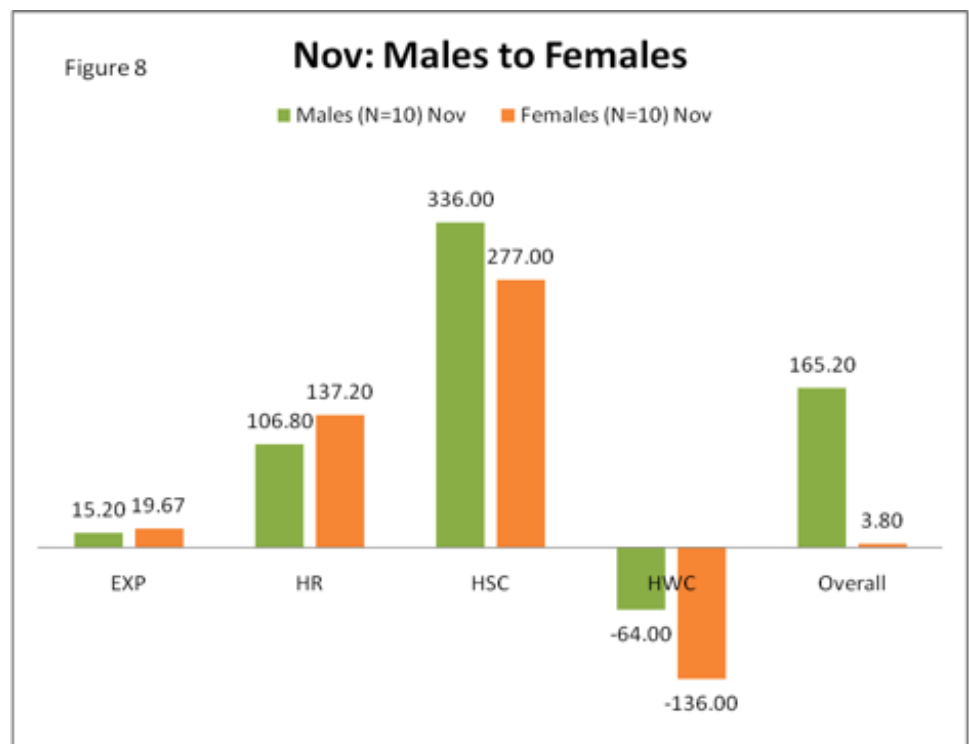
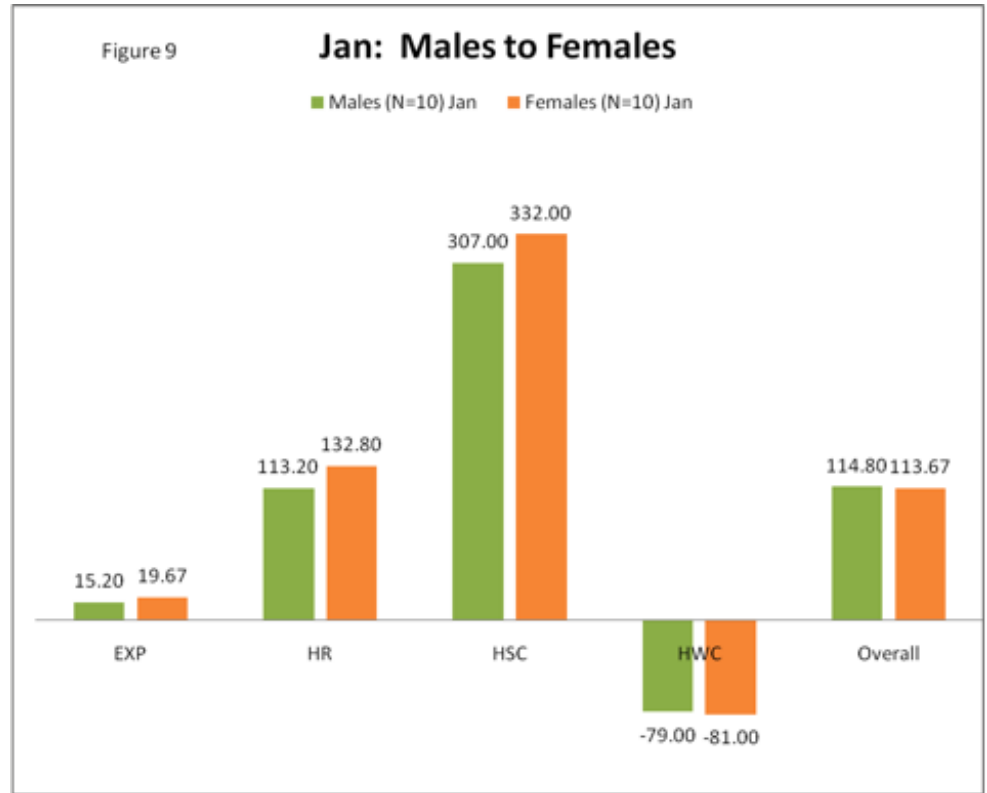


