
Title	Teacher stress as a correlate of attitudes towards responsibility and change
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Source	<i>Singapore Journal of Education</i> , 8(1), 89-91
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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Teacher Stress as a Correlate of Attitudes Towards Responsibility and Change

Soh, Kay-Cheng

Teachers today are continually charged with new responsibilities as a response to the changing world outside the school. Changes in the society at large require corresponding changes within the school if the latter is to be responsive to society's ever-changing needs. To the extent that stress experienced by teachers affects their attitudes towards responsibility and change, which in turn affect their professional performance, the importance of teacher stress cannot be over-emphasized. That twice as many teachers as other professionals in human services reported nervous strain indicates an aggravated situation (Cox et al., 1978).

The job environment has been identified as an important source of teacher stress. Role overload was the most significant predictor of overall stress and conflicting job demands have been found to be a contributing factor of stress among high school teachers (Litt & Turk, 1985). On the other hand, teacher stress can also, understandably, be attributed partly to personality factors. Studies in locus of control have found *internal* teachers who believed in their personal efficacy in influencing student performance and behaviour reported lower degree of stress (Halpin, Harris & Halpin, 1985). Thus, internal locus of control serves as a moderator of job stress among secondary and college teachers (Soh, 1986).

What are some of the effects of stress on teachers? Litt and Turk, (1985) found teachers afflicted by job stress reporting dissatisfaction, negative well-being, physical and psychological

stress, absenteeism, and intention to leave the profession.

The three stages of burnout are stress, strain, and coping. Resource-demand imbalance results in stress which, when not ameliorated, causes strain characterized by tension, fatigue and irritability. Prolonged strain then leads to defensive coping behaviour, characterized by emotional detachment, withdrawal, cynicism, and rigidity. This suggests that teachers experiencing greater stress can be expected to be less willing to take on new responsibility and be less receptive to change.

Against this background, the present study attempts to find out the relationship between teacher stress and teachers' attitude towards responsibility and change. It is predicted that there is a negative relationship between stress and attitudes towards responsibility and change.

METHOD

Subjects

Twenty-seven participants of an advanced teacher education programme (Further Professional Certificate in Education) at the Institute of Education, Singapore took part in this study. They were in the first quarter of a one-year programme preparing them to assume the responsibilities of departmental heads in primary schools. There were eight men and 19 women. Of these, 60% had 16 or more years of teaching experience while the remaining 40% had less.

Measures

Teacher Stress. A 20-item self-reporting scale was adapted from Wilson Profile of Teacher Stress. Earlier studies (Soh, 1986) using this scale found it to have acceptable reliability and validity. Five aspects of occupational stress experienced by teachers were covered, namely, student behaviour, administrative relationship, peer relationship, intra-personal conflicts, and physiopsychological symptoms. The total score indicated the degree of overall stress. For the present sample, the scale as a whole has a Cronbach's alpha of .85.

Responsibility. The willingness to accept responsibility and the attitude towards it was measured by a 14-item scale. In an earlier study (Soh, 1985) involving primary and secondary school teachers, this scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .79 and had significant correlation with educational attitude and locus of control. For the present sample, the Cronbach's alpha is also .79.

Change. The subjects' attitude towards change was measured by a 20-item scale. This scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .89 and correlated significantly with educational attitude and locus of control (Soh, 1985). For the present sample, the Cronbach's alpha is .69.

RESULTS

Correlations between teacher stress measures, on the one hand, and attitudes towards respon-

sibility and change, on the other hand, are shown in the table. As shown therein, all correlations between teacher stress measures and attitude towards responsibility are *negative* and significant at the .05 level. Only two correlations between teacher stress measures (Student Behaviour and Physiopsychological Symptoms) and attitude towards change are significant. The correlation between another two teacher stress measures (Administrative Relationships and Intrapersonal Conflicts) marginally miss the .05 level of significance. For teacher stress in general (Overall Stress), the correlations with both attitudinal measures are significant.

DISCUSSION

The finding of negative relationships between stress and attitude towards responsibility and change deserves attention. In an ever-changing world, a negative attitude towards change signals potential poor adjustment in work at the personal level and a hindrance to progress at the system level. The importance of the willingness on the part of teachers to shoulder new responsibilities cannot be over-emphasized. Teachers today are expected to take on new duties which may call for extra effort to carry out familiar tasks or to acquire new skills for unfamiliar ones. Without a positive attitude towards responsibility and change, many of the

TABLE: CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CHANGE, RESPONSIBILITY AND TEACHER STRESS MEASURES

Teacher Stress Measures	Correlations with	
	Responsibility	Change
Student Behaviour	-.40*	-.25*
Administrative Relationship	-.50*	-.22
Peer Relationships	-.43*	-.08
Intrapersonal Conflicts	-.49*	-.22
Physio-psychological Symptoms	-.65*	-.36*
Overall Stress	-.68*	-.30*

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed test)

new, innovative educational enterprises will have difficulty in taking off.

It is then logical that ways and means need to be found to immunize teachers against undue stress if they are to function effectively. Since it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to change the work environment in which teacher stress is experienced, one possible line to take is to change the teacher's locus of control, as it has been found that internality has a moderating effect on stress. This is not only feasible but also possible as shown by the successful use of RSI

(Relaxation, Suggestion, and Imagery) technique with high-school teachers in modifying their locus of control (Stanton, 1982). A similar experiment has been planned for some teachers in Alabama and Kansas (Sadowski, personal communication). Such training programmes may prove themselves valuable in enhancing teachers' ability to cope with stress and indirectly affecting their attitudes towards change and responsibility, two important ingredients in teacher effectiveness in a fast changing society.

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