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STRESS: EFFECTS ON SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND ITS MANAGEMENT

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ABSTACT

Stress may be defined as an unpleasant state of mind and body that people experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well-being. Many psychologists view stress as a process involving a person's interpretation and response to a threatening situation. Hans Selye in the 1950s introduced the term "stress" from physics and engineering. He defined it as 'mutual actions of forces that take place across any section of the body, physical or psychological; the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it'. The objective of this article to discuss, based on carefully researched literature review: the meaning of stress, the sources of stress, factors influencing the experience of stress, the effects of stress especially as it relates to school Leadership, some methods that are used in measuring stress level, Drawing relevant inferences from some studies that has been carried out on how stress rears up its head in the school set-up, and how stress can be managed and coped with by school Leaders. This study therefore, especially reveals some basic coping strategies, for school leaders. Significant amongst others are, improving the financial remunerations and fringe benefits, reducing the workload and responsibility for people and materials, of the school leaders or Administrators, is a sin-qua-non to efficient, relatively less stressful tasks performance, as findings reveal in The Gambia. Also, School leaders must communicate more often and through more channels, because information that people in an organization do not have creates a vacuum filled with stress

KEYWORDS: stress, school, leadership, coping strategies, measuring stress.

1. INTRODUCTION

A head teacher sits at her desk. The day had started badly. Her new car had broken down and she was forced to walk the last two miles of her journey to work, arriving hot and flustered. She is working through the school accounts – they do not balance. Constant interruptions make matters worse. The Head of science department walks in demanding money for textbooks, which the school cannot afford. A parent phones worried about his son's progress in mathematics. Just as she returns to the school accounts, her secretary walks in with a pile of urgent papers to sign. By this time, the head teacher is under **stress**. Her pulse is racing, she is sweating and her stomach feels as though it is in a tight knot. In fact, school leaders are not exempt from the effects of stress and psychological distress, (Holt .J and Turner D, 2003).

It is the objective of this article to discuss:

- the meaning stress,
- the sources of stress,

- factors influencing the experience of stress,
- the effects of stress ,especially as it relates to school leadership,
- some methods that used in measuring stress level,
- some studies that has been carried out on how stress rears up its head in the school set-up, and
- how stress can be managed and coped with by school leaders .

The example above illustrates several aspects of stress. First, stress is often caused by external events, largely outside a person's control. Second, stress affects a person's internal state, for example it can lead to an increase in heart rate. Third, stress is usually seen as a negative experience. Stress may be defined as an unpleasant state of mind and body that people experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well-being. (Agbonile, 2009)

Many psychologists view stress as a process involving a person's interpretation and response to a threatening situation. Hans Selye in the 1950s introduced the term "stress" from physics and engineering. He defined it as 'mutual actions of forces that take place across any section of the body, physical or psychological; the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it'(Seyle, 1956). He also pointed out the link between stress and the pituitary gland.

Claude Bernard, a physiologist had earlier proposed the concept of "milieu interieur". He described the principle of "dynamic equilibrium" that a steady state (constancy) of the internal environment is essential for their survival. Therefore, external changes that threaten the constancy must be reacted to and compensated for to ensure survival. A neurologist, Walter Cannon (1932), expanded the definition of dynamic equilibrium further by introducing the term "homeostasis". He was also the first to note that stress could be provoked by both emotional (psychological) as well as physical factors. He went further to describe the relationship between stress and the neurotransmitters secreted by the adrenal gland as well as the "fight or flight" response.

1.1 THE ROLE OF STRESS IN OUR LIVES

It is interesting in to note that a "decent" level of stress is required for us to function at our best in whatever we do. Mild to moderate stress can motivate us to perform better, and also fuel creativity on less complex tasks. Stress also enables us to avoid and deal with dangerous and threatening situations and events.

On the other hand, stress may hamper performance on difficult or complex tasks. Stress often leads to aggression and misunderstanding in personal relationships. Intense prolonged stress may lead to physical or mental illness. Stress can be classified into positive stress or negative stress.

Positive stress: is stress arising from desirable events or situations e.g. birth of baby, weddings (enormous stress may be experienced during the preparations for a wedding), job promotions (may be accompanied by greater and more stressful responsibilities) etc.

