IGNORING LEARNERS: AN EXPLORATION OF COPING STRATEGIES AMONG STRESSED TEACHERS IN RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE VHEMBE DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this study was to examine the coping strategies used by stressed teachers in the rural secondary schools in the Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa. Being a qualitative design, eight rural secondary school teachers were purposively selected from three randomly selected schools. The individual interview technique was used to collect data from the participants. The findings revealed that the teachers in the rural secondary schools commonly used avoidance, personal resilience and problem-focused stress coping strategies to deal with stress; furthermore, effective teacher stress management strategies do not necessarily improve teaching performance, as factors such as a lack of teaching facilities, poor teacher remuneration, learner absenteeism, poor infrastructure and poverty, among other factors that are not addressed. The study concludes that the stressful nature of the teaching profession should be communicated earlier to prospective in-service teachers prior to graduation or the commencement of one's teaching career. In addition, rural teachers should be trained on how to transform stressful experiences into opportunities through the application of the identified stress coping strategies, thus promoting the development of robust personal resources for teaching effectiveness and the realisation of education objectives.

Keywords: Coping strategies, ignoring learners, rural secondary schools, stressed teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Central to the goals of the educational system in any nation of the world is the effectiveness of the teaching and learning processes, the role that is solely vested on teachers. Teaching, being a rewarding profession, is accompanied by social respect and dignity. Teaching can sometimes be challenging due to its complex nature that is beyond just transmitting information, but also ensuring that the knowledge, skills and attitudes required by individual learners to become successful and competent citizens are acquired so that they will be able to navigate through the challenges of life (Collie et al. 2015; Guerriero 2017; Viac & Fraser 2020). Teachers are the front-line workers with multiple responsibilities, ranging from developing lesson plans, promoting learning activities by delivering evidence-based instruction, managing learners behaviour both socially and emotionally, utilising effective assessment tools, responding to learners' individual differences, providing feedback to parents and collaborating with other educators (principals and non-teaching staff of the school) and parents for the holistic development of learners. Teachers in

this technological era are expected to adopt virtual, remote or online learning approaches (Duraku & Hoxha 2020; Lawrence & Fakuade 2021; Mankin et al. 2018; Schleicher 2018; Viac & Fraser 2020), not to mention poor school and class room conditions under which the teachers are expected to carry out these enormous roles. Indeed, the teaching profession can be stressful (Ingersoll & May 2012).

The increasing job demands imposed on the teachers have continued to worsen their job performance, partly because of the professional burnout being experienced daily on the job. Although job stress is not new in research endeavours, it has gained the attention of researchers for decades, especially the negative impact it has on job output, employees' performance and human capital retention (Hamid et al. 2015). The Health and Safety Executive (2015) describes job-related stress as a person's adverse reaction towards excessive workplace pressures or demands and its impact on family life, job satisfaction, health and wellbeing, job performance and quality of work life; similarly, the World Health Organisation [WHO] (2015) perceives job stress as an employee's negative response to the demands and pressures of the job due to the mismatch of knowledge and abilities, thereby posing challenges in coping with such demands or pressures. Stress can be induced either internally or externally, the former encompasses the thoughts and behaviours of an individual that emanate from the psychological mind-set based on unmet expectations, leading to a fear of failure, worries, anxiety and depression, among others. The latter involves adverse events or forces that are beyond one's control (Maphalala 2014). Oliver and Venter (2003) perceive stress as an internal stimulus or an individual response. Jackson and Rothman (2005) submitted that workplace stress is a product of an imbalance between the environment and the individual's capabilities. In this current study, stress is conceptualised as the tension that continues to build up within an individual teacher as a result of an inability to deal with the demands of teaching. Thus, the study was guided by the following objectives;

   i.   To identify the coping strategies adopted by stressed teachers in rural secondary schools in the Vhembe District, and

   ii.   To determe how well the stress coping strategies adopted by teachers improve teaching performance in the rural schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, teaching has been identified as one of the top five most stressful professions (Kyriacou 2001), while other studies have noted that 33 percent of teachers are experiencing high levels of job stress (Collie et al. 2015; Crafford & Viljoen 2013). Hamid et al. (2015) also opined that most South African educators experience high occupational stress. Unsurprisingly, Bowen (2016) describes teaching as the only profession "that eats its young." Maphalala (2014) attributes teachers' stress to sources such as curriculum changes, learners' ill-discipline, job insecurity, poor rapport with school management, poor relationships with colleagues, reward and recognition, role ambiguity and workload pressures. To Bowen (2015), teachers could be stressed because of the incessant and fragmented demands of teaching, along with daily interactions with students and colleagues. Although teaching can be stressful anywhere, teaching in rural communities with a prevailing lack of teaching and social resources could be more stressful (Kutame et al. 2014;

Pretorius 2014). Teachers in rural schools are most likely to experience escalating job stress, leading to job dissatisfaction, low levels of job commitment, high attrition rates among teachers, low motivation and consequently students' poor performance compared to those in the urban communities (Collie et al. 2012; Desrumaux et al. 2015; Klassen et al. 2013).

