WORKPLACE STRESS AND PERCEIVED STRATEGIES THAT SCHOOL PRINCIPALS USE IN HANDLING TEACHERS' WORK-RELATED STRESSORS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA

Mbonu, Victoria Chimezie[1i],
Nkemdilim Anayo Isaac[2]
[1]Department of Management and Policy,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka, Anambra State,
Nigeria
[2]Department of Educational Foundation,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka, Anambra State,
Nigeria

Abstract:

School teachers can experience stress at work and outside of work for a variety of reasons. This study investigated workplace stress and perceived strategies that school leaders use in handling work-related stressors in secondary schools in Anambra state. A descriptive survey research design was used for the study. A total of 1,180 teachers were chosen from a population of 6,887 secondary school teachers. The data collection instrument is a questionnaire separated into three sub-sections: A, B, and C. The data was gathered by delivering the test instruments directly to the respondents, and the data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics. Means and standard deviations were used to answer research questions 1 and 2, while percentages were used to answer research question 3. The results indicated among others, that majority of study respondents choose "improved career development" as their top perceived approach that school principals use in handling teachers' work-related stressors. Based on the study, the researcher suggests that school principals strive to incorporate long-term preventive stress control strategies that improve teachers' mental wellness and well-being, such as exploring professional and family support and counselling.

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[i] Correspondence: email unizikacademia@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Workplace stress has become a major issue in recent times, both in Nigeria and elsewhere around the globe. This could be traced back to the individual's perceptions of the pace and demands of the contemporary workplace. The Survey of Workplace Stress in Anambra state by Akuezuilo and Azuji (2019) showed that workers, especially those in the teaching profession, believe that they are under more stress than ever in recent times.

The term stress refers to an unpleasant internal state, often triggered by external sources or stressors. This description is consistent with early definitions of stress based on the response of the body to the threat or danger, known as the "fight or flight" response of Selye 1956. Numerous studies have confirmed Selye's original assumptions regarding the harmful effects of stress on the body. As a result, stress is a cause or precipitation factor in many diseases, ranging from day-to-day health problems such as common colds to life-threatening conditions such as coronary heart disease. In addition, evidence from the (Shu Mi et al., 2015) study shows that stress is either direct or indirectly trigger a variety of mental health problems, ranging from common conditions such as depression. Thus, in this study, teacher stress is defined as an experience of negative emotions that results from the disparity between the external and internal job demands and the external and internal job resources.

While teachers may find personal satisfaction in teaching, they may also result in stress, burn-out, and leaving the profession. School teachers who bring an emotionally positive state of mind to their workplace are investing emotionally and cognitively in their work (Lee, & Ok, 2015). According to Durante and Laran (2016), people experience stress as physiological and psychological reactions when they are unable to cope with the demands of life events, with work-related events, relationships and finances being the most common stressors for adults.

Teachers as school staff may experience stress at work and out of work for a variety of reasons. Experience could give rise to work-related stress, such as job dissatisfaction, job insecurity, organisational conflict and organisational change (Smollan, 2015); money stress (Sturgeon, Zautra, & Okun, 2014); and retirement-related stress (Verne, 2015). In addition, stress, both inside and outside the workplace, could also affect the productivity of teachers. Research according to Fisher (2011) identified possible causes of work-related stress for teachers. Among the causes identified are: larger class sizes, increased parental concerns, decreased support, increased stressors, weak administration, low salaries, working environment, school culture, teachers' personalities, student misbehaviour, and overwork. In a previous study by Sorenson (2007), he discussed how teachers in the 21st century were in what was called active jobs. Active teacher jobs include high expectations, such as improving student achievement and improving school overall through accountability measures, testing, and policy reforms.

Similarly, in their study, Mark and Smith (2012) reported that moderate levels of stress may motivate teachers, while overstress may reduce teachers' desire to remain in the profession and lead to burnout. These factors may be the reason why there is an

increase in the number of teachers wishing to leave the teaching profession. In addition, a study by Demjaha, Bislimovska and Mijakoski (2015) confirmed that teaching as a profession is gradually becoming a stressful occupation due to increased responsibilities and demanding deadlines. In addition, it has been reported that there has been a significantly higher departure rate for teachers compared to any other occupation.