Negative stress: is stress arising from undesirable or unwanted situations or events. E.g. the loss of a loved one, an overbearing boss, ill health, financial problems, etc.

Events and situations that lead to stress are called stressors.

1.2 SOURCES OF STRESS

Stressors may be:

Psychogenic stress: - those that have psychological beginning such as anticipating an adverse event.

Neurogenic stress: - stress due to physical stimulus.

Processive stress: - stress due to high levels of cognitive processing of incoming sensory information.

Stressors can be classified as follows:

1. Everyday problems
- 2 Major life events
- 3 Catastrophic events or situation.
4. Workplace stressors

1.2.1 Stressors Due to Everyday Problems

Though people are exposed to Stressors everyday of their lives, what one person perceives and responds to as stress may not be to another person. Examples of such Stressors are – a quarrel with a friend, marital problems, an overbearing boss, being stuck in traffic, difficult work environment, living in a very noisy neighbourhood, financial insolvency, etc.

1.2.2 Stressors Due to Major Life Events

These Stressors arise as a result of major unusual changes in an individual's life e.g. loss of a spouse or loved one, loss of employment, nature of employment, divorce, disability or illness, bankruptcy, etc.

Stressors Due to Catastrophic Events or Situations

These are sudden, often life threatening disaster or calamity, like the bomb blasts that do occur in some big cities, motor accidents, armed robbery attacks or other violent attacks, sexual assault e.g. rape , floods, fire accidents, ethnic and or political clashes.

1.2.3 Workplace Stressors

In recent years, the workplace has been seen as the major source of stress, so much so that stress has overtaken the common cold as the main cause of absence from work (Furedi, 1999). Some of the findings of research concerned with stress at the workplace that seem to support this assertion are highlighted as follows:

Workload ,according to Breslow & Buell,1960, In a study of some workers under age 45,in light industrial set-ups ,those who worked over 48 hours a week (overload) were twice as likely to develop coronary heart disease than those who worked 40 hours or less. Repetitive work, Jobs which require frequent repetition of a simple task have often been linked to indicators of stress, as revealed in a study of Swedish sawmill workers, who did little more than 'feed' machines with timbers, which indicated that they suffered from a high rate of stress related illnesses.(Frankenhaeuser,1975). Workers find repetitive jobs boring and monotonous, there is little opportunity to take pride in the job or feel a sense of achievement. Social isolation, in some work situations, workers are isolated from each other. This often happens when machines control work operations, workers are tied to machines with little opportunity to work around the shop floor and talk to each other. Social isolation is related to various indicators of stress, for example high levels of adrenaline and non-adrenaline (Cooper & Marshall, 1976).

Other factors include Lack of control (Labour Research, July, 1995); Environmental factors e.g. temperature, humidity, noise, vibration, lighting and ventilation. (Bell et al., 1990) Role ambiguity, a role is a set of directives about how to behave when occupying a particular social position or status and this occurs when the guidelines for a role are unclear and ill defined. This appears to be linked with low job satisfaction and low self confidence and is regularly reported as one of the main factors contributing to stress in the workplace (Kahn et al., 1964); Role conflict, this occurs when the requirements of two or more roles conflict or when aspects of one particular role conflict, for example when a work role conflicts with a non-work role such as parenthood, also when aspects of a role conflict – provided by middle management who have the responsibilities to shop-floor workers and to higher management. Demands from higher management for greater output may conflict with demands from the shop floor for better working conditions (Arnold et al., 1991).

1.3 FACTORS INFLUENCING THE EXPERIENCE OF STRESS

Factors affecting the experience of stress include the following:

Controllability—the degree to which stress can be mitigated or eliminated on appropriate response.

Predictability of onset—Onset whether acute or insidious

Timing and frequency of the Stressors—the genetic makeup is important in the experience of stress.

Other factors that may influence the experience of stress are nutritional status, overall health and fitness levels, emotional well being and the amount of sleep and rest.

