

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **A Don Quizote fighting windmills: A study of teachers' imagined stress in the teaching profession**

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**The present study investigated the prevalence of teacher occupational stress among primary school teachers in Matebeleland North Region. A survey method was used to collect data for the study. A sample of 10 schools was randomly selected from primary schools in the Region. A total of 120 teachers drawn from the 10 schools participated in the study. A survey questionnaire (the adapted version of Kyriacou and Sutcliffe's (1978) instrument) was used to collect data for the present study. A t-test was used to determine gender differences in teachers' perceptions of stressful experiences. The major findings were that all the participating teachers perceived their profession as stressful. The majority of teachers (66%) views the teaching profession as much too extremely stressful and is in the risk category while 34% perceive their occupation as mildly to moderately stressful and are in the productive category. The t-test showed no gender differentiation with regards to stressful experiences among teachers. The study recommended the improvement of teacher's quality of work life through identifying and addressing the underlying causes of stress. Further the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture could consult countries that have successfully attenuated teacher stress and implement similar stress reduction strategies.**

**Key words:** Stress, teacher stress, teaching profession.

## **INTRODUCTION**

There exists a substantial body of literature describing teaching as a stressful occupation and suggesting that teacher stress appears to be an increasing problem (Denhere and Chireshe, 2005; Zindi, 2001; Kyriacou, 1998, 1999, 2001; Carter, 1994; Muchnisky, 2000; Rudow, 1999; Dunham, 1998). Stress is an occupational hazard, which all members of helping professions are exposed to including teachers (Carter, 1994). Seyle (1974) describes stress as non-specific response of the body to any demands made on it to adapt. French et al. (1974) define stress in terms of a goodness of fit between an individual and the needs, goals and abilities of individual on one hand and the resources or demands of the environment on the other. Stress may result from an environmental situation perceived as meeting that demand. The stressfulness of a situation largely depends on how an individual perceives their abilities to deal with those demands and opportunities of that situation in relation to their needs and goals.

Stress, though not always a bad thing (Zindi, 2002) is

often associated with those uncomfortable and undesirable states or feelings people have about themselves. Literature reveals that work-related stress can have positive or negative consequences. A certain amount of stress is necessary to motivate performance and induce change (Chermis, 1980). However, excessive stress is considered deleterious (Winnubst, 1984).

Teacher stress may be defined as a response syndrome of negative affect resulting from aspects of the teacher's job and mediated by the perception that the demands made upon the teacher constitute a threat to his or her self-esteem or well being (Kyriacou and Sutcliffe, 1978). It would seem that teacher-occupational stress occurs when the teacher fails to cope with the demands perceived to be too excessive and unbearable for him or her to cope.

Literature on teacher stress has shown that while most teachers concur that teaching is a stressful profession, the majority reported stress within the productive range of mild to moderate stress (Zindi, 2001; Denhere and

Chireshe, 2005). Stress experienced by such teachers is referred to as eurostress that is motivational and therefore productive.

Internationally teachers have had to resort to industrial action to draw government's attention to their potentially hazardous working conditions with the authorities engaging teachers in a dialogue and resolving some thorn issues. In Zimbabwe teachers have gone on strike demanding increase in salaries seemingly the lowest in the world. Due to the stalemate encountered some teachers left for greener pastures elsewhere outside the country.

Some left to seek political asylum after being reportedly harassed for sympathizing with the opposition. Some teachers have had to do menial jobs abroad. It remains to be seen whether teachers such as these still experience stress that is in the productive levels as reported by Zindi (2001) and Denhere and Chireshe (2005). This study therefore is an attempt to find out the Zimbabwean teacher's perceptions of their profession.

It is prudent therefore to have a multiplicity of studies as opposed to a mere modicum of researches (Chireshe and Mapfumo, 2003; Nhundu, 1999; Zindi, 2002; Denhere and Chireshe, 2005) as is the case in Zimbabwe at the moment on the phenomenon stress in order to understand comprehensively the stressful situations in the teaching profession.

In light of the above realization, the specific question, to which the present study was addressed, was concerned with whether primary school teachers in Matebeleland North Region perceived their profession as stressful.

### **Problem statement**

The problem of the study was to determine the prevalence of stress among primary school teachers.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study was to examine the prevalence of stress among primary school teachers in Matebeleland North Region and suggest interventions that could be made to attenuate stressful situations in the teaching profession.

