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AUTHOR Wheeler, Larry J.; And Others  
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ABSTRACT

Responses to a questionnaire regarding stress and coping skills were collected from 185 regular educators and 225 special educators--teaching emotionally disturbed (ED), learning disabled (LD), mentally retarded (MR) or other types of handicapped children. Results demonstrated little difference between the regular and special educators' responses to both stress and coping. Both groups of teachers reported administrative variables, student behaviors, pressure, and paperwork as producing the greatest amount of stress. More teachers of ED and LD children than teachers of MR or other handicapped children reported the administration as their most common source of stress. ED teachers reported conflicts between themselves and other staff members, as well as no student progress, to be more stressful than other special educators. MR teachers reported inappropriate student behaviors less frequently (15%) than either ED or LD teachers as a source of stress; and only 2% of the other special educators saw inappropriate student behaviors as a source of stress. LD teachers and other special educators reported internalizing stress as a coping mechanism more frequently than either MR or ED teachers. All groups of teachers reported internalizing stress, talking to a safe person, and engaging in alternative activities as the most common methods of coping with stress. (DB)

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STRESS AND COPING: A COMPARISON OF REGULAR  
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Larry J. Wheeler, Ed.D.  
Associate Professor  
Special Education Programs  
Dept. of Curriculum and Instruction  
Southwest Texas State University  
San Marcos, Texas 78666

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Thomas F. Reilly, Ed.D.  
Associate Professor  
Dept. of Special Education  
Chicago State University  
Chicago, Illinois 60628

Catherine Donahue, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Dept. of Special Education  
North Texas State University  
Denton, Texas 76203

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STRESS AND COPING: A COMPARISON OF REGULAR  
AND SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Abstract

Responses to a questionnaire regarding stress and coping skills were collected from 410 educators. These responses were compared to determine similarities and differences between regular and special educators. In addition, the special educators were divided into different categories, depending on what type of handicapping condition taught, and those responses were also compared. The results demonstrated little difference between the regular and special educators' response to both stress and coping, although some interesting relationships were found between the different special education teachers. However, except for a few differences, it appears that these teachers' responses to stress variables and coping skills were similar.

STRESS AND COPING: A COMPARISON OF REGULAR  
AND SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Much has been written on the topic of stress (Levinson, 1970; Maslow, 1971; Schafer, 1978; Selye, 1976), including teacher stress (Brown, 1972; Duffner, Long, & Fagen, 1979). Selye (1976) has defined stress in terms of the physiological reaction of the body to environmental demands made on it. Obviously, there are many demands made of teachers today. With the passage of Public Law 94-142 (Federal Register, 1976) the educational environment of the public schools has dramatically changed. Special educators are now serving a more severely impaired student population and regular educators are now serving special education students with more frequency than in years past. Consequently, the amount of work required of teachers, as well as their stress level, has greatly increased due to the increased expectations for teachers.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what causes this stress in education since different individuals will perceive different situations as stressful. In addition, the cause appears to be cumulative rather than singular. It may entail one or more of the following: (a) good intentions gone awry, (b) paradoxal morals, (c) ethical ambiguities, (d) unreasonable expectations, (e) administrative inconsistencies, (f) poor financial incentive, (g) misdiagnosed and/or inappropriately placed students, and (h) being "tired" of daily school activities; and frequently culminates in a condition referred to as burnout (Freudenberger, 1974; Hendrickson, 1978; Zabel & Zabel, 1982).

Since stress appears to be a reality in education, it was the purpose

of this investigation to identify: (a) those situations perceived as stressful by both regular and special education teachers, and (b) the coping skills utilized by those teachers for dealing with stress. In addition, this investigation also compared those responses to perceived stress and coping skills, between the different categories of teachers sampled in this investigation, in order to determine similarities and differences.

Method

The subjects utilized in this study were 410 regular and special education teachers located in the southwestern (N=162) and midwestern (N=248) regions of the United States. These teachers were sampled from both the elementary and secondary schools. In addition, the special educators included teachers for the emotionally disturbed (ED), learning disabled (LD), mentally retarded (MR), and other special education personnel (i.e., teachers for the orthopedically handicapped, hearing impaired, and visually impaired, as well as speech pathologists and educational diagnosticians). These other special educators were grouped into one classification for this investigation due to their infrequent number in the sample.