1.4 PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF STRESS

Stress response is mediated via a complex system of neural connections involving the locus ceruleus-sympathetic nervous system and the Hypothalamus-Pituitary-Adrenal axis. These systems are linked through the limbic system and the Hypothalamus as well as the endogenous opiate / reward (dopamine) system.

1.4.1 Mechanism of Stress Response

The locus coeruleus and sympathetic Nervous connections: mediates the immediate stress response. The locus coeruleus is triggered through its connections to centres that process sensory information. The trigger occurs when the sensory perception identifies an object or event as stressor. It releases noradrenalin and induces the sympathetic nervous system to do same. This leads to increased arousal, vigilance, increased heart and respiratory rate, diversion of blood flow the gastro intestine tract and sexual system. Hypothalamo-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) Axis. Following the immediate response, the Hypothalamus releases corticotrophin releasing (CRF) which in turn triggers the release of adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH). ACTH causes the adrenal cortex to release cortisol. Cortisol increases the body fuel supply via breakdown of muscle, decreased inflammatory response and suppression of the immune system. Extremely high levels may lead to fluid retention, hypertension, depression and psychosis. Endogenous Opiate and Reward Systems: are involved in pain regulation and the production of happy feelings and euphoria, which may be found during stress. These systems may also have a role to play in the maladaptive behaviour of abuse of drugs and other psychoactive substances exhibited by some people coping with stress.

1.5 EFFECTS OF STRESS

Approaches which focus on the stress response tend to see stress as a negative and harmful state. Stress can threaten psychological and physical well-being, it can result in illness and even death. (M. Haralambos, D. Rice et al., 2002). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) for example defined stress as 'negative emotional and physiological process that occurs as individuals try to adjust to or deal with environmental circumstances that disrupt, or threaten to disrupt, their daily functioning'. This view of stress as harmful is particularly appropriate for severe and prolonged stress.

However, in the short term, moderate levels of stress 'can be stimulating, motivating and desirable' (Bernstein et al., 1997). Without stress life would have no challenges and thus may not be progressive, no striving to achieve higher standards. In fact, overcoming challenges is essential for any species' adaptation and survival and this involves the positive use of stress.

Notably, abnormal stress response can lead to both psychological and physical effects of stress.

1. Psychological (Emotional)

2. Physical

These effects are largely mediated by the secretion of Adrenaline and Cortisone.

1.5.1 Psychological (emotional) effects of stress

This may vary from mild to severe effects such as tensions, poor concentration, difficult remembering, irritability, anxiety, anger, aggression, sleep disturbances, sexual disturbances. Adolescents may exhibit truancy, poor performance at school. More severe effects may include, "heat" or "peppery" Sensation all over the body, sad mood, these may degenerate to severe mental illness with symptoms like inappropriate behaviour, hearing voices others cannot hear, keeping to self, deterioration of personal hygiene, talking to self, etc.

1.5.2 Physical effects of stress

These also vary from mild to severe viz-increased heartbeat, palpitations, persistent headaches, increase blood pressure, peptic ulcers and persistent body aches. More severe effects are increased risk of heart disorder and attacks. Persistent stress has been linked with suppression of the body's immune system and this can result in disease conditions and even death.

1.6 MEASURING STRESS

Research on stress stands and falls on the identification and measurement of stress. How do we know that stress is present? How can we measure the level of stress? This section looks at these questions.

1.6.1 Physiological measure

The physiological stress response provides one way of identifying and measuring stress. Since stress involves physiological changes, measurements can be made from samples of blood, urine or saliva. The presence or level of certain hormones and neurotransmitter chemicals indicates the level of activity in particular nervous systems. There are a number of problems with this approach. Simply measuring the level of a hormone does not show how stressed an individual is feeling. In addition, there are daily cycles in the production of hormones, so levels will be affected by the time of day when samples are taken.

1.6.2 Laboratory experiments

Laboratory experiments provide an opportunity to control and measure certain stressors. For example, extremes of heat and cold are sometimes used as stressors in experiments. Temperature can be easily measured and controlled. Animal experiments provide examples of the control and measurement of stressors. Sleep deprivation experiments are conducted by placing the animal on an upturned flowerpot in a pool of water. Every time it falls asleep, its nose drops into the water and it promptly wakes up. The length of sleep deprivation can be timed accurately. Overcrowding and isolation stress animals. Again, these conditions can be timed and, in the case of overcrowding, the density of animals in a fixed area can be measured.

