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## The Relationship between Workaholism Tendencies and Stage of Development in a K-12 Teacher Population

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#### **Abstract**

Workaholism has been defined as a compulsive devotion to work that significantly impairs other areas of an individual's life (Selinger, 2007). Since this disorder was first conceptualized by Oates (1971), few articles have been published on the nature of workaholism tendencies for workers employed in specific occupations. A Mississippi sample was utilized for this study, for the purpose of exploring workaholism tendencies in a kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) teacher population. Results indicate that elementary school teachers in particular may exhibit workaholism tendencies. Additionally, beginning teachers, those with more than 10 years of teaching experience, and those who teach in struggling school districts, may be the most likely to struggle with work addiction. We recommend future research be conducted on interventions that can be used within the school system itself to help work-addicted teachers develop a greater work-life balance.

*Workaholism* has been defined as a compulsive devotion to work that significantly impairs other areas of an individual's life (Selinger, 2007). Since this disorder was first conceptualized by Oates in 1971, numerous articles have been published on this topic. Research has often focused on how workaholism tendencies are related to health and mental well-being (Burke, 2000), but have also focused on gender (Taris, Van Beek, & Schaufeli, 2012), ethnicity (Aziz, Adkins, Walker, & Wuensch, 2010), marital (Fassel, 2000), and parental (Carroll & Robinson, 2000; Chamberlin & Zhang, 2009) status, to name a few. Over the last forty-two years, however, scant research has been conducted on the nature of workaholism tendencies for workers employed in specific occupations. The education literature is one area in particular where workaholism-related issues have received little attention. The purpose of the current study was to examine workaholism tendencies in a Mississippi Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (K-12) teacher population.

#### **Workaholism Literature**

Although Selinger (2007) conceptualized workaholism tendencies as being driven by a compulsive need to work, one that impacts other life domains in a negative manner, a consistent definition of workaholism between researchers has not yet been devised (Aziz & Tronzo, 2011). Griffiths (as cited in Aziz & Tronzo, 2011) viewed workaholism as an addiction-based disorder that involves "salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, conflict, and relapse" (p. 271). Garson (2005) conceptualized workaholics as using work as a means of escapism. Some researchers (Mosier, as cited by Burke, 1999) define and measure workaholism by the amount of time spent devoted to work. Other researchers, such as Schaufeli, Tarris, & Bakkar (2008), define workaholism as an excessive need to work, one that is compulsive in nature. Thus, workaholism has been conceptualized in a variety of ways over the last several decades.

No matter which definition of workaholism one chooses to employ, it is important to note that workaholics can endure harsh consequences for their addiction. For

example, the recent death of a young intern, Moritz Erhardt, received international attention for what some consider to have been caused by strenuous 110-hour work weeks (Bland, 2013). Tragic cases such as Erhardt's, who has been referred to as a "workaholic," in the media (Bland, 2013), may cause both workers and organizations to question the importance of working so hard to the detriment of other areas of life including one's health.

Although not all workaholics 'die at the desk,' workaholism has been linked to problematic physical and mental health concerns, including heart disease (Booth-Kewley & Friedman, 1987), self-esteem issues (Chamberlin & Zhang, 2009), and coping strategies used to hide depression and/or anxiety (Robinson, 1998). Such major issues stemming from an over-engagement in work are the reason why Shifron and Reysen (2011) proposed that workaholism be conceptualized as an addiction. In fact, an organization called Workaholics Anonymous, similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, was developed for the purpose of helping workaholics develop a healthier orientation towards work (Workaholics Anonymous, 2015).

It is also interesting to note that workaholics are not necessarily more effective workers. For example, while conducting a study on medical students, Schaufeli et al. (2008) found that those with excessive work habits had: greater difficulty recuperating after a long work day, less compassion for patients, a greater tendency toward working even when sick, and reduced levels of work performance. Other researchers have discovered similar results. Liang and Chu (2009) empirically linked workaholism to reduced job productivity. And Salmela-Aro and Nurmi (2004) found that those with an excessive devotion to work were at a greater risk of job burnout. Thus, even though workaholics are committed to their jobs, their *overcommitment* may have very negative consequences.