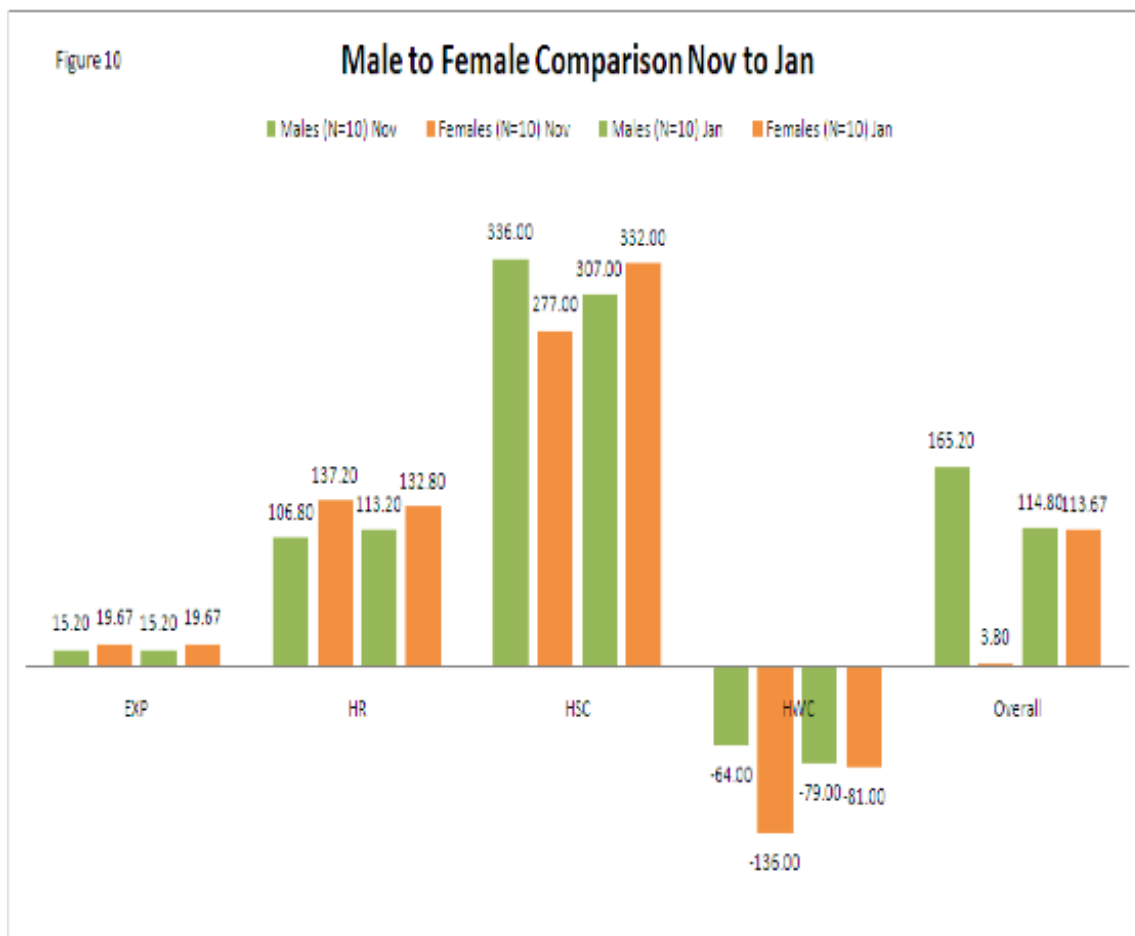
Figure 9 presents a gender comparison of the data (N=20; 10 males and 10 females) for the January surveys. EXP shows the males have 4.47 fewer years of experience. HR shows a difference of 19.6 points, indicating the males are experiencing fewer stress-related life events. HSC shows a difference of 25 points, indicating the males are making fewer strong choices. HWC shows a difference of 2 points, indicating the males are making fewer weak choices. Overall shows a difference of 1.13 points,



indicating the males are under less stress than the females in January.

Figure 10 presents a November to January comparison of data from Charts 8 & 9. EXP shows the males have fewer years experience than the females. HR shows a male increase, but a female decrease in stress-related life events. HSC shows a decrease in making strong choices by males, but an increase in making strong choices by females. HWC shows a increase in making weak choices by males, but an decrease in making weak choices by females. Overall shows the males are under less stress in both November and January than the females.





Reflection Summaries

An assessment of the school administrators and teachers' reflection statements revealed five main themes of concern quite similar to those cited in this study: administrator cause stress, administrators know their teachers are stressed, teaching is stressful, educators are aware of their stress, and stress affects students.