Laboratory experiments with humans have used all sorts of unpleasant experiences to induce stress. They include electric shocks, overcrowding and exposure to high and low temperatures. Again, there is ample opportunity for measurement. In the case of electric shocks, their numbers, duration and intensity can be measured accurately. There are, however, a number of problems with laboratory experiments. Although they can measure certain aspects of a stressor, for example, temperature, this does not necessarily say anything about its impact on the individual. For example, a comfortable temperature for one person may be uncomfortably hot for another.

An event or experience only becomes a stressor when it is perceived as such. Despite the accuracy of measurement in the laboratory, this does not tell us how the individual perceives the intended stressor.

The laboratory is an artificial situation and participants tend to see it as such. For example, one experimental procedure involves participants submerging their arm in a bucket of ice-cold water. This hardly reflects their experience of stress in life outside the laboratory, laboratory experiments do not last long. At best, they can only measure the strength of short-term stressors and the effect of short-term stress. Laboratory experiments raise ethical issues about the treatment of participants, both animal and human. For example, the British Psychological Society's guidelines for the use of animals in research state, 'if the animals are confined, constrained, harmed or stressed in any way the investigator must consider whether the knowledge to be gained justifies the procedure' (BPS, 1998).

1.6.3 Self-reports

Self-report studies ask people to report their perceptions of stressors and their experience of stress. These studies have the advantage of looking at stress from the point of view of those who experience it. Participants are often asked to keep diaries and, for example, report on daily hassles over a period of days, weeks or months. This overcomes one of the problems with many stress measures, which provide only a one-off measure of stress, a snapshot of stress levels at a particular point in time. A diary report can note stress levels at various times during the day or week. The advantage of this can be seen from a study of stress in British drivers (Gulian et al., 1990). Drivers were asked to keep a diary of their feelings when driving, over a five-day period. They reported feeling more stress in the evening and midweek. Their stress levels also appeared to be related to driving conditions, how well they had slept, their age, health and driving experience, and whether or not they perceived driving as a stressful activity. At best, however, self-report studies can only give a rough and ready guide to stress levels. Asking people to report on their feelings of stress cannot provide an objective and accurate measure of stress levels. Subjective feelings cannot be measured in the same way as temperature. In addition, people may exaggerate or minimize their experience of stress. For example, people with a pessimistic outlook may have a tendency to report higher stress levels than people with an optimistic outlook, even when their experience of stress is similar. A variation on self-report studies asks participants to assess events, which are then used as the basis for a questionnaire designed to measure stress. This method was used to construct the social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). Samples of 394 people were asked to rate life events in terms of the amount of social readjustment they required. There are a number of problems with this approach. First, many members of the sample may not have experienced some of the 43 life events they were asked to assess, for example death of a spouse and divorce, the top two items on the SRRS. Second, they were asked to make 'snap judgments' about social readjustment, something they had probably not considered before. Despite this, there was considerable agreement on the ranking from a sample composed of different age

groups, men and women, Protestants and Catholics. However, the level of agreement was lower between African Americans and whites.

1.6.4 Triangulation

Often researchers combine various methods, a procedure known as *triangulation*. This can provide a means of checking on the accuracy of the data produced by different methods. For example, if physiological data contradicted data from self-report studies, then this leads the researcher to question the methods and the data they have produced. Triangulation also produces a fuller picture as different methods produce different types of data. For example, a study of fire fighters combined self-report and physiological measures. The heart rate of each fire fighter was recorded when they were at work using a portable electrocardiogram. They also kept a diary recording events they perceived as stressful (Douglas et al., 1988)

