CAUSES AND MANAGEMENT OF STRESS AMONG STUDENT TEACHERS: A CASE OF UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST, DISTANCE EDUCATION CENTRES IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF GHANA

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Abstract

The Researchers investigated into the causes, effects and management strategies of stress among University of Cape Coast Distance Education student teachers in the Central of Ghana. The study employed the Phenomenology approach to provide insights into the sources of stress and how it can be managed to reduce its negative effects on student teachers and their performance in the classroom. Purposive sampling technique was used to select Twenty-eight (28) participants for the study. It emerged from the study that stress is caused by personal/individual factors, interpersonal factors, leadership/management factors as well as professional factors. It was, also, found out that individuals adopt various ways and means such as seeking counselling services, involving in political arguments to while away time to reduce tension and talking to friends. The study recommends that the management of CoDE organize regular orientation programme for teachers on how to deal with stress professionally. It is also recommended that the government through the Ministry of Education trains more teachers to reduce workload on teachers. Lastly, GES should encourage teachers to engage in extra-curricular activities to reduce stress.

Keywords: Stress, Distance Education, Teaching Profession.

Introduction

Modern living has brought with it, not only innumerable means of comfort, but also demands that tax human body and mind. People often have too many of these demands placed on their time; they are worried about job prospects, promotions and uncertain future, and have little time for family and fun. But would one be better off without stress? A little stress is good for survival of man. Thus, every organism must solve their problems to strive and thrive (Adeoye, Durosaro & Olugbemileke, 2009).

Teaching profession comes with lots of expectations and pressures. The profession is one of those professions that are very stressful and demanding (Teacherline UK, 2004; Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor, and Millet, 2005; Newberry and Allsop, 2017). Studies revealed that a number of teachers have experienced stressed in some form (Chaplain, 2008; Kyriacou, 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Related to stress is the issue of workload that some teachers have to cope with especially those who find themselves in densely populated schools (Hooftman, Mars, Janssen, de Vroome & Van den Bossche, 2015). These situations can be frustrating particularly for the novice teachers who were found in a USA-based study to be highly at risk of these phenomena (Fitchett, McCarthy, Lambert, & Boyle, 2018).

What then is teacher stress? Teacher stress can be explained as a teachers' experience of unpleasant, negative emotions resulting from some aspects of teaching work (Kyriacou, 2001). Stress is a reaction to a situation in which you perceive you will not be able to cope with successfully and which results in unwanted physical, mental or emotional deterioration (Armstrong, 2009; Safaria, Othman, & Wahab, 2011). This may lead to low productivity of an individual and ultimately affect performance of an organization. Based on interaction with some students during

counselling sessions for students who had challenges with their studies and other personal issues, it appeared that their problems were associated with stress. This paper, therefore, attempts to explore the challenges and causes of stress student teachers face and the coping strategies among teachers who are on the distance education programme at the University of Cape Coast

The study is significant in four main ways. Firstly, it helps the teachers to know the causes of the stress they experience in carrying out their roles and responsibilities. Secondly, the study draws the university authorities' attention to the factors responsible for the stress experienced in their distance education programme. Thirdly, the management of the university would also be informed about the policies that could be put in place to support the teachers in their effort to manage the stress they experience. Finally, the study contributes to literature on work-related stress in the Ghanaian context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on person-environment (PE) fit theory and the transactional model of stress. Person-environment fit is the degree to which individual characteristics harmonise with those of his or her environment (Meyer & Dale, 2010). Person-environment fit theory and transactional model of stress assert that the interaction between an individual and his or her environment determines whether or not the situation is stressful for that person. It assumes that human behaviour is a function of the person and the environment, and that a person's vocational satisfaction, stability and achievement depend on the congruence or fit between the person's personality and the environment in which the person works (Herr, Cramer & Niles, 2004). In the work situations, higher degrees of fit predict positive work outcomes (Vogel & Feldman, as cited in Appiah, 2017). According to Clark-Murphy (2010), the person environment approach suggest that for optimal productivity, individuals should be compatible with their environments. Streufert and Swezey (1986), concluded that decision-making performance reaches an optimal level when an individual's cognitive capability matches the complexity of their environment. Jacques (as cited in Appiah 2017) also argued that for optimal productivity, organisations should be designed on the person-environment fit based on individual's cognitive capacity at every level of the organisation.