### **Hypothesis**

In this study the researcher hypothesized that:

- (i) Teachers perceived their profession as extremely stressful.
- (ii) There was no gender differentiation with regards to stressful experiences among teachers.

### **Significance of the study**

While seemingly there is a preponderance of researches on teacher stress in the developed world, the same cannot be said of the developing countries such as Zimbabwe where studies on the phenomenon are still very scant. This study might be important to Education authorities, as it would increase their knowledge on the phenomenon of teacher- stress and its pernicious effects on the teachers' health as well as their self- efficacy.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This present study examined the prevalence of stress among the Matebeleland North primary school teachers. A survey design was used to obtain teachers' self-reports on teacher occupational stress. Surveys have been used in many researches for the purpose of ascertaining the typical or the existing condition of a phenomenon (Sudhi, 2003). This methodological design is useful in answering the question, 'what are the real facts with regard to the existing conditions?' It enables the researcher to establish the status of a given phenomenon. Further, prominent researchers have used the survey design to investigate the prevalence of stress in the teaching profession (Zindi, 2002; Kyriacou and Sutcliffe, 1978; D'Arcy, 1989; Dunham, 1976).

### **Sample**

Ten schools were randomly selected from a list of 78 schools in the District obtained from the Matebeleland North Regional Office. A total of 120 teachers (62 females and 58 males) whose age ranged from 27 to 60 years who participated in the study were drawn from the randomly selected 10 primary schools.

### **Survey instruments**

The survey instrument consisted of a stress inventory questionnaire adopted from Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978). Respondents indicated the degree of stressfulness on a 5-point Likert type scale as follows: 0= not at all stressful, 1 = mildly stressful, 2=moderately stressful, 3= very much stressful and extremely stressful.

A pilot study was carried out with 11 teachers not involved in the main study to determine the validity and the reliability of the instrument. The respondents affirmed that the items were clear. The instrument had a split-half reliability coefficient of 0.85. Hence the instrument was considered reliable.

### **Procedure**

Two research assistants administered the survey instruments to the participating primary school teachers. Enclosed with the instruments was a letter that described the study and solicited the voluntary participation of the teachers. The participants were requested to rate their responses to the question, "in general, how do you find being a teacher?" On a five -point Likert type scale labeled 'not at all stressful', mildly stressful, moderately stressful, very stressful and extremely stressful. The research assistants collected the questionnaires from the respondents after completion. This yielded a 96% return rate.

### **Data analysis**

Data collected using the designed stress survey instruments were

analyzed using the SPSS processor using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages and the t-test to determine significant gender differences in stress experiences. The t-test is a statistical test that allows the researcher to compare two means to determine the probability that the difference between the means is a real difference rather than a chance difference.

## RESULTS

The teachers in the sample reported experiencing teacher stress ranging from mild stress through moderate and much to extreme stress. The majority of teachers (n=78) is predisposed to much and extreme stress (Table 1).

The result of the T-test analyses as shown in Table 2 illustrates that there was no statistically significant gender differentiation with regards to teachers' stressful experiences,  $t=2$ ,  $p>0.01$ ). Since the calculated t-test value (2) is smaller than the cell value (2.62), the hypothesis that there was no gender differentiation with regards to teachers' stressful experiences is accepted.

## DISCUSSION

The present study revealed that the phenomenon of stress haunted all the participating teachers with the degree of stressfulness ranging from mild through moderate, much to extreme stress. This finding affirms the researchers' hypothesis that teaching is a stressful occupation'. This is also in tandem with prior research findings (Chireshe and Mapfumo, 2003; Nhundu, 1999; Kyriacou, 2001) that indicate that teaching is a stressful occupation.

The fact that all these teachers (n=120) perceived their profession as stressful is an incontrovertible evidence that there are problems in the teaching profession. Some may view this finding with some skepticism as teachers are known not only to be open about their feelings, but are particularly an articulate professional group that is able to define and discuss their perception of work situations more easily and convincingly than any other group of professionals (Cox and Brockley, 1984); as such, teaching might appear to be ostensibly stressful indeed. The most unusual finding of the present study is that not a single participant reported experiencing no stress at all. This may not be inconceivable given that the present study focused on rural schoolteachers in a developing country without sufficient resources to adequately caution the teacher's perceived stress.