Those who do not have an over-reliance on working may not understand why workaholics are so overly committed to their jobs. Considering that between a quarter and

almost a third of American workers are reported to be workaholics (Robinson, 2007), workaholism as a disorder appears to have influenced a significant proportion of Americans. Furthermore, since many of these individuals are at-risk of developing mental and physical health concerns as a result of their extreme work ethic, developing a greater understanding of the specific factors that are related to workaholism is crucial.

Minimal research has been conducted on the relationship between workaholism and demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, marriage, and parental status in a teacher population. Previous research that has been conducted on these variables in general, however, reveal that women are just as likely as men to be workaholics (Taris et al., 2012), there is an equal distribution of workaholism tendencies among varying ethnic groups (Aziz et al., 2010); dissatisfaction with marriage (Robinson, Carroll, & Flowers, 2001), and that children can develop physical and mental health-related concerns when one or more parents are workaholics (Chamberlin & Zhang, 2009). These variables will be explored in the current study.

In addition to the variables discussed above, another factor that has not yet been explored in-depth in either the education or counseling literature is the relationship between workaholism and one's specific occupation, such as teaching. Taris et al. (2012) emphasize this point when they say that "the demographic and occupational profile of the "typical" workaholic has not yet been characterized" (p. 547). Scant research has been conducted on the relationship between workaholism tendencies and stage of development for K-12 teachers. The results of the current study may shed light on which relationships exist between workaholic behaviors and specific demographic variables for K-12 teachers in Mississippi.

### **Contributing Factors to Workaholism Tendencies**

Although being a workaholic has major disadvantages, including those related to poor

mental and physical health, it is important to note that many workaholics are rewarded for their addictive behaviors. These rewards may come from either the workaholics themselves or from their work environment. Uchitelle (2006), for example, argued that hard working individuals were often rewarded by organizations with bonuses or awards based on commitment to their work. However, as these job-related “perks” have decreased over time in the American workforce, George (1997) emphasized that a scarcity of tenure options for many organizations may cause workers to soothe their own anxiety by being excessively devoted to work.

### **The Strenuous Tasks of Teaching**

One might argue that teaching, in particular, is one field where workers are at a great risk of becoming excessively devoted to work, due to number of hours spent working each week. For example, while the official work hours of teachers are set by the districts and schools in which they teach, many teachers come well before the school day begins and stay well after the last child has gone home. The extended work hours of teachers can also be seen in the lesson planning and grading that are essential components of the job. Most teachers do not have ample time built into the school day to complete such tasks, so, traditionally, most of the planning and grading tasks are done on the teacher’s own time. It is estimated that on average, teachers spend 8 hours a day in the classroom, one hour a day either before or after school at the school site preparing for the day or next day’s instruction, and another 2-3 hours on their own time grading, planning, and attending required meetings, or conferencing with parents (Forgasz & Leder, 2006).

Tracking teacher work hours has been a difficult endeavor because of the number of hours teachers spend working outside the school building and due to the structure of the school year with most schools employing teachers for nine months a year. Only 10 percent of public schools in the United States employ teachers year-round (Desshoff, 2011). Therefore, the majority of teachers do not have defined working hours in the summer. Even without the

defined hours, many teachers do work over the summer. It is estimated that teachers spend on average two to four weeks during the summer in workshops and other continuing education settings and another four weeks leading up to the start of the school-year planning and preparing (Philipp & Kunter, 2013).