In the context of the workplace, the individual's attributes are interests, transferable skills, career motives and values, personality preferences, career orientations, self-concepts and sense of self-efficacy. The work environment include individual's expectations and perceptions regarding workload, control over one's work, tangible and intrinsic rewards of work, the relationship and sense of community among co-workers, perceptions of fairness in the workplace and the role of personal and organizational values (Herr et al, 2004). If the fit between an individual and his environment is incompatible, stress results. Similarly, lack of fit between the demands placed on individuals and their abilities to meet those demands can result in stress.

Context

Student teachers at college of education are likely to experience stress because they operate in very challenging professional contexts. For example, some student teachers could teach large class-sizes ranging from 60-80 per week, in some cases; student teachers travel from 40-50 kilometres before they attend lectures at their various study centres, preparation of daily lesson note and studying their modules for examination for their various degrees of their individual choices. Therefore, student teachers who study under such conditions are likely to face stressful situations.

Research Methodology

The methodology choice for the study was underpinned by interpretivist philosophical stance. The researcher employed phenomenological   design to understand and experience from the participants point of view their courses and management of stress by student teacher in CoDE, UCC. Case study provides the researcher with detailed information using different data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (Yin, 2009). This design was used because the Researchers believe that the best way to understand a phenomenon is to enter into people's world in the real setting. This approach was deemed appropriate because it would provide the participants the opportunity to freely express themselves in a manner that they want.

The study population consisted all the student teachers from University of Cape Coast Distance Education (CoDE UCC) in Central Region. It was from this population that purposive sampling technique was used to sample twenty-eight (28) student teachers for the study. This sample size was selected for the qualitative study because it was

manageable. Also, in qualitative study, it was necessary to select a sample that would enable the phenomenon under study to be explored for a better understanding. Creswell, (2005) argues that selecting a large number of interviewees will 'result in superficial perspectives ... the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site' (p.207).

The instrument used for data collection was semi-structured interview. The interview schedule was employed to gather data qualitatively. Interview schedule was based on the issues that were discussed in the review of literature and observable challenges that students complain to the researchers. Duration for data collection was three (3) months

Validity and Reliability

Tests and measures are used to establish the validity and reliability of quantitative research cannot be applied to qualitative research but In order to establish the validity of the instrument Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for demonstrating rigor within qualitative research namely truth value, consistency and neutrality and applicability were adhered to.

On the issues of value all the 28 teachers showed willingness to share their experiences in depth and over time enabled clarification of the findings. Semi structured audio recorded interviews allow for repeated revisiting of the data to check emerging themes and remain true to participants' accounts of their course of stress and its management. Use of rich and thick verbatim extracts from teachers assists the reader to make judgements about whether the final themes are true to participants' accounts.Participants were also invited to comment on the research findings and themes

In case of consistency and neutrality. Transparent and clear description of the research process from initial outline, through the development of the methods and reporting of findings. In addition maintaining a research diary documenting challenges and issues assisted in maintaining cohesion between the study's aim, design and methods. Emerging themes were discussed with research team members who had qualitative research expertise in an open process where assumptions could be challenged and consensus reached.

In terms of applicability rich detail of context, the course of stress effects and its management, the conclusions, recommendations makes the study transferable to other distance education student teachers. The qualitative data was analysed thematically. The data collected through interview and field notes were coded and themed after transcription. The analysis was done literally, interpretatively and reflexively. Major themes that emerged from the data were categorized based on the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase guide was used for the thematic analysis. Becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining theme, preparing the write-up.

Thematic analysis is an analytical process which requires researchers to work with data, organising them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them and searching for pattern. For example, a comment like "I experience my stress when there is excessive workload on me; teaching, marking. When it happens like this and you don't meet deadline, it sometimes creates tension between me and head teacher which worsen the case" was coded as "Student Teacher workload" furthermore, to attribute comments to the respondent, the interview transcripts were assigned with some serial codes. For instance, Interviewee Student Teachers from College of Distance Education (ISTCoDE-1to28).