Despite teachers' exposure to various sources of stress, everyone devises a strategy of dealing with stress, either by avoidance or by supportive, emotional, social, psychological or palliative approaches (Griffith et al. 1999; Roffey 2012). Conceptually, teacher coping strategy can be defined as the way teachers deal with and react to the daily challenges they face in carrying out their duties (Parker & Martin 2009). Lazarus and Folkman (1987), in their transactional model, proposed behavioural, cognitive and emotional strategies as types of coping strategies that individuals often used to deal with any given stressful event. According to Hristofski (2016), teachers who are resilient are more likely to remain resolute in the face of adverse stressful circumstances. Hence, Santrock (2003) alludes that an individual's ability to cope with a stressful situation or event potentially renders the said situation less stressful. Other previous researchers have identified other stress coping strategies such as collaborative problem-solving (Schaubman et al. 2011), coaching (Nishimura 2014), development of resilience capacity (Howard & Johnson 2004; Quinn 2011), effective administrative support (Cancio et al. 2013; Hamama et al. 2013), mentoring (Paris 2013), stress management training programs (Harris 2011), team work (Lhospital & Gregory 2009) and school-based stress management for teachers' approach (Ross & Horner 2007; Collie et al. 2012).

Skinner and Beers (2016) proposed mindfulness as a coping strategy which can be helpful in reducing the exhaustion, burnout, wear and tear, mental health and physical problems that are so prevalent among teachers. Unlike the other strategies, mindfulness has the potential to transform stressful experiences into opportunities for teachers to learn and grow. Similarly, it promotes the development of robust personal resources for daily resilience and enables students to experience the kind of warm, supportive, motivational and instructional climate that nurtures their own learning engagement, achievement and healthy lifestyles. Recently, Klapproth et al. (2020) found out that the type of strategy teachers used depends on the sources of the stress. For instance, they allude that when teachers are experiencing external stressors, they prefer to adopt functional coping strategies such as planning or seeking social support. When the stressor is internally related, they are likely to use dysfunctional coping strategies which involve drinking alcohol, watching more TV programmes or abandoning their personal goals. Additionally, while evidence abounds that the effective management of stress leads to improved teaching competence (Jennings & Greenberg 2009), poorer stress management, partially because of inadequate professional training on stressor response (Kerr et al. 2011), equally results in lower quality teaching (Clunies-Ross et al. 2008). Unfortunately, little is known in South Africa about the coping strategies being used by stressed teachers in rural secondary schools.

METHODOLOGY

This study was premised within the interpretative paradigm (McMillan & Schumacher 2010) which involved a qualitative research design. This design was deemed appropriate, given the

nature of the design, which relied on a case study approach for data collection from a small sample size. The population consisted of teachers in the Vhembe District. Three secondary schools were purposively selected to participate in the study. In this study, an interview schedule was used to source information that answered the 'what and how' questions from the participants. The questions were worded in English and six sampled respondents were allowed to freely express their opinions on the issues under discussion. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. The responses were analysed to establish cohesion and trends in the stress coping abilities of teachers from the selected Vhembe District schools. Ethics is the morality of any research. The study adhered to the international ethics of research by ensuring confidentiality and respecting the voluntary nature of the participation by the participants. The authors assured the participants that the information gathered would be used for research purposes only.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of the study, followed by discussions of each result based on the responses of the six participants, as derived from the two research questions raised in this study. The respondents, who were teachers in selected rural schools, were presented with these codes; ST1 to ST6 for Stressed Teacher 1 through to Stressed Teacher 6 and Sch. for schools.

Research Question One

The first research question was: *What were the coping strategies adopted by stressed teachers in rural secondary schools in Vhembe District?* As defined earlier by Parker and Martin (2009), teacher stress coping strategies are the ways in which teachers deal with and react to the daily pressures of the profession. The strategies being employed by the teachers in order to cope with the challenges of teaching and stress sometimes vary from individual to individual. However, teaching and learning effectiveness could rely heavily on other things, such as the stress coping strategies adopted by the individual teacher, especially by those in the rural communities. In this study, the following themes have emerged:
   i.   Avoidance
   ii. Personal Resilience
   iii. Problem-focus

i) Avoidance as a stress coping strategy

The primary strategy recounted by most of the participants was the avoidance of stress, which in their words was ignoring learners. The avoidance coping strategy is one of the various strategy's individuals use to cope with stress (Cohan et al. 2006), avoidance involves using a cognitive approach in a deliberate effort to escape from stressful events, such as seeking distractions, wishful thinking and substance use. In the words of the teachers:

