

Full Length Research Paper

Levels of stress among secondary school administrators and its implication in education management in Kenya

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Stress significantly affects performance and service delivery of workers. Given the important role that education plays in the society, coupled with the dynamic nature of the education sector there has been an increased social pressure on the education system in general and school administrators in particular. This influences their levels of stress. This study sought to investigate the levels of stress among secondary school administrators in Ol Kalou Division of Nyandarua District in Kenya, and its implication in education management. The study adopted an ex post facto research design. The population comprised 336 secondary school administrators (28 principals, 28 deputy principals and 280 heads of departments) in the 28 secondary schools in the study area. A random sample of 134 administrators (18 principals, 18 deputy principals and 98 heads of departments) from 18 secondary schools was obtained. Primary data were collected using a questionnaire. The collected data were then processed and analyzed by both descriptive and inferential statistics using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The study established that the school administrators experienced stress in their work. 54.5 percent of the respondents recorded high levels of stress resulting from their school workload and other responsibilities. Among the three administrative levels, a bigger proportion of principals recorded high levels of stress compared to deputy principals and heads of departments. Based on the study findings, three key recommendations were made. There is need for stress management techniques and strategies for school administrators regardless of their administrative level. Due to the rising cost of medical care, and the risk of stress related diseases, there is need for health insurance to cover psychological counseling.

Key words: Stress, levels, neustress, eustress, environment, alarm, stress among school administrators.

INTRODUCTION

The word stress has been used in different ways by different theorists. Wayne (2001) defines stress as any circumstance that threatens or is perceived to threaten one's well-being and that thereby taxes one's coping abilities. Threat may be to immediate physical safety, long-range security, self esteem, reputation, peace of mind or many other things that one values. Walt (1996) defines stress as the arousal of mind and body in response to demands made on them. Such demands

may be characterized by variables like threats or opportunities. The word stress tends to spark images of traumatic crises. Stress is an everyday experience such as waiting on a bank line, having car trouble, shopping for Christmas presents, staring at bills you cannot pay, dealing with employees or employers. At a personal level stress can be related to depression, anxiety, general mental distress and symptoms such as heart disease, ulcers, and chronic pain (Sauter and Cooper, 1989). Smith

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(1993) also indicates that work overload is one of the main causes of stress. This is because too much work does not match with the time available to accomplish it. This is also supported by Rice (1992) who reported that job related stress can lead to burnout, dissatisfaction and health problems. McMahon (2010) indicates that stress among teachers in the United States of America has caused a work related dysfunction among them and even led some out of the profession. He adds that this is caused by demands to meet government teaching targets in tests. Another evident of such findings was a report by the Health and Safety Executive (2000) in America that found teaching to be the most stressful profession, with 41% of teachers reporting themselves as “highly stressed” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School>). In another study by Lynda et al. (2003), the results indicated emotional, physical, as well as general ill health that were related to work related stress among high school teachers in Canada.

In Kenya, school administrators are the most influential factor in the success of a secondary school. The duties of the school administrator include teaching his subject of specialization to enable him supervise curriculum implementation, be resourceful in attracting funding and prudently manage the same, supervision of the members of staff both teaching and non teaching, management of students’ affairs as well as having good public relations and a sense of commitment to duty, hence a role model to teachers, students and the community in general. This is a major responsibility with many tasks. The demands of such tasks can place the school administrators at the risk of stress. Gordon (1974) observes that the administrators’ influence and interest parade all aspects of the institution. According to Dollard (2003), teaching is one of the most stressful occupations. One major stressor for school administrators involves conflicting demands made by the employer, supervisors, colleagues, students and parents. Another set of stressors relates to the workload which involves too many demands with too little time in which to meet these demands adequately. It is worth noting that the success of the school in areas of infrastructure or academic performance is solely attributed to the school administrators. Lack of success leads to demotion of administrators or even other disciplinary actions by the Teachers Service Commission in Kenya.

Types of stress

Walt (1996) identified three types of stress namely; neustress, distress and eustress.

Neustress is neutral stress – arousal with neither harmful nor helpful effects on the mind or body. When arousal is too high or too low, distress ensues, resulting in harm to mind and body. Common distress symptoms include trembling hands, tight shoulders, anxiety, poor

concentration, depression, fuzzy thinking, accelerated speech, irritability and short temperedness. These symptoms serve as a warning that something is wrong and needs to be changed. Distress is something to avoid whenever possible because its cost does not stop with the individual since its negative energy ripples outward affecting others. Eustress, on the other hand, is a positive stress or helpful arousal that promotes health, energy, satisfaction and peak performance. Eustress is helpful in that it enables us to respond quickly and forcefully in physical emergencies and to prepare for deadlines. For the purpose of this study, distress will be the focus of investigation among the respondents. This is because it negatively affects performance, and health of its victims.