Causes of Stress among College of Distance Education Student Teachers

Personal/Individual Factors Causing Stress

Under this theme, it was revealed that stress is caused by lack of personal time, involving in domestic chores and getting up early and late to bed. For example ISTCoDE-10 shared their experiences:

As a nursing mother and a teacher, I have to wake up early to take care of three children before going to school. So for stress, it is not easy for us the nursing mothers at all. Apart from that, our modules are also there. It is really stressing to be distance learner and teacher

Household responsibilities are demanding a lot. Even though am single, I have to do lots of work in the house such as cooking, washing clothes and stuff. These things take lots of time and if not managed can cause stress, in my opinion ISTCoDE-3

ISTCoDE-7 shared her view:

Well, as a nursing mother and teacher my role are more involving... I guess that I have got better at it and can handle the stress but there is always something new to throw you on daily basis; teaching, marking, couple with bad condition of service and on Saturday too travelling long distance for academic pursue. All these causes me a lot of stress.

ISTCoDE-1, 9, 12, 20, 28 and 14 also have this to say about personal or individual factors that cause stress at work place: They believe that getting up early and go to bed late are stressful. If they are late to school. It always creates conflict between them and head teachers.

It emerged from the data that causes of stress in the classroom was when teaching intellectually weak students; students neither understood, nor contributed to lessons. It appeared that when the students are weak academically it makes the teaching difficult. The teachers do all the talking as no contributions come from the students and finally do not perform in exams. ISTCoDE-4 was emphatic that:

It is very stressful to me when I am teaching and realized that I have not communicated to the students; they didn't understand the lesson, probably their understanding is very low. When I conduct exams and students' performances do not reflect the way they understood me, I feel bad.

My stress starts when I am about to go to the class and I feel that I haven't been able to revise, mark assignments, and collate marks to know students level of understanding. I struggle with wanting to reach every student. How do I manage my instruction to meet all academic level in the classroom? With that, how do I manage the time I spent teaching to make sure everything is done? Couples with this, Saturday await you with this long distance traveling to UCC for studies ISTCoDE-2.

What the interviewees seem to suggest is that when individual does not have time for himself, couple with professional work demands, it can cause the teacher to experience serious stress. Stress arises when you do not have space and time to work at the pace that you can accommodate. Lots of people cannot work under pressure and if care is not taken, serious blunders could be committed. This confirmed what Clunies-Ross, Little, and Kienhuis, (2008) said that lack of space and time couple with high job demands is found to be serious cause of stress among teachers.

Another interviewee also has this to say about personal or individual factors that cause stress at work place:

For me getting up early and go to bed late are stressful. If I don't do this, I will not be able to go to school early and that would be a conflict between me and my boss (ISTCoDE-11).

Interpersonal Factors

Stress does not only emanate from the individuals but as a result of working with other people at the work place. This is what is we termed interpersonal factors. For example this interviewee intimated that:

*Other people at work could cause stress in my opinion. Sometime, other people at workplace could disturb especially when they try to weigh you down when you want to progress. Some of my staff members gossip about everything you do (*ISTCoDE-13).

ISTCoDE-8 complained particularly about bureaucracy in dealing with problems, processing of documents and promoting staff members. ISTCoDE-17 also affirmed that:

It is very stressful when the authorities tend to favour some colleagues. At times processing of our documents and promotions are not attended to as expected whiles others get it easily. Meanwhile, they cannot give you the criteria they use to measure and even sometimes not ready to explain to you why the delay.

However, one of the interviewees was also of the view that though there was shared decision-making or collaborative style of leadership, there was always pressure to get to consensus, the energy and commitment it took to get decisions. He wanted direct leadership style or to be instructed/led.

Sometimes it is good sharing views on things, but mostly I just want to be told what I need to do and the necessary materials that will help me do it, so that I can get home. I mean I have so much to do before tomorrow. I know head of department is capable of doing things well, he cares but it just takes ages (ISTCoDE-6).