ST 1; Sch. 1: *I feel more stressed when questions are asked by learners because it adds stress to me as a stressed teacher. But then all I do is to ignore them since corporal punishment has been abolished.*
ST 3; Sch. 3: *I feel embarrassed and don't give learners total attention as I know a little about the subject I am teaching.*
ST 4; Sch. 4: *If questions are for fun or teasing, then I get irritated, but there is no problem if questions are educative. Once I get irritated then I disregard the learners.*
ST 5; Sch. 5: *I ignore learners and just look at them without bothering if the child is listening or not, as long as I complete the pace setter and tracker.*

It is evident from the responses of the participants that teachers in the rural communities use avoidance coping strategies to manage classroom demand, a type classified as learner-related stress. Notably, ignoring learners may have negative consequences on learners' academic outcome and in the long run deters the realisation of an educational goal. This outcome is consistent with other studies that have identified the avoidance strategy as one of the stress coping strategies Parker and Endler (1992); Smith et al. (2016) who found that avoidance-oriented coping is efficacious in stress management and it had independent temporary positive effects on life satisfaction. Avoidance coping strategies are a potential emotional booster that is often short-lived but has long-term outcomes that are less adaptive. Other past studies also affirm that the avoidance coping strategy is a denial approach which may only reduce the individual's stress at that moment and allow for normal daily functioning but may not be effective in the long-term (Moos & Holahan 2003; Stowell et al. 2001; Pickens et al. 2019).

ii) Personal resilience as a coping strategy

The study outcome revealed that personal resilience is another way of coping with the demands of the classroom. As described by previous authors such as Bonanno (2004), Masten (2001), Prince-Embury (2011) and Saklofske et al. (2013), personal resilience is characterised by an individual's ability to adapt, withstand, recover and flourish when faced with adversities. In this present study, the participants expressed that their ability to cope with the demands of the job, especially when dealing with learners' behaviour, is based on their personal resilience ability. This explains that the participants in this study believed and used inner ability to manage teaching related stress. In their expression they said:

ST 2; Sch. 2: *Teaching profession is actually one of the most stressful professions, however individual passion, courage, tenacity and positive mind-set will help to thrive and overcome the challenges of the profession. Also, as teachers if one beliefs in the learners' abilities and future irrespective of their individual cultural disparities, and their own negative behaviours, then one will carry on with the profession, which to me it's being resilient.*
ST 6; Sch.6: *Although the demand of the job is much especially when you are a full-time teacher. However, teaching is my passion and I have always enjoyed working with learners, and that is the reason that I am still in teaching profession.*
ST 7; Sch. 7: *I do my best not to be distracted by the circumstances around me, especially with what learners are doing because my job is I feel fulfilled teaching students.*

ST 8; Sch. 8: *A sense of commitment is what is paramount in the day to day stress we are facing as teachers; and I am only motivated by the possibility of conveying knowledge to the students.*

As evident from the above narration of the participants, resilience was found to be a strategy used by teachers to face the challenges of rural secondary school-related stress; thus resilience is a coping strategy in reducing teaching-related stress. This outcome is congruent to other past research, such as Gu and Day (2013), Le Cornu (2009) and Mansfield et al. (2012) who submitted that a teachers' resilience is a requirement to overcome teaching stress, as resilient teachers add great value to the quality of education. Mansfield et al. (2012) aver that resilient teachers are more likely to find it easier to adjust to stressful events, adapt to change and persevere in adverse circumstances. Hence, such teachers will be able to create their own support networks and are less likely to leave the profession, thereby increasing teacher retention rate (Cornelissen 2016).

iii) Problem –focused strategy

Problem-focused strategies also emerged as stress coping mechanisms employed by the rural teachers who participated in this study. According to De la Fuente et al. (2013), being problem-focused is a cognitive effort adopted by individuals to reduce and manage the effects of stress occasioned by daily activities. Being problem-focused is an active coping strategy that involves seeking help, perceiving opportunities in a failure of challenges, having an action plan and sourcing a new way of doing things, among others (González, Torres & Artuch-Garde 2014). The participants' narration goes:

ST 6; Sch.6: *Fine, the job is stressful but the stress will not last forever. We have been trained to teach therefore we do not have other job to do.*
ST 7; Sch. 7: *The system here in the rural is quite different. Imagine teaching a subject one is not trained for and learners have high expectations on one so that they can equally do well academically. I do it to face the problem and learn how to overcome it, so I sought for other teachers who knows the subject in other schools to train me. That is how I am coping.*
ST 8; Sch. 8: *I seek support from colleagues when am stressed, and at time I used humour to carry on with my life. I also think about other way to solve the problems and take steps. You know, I place priority on myself, since no one can be all things to everybody.*

From the expressions of the respondents, being problem-focused was found to be a strategy used to cope with the stress of the teaching profession. This is in line with other studies such as Chinaveh (2013) and Denovan and MacAskill (2013) who found that problem-focused strategies such as active and planned coping have a significant positive impact on positive career aspirations, job commitment, workplace buoyancy and teaching self-efficacy (Briones et al. 2010; Foley & Murphy 2015; Parker et al. 2012). Similarly, Pogere et al. (2019) found that teachers who are concerned about their students prefer to apply problem-focused strategies in coping with the stress associated with the teaching profession. Hence, teachers who apply problem-focused strategies are likely going to experience less psychological distress, less disengagement from the teaching profession, less depersonalisation and a stronger sense of job satisfaction and personal accomplishment.