These teachers were asked to complete a survey regarding stress and coping skills. This survey instrument collected demographic information and written responses to two open-ended questions. The demographic information pertaining to the subjects is presented in Table 1. The two

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Insert Table 1  
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open-ended questions were: (a) "Those stressors which regularly increase or maintain a high stress level for me are. . .", and (b) "When feeling under stress, I. . .". Of the 499 survey forms distributed, 410 (82%) were completed and returned. The author feels this high return rate indicates that many teachers are concerned with stress and its effect.

### Results and Discussion

The responses to the survey were tabulated and are reported in percentages for each area (i.e., stressors and coping skills). These percentages were rounded off to the nearest whole number except for those frequencies below 1%. In those instances, the percentages reflect accurate frequencies.

#### Stressors

The respondents reported a number of variables they found to be stressful. These variables included their administration, inappropriate student behaviors, external and internal pressures to do a good job, a vast amount of paperwork, incompetent others who do not meet their responsibilities, hostile or apathetic parents who do not support educators, inadequate salary, conflicts with other staff members (e.g., other teachers), students who demonstrated no progress, no recognition or positive feedback for what they accomplish, not having adequate materials to teach, others not understanding their students or program, dishonesty, and gossip. These variables, and the frequency to which the different teachers responded to these variables, are listed in Table 2.

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 Insert Table 2  
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As Table 2 indicates, there was not a great deal of difference between the percentages or the ranking of the stress variables reported by both regular and special education teachers. Both groups of teachers reported administrative variables, student behaviors, pressure, and paperwork as producing the greatest amount of stress. However, regular education teachers found the administration and student behaviors to be more stressful than special education teachers. In contrast, special educators found paperwork to be slightly more stressful than regular educators. Incompetence and parents followed those variables, and showed the only difference in rankings between the two groups. Special educators found incompetence to be more stressful than parents. Whereas, regular educators reversed this order in their rankings. The remaining stress variables reported by the respondents were consistent between the two groups in their ranking, with only slight differences ranging from .09% to 2% reported in their responses.

Although there were no great differences in the variables both regular and special educators perceived as stressful, the comparison between the different special education teachers demonstrated some interesting relationships. Once again, regardless of placement, all special education teachers reported the administration as their most common source of stress. But the number of people responding to this variable differed between the different placements. A greater number of LD (38%) and ED (36%) teachers responded to this factor than either MR teachers (30%) or those placed in other special education positions (29%). Following administrative variables, the special educators revealed no consistent pattern in their rankings. Nevertheless, several interesting results were identified regarding the

percentage of responses. ED teachers reported conflicts between themselves and other staff members, as well as no student progress, to be more stressful than the other special educators. In regard to lack of student progress, it is interesting to note that only 2% of the LD teachers, and neither the MR teachers or other special educators responded to that factor. One can only speculate that these special educators perceive their students as either: (a) progressing to their capabilities, or (b) handicapped to the extent that progress is very slow. Another area of interest was the MR teachers' response to student behaviors. MR teachers (15%) recorded inappropriate student behaviors less frequently than LD teachers (21%), ED teachers (23%), or other special educators (26%). A final area of interest concerns paperwork. Even though differences existed between LD (23%), ED (18%), and MR (15%) teachers, the interesting finding was the lack of response shown by the other special educators (2%).

### Coping Skills

As with the stress variables, the respondents identified a number of coping skills they utilize when confronted with stress. The most common response was to internalize that stress (i.e., to become nervous, anxious, depressed, and irritable). After internalizing stress, the participants responded that they talked to a safe person (e.g., a colleague, friend, or family member) or participated in alternative activities (e.g., taking a day off from school, reading, going out to eat and/or a movie, drinking alcohol, and sex). Other coping skills listed by the teachers were relaxing, physical exercise, rationally thinking the problem out to a conclusion, displacing their feelings of frustration (usually on their families, friends, and/or students), eating, praying, reflecting on positive thoughts/comments

that had occurred prior to the stressful situation, developing physical symptoms of ill-health, changing the structure of the classroom and/or activities, dealing directly with the stressor, complaining to someone in authority (e.g., a principal or supervisor), taking some form of medication, ignoring the problem, going back to school to upgrade their education, and seeking professional counseling. Table 3 lists these coping skills and shows how frequently the different teachers recorded those skills.