It is instructive to indicate that stress could come as a result of annoyance or other people's negative behaviour towards each other. This is in line with Schonfeld (2001) who find out that poor human relations could cause stress among teachers in any working environment, there are bound to be frictions as people go about their normal activities some would stand aloof and not contribute to the growth of the institution but rather would attempt to derail what others are trying to do. This could cause stress to those who are concerned about the development of the institution or the organisation. This phenomenon sits well with the burnout theory by Dollard, Winefield, and Winefield (2003) which argues that burnout results from prolonged exposure to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job from working with troubled people.

1.3. Professional Factors

Stress also arises as a result of one's working environment. So, the next theme we categorised is on professional factor. This has to do with the fact that a teacher's working condition can induce stress for some reasons, for instance, the working environment and the kinds of students a teacher handles can be a source of worry to the said teacher. Some instances were captured by the participants.

Pupils are academically weak and needs more explanations before understanding a concept [(ISTCoDE *28].*

Some school environments do not allow staff to take initiatives and this can be frustrating especially for those who are initiative-oriented. When teachers are allowed to take decision on their own, it goes a long way to help them develop confidence as they grow professionally. Worrying is the situation where the head of the institution take unilateral decision and play down on the integrity of the staff. In other words, when the head practices autocratic leadership style, it kills the spirit of teachers in terms of taking control of their job. This aspect relates to cognitive phenomenological theory that argues that stress is a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised as taxing or exceeding resources, and endangers a person's or worker's well-being (Dollard, 2003).

Apart from working environment, there is also another source of stress for teachers. Dealing with difficult students at times can be drudgery or a nightmare more importantly for the novice teacher. Studies show that novice teachers are likely to experience stress as a result of handling troublesome students (Fitchett, McCarthy, Lambert, and Boyle, 2018). This teacher exactly hit the nail right on the head:

Stubbornness of students during lesson delivery. Some pupils can get on your nerves. The annoying thing is that the not good ones are stubborn [(ISTCoDE *9].*

There are some students who are naturally difficult sometimes because of their conditions, whether physical, social, emotional or psychological. Some students can be hyperactive, insulting, maladjusted or physically challenged. This confirmed what researchers such as Manduku, Koech and Chepkirui (2016) found that unsatisfied and insulting pupils could cause stress for teachers. If teachers are not trained to handle some of these behaviours in a professional manner, it can lead to frustration. And to a new teacher, it can be more disturbing especially if they were not given any training on handling such cases.

Again, at times, the system in which one works can also contribute to stress conditions. When there is congenial atmosphere where one works can reduce stress. By implication, if the working conditions of teachers are not inviting, it could be a source of stress. This was captured by some participants:

Unnecessary demands made by officers at districts, regional and national level [(ISTCoDE *16].*

Studies by earlier researchers such as Hastings and Bham, (2003) indicated that working conditions such as pressures from subordinate's bosses can cause stress. High demands from teachers' workplace is said to trigger stress probably because of the fact that the teaching job involves handling pupils from different backgrounds.

Management or Leadership Factor

The part of research question one falls within management or leadership domain. It is true that management or leadership style can cause stress if the leadership style is negative. For example, if the right material or tools to work with are not provided by the management or the leadership and yet there is insistence on things should be done for the organisation to move forward. This can lead teachers to stress themselves up. This interviewee stressed:

*Mismanagement at workplace. Sometimes, I become incest about my head because monies allocated for certain things are not used for those things. For example, our football is not in good shape and any time I complain, he would give you stories (*ISTCoDE-14*).*

Another participant has a cause: Lack of support from our head teacher is troubling. He is not supportive at all. I think his style of leadership is not helping us at all (ISTCoDE-1). So, if the management or leadership is not doing what the subordinates are expecting, it can cause dissatisfaction which can lead to stress among staff. For example a study conducted by Rita et al. (2013) at the Pantang Hospital in Accra indicated that leadership or management styles were stress-generative for staff.