1.7 STRESS STUDIES IN THE EDUCATIONAL (SCHOOL) SYSTEM

Allison, Donald Grant (1995), conducted an investigation of administrative stress and coping in British Columbia elementary and secondary public school principals. The purpose of this study was to investigate administrative stress and coping in British Columbia elementary and secondary public school principals. Three research questions were posed: (1) How does administrative stress affect British Columbia public school principals? (2) What coping strategies do British Columbia school principals use to moderate the effects of stress? In addition, (3) How do personal and environmental variables interact with stress and coping? A three-part questionnaire was mailed to the population of 1455 public school-based principals in B.C. The questionnaire consisted of the Administrative Stress Index (ASI), the Coping Preference Scale (CPS), and the Demographic and Biographic Inventory. The response rate to the questionnaire was 44.2% (n = 643). The findings show that the typical principal perceives that approximately 80% of his total life stress is job related. Approximately 50% of the respondents have seriously considered leaving school administration. The overall stress level reported by school principals on the ASI is moderate. The greatest sources of stress are found to relate to heavy workload and lack of time, parent/school conflicts, and administering the negotiated contract

The following conclusions were stated: (1) the majority of B.C. school principals are able to deal satisfactorily with their job-related stress. (2) Principals need increased emotional and social support from their colleagues. (3) Managing and working within the constraints of negotiated collective agreements is a major source of stress for B.C. public school principals. (4) If school principals responsibilities are increased while their administrative time and support are not increased proportionately, greater stress for school principals is an inevitable result. (5) Principals who have more extensive coping repertoires are more likely to be in better health and experience lower levels of stress. (6) Person-Environment Fit Theory provides a useful model for investigating administrative stress and coping.

Other Studies on stress in school administrators in America, Europe and Australia have explored the causes, reactions, coping responses and consequences of stress. The studies, both varied and interesting, included that of Wiggins (1983) which explored the relationships between occupational stressors and administrative role. Gmelch and Swent (1984) which considered the impact of management stressors on the health of school administrators, and Friesen (1986) and Macpherson (1985), which focused on burnout and O'Brien (1981) which considered coping strategies. Brennan (1987) felt that it was meeting the continuous emotional needs of the school and not the work of administrators that was causing the stress.

In the late 1980s, the increasing incidence of educator stress became such a cause for concern that a special edition of the Journal of Educational Administration (Gmelch, 1988a) was devoted to a whole set of issues on stress. In it, Sarros (1988) explored the consequences of severe distress in his study of burnout among Canadian administrators; Cooper, Sieverding and Muth (1988) used data from portable heart-rate monitors and work dairies to relate nature of the principal's work to physiological stress while Milstein and Farkas (1988) questioned whether principals actually

experienced excessive stress. Lam (1988) examined the impact of external environmental constraints on the various sources of stress in school administrators.

Recent studies such as Torelli & Gmelch (1992) on burnout and Wylie & Clark (1991) on administration in small schools dealt with similar problems. There have been few Asian studies; Chang and Goldman (1990) considered the role conflict and role ambiguity of Taiwanese junior high school administrators with a focus on Chinese cultural characteristics. The Asian Magazine (1993) pointed out that working at full stretch the Asian way have brought much stress to Asian societies. Largely, it a clear observation that, most of the studies on stress in school administrators focus on the top management group in the schools: principals and vice principals (VP). The middle management group in schools, such as heads of department (HOD), have not been considered, except in a few studies, according to, Dunham (1984) and Marland and Hill (1981). Igharo (2012) in a study carried out in all the educational regions in ,The Gambia, investigated the relationship between administrative stress and post-primary schools administrators' task performance,this work adequately catered for all the personnel captured in the administrative cadre in secondary schools in The Gambia viz:principal,vice principal, and Heads of departments. School leaders cannot prevent stress entirely, but they can control it to such an extent that, he/she functions to bring about an appreciably improved teaching-learning environment, with a resulting ripple effect of improved implementation of educational policies and practices.