The finding by the present study that the 100% participants perceived stress within the category of mild to extreme stress by far exceeds the levels of 58.7 and 52.3% reported by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1977a and 1978b) respectively. This differentiation could presumably indicate that the participants were not in any way insulated against stress at all. It can be argued that

probably the Education authorities in Zimbabwe have not made sufficient efforts to empower teachers with mechanisms to cope with stressful work situations. Further, the present study's category range of mild to extreme stress differed considerably with Zindi's (2002) whose study reported that teachers experienced stress ranging from mild to moderate level. These differentiations could be attributed to a number of reasons. Zindi (2002) focused on secondary school teachers while the present study examined the prevalence of the phenomenon of stress among the primary school teachers. It can be argued further that the stressfulness of a situation is dependent on variables such as school type. It is also common knowledge that secondary and primary school teachers are treated differently in Zimbabwe. Secondary schoolteachers are held with high esteem as they are provided with better houses than the primary school teachers. Even in rural areas, secondary schools have tapped water and electricity while very few primary schools have such facilities.

Out of the 120 teachers, 64% that participated in the present survey reported suffering from stress that ranged from very stressful to extremely stressful. It is most probable that teachers reporting extreme stress at their schools find workplace conditions absolutely stressful and intolerable. Some participants in the present study perceived the teaching profession as mildly stressful. This is consonant with Capel's (1987) finding that teachers experience relatively medium level of stress that showed that 8% of the teachers reportedly experiencing low levels of stress. Teachers experiencing mild stress may be those at schools where conditions were less stressful or were senior teachers who favoured themselves when distributing workloads. The hypothesis that there is no gender differentiation with regards to stressful experiences among Matebeleland North school teachers was accepted. The explanation to this finding could be that these teachers were subjected to the same unpalatable working conditions that made them experience more or less much stress to extreme stress levels.

## Conclusion

The present study examined the prevalence of stress among primary school teachers. The study revealed that the teachers perceived their profession as stressful. The majority of teachers reported experiencing much stress to extreme level of stress. This therefore means that these teachers are at high risk as they are exposed to debilitating stress. It is apparent that urgent measures need to be taken to ameliorate the stressful situations if teachers are to continue being productive and efficacious. It is in this light that the following interventions are suggested to reduce stress among the

**Table 1.** Prevalence of stress by school in frequencies and percentages.

Item	School	No stress (0)	Mildly stressed (1) {f (%)}	Moderate stress (2) {f (%)}	Much stressful (3) {f (%)}	Extremely stressful (4) {f (%)}	Total
How stressful do you find the teaching profession?	1	0	1(8)	0(0)	0(0)	12(92)	13
	2	0	5(36)	1(7)	0(0)	8(57)	14
	3	0	0(0)	5(50)	1(10)	4(40)	10
	4	0	2(14)	8(58)	1(7)	3(21)	14
	5	0	0(0)	5(46)	2(18)	4(36)	11
	6	0	2(17)	1(8)	3(25)	6(50)	12
	7	0	2(15)	1(8)	1(8)	9(69)	13
	8	0	2(15)	5(39)	0(0)	6(46)	13
	9	0	0(0)	0(0)	3(30)	7(70)	10
	10	0	0(0)	2(20)	4(40)	4(40)	10
Total response		0	14(11.66)	28(23.33)	15(12.5)	63(52.5)	120
			Productive stress		Harmful stress		

**Table 2.** Gender differentiation with regards to teachers' stressful experiences.

Variables	Frequencies	Mean	Calculated T value	Degrees of freedom	Table or cell T value	p
Male	58	4.74				
Female	62	4.66	2	118	2.62	0.01

Significant at 0.1 level.

teachers who participated in the study:

(i) There is absolute need to improve teachers' quality of work life by addressing the underlying causes of stress. This may entail examining the workplace conditions and reviewing the conditions of service for teachers.

(ii) The Ministry and Education, Sport and Culture could consult some countries that have

successfully attenuated teacher stress and implement similar stress reduction strategies.

(iii) The Ministry of Education could engage researchers to identify sources of stress in the work places.

(iv) A study on a national scale should be conducted on the prevalence of stress in the teaching profession taking into consideration variables such as the teacher's age, personality

type, gender, experience and type of school.

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