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Vocational Teacher Stress and Internal Characteristics

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Abstract

Stress in teachers has been a topic of much discussion over the years. Unproductive levels of stress might be harmful to teachers and can affect their teaching, personal lives and, most importantly, their students. Internal characteristics were found to be one of the most important sources of teacher stress. This study analyzed six internally related characteristics: role preparedness, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, illness symptoms, locus of control, and self-esteem. Data were collected from two samples of vocational teachers in a southeastern state, and a multiple regression model was used to examine the role of these internal characteristics in explaining vocational teacher stress. This regression model was successful in explaining approximately 55.75% of the variance in vocational teacher stress. The most important internal characteristics in explaining vocational teacher stress were found to be illness symptoms, self-esteem, and role preparedness.

Many of the frustrations and pressures we experience in our social, personal, and work lives cause us to feel stress. Today's fast-paced and ever-changing environment has caused stress to become a part of our daily living. All of us have encountered stressors, experienced stress, and felt the effects of stress. Stress is actually the body's reaction to the stressors we encounter (Kaiser & Polczynski, 1982; Terry, 1997). Stress has been studied for many years by researchers in psychology, sociology, and medicine. People have become enormously