Research Question Two

To address the last research question; being: *How well had the stress coping strategies adopted by the teachers improved teaching performance in the rural schools*? Crucial to teachers' stress coping strategies, among other things, is to reduce the teaching profession demands and consequently improve the teaching and learning quality. Benítez, Cabay & Encalada (2017) and Gálvez and Milla (2018) noted that good teaching performance is when teaching competency is expressed as an observable pedagogical practice measured by learners' achievements. That is the intentional achievement of educational quality. Despite the stress coping strategies used by the participants of this study, it was evident that teaching performance in the rural areas has not improved. The participants have this to say:

> **ST 5; Sch.5**: *My stress remedy as a teacher is to get enough sleep, if I fail to sleep, the doctor may help with sleeping tablets, so I just teach according to the tracker and the pace setter in order to cover the syllabus. I have no time to re-teach what I taught because when people in authority come, they expect me to have covered certain sections; that is why most learners' academic performance is affected because even if they don't understand we move to the next content. When my learners perform poorly, it affects me as a teacher.*
> **ST 2; Sch.2**: *Even with our coping strategies, teaching performance can't improve because of lack of facilities in the rural schools. Facilities are not available; it affects learners' academic and teachers' performance. This is part of stress for us in the rural schools.*
> **ST 4; Sch.4**: *Ignoring learners and left them on to themselves is not good enough but what can we do? With this approach we cannot produce good results.*

Given the outcome of this study, the three stress coping strategies commonly used by teachers in rural secondary schools in Vhembe (avoidance, personal resilience and problem-focused strategies) did not improve their teaching performance. The only plausible explanation for this outcome could be a lack of necessary facilities, competent teachers, teachers' well-being, learners' readiness, parental corporation or school policies and leadership styles, among others. This finding substantiates previous studies, which established that teaching performance depends not only on the teachers, but also on other related factors including learning conditions, teacher support, family characteristics and government policies (Costa & Araújo 2015; Gomendio 2017; Isac et al. 2015; Hattie & Timperley 2007; Lipko-Speed et al. 2014; Martin & Mullis 2013). Essentially, this current study established that effective stress management does not automatically improve teaching performance, especially in the rural secondary schools where a lack of teaching resources or facilities, student absenteeism, economic deprivation and social infrastructure remain major challenges. This assertion contradicts the position of Clunies-Ross et al. (2008), Jennings and Greenberg (2009) and Kerr et al. (2011) who affirmed that effective stress management leads to improved teaching competence, while poorer stress management decreases the quality of teaching.

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CONCLUSION

Numerous past studies within and outside South Africa (Bowen 2015; Collie et al. 2015; Crafford & Viljoen 2013; Maphalala 2014) have and continue to emphasise the sources of stress in the teaching profession, which are inherent, while some studies proposed certain coping strategies like sleeping, exercising, eating well and seeking social support. Nobody known to the authors has examined the coping strategies used by rural teachers who are faced with multiple stressors by virtue of rurality. It is this concern that impelled the authors to examine the coping strategies used by stressed teachers in the rural secondary schools in the Vhembe district, South Africa. The findings from the study established that the coping strategies commonly used by teachers in the rural areas were avoidance (ignoring learners), personal resilience and problem-focused strategies. Furthermore, the outcome also revealed that despite adopting stress coping strategies, teaching performance in the rural secondary schools has not improved, factors responsible for this outcome were a lack of teaching facilities, learner absenteeism, poor infrastructure, poverty and others. The authors conclude that effective teacher stress management strategies (avoidance or ignoring learners as stressors, personal resilience and problem-focused) do not majorly improve teaching performance. Hence, it was recommended that the stressful nature of the teaching profession should be communicated earlier on to prospective in-service teachers prior to graduation or the commencement of one's teaching career. In addition, unnecessary teaching profession stressors that are needless to the teaching profession should be eliminated. This can allow teachers to remain focused on the teaching mandate, which is to equip and transform the next generation. Also, rural teachers should be trained on how to transform stressful experiences into opportunities through the instrument of identifying stress coping strategies, thus promoting the development of robust personal resources for teaching effectiveness, as well as the realisation of educational objectives.

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