In the opinion of Fisher (2011) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015), school leaders are not undertaking sufficient strategies to combat teacher stress in order to retain their teachers. Some of the strategies that school leaders could implement included improved professional development, mentors for new teachers, or time allocated for teacher collaboration. These strategies, as fisher notes, have been identified to reduce teacher stress levels. Professional development is considered necessary to educate teachers on how to combat and use strategies to cope with the inevitable demands of work and the stress of the profession. School teachers are a vital professional group and play an important role in the success of their students. It is therefore crucial for schools and school administrators and teachers themselves to be trained in work-related stressors and strategies to help teachers manage and cope with the stress of their jobs.

2. Statement of the Problem

Stress, whether related to work or out of work, could lead to a decline in employee productivity and job performance. Teachers, for example, have an important role to play in the success of their students, but work-related stress can negatively affect the performance of teachers. Generally speaking, leaders lack strategies to reduce employee stress in order to increase productivity. In the case of secondary school teachers in Anambra State, the specific problem could also be linked to the notion that some leaders and managers lack strategies to reduce the stress on the work place of teachers.

Despite the promising growth in professional development approaches, which focus on both teacher stress management and improving the quality of teaching by addressing key sources of teacher stress, these approaches have yet to be integrated into a comprehensive framework. The objective of this study is to fill this identified gap in the literature by investigating workplace stress and perceived strategies that school leaders use in handling work-related stressors in secondary schools in Anambra state.

2.1 Purpose of the Study
The main purpose of the study is to investigate workplace stress and perceived strategies that school leaders use in handling work-related stressors in secondary schools in Anambra state. Specifically, the study sought to investigate:
1) The stressors that secondary school teachers experienced in their teaching positions.
2) The emotional and physical manifestations of work-related stress experienced by secondary school teachers in Anambra state.

3) The school teachers perceived strategies that school principals' use in managing work-related stressors.

2.2 Significance of the Study

The study results could prove beneficial to school district administrators who provide professional development and support for teachers; teachers themselves could also find the study results insightful as they explore ways to reduce work-related stress in schools.

2.3 Research Questions

The following research questions were posed to guide the study:

1) What are the stressors that secondary school teachers experienced in their teaching positions?
2) What are the emotional and physical manifestations of work-related stress experienced by secondary school teachers in Anambra state?
3) What are the teachers perceived strategies that school principals' use in managing work-related stressors?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The survey research design was considered appropriate for this investigation because it helped the researcher to collect standardized information from the respondents. The researcher collected and analysed the characteristics of a whole population by studying a representative sample.

3.2 Research Setting

The study was carried out in Anambra State of Nigeria. Anambra State is one of the thirty-six states of Nigeria. It is located in the South-Eastern part of the six geopolitical zones in the country. There are six education zones in the State with 261 public secondary schools (Post- Primary Schools Service Commission, PPSSC, 2019).

3.3 Participants

A total of number of 1,180 teachers from population of 6,887 secondary schools teachers in Anambra State made up the sample for this study. A multi-stage sampling method was used in data collection.

3.4 Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for data collection is a questionnaire divided into three sun-sections; A, B and C. section A comprised eight survey items that sought to identify the extent to which the school teachers experienced work-related stressors. The response options included a 1-5 Likert-scale in which 1 indicated very low extent and 5 indicated very high extent. Section B comprised 13 survey items in which the respondents are to indicate the

frequency with which they experienced physical and emotional manifestations of work-related stress. The response items included a 1-5 Likert-scale in which 1 indicated never and 5 indicated always. Section C comprised a 10 items questionnaire whereby the respondents rank ten items from 1-10 with 1= the strategy used most and 10=the strategy used least to cope with work-related stress.

3.5 Method of Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through direct delivery of the research instruments to the respondents. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to perform the data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. Research question 1 and 2 were answered with means, standard deviation, while research question 3 was answered using percentages for the survey items. Ranking scale from 1-10 with 1= the strategy used most and 10 = the strategy used least to cope with work-related stress was employed; data were reported by frequencies and percentages calculations.

4. Results

Data collected from the field of study were analysed and presented in tables as follows:

Research Question 1: What are the stressors that secondary school teachers experienced in their teaching positions?