Data from the American Time Use Survey shows that teachers are more likely to do some work from home than individuals employed in other professions. Thirty percent of teachers reported working at home most days of the week compared to twenty percent of professionals in other fields. Teachers were also more likely to work on Sunday than other professionals. The survey also showed that teachers were more likely to have a second job than other professionals (Krantz-Kent, 2008). Thus, with 60 hour work weeks, summer work commitments, spending numerous working on weekends, as well as needing to work additional jobs, it seems safe to assume that developing a healthy work-life balance for many teachers is not easy.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to assess the relationship between workaholism tendencies and stage of development in a Mississippi K-12 teacher population. Specifically, the relationship between workaholism tendencies and: number of years of teaching experience, occupation type (e.g., elementary vs. high school teacher), school setting where employed (e.g., public vs. private school), and school district rating (star vs. low performing) were assessed. Specific demographic variables were also evaluated in their relationship to workaholism, including gender, ethnicity, marital, and parental status.

The results of this research may help both administrators and teachers develop a greater understanding of which type(s) of Mississippi educators have the greatest likelihood of exhibiting workaholism tendencies. Furthermore, knowing which particular types of individuals have the greatest likelihood of becoming workaholics may help administrators pursue an active role in assisting their

workaholic employees in developing a healthier work-life balance.

## Methods

### Participants

Two hundred and fifteen K-12 school teachers (n = 215) from the State of Mississippi participated in this study. Demographic characteristics of the population included 85% female and 15% male. Eighty-eight percent of respondents identified their race as white, while 9% identified as black, 2% Hispanic, and 1% other. Teaching experience for these participants ranged from pre-service teachers to 10+ years. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents identified as having 10 or more years of experience, 21% stated they had 5-10 years, 10% stated 3-5 years, 11% identified as 2 years, 11% stated 1 year, and lastly 8% identified as pre-service teachers.

When respondents were questioned about their current relationship status, 64% identified themselves as married, 28% as single, 7% as divorced, and 1 participant identified as a widow. Sixty-two percent of respondents stated that 'Yes' they had children, while 38% stated that 'No' they did not have children. Respondents were questioned as to what grade level they were currently employed. Thirty-seven percent stated they taught at the elementary level, 29% stated they taught at the middle/junior high school level, and 27% stated they taught at a high school.

Specific questions were also asked to describe the respondents' current place of employment. When participants were asked to identify their school as public or private, 100% of respondents stated that they identified as working for a public school. Respondents were also asked to identify how their school was labeled in regards to academic performance using the following categories: Star, High Performing, Successful, Academic Watch, Low Performing, At Risk of Failing, or Failing. The Star category was chosen by 8% of respondents, High Performing 42%, Successful 28%,

Academic Watch 8%, Low Performing 8%, At Risk of Failing 3%, and Failing 3%.

### Instrument

For this study, the Bergen Work Addiction Scale (BWAS) was utilized to determine the level of work addiction specified by currently employed school teachers in the State of Mississippi. The instrument focuses on 7 components of addiction. These 7 core elements (salience, tolerance, mood modification, relapse, withdrawal, conflict, and problems) help to support the use of the BWAS and lends to its relatively high content validity in terms of addiction (Andreassen, Griffiths, Hetland, & Pallesen, 2012). Ng, Sorensen, and Feldman (2007) stated that work addiction encompasses three main dimensions: affects, cognitions, and behavior. The BWAS reflects these domains and has been determined by Andreassen et al. (2012) to have adequate convergent and discriminative validity.

### Research Hypotheses

Hypotheses 1.0: There is no significant difference between years of experience and work addiction tendencies.

Hypothesis 1.a: There is a significant difference between years of experience and work addiction tendencies.

Hypothesis 2.0: There is no significant difference between elementary, middle, and high school teachers and work addiction tendencies.

Hypothesis 2.a: There is a significant difference between elementary, middle, and high school teachers and work addiction tendencies.

Hypothesis 3.0: There is no significant difference between school status label and work addiction tendencies.

Hypothesis 3.a: There is a significant difference between school status label and work addiction tendencies.

## Findings

The researchers created a mean work addiction score from the BWAS. The dependent variable ranges from 1 (least likely to exhibit work addiction behavior) to 5 (most likely to exhibit work addiction behavior). In the survey sample of 215 teachers, the mean work addiction score was 3.17 with a range of 1.14 to 5.

### Analysis

To test the hypotheses 1-3, we present means comparisons between the work addiction mean index and the independent variables of interest. We conducted a One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine statistical significance between different groups within the independent variables of interest.

**Hypothesis 1.** The researchers examined years of teaching experience across six categories, ranging from pre-service student teachers to those teachers with more than 10 years of experience. Table 1 shows the mean work addiction scores by years of teaching experience. First year teachers showed the highest score at 3.41, although the score decreased with more years of teaching throughout the first decade in the classroom. However, for those with more than 10 years in the classroom the work addiction score increased to the highest level except for first year teachers. Using ANOVA, we found a significant F-Test (2.72,  $p < .05$ ), which showed that the means were not all equal. To determine the significant mean differences, we conducted a Bonferroni multiple comparison test and found significant differences between first year teachers and those with 5-10 years of experience ( $p < .05$ ), along with those who had 5-10 years of experience and more than 10 years of experience ( $p < .05$ ).

Table 1  
*Mean Work Addiction Scores by Years of Teaching Experience*

Years of Experience	Mean Work Score	n
Student Teachers	2.86	2
1 <sup>st</sup> year	3.41	27
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	3.21	27
3-5 years	3.15	24
6-10 years	2.83	46
More than 10	3.26	89
Average	3.17	215
F-Test	2.72*	

**Hypothesis 2.** Examines school grade level and work addiction tendencies. Table 2 shows that elementary school teachers have the highest scores at 3.32 followed by high school teachers at 3.15 and middle school teachers having below average scores right at 3. The ANOVA F-Test shows a significant difference between group means with the Bonferroni comparison finding a significant difference between elementary and middle school teachers.

Table 2  
*Mean Work Addiction Scores for School Grade Level*

Educ. Level of School	Mean Work Score	n
Elementary School	3.32	81
Middle School	3	70
High School	3.15	64
Average	3.17	215
F-Test	3.34*	

**Hypothesis 3.** Examines school performance and work addiction scores. In table 3, we examine three categories of schools: Star

and High-Performing, Successful, and At-Watch and below. Teachers in struggling schools demonstrate higher levels of work addiction tendencies (3.32) compared to those in successful (3.19) and high performing (3.11) schools. However, as shown by the ANOVA F-Test, there is not a statistically significant difference between the groups. While not significant, the findings suggest teachers show higher levels of work addiction in poor performing schools.

Table 3  
*The Relationship between School Performance and Work Addiction Scores*

	Mean Work Score	n
High Performing	3.11	112
Successful	3.19	55
At-Watch or Below	3.32	46
Average	3.17	215
F-Test	1.19	

Specific demographic variables were also evaluated in their relationship to workaholism, tendencies that included gender, ethnicity, marital, and parental status. Using these demographic variables the analysis yielded no results to suggest a significant difference based upon gender, ethnicity, marital, or parent status.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine workaholism tendencies for K-12 teachers in the state of Mississippi. Specifically, we sought to discover the relationship between workaholism tendencies and teaching experience, type of occupation (e.g., elementary vs. high school teacher), school setting (being employed in a public or private school), and school district rating (star vs. low performing). Specific demographic variables were also evaluated in their relationship to workaholism, including gender, ethnicity, marital, and parental status.