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 Insert Table 3  
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Comparing the responses of regular and special educators in Table 3 shows little difference between the two groups' skill to cope with stress. Although some difference was revealed in how the two groups ranked the coping skills, the percentages of responses from both groups were equivalent. Only internalizing stress showed a slight difference between regular educators (29%) and special educators (34%):

Even though there was little difference between the responses of regular and special educators, there were some interesting differences found to exist between the different groups of special educators. ED teachers reported they internalized stress, talked to a safe person, and engaged in alternative activities at an equal frequency. While MR teachers reported slight differences between these coping skills, with greater differences reported by LD teachers and the other special educators. These LD teachers and other special educators responded more frequently than ED or MR teachers to internalizing stress, with less frequent responses to engaging in alternative activities. In addition, after these first three

responses, there was a sharp decline in ED teachers response to the other items. Followed by a gradual decrease in responses for the other items. In comparison, LD teachers and the other special educators showed a sharp decline in responses after the first two coping skills (i.e., internalizing stress and talking to a safe person). This decline was found to be so extreme that, when compared with the other groups of special education teachers, differences were found in several areas (i.e., engaging in alternative activities, relaxing, physical exercise, and rationally thinking the problem to a conclusion). Finally, the comparison showed MR teachers had a gradual decrease throughout all responses.

#### Conclusions

These results indicated that, for the teachers sampled in this investigation, there was a variety of situations that were perceived as stressful. In fact, upon tabulating the responses it was discovered that most of the participants included more than one response. But the comparison between these regular and special educators, as well as the different groups of special educators, demonstrated little difference in how they perceived stress. It appears that, except for the few differences previously mentioned, teachers perceive similar situations as stressful.

These results also demonstrated that these teachers utilized a number of coping skills when dealing with their stress. Again, as with their perceptions of stress, some differences were found to exist in how they coped with stress. But many of their responses were similar. Even though they differed in how they ranked the coping skills and the frequency of responses, all groups of teachers identified internalizing stress, talking to a safe person, and engaging in alternative activities as the

three most common methods of coping with stress.

Possibly one of the most important findings of this investigation is that all groups of teachers, regardless of placement, identified the administration as their major stressor. Although differences were found to exist in the frequency to which the different groups responded to this factor, they all found this variable to be the most stressful. These teachers' responses indicated that they felt their administration provided no leadership, support, communication, or follow-up. They also felt their administrators were disorganized and inconsistent. This finding corroborates other research. Lawrenson and McKinnon (1982) asked teachers who had resigned to rank order the reasons for leaving their jobs. The highest ranking in their survey was tired of hassles with the administration. In addition, when they asked both the teachers who had resigned and teachers who were still employed to rank order job dissatisfiers, the total group identified lack of administrative support as the number one job dissatisfaction.

Another important finding of this investigation is that few of the coping skills utilized by these teachers actually dealt directly with the stressor. Most of the responses allowed the individual the opportunity to temporarily vent their frustrations. However, very few dealt directly with the problem. But when the major stressor identified by all groups of teachers is the administration, then it's not surprising that only a few are willing to confront that source of stress.

In conclusion, it appears that the teachers sampled in this investigation perceive their administrations as a major source of stress. Coupled with the fact that very few of the coping skills utilized by these teachers

dealt directly with their source of stress, and it seems inevitable that burnout will occur. Therefore, school administrations must be willing to address teacher stress. Much can be done at the administrative level to alleviate teacher stress through program strategy, changes, and interventions (Weiskopf, (1980). If school administrations do not address these issues, than these problems can be expected to continue.

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Table 1

Demographic Information Pertaining to the Sample

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<u>Sex</u>		<u>Ages*</u>	
Male	53 (13%)	18-30	141 (34%)
Female	357 (87%)	31-40	161 (39%)
		41-50	73 (18%)
		51-60	27 ( 7%)
		Over 60	5 ( 1%)

Teaching Positions

Regular Education	185 (45%)**	
Special Education	225 (55%)	
ED	61 (15%)	(27%)***
LD	56 (14%)	(25%)
MR	74 (18%)	(33%)
Other Special Educators****	34 ( 8%)	(15%)

\* 3 subjects (1%) did not reveal their age

\*\* Percent of total sample

\*\*\* Percent of special education sample

\*\*\*\* Orthopedic handicaps, hearing impairments, visual impairments, speech pathologists, and educational diagnosticians.

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Note: Percentages are rounded off to the nearest whole number.