The findings and conclusions, according to Igharo (2012) revealed clearly that, monthly salary, working experience, age, workload, gender, marital status and educational region distribution of post-primary schools administrators were major stressors. The analysis indicated that the modal score of the stress level experienced by secondary schools administrators in The Gambia was 102 out of a maximum score of 126. This score fell in the range of **stressful** and this correlated with the mean score of 99.8, which also fell in the range of **stressful**. This agrees with the assertion of Mills (1982), that overload in most systems lead to breakdown whether we are dealing with single biological cell or an individual in the organization give further credence to this conclusion. Workplace has been seen as the major source of stress, so much so that stress has overtaken the common cold as the main cause of absence from work (Furedi, 1999). Workload, according to Breslow & Buell, 1960, is a major Stress trigger at the workplace. When the financial remunerations that is actually received is less compared to the job tasks and responsibilities, this can result in dissatisfaction and thus may trigger stress, hence the misfit between demands and abilities induces coping and defense mechanisms, which in turn influence objective and subjective representations of the environment Misfit between the objective reality of the work environment and an individual's subjective perceptions of the work environment(including financial remunerations) also can result in stress.(Edwards et al., 1998).

1.8 STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH STRESS

Some basic coping strategies include: Problem Oriented coping strategy, (Agbonile, 2009), Emotional Oriented coping strategy (Agbonile, 2009) and Stress inoculation (Meichenbaum, 1977).

Problem-oriented strategy, people "take action" by either avoiding, minimizing or modifying the stressor (problem) i.e. they vary or change their behaviour to deal with the stressor. E.g. a student faced with a tough examination (stressor) may cope by "taking the action" of organizing group tutorials, studying hard, attending classes. This builds confidence and leads to reduction of stress associated with the impending school examination.

Emotion strategy, people try to control their emotional responses to stress. i.e. they attempt to **-oriented** eliminate or modify unpleasant (negative) emotions. They may do this by thinking about the stressor in a positive way, relaxing, denial, or escaping into a world of fantasy (wishing thinking).Using our hypothetical student again as an example, faced with a tough exam, he may decide to watch TV for hours to avoid or "forget" stress associated with the impending test. This strategy is only of temporary relief obviously, the problem-oriented strategy is more productive since it seeks to eliminate or minimize the stressor. The two strategies may be combined e.g. he watches TV for one hour or relax and "calm down" before studying and organizing tutorial study groups for the exam.

Stress inoculation strategy, Donald Meichenbaum (1977), coined this term. He argued that just as a person can be inoculated against a flu virus and become resistant to it, so they can be 'inoculated' against stress and become 'stress-resistant'. He developed a stress management programme, which aimed to do just this.

Phase 1: First a person must identify the sources of stress in their life, examine how they cope with stressful situations, and consider alternative ways of coping. According to Meichenbaum, going through this process gives people a sense of control. Phase 2: The next step is to learn a series of skills for dealing with stressful situations. This involves learning a list of coping self-statements, all of which are positive, reassuring and encouraging. At the same time negative self-statements which are self-critical and defeatist, must be identified and rejected. For example, before giving a speech, negative statements such as, 'I'll forget my line', and 'I'll sound boring', must be replaced by positive statements such as 'I'm well prepared', 'I'm nervous but that means I'll give of my best'.

Phase 3: The final step is to appraise the performance. People must give themselves full credit for successful coping. Again, the emphasis is on positive statements, this can be self-reinforcing, increase self-confidence and improve self-image.

2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, significantly improving the financial remunerations and fringe benefits, reducing the workload and responsibility for people and materials, of the post-primary school leaders or Administrators, is a *sin-qua-non* to efficient, relatively less stressful tasks performance, as findings reveal in The Gambia, since it is a fact, that basic principles are well accomplished; if basic needs are adequately gratified.

The use of Hersey-Blanchard's (1988), situational leadership model is recommended for secondary schools Leaders, it asserts that successful leaders adjust their styles depending on the maturity of followers, indicated by their readiness to perform in a given situation i.e. how able and willing or confident followers are to perform required tasks. Therefore, the leader could apply a combination of the following styles: Delegation, Participation (sharing ideas), selling (explaining decision) and Telling (giving instructions).

To substantially reduce to a minimum proportion Leadership stress still persistent in our school system, more attention should be focused on this vital area, by the post-primary school governing authorities in the ministries or departments of Basic and secondary Education. In addition, Reeves, D.B (2010), recommends that school Leaders must communicate more often and through more channels, because information that people in an organization do not have creates a vacuum filled with stress, fear and rumours.

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