Effects of Stress among CoDE Student Teachers at UCC Study Centre

Literature reports on the negative outcomes or effects of stress among student teachers across the globe for which Ghana is no exception. The consequences of stress ranges from physical, emotional, social to psychological situations. For instance, de Souza, de Sousa, Belísio, and de Azevedo, (2012) found out that teachers' psychological stress affects their physical health. Again, a number of them were diagnosed with excessive daytime sleepiness and poor sleep quality, compromising health, quality of life, and teaching performance. This was found in what a ISTCoDE-8 said:

*Stress affects teachers in general by forgetting sometimes what they have to do at a time. Due to fatigue, you can even forget that you have a lesson to tech (*ISTCoDE-8*)*

Stress can have other physical effect such as dullness and tiredness.

*It brings tiredness, fatigue and general body pains (*ISTCoDE-1*).*

It was also found out that stress can affect teachers output greatly. This was acknowledged by most participants. For instance, participants said the following:

Teaching involves a lot of talking hence diminishing returns sets in during lessons. Some people say that talking is not difficult but I bet you, if you are tired, you cannot talk as you have to ISTCoDE-5.

In support of this, another participant stressed: *Stress can make teachers ineffective in their teaching. If you are fatigued, you cannot do anything well. So, I can say that stress reduces work output (*ISTCoDE-11*).*

The ISTCoDE-1 to 28 were asked whether their job as teachers affected their home life or not. Majority of them claimed their job as teachers affected their home life. Their views pointed that it was so because bad mood at school translates itself to the home. They also commented that, they spent all their time on schoolwork which they missed out on personal responsibilities/ activities in the home; their family concerns were not well attended to. Most of the interviewees felt their status as teachers and students affected their home life. ISTCoDE-14, shared his experience:

My status as a teacher and a student affects my home life because when I am stressed and in a bad mood at school, I go home with it. I spend almost all day working on schoolwork and also spend on weekends on my academic peruse this makes me miss out personal activities; I don't get enough time to attend to my wife and children and extended family issues are not also properly attended to.

As can be seen, the effect of stress can be devastating especially on the health of teachers for that matter. For instance studies revealed that when there is loss of sleep as a result of fatigue, it affects one's health (Harmsen, Helms-Lorenz, Maulana, van Veen, and van Veldhoven, 2016) and output is also affected.

How to Manage Stress among CoDE Student Teachers

Management of stress among workers in general and teachers in particular has been researched a lot. There is no one particular antidote to stress management across the globe and stress management depends on the kind of person and work involved. However, it is reported that teacher stress can be managed by one, having good relations with pupils, engaging in healthy debates, seeking counselling, engaging in extra-curricular activities, reducing thing that cause stress. This can help in reducing the stress situation as this social support could serve as an avenue to let go the tension at workplace. Stressing the importance of this relation, a participant has this to say:

Teachers can reduce stress by having a good and cordial relationship with students. Students can make teacher happy through interaction and conversation (ISTCoDE-19).

Another participant outlined some strategies to manage stress as a teacher.

Teachers could involve in political arguments to while away time and reduce   tension. Also, involve in community services and gatherings. Finally, one could   sit by the road side and be watching cars and passers-by (ISTCoDE-25)

ISTCoDE-11, for instance, explained:

I walk up and down stairs to interact with colleagues, I crack jokes and we laugh over it. I interact with students who I consider to be matured and respectful. I also sit behind my laptop to browse for fun or visit facebook to chat with friends when I am on break. Sometimes I move outside the sit to exercise or stretch my legs. I also try to always think positively and pray constantly for assistance because the Lord knows better than human beings.

For this participant, when people do not have the opportunity to express themselves in terms of workplace conditions, it creates stress challenge for the person involved. This fits in a popular saying that "a problem shared is half solved". When there are avenue for people to express themselves concerning what happens at workplaces including schools, it makes them relieved. If people cannot share problem relating to their work with friends and family members, it built up and eventually blows up causing damage to the individual involved (Kahn, Schneider, Jenkins-Henkelman, and Moyle, (2006).