Causes of stress in work environment

Although occupational stress cannot be avoided, knowledge of factors that are stressful raises the possibility of redesigning jobs and implementing stress management interventions (Taylor, 1995). Work overload is a chief factor producing high level of occupational stress. Workers whose jobs are too long and too hard, as well as demand too many tasks feel more stressed and face more health risks. Stress is even greater when work overload and pressure involves responsibility for people rather than responsibility for things like products. Perceived inadequate career development has also been linked to psychological distress and to illness precursors. People who feel they have been promoted too quickly or too slowly, people who feel unsure about their job security and those who feel that their ambitions are thwarted in their current jobs feel more stressed.

According to Gherman (1981), other factors likely to cause stress at work environment include role ambiguity or lack of job description where the person is not sure of what or how to carry out a task, external control, for example a chief executive may create stress to a member of his organization because it is only him who makes decisions and others are excluded. Taboos and ethics against negative emotion at work condition in a corporate office usually demand that an employee contains his/her emotional reactions; production quota (where there is a set amount of production required from a worker), communication breakdown and job importance are all viewed as possible causes of stress.

Poor relationships among workers are another factor likely to cause stress because when relationships are dysfunctional, working becomes mechanical and a burden, hence stressful. Workers sometimes stagnate on one job group for long without promotion while others are promoted within shorter durations to higher job groups and given pay increments. In both cases those involved are stressed. In one case, there is lack of rewarding of experience and long service, while in the other, the promotion without enough experience can be a cause of

stress due to inability to function effectively.

Greenberg (1990) views job dissatisfaction as another occupational stressor. The factors that are typically thought related to job dissatisfaction are salary and conditions of the workplace. Types of work-related factors called motivational factors can affect job satisfaction. These factors include: the degree of stimulating tasks involved, the amount of recognition for jobs well done, relationship with fellow workers and the amount of encouragement to take up responsibility.

The stages of stress

Stress does not sneak up on its victim, capturing him or her in an unpredictable surprise attack. Stress passes through three stages from the time it appears until it reaches its most acute level. Pestonjee (1997) has given the three stages as: stage of alarm reaction, stage of resistance and stage of exhaustion.

The stage of alarm reaction includes an initial shock phase in which resistance is lured and a counter shock phase in which defensive mechanisms become active. In the stage of resistance maximum adaption occurs until resistance increases to levels above normal. If the stressor persists or the defensive reactions prove ineffective, the organism deteriorates to the stage of exhaustion. In this stage, adaptation energy is exhausted, signs of alarm reaction reappear and resistance level begins to decline irreversibly and the organism collapses.

According to Melgosa (2000), exhaustion stage is characterized by fatigue, anxiety and depression. A person suffers from sleeplessness, thoughts become pessimistic and feelings become more and more negative. It takes a great deal of effort to escape from this stage of stress. Normally, external help from one's family, physician, psychiatrist and /or psychologist is needed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used *ex post facto* research design. Kothari (1990) describes *ex post facto* studies as attempts by researchers to discover causes even when they cannot control variables.

The location of the study was Olkalou Division of Nyandarua District in Kenya. The population of the study comprised all administrators in the 28 public secondary schools consisting of 28 principals, 28 deputy principals and 224 heads of departments. However, only a sample of 18 secondary schools was selected and included in this study. This sample is deemed representative because of their homogeneous demographic characteristics in the areas of social, economic, geographic and cultural variables.

Sampling procedure and sample size

Simple random sampling was used to select the above 18 schools from the 28 public secondary schools in the division. Lottery system was used in selecting the 18 schools. In order to determine the sample size of the administrators to be drawn from the 216 administrators in the 18 selected schools, this study adopted a formula by Kathuri and Pals (1993) for estimating a sample size, n ,

from a known population size, N , for representativeness.

In addition to the head teacher and his/her deputy, the Ministry of Education in Kenya has guidelines on the specific number of academic – related departments that each secondary school has to establish. Therefore, the sample size of 139 was equally divided among the 18 selected schools so as to adequately compare these departments. Dividing 139 among 18 schools resulted in 7.69, which was approximated to 8 administrators per school. In total therefore, the study targeted a sample of 144 administrators. In each of the selected schools, the principal and deputy principal qualified as respondents. The remaining 6 administrators to be selected from each school were drawn from the 6 core departments in all secondary schools in the country, therefore Heads of Departments for Languages, Mathematics, Science, Humanities, Games and Guidance and Counseling were purposively selected. This made up a total of 8 respondents in each school. However, only 134 respondents managed to correctly complete the questionnaires. The other 10 returned incomplete filled questionnaires which were not used in the analysis.