Table 1: Mean scores of the stressors that secondary school
teachers experienced in their teaching positions (N= 1,180)

Work-Related Stressors		
	M	**SD**
There is too much work to do.	3.79	0.95
Students' behaviours negatively impact my ability to perform my job.	3.72	1.21
There is little time to prepare for my lessons	3.62	0.98
My personal priorities are being short-changed due to time demands at work.	3.53	1.17
There is too much paperwork in my job.	3.18	1.21
The pace of the school day is too fast.	3.17	1.13
There is lack of support for my job responsibilities.	2.96	1.21
My class is too big.	2.82	1.29

Table 1 data also reveal that the four highest mean scores of work-related stressors as reportedly experienced by study respondents were: there is too much work to do (M = 3.79), student behaviours negatively impact my ability to perform my job (M = 3.72), there is little time to prepare for my lessons (M = 3.62), and my personal priorities are being short-changed due to time demands at work (M = 3.53). A general lack of support for my job responsibilities (M = 2.96) and my class is too big (M= 2.82) received the lowest mean

scores indicating a lower reported rating of work-related stress experienced than the other six work-related stressors.

Research Question 2: What are the emotional and physical manifestations of work-related stress experienced by secondary school teachers in Anambra state?

Table 2: Emotional and Physical Manifestations of Work-related Stress

S/N	Responses to Stress	M	SD
1	I respond to stress by feeling anxious.	3.53	1.07
2	I respond to stress with physical exhaustion.	3.19	1.13
3	There are days when I feel tired before I arrive at work.	3.19	0.99
4	I respond to stress by becoming fatigued in a very short time.	3.06	1.11
5	I respond to stress by procrastinating.	2.86	1.06
6	I respond to stress by feeling insecure.	2.83	1.02
7	I respond to stress by feeling angry	2.70	1.03
8	I respond to stress by feeling vulnerable.	2.67	1.06
9	I respond to stress by feeling depressed.	2.60	1.14
10	I respond to stress by feeling sick	2.58	1.05
11	I respond to stress by feeling unable to cope.	2.58	1.02
12	I respond to stress by sleeping more than usual.	2.53	1.07
13	I respond to stress with physical weakness.	2.19	1.05

Data in Table 2 data revealed that mean scores for responses to emotional and physical manifestations of work-related stress as reported by study participants were highest for those who felt anxious (M = 3.53) followed by feeling tired before arriving to work (M = 3.19), physical exhaustion (M = 3.19), and becoming fatigued over a short period of time (M = 3.06).

The researcher considered mean scores at or above 3.0 as indicators of higher emotional and physical manifestations than mean scores below 3.0 based on a discernible differentiation between the mean scores. The lowest mean score, 2.19, was for the item I respond to stress with physical weakness.

Research Question 3: What are the teachers perceived strategies that school principals' use in managing work-related stressors?

Table 3: Teachers Perceived Strategies that
school principals utilise in managing Work-related Stress

S/N	Strategies for Managing Work-related Stress	No of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
1	Improved professional development	1100	320	29.1
2	Allocated time for teacher collaboration	1050	180	17.1
3	Personal relationships	1000	160	16.0
4	Counselling	1060	120	11.3
5	Entertainment (movies, plays, sporting events,	1110	100	9.0

6	Mentors for new teachers	980	60	6.1
7	Vacation	1080	50	4.6
8	Mediation/Mindfulness	1110	50	4.5
9	Physical Activity (ex. running)	970	40	4.1
10	Administrator Support	1020	10	1.0

Data in Table 3 reveal percentages and frequencies of the total number of study teacher respondents who reported perceived strategies that school principals utilized to cope with work-related stress. Improved professional development was identified as the coping strategy used most for work-related stress, 320 of 1100 study respondents or 29.1% followed closely by 180 of 1050 of study respondents or 17.1%, who chose allocation time for teacher collaboration. For the remaining proposed strategies for managing work-related stress, percentages of respondents who chose to answer the question were all under 18.6%.

In summary, improved professional development and allocation time for teacher collaboration are reported as the teachers' perceived strategies that school principals utilized more often than the other eight strategies listed as options to manage teachers' work-related stress in secondary schools.

5. Discussion

The findings of the study as presented in the above table as discussed as follows:

5.1 Stressors that secondary school teachers experienced in their teaching positions
The work-related stressors identified by respondents as being experienced to high extent was for the selection, behaviours negatively impact my ability to perform my job. Respondents also identified as being experienced to moderate extent as: there is little time to prepare for my lessons/responsibilities; there is too much work to do; the pace of the school day is too fast; and there is too much paperwork in my job. Literature supports the findings identified by the respondents to the study. For example, the Fisher (2011) study found that students misbehaviour, work environment, and increased stressors were identified as possible causes of work-related stress for teachers. Subsequently, the American Psychological Association (2017) identified specific sources of work-related stress. Examples included low salaries, excessive workloads, limited prospect of advancement, reduced support, lack of control of circumstances, and conflicting demands or vague expectations of work.