Administrators Cause Stress

Many of the teachers reflected on how administrators, in particular, new administrators cause stress.

One participant said, "...just stressed to the maximum levels due to a new principal..." Another reported, "...having a difficult time adjusting to the principal's commitment to school."

Clearly stress can widen the gap between administrators and teachers as this participant reported to be, "...frustrated with the school bureaucracy and often feels it is an us vs. them environment..."

Administrators Know Their Teachers are Stressed

"As a principal, I feel it's my job to help my staff when dealing with stress." Another administrator admitted that stress is often overlooked, "It is vital that we identify situations that might cause undue anxiety and stress among our staff." His sentiments are echoed by this statement, "We should also do what we can to prevent these situations, as well as provide support for our staff to relieve stress at the workplace."

Teaching is Stressful

Many teachers are aware their chosen profession is stressful as indicated by this participant's statement, "As educators, it is important to know that teaching is one of, if not the most, stressful

occupations there is.” This participant stated, “With the directions the educational system seems to be moving, I don’t see stress levels going down anytime soon...”

Educators are Aware of Their Stress

This theme had the most related reflective statements. While teachers are aware of their stress, they are nonetheless still stressed. “I have always known that I don’t cope with stress well and need to get some ideas...things I can do to prevent stress...” “Most of my stress comes from worrying about things that never come to pass.” “We become so accustomed to our levels of stress that we don’t even realize the price we are paying physically.”

Stress Affects Students

If stress affects how we teach, it must affect how our students learn. Several participants expressed concern as to how their stress levels affect their students. One participant said, “...stress in a teacher causes student disruptions and misbehaviors.” “...kids will not learn effectively if the school is stressful.” “When the teacher is stressed the students know. The teacher’s stress level will affect the student’s achievement.” “As I look back on some of my worst tense filled days, I have started to notice a pattern with my students. The students are responding to my demeanor and attitude.”

DISCUSSION

How do the levels of stress differ between administrators and teachers?

The data clearly indicates there is a difference in stress between school administrators and teachers. Administrators are making healthier choices than the teachers are. The November to January comparisons are also interesting. Administrators are under more stress in January than they are in November and the opposite is true of the teachers. The teachers are experiencing less stress in their lives and are handling what stress they have better in January than they were in November. This contradicts the information from the 2007 Kings Langley Secondary School Stress Study.

Our former experiences as school administrators provide some insight into possible explanations for the change in stress indication for administrators. Local boards of education generally evaluate administrators during the month of January and either renew or non-renew their contracts. This coupled with the highly involved activities programs of the high school have contributed extensively to the January stress levels of the researchers. The positive change for the teachers is more difficult to explain in light of the Kings Langley Study. Additional comments from the video indicate that the counseling center receives double the calls in January than in December. This contradiction cries for further study.

How do the levels of stress differ between male and female educators from November to January? HR reveals the males experience an increase in stress-related life events; however, the females experience a decrease during the same time. HSC reveals the males experience a decrease in making strong choices; however, the females experience an increase in making strong choices. HWC reveals the males experience an increase in making weak choices; however, the females experience a decrease. Overall reveals the males are under less stress than the females in November and January.

Reflective Summaries Themes

A closer look at the reflective summaries reveals that both school administrators and teachers are aware of their stress and its effects on their health and job performance. They are also aware that their

stress trickles down and has an extremely negative effect on their students' ability to learn.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study provide data to school districts, university graduate programs, and professional organizations for continued personal development opportunities and insight to the different level of stress in school administrators and teachers during the months of November and January.

Limitations

Limitations of this study are as follows:

- 1) This study is limited to the participants of the November Camp Aldrich Seminar. We did not attempt to elicit information from external sources outside the group of participants.
- 2) The surveys did not include education specific stress producers.
- 3) We did not collect data on the number, and frequency, of participant implementation of stress reducing activities and programs presented during the seminar.

These limitations, and the results of the surveys, serve as a call for further research into stress for educators.

Recommendations

Further research is needed involving a larger, randomly selected set of participants. A closer investigation of the choices that each subgroup makes could help determine whether there are consistent choices amongst the groups. An item analysis would provide much needed insight into specific life style changes within each group over time. Further research could determine the effects of the implementation of programs and practices to reduce stress on the stress levels of educators. In particular, which activities from Camp Aldrich had the biggest positive impact towards reducing stress levels for administrators or teachers? This information would be beneficial to administrators in the leadership of their organizations, to teacher leaders within their own systems, to institutions of high learning for their educator preparation programs, and to service center personnel in their program development and delivery. Education is a high stress occupation with high rates of attrition for a variety of reasons. Information generated from additional study of stress has the potential to increase job satisfaction and to reduce the turnover rate for experienced as well as novice teachers.

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