Instrumentation

Primary data were collected through administration of a professional life stress scale (PLSS) modified from Fontana (1989). This scale measured symptoms of stress in the administrators related to their place of work and their homes. The research instrument in this study was validated in two ways. The first method involved the researcher going through the instrument in relationship with the set objectives to make sure that it contains all the information that are needed to answer the objectives. The second method involved consulting and seeking the opinion of experts from the Department of Psychology and Counseling at Egerton University. The instrument was then taken for piloting on a population of two schools within Nakuru municipality and included two principals, two deputy principals and twelve heads of departments. Cronbach's coefficient alpha formula was used to compute the reliability of the instrument. A reliability coefficient alpha of 0.72 was obtained. Such a coefficient alpha which is at least 0.7 is considered to be sufficient enough to confirm the consistency of the instrument (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2000).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stress is such a complex phenomenon and since researchers cannot agree on a single definition of stress, one might suspect that its measurement is extremely difficult. Ronald (1995) has identified various approaches to measuring stress. This study adopted the self report assessment approach which involved asking the respondents to report on their own perceived stress through a rating scale. Stress levels among school administrators were measured on a 3 point Likert Scale. The items of the instrument used work related stress scale. Table 1 summarizes the responses given by the respondents.

It can be observed that more than 50% of the school administrators reported that the amount of work they have undertaken exceeds the time available. This means that they feel overstretched in matters of time and energy to work. They also do not feel motivated to go to work and they do not feel satisfied by their achievements. Keith (1981) indicated that such symptoms reported by the respondents are related to work overload which is

Table 1. Symptoms of stress among the respondents.

	Response (%)		
	Often	Sometimes	Never
The amount of work that I do exceeds the time available	59.7	33.6	6.7
My work is boring	59.7	29.1	11.2
I always like myself	53.7	30.6	15.7
I always feel that I have unsettled conflicts with colleagues	41.8	9.7	48.5
I always look forward to going to work	7.5	33.6	59.0
Other people make important decision in my life for me	23.9	0.0	76.1
Always finish working day feeling satisfied with what I have achieved	16.4	20.9	62.7

N = 134.

Table 2. Level of stress among the sampled administrators.

Level of stress	Frequency	Percent
Low	37	27.6
Neutral/average	24	17.9
High	73	54.5
Total	134	100.0

rated as one of the major causes of stress among workers.

The school administrators responded to another test that measured the level of stress. The scores were summed up to indicate the level of stress. The scores 1-6 indicated low level of stress; 7-13 indicated low average level of stress, while scores 14-21 indicated high level of stress. Table 2 demonstrates the score levels in the stress test.

The results indicate that 54.5% of the school administrators recorded high levels of stress. They reported visiting doctors for treatments related to blood pressure, blood sugar, and pains in parts of the body. Others reported feelings of helplessness and depression related to work overload. Kosslyn and Rosenberg (2004) have reported that one major source of stress is work related demands. These include the mental workload, physical work, perceived control of the job, and time pressure. Tables 1 and 2 indicate that the administrators experienced job related stress. The work overload leads to exhaustion and consequently, to lack of motivation to attend to work. Walt (1996) reported a Gallup Poll on the major causes of stress in America. The findings showed that 71% of respondents indicated that their source of stress is job related, 63% indicated money related stress, while 37% indicated housework related stress. Therefore, job related stress ranks highest among other causes of stress. Such findings support this study.

The stressors that were investigated by the study included the size of the schools, where the student populations ranged from 372 to 799, satisfaction with remuneration, inadequate allowances, job overload, transfers

from one school to another, lack of counseling services for school administrators, and family responsibilities. The results indicated that such issues were causing stress among the administrators. The symptoms that were inherent among the stressed administrators were sleeping problems, lack of energy, irritation, and feelings of hopelessness.

Implications of the study

The study established that stress is highly prevalent among secondary school administrators. This implies that secondary school work load is a major cause of stress among the administrators. Because stress loads negatively on work performance, the resulting implication is that the administrators may not be performing to their optimal due to stress. This may lower the overall school performance in academic, development of the school, and extra-curricular activities. All these responsibilities are managed by the school administrators. If they are stressed, the implication can be that the management of such core functions may not be effectively done, hence, leading to lower performance in the institutions. Work related stress may place administrators at risk of major psychological distress like depression, leaving the job, and inability to attend to their family demands effectively (Melgosa, 2000). It is also implied that the school administrators may lack proper administrative staff to assist them in the school matters. Work overload was also reported. Given the strict measures taken by the government to employ new teachers, it might be real that most administrators may not have adequate staff to teach, hence taking extra load of teaching alongside their administrative responsibilities. This may contribute to the stress factor among them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has found that stress is being experienced by the secondary school administrators. With the demands of secondary school students and the resultant unrests

and destruction of property, the administrators are vulnerable to such issue related stress. The study therefore comes forth with the following recommendations:

1. That there is a need for an Employment Assistance Programme to counsel employees in the management of their work related stress.
2. There is a need for provision of professional counseling services and teaching of stress management skills for school administrators.
3. That secondary school administrators need to be provided with short refresher courses by the Ministry of Education aimed at giving such administrators some break from their busy schedules.
4. That better stress coping mechanisms be used by the school administrators, like exercises, proper diet, peer and social support and optimism at the place of work.
5. Due to the rising cost of medical care, and the risk of stress related diseases, there is need for Health Insurance to cover psychological counseling.

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