Table 2

Teachers' Response to Stress Variables

<u>Administration</u>		<u>Student Behavior</u>		<u>Pressure</u>		<u>Paperwork</u>	
Regular	43%	Regular	32%	Regular	22%	Regular	15%
Sp. Ed.	35%	Sp. Ed.	21%	Sp. Ed.	20%	Sp. Ed.	20%
ED	36%	ED	23%	ED	20%	ED	18%
LD	38%	LD	21%	LD	18%	LD	23%
MR	30%	MR	15%	MR	20%	MR	15%
Other	29%	Other	26%	Other	18%	Other	2%
<u>Incompetence</u>		<u>Parents</u>		<u>Money</u>		<u>Staff Conflicts</u>	
Regular	10%	Regular	15%	Regular	6%	Regular	4%
Sp. Ed.	14%	Sp. Ed.	11%	Sp. Ed.	8%	Sp. Ed.	6%
ED	10%	ED	9%	ED	5%	ED	13%
LD	14%	LD	7%	LD	1%	LD	2%
MR	15%	MR	4%	MR	8%	MR	5%
Other	14%	Other	9%	Other	3%	Other	-
<u>No Student Progress</u>		<u>No Recognition</u>		<u>No Materials</u>		<u>No Understanding</u>	
Regular	4%	Regular	4%	Regular	3%	Regular	2%
Sp. Ed.	3%	Sp. Ed.	3%	Sp. Ed.	2%	Sp. Ed.	1%
ED	8%	ED	3%	ED	5%	ED	2%
LD	2%	LD	4%	LD	-	LD	-
MR	-	MR	1%	MR	3%	MR	3%
Other	-	Other	3%	Other	-	Other	-
<u>Dishonesty</u>				<u>Gossip</u>			
Regular	-			Regular	-		
Sp. Ed.	0.9%			Sp. Ed.	0.9%		
ED	-			ED	-		
LD	-			LD	-		
MR	1.0%			MR	1.0%		
Other	3.0%			Other	3.0%		

Table 3

## Teachers' Response to Coping Skills

<u>Internalize</u>		<u>Talk to Safe Person</u>		<u>Alternative Activity</u>		<u>Relax</u>	
Regular	29%	Regular	30%	Regular	27%	Regular	15%
Sp. Ed.	34%	Sp. Ed.	32%	Sp. Ed.	24%	Sp. Ed.	18%
ED	30%	ED	30%	ED	30%	ED	18%
LD	41%	LD	29%	LD	16%	LD	16%
MR	24%	MR	32%	MR	23%	MR	19%
Other	44%	Other	32%	Other	9%	Other	9%
<u>Physical Exercise</u>		<u>Think Rationally</u>		<u>Displace Frustration</u>		<u>Eat</u>	
Regular	13%	Regular	10%	Regular	3%	Regular	5%
Sp. Ed.	10%	Sp. Ed.	10%	Sp. Ed.	4%	Sp. Ed.	3%
ED	10%	ED	13%	ED	7%	ED	3%
LD	7%	LD	16%	LD	4%	LD	-
MR	16%	MR	4%	MR	4%	MR	3%
Other	3%	Other	6%	Other	-	Other	6%
<u>Prayer</u>		<u>Positive Thoughts/Comments</u>		<u>Physical Symptoms</u>		<u>Change Class</u>	
Regular	5%	Regular	5%	Regular	5%	Regular	3%
Sp. Ed.	5%	Sp. Ed.	4%	Sp. Ed.	4%	Sp. Ed.	2%
ED	5%	ED	3%	ED	5%	ED	-
LD	2%	LD	4%	LD	2%	LD	4%
MR	7%	MR	7%	MR	4%	MR	1%
Other	3%	Other	-	Other	-	Other	6%
<u>Deal Direct</u>		<u>Complain</u>		<u>Medication</u>		<u>Ignore Problem</u>	
Regular	2%	Regular	-	Regular	-	Regular	0.5%
Sp. Ed.	3%	Sp. Ed.	2%	Sp. Ed.	1%	Sp. Ed.	0.5%
ED	-	ED	3%	ED	2%	ED	-
LD	7%	LD	2%	LD	-	LD	2.0%
MR	-	MR	-	MR	-	MR	-
Other	6%	Other	3%	Other	3%	Other	-
<u>Upgrade Education</u>		<u>Professional Counseling</u>					
Regular	0.5%	Regular	0.5%				
Sp. Ed.	0.5%	Sp. Ed.	-				
ED	-	ED	-				
LD	-	LD	-				
MR	1.0%	MR	-				
Other	-	Other	-				