ISTCoDE-3 advice to deal with stress was in the area of seeking professional counselling. The ISTCoDE-7 belief was that managing stress goes beyond the individual capacity. If help is sought early from professionals in counselling domains, it does lots of good to the persons involved. However, ISTCoDE-28 stated that:

"*Seek counselling services from those who are trained can help to deal with stress. So, I think that seeking counselling services can help to reduce the effects of the phenomenon"* (ISTCoDE-28).

This revelation corroborated with the earlier finding by Manduku, Koech and Chepkirui (2016) that guidance and counselling services for teachers can help reduce the effect of stress. The counselling services would provide the teacher what to do and how to reduce it.

Researchers also suggest that stress is handled through physical fitness exercise. Those who experience stress when they engage in rigorous exercises are less affected by it. Kirkcaldy, Furnham, Shephard (2009); Gulwadi (2006), say that physical fitness programs have become widely available to employees as educative strategies of preventing stress. Additionally, relaxation was found to be a time-honored stress antidote (Benson, Casey, Dadoly, Coltera, Slon, and Allison, 2008). This was confirmed by a participant who said that:

Engaging in extracurricular activities by teachers could reduce some stress.   When one engages in these events such as football, volleyball, running, you   tend to forget about your worries thereby lessoning the stress effects on you   (ISTCoDE-12).

Another one mentioned that: *Teachers need to rest when they are stressed up. Relaxation helps the tensed body to rejuvenate so that you can bounce back strong (*ISTCoDE-21*).*

Another ISTCoDE-24 commented:

*I talk with my friends when I am stressed. I also like sports a lot so I sometimes engage in sports small. I think positively and try not to internalize or harbour issues and also not forgetting my prayers because in Psalm 131:1-2 the Bible says "Destructive fear (worry, panic, suspicion) is generated from anticipation of the unknown. We all like to be in control of our circumstances. But when I compared my minimal human capabilities to that of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present God, I surrender my control. Suddenly my fears and anger diminished (*ISTCoDE-24*).*

Another theme that came up was reduction of things that serve as a source of stress. Teachers engage in a number activities including preparation of teaching materials and lesson notes, teaching, and marking pupils exercises. These activities could pose serious challenge to teachers particularly if the class size is large. Teachers who found themselves in this situation could be tackled if these activities are reduced. These are what ISTCoDE-S4 have to say:

*Minimizing some of the things that give you stress can help reduce the phenomenon. We teachers perform lots of activities which tend to weigh down heavily on us (*ISTCoDE-4*).*

Another one supported this by suggesting that:

In my opinion, there should be reduction of workload of teachers to so that they can be effective in the classroom (ISTCoDE-6).

Studies report of reduction in the workload for teachers as one of the best ways to manage stress. For instance Sharma (2008) recommended that there should reduction in the workload for teachers in order to reduce stress. Another dimension of coping strategy suggested by the interview data was effective time management. The interviewees were of the view that the little time when managed appropriately relieves one from stress and burnout.

ISTCoDE-3 shared this view commented that:

Coping with stress, deals with effective time management, so I plan my time table very well and adjust to it. When there is a clash I look for convenient time to attend to that schedule and make sure that the time is effectively managed as the saying goes "time is money"

It also emerged from the data that due to the large number of students, teachers tried not to pile up scripts. Others admitted that most of their questions were objective types so that they could be helped out. ISTCoDE-7, for example commented: "My students are many so after assignment, I start marking as early as possible in order not to pile up the scripts to be a burden on me. Sometimes, objective questions are set so that I could be helped out".

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides an insight into the causes and the management strategies that those who experience it adopt. Stress among teachers must be approached proactively if teachers are to function holistically since it suggests from the findings that stress is a common place in the teaching profession. Stress management among teachers should be taken seriously because it affects productivity which indirectly leads to students' poor performance.

Base on the findings, it is recommended that management of CoDE should organize regular orientation programme for teachers on how to deal with stress especially on how to handle troublesome students in classrooms. Ghana Education Service should intensify counselling services in schools to help both teachers and pupils develop cordial relationships which culminate into reducing stress. Finally, GES should encourage teachers to engage in extra-curricular activities to reduce stress.

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