In a study by Demjaha et al. (2015), the results of the study were based on the fact that, as a profession, teaching is gradually becoming a stressful occupation due to increased responsibilities and demanding deadlines. Role overload exists when an individual performs multiple roles simultaneously and lacks the resources to perform them. It can evolve from both excessive time demands and excessive psychological demands. Similarly, in another study, such as the one conducted by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015), teaching as a whole was stressful, as reported by the results of the 30-

teacher study. The results of those studies indicated that workload and time pressure were particularly stressful for the majority of teachers.

5.2 Emotional and physical manifestations of work-related stress experienced by secondary school teachers in Anambra state

From the manifestations of stress identified by teacher respondents, physical manifestations of stress (physical exhaustion, days when I feel tired before I arrive at work, and becoming fatigued in a very short period of time) were reported by majority of the study respondents and many of manifestations of stress reported by study respondents were considered to be emotional manifestations (feeling anxious). These findings is in accord with published findings from the American Psychological Association (2017) help centre article, which stated work-related stress can produce physical and emotional manifestations.

Physical manifestations, generally characterized by some degree of physical exhaustion or a general feeling of being tired and rundown included fatigue manifestations, cardiovascular manifestations, gastronomical manifestations, and behavioural manifestations (Noushad, 2008). Fatigue was manifested in a range of stress-related signs; headaches, sleeping more than normal or having insomnia, procrastinating, lacking energy to the point of experiencing physical weakness, fatigued over a short amount of time, physical exhaustion, and even physical limitations.

Emotional manifestations (i.e., psychological manifestations) were characterized as how teachers responded emotionally to stressful work situations based on how the teacher described his/her emotional state. Feeling insecure, feeling vulnerable, the inability to cope, feeling depressed, and feeling anxious were all varying ways emotional manifestations were characterized.

5.3 Teachers perceived strategies that school principals' use in managing work-related stressors

The study results revealed that majority of the study respondent's selected "improved professional development" as their number one perceived strategy that the school principals use in managing teachers' work-related stressors. This was followed by "allocated time for teacher collaboration", and "personal relationships". It was not surprising that improved professional development and allocated time for teacher collaboration were reported as the coping strategies utilized most often. Other coping strategies reported by study respondent were also not unexpected and those included: personal relationships, counselling and entertainment.

However, contrary to the findings of this study, it was reported in the literature review that teachers suffering from excessive stress typically chose unhealthy responses such as adopting unhealthy eating habits, and using drugs such as sleeping pills, tranquilizers, and mood elevators (Research Services, 2010). An unexpected finding of the study was that of the strategy chosen least, administrator support. Which this researcher believes should have been at the top of the priority strategy for the school

administrator in managing stress experienced by the school teachers. Supportive environments were also found to be related to healthy teaching profession. The APA (2018) publication mentioned support systems provided by employers through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) as a means to assist employees in resolving personal problems affecting their health.

5.4 Conclusion

The study respondents were varied in the perceived strategies they reported that the school principal use in managing teachers work-related stress. The strategies at the top of the perceived list include; improved professional development, allocated time for teacher collaboration", and "personal relationships". Research suggested that if the school principals can implement long-term preventive stress management practices to promote the teachers overall health and well-being, such as finding personal and family support and seeking counselling; they can learn to ultimately minimize situations that were once interpreted as stress threats, thus reducing their level of stress.

5.5 Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the study findings:
1) School principals should endeavour implement long-term preventive stress management practices to promote the teachers overall health and well-being, such as finding personal and family support and seeking counselling.
2) There should be established support systems provided by employers through the Employee Assistance Program as a means to assist employees in resolving personal problems affecting their health.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they are not affiliated with or involved in any organisation or agency that has a financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter covered in this manuscript.

About the Authors

Mbonu, Victoria Chimezie is a lecturer in the department of Management and Policy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. She has years of experience teaching and school management at the secondary school before her appointment as lecturer in the department of Management and Policy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University.
Nkemdilim Anayo Isaac is a lecturer in the department of Education Foundation, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, and Anambra State, Nigeria. She teaches undergraduate courses in the university.

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