Our initial results indicate that our beginning teachers had some of the highest levels of work addiction tendencies. This unhealthy orientation towards work may be related to the long work weeks that many educators experience – those that include arriving at school early in the morning, working a full 8-hour day, planning lessons and grading papers late into the evening, as well as working on weekends (Forgasz & Leder, 2006). It is interesting to note, however, that those with the most teaching experience also have a greater tendency to become workaholics. This may be due to how senior teachers take on more responsibilities such as chairing their department, becoming a Teacher Support Team chair, etc. Knowing that these two groups in particular - those with either the least or the most amount of teaching experience - are important for school leaders and personnel to consider when developing interventions.

Second, we found that there was a difference between number of years of teaching experience and occupation type, with elementary school teachers showing higher levels of work addiction than middle and high school teachers. We postulate that these workaholism tendencies may be due to the result of the tasks that elementary school teachers complete on a regular basis that are specific to the age group they teach. These tasks may include the teaching of all subject areas, the responsibility for the same set of children for the entire school day and the intense nature of the relationship with parents of elementary school children. Knowing that elementary teachers in particular exhibit these tendencies could help administrators develop support plans or interventions that are specific to this occupation type. These efforts may take the form of workshops that are focused on developing a better work-life balance.

Next, we found that participants who are employed in the lowest-performing schools have the highest levels of work addiction. We believe this finding is especially important, as it means these educators not only have the difficult task of helping the students who are closest to failing academically, but are also, themselves, at the

greatest risk of having to cope with the adverse consequences of work addiction.

The results of our study indicate that the types of teachers mentioned above are at the greatest risk of work addiction. These consequences may take the form of mental- (Chamberlin & Zhang, 2009) or physical health-related problems (Booth-Kewley & Friedman, 1987), a decrease in happiness, difficulty maintaining social relationships, reduced work performance (Schaufeli et al., 2008) and productivity (Liang & Chu, 2009), as well as job burnout (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 2004). Although correlation does not necessarily equal causation, we speculate that the more pressure educators experience in trying to help their students succeed, the more likely they are to develop an unhealthy orientation towards role as educators. The results of this study lead us to believe that these groups of teachers are in great need of resources provided by their schools.

### **Practical Implications**

It appears that teachers from specific sub-populations are at the greatest risk of developing workaholism tendencies. Educators who work in the lowest-performing schools, teach at the elementary level, and/or fall at the ends of the teaching experience spectrum appear to be the most likely to become workaholics. These results lead us to conclude that work addiction develops as a maladaptive strategy to cope with work-related pressures. This finding goes along with Schaufeli et al. (2008), who conceptualized workaholism as a compulsion to work, one that is excessive in nature. We encourage school administrators and counselors to consider developing both preventative measures as well as interventions for workaholic teachers.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. First, although the sample size obtained was adequate and represented a variety of schools, the researchers had hoped to acquire a sample size that included more private school teachers. As 100% of respondents mentioned being employed at a public school, obtaining

data from a larger number of private school teachers would have helped make our findings more generalizable to all Mississippi teachers. We recommend future research be conducted on private school teachers and their experience of work addiction.

Second, although our participants came from a diverse sample, only 3% of those sampled were from the lowest-performing schools. With our research indicating that these teachers in particular may struggle with work addiction tendencies, we recommend further research be conducted on this group of instructors specifically.

Last, our research was conducted using volunteers. Those who took part in this study knew workaholism was a variable, based on how the study was advertised. This way of advertising may have attracted workaholics in particular to participating, which may have influenced our results.

### **Conclusion**

As workaholism is a disorder that has been associated with a variety of adverse consequences (i.e. burnout, mental and physical health issues, etc.), we believe that the results of this study are crucial for educators, administrators, and school counselors to consider. Additionally, through our research we have identified specific groups of Mississippi educators who tend to struggle with this addiction; these groups are beginning teachers, those with 10 or more years of experience, elementary school teachers, as well as those who work in the lowest-performing schools. These results may lay the foundation for future researchers to explore why these groups in particular struggle with such a difficult disorder. These findings are also why we highly recommend that future studies be conducted on interventions that can be used within the school system to help workaholic teachers develop a healthier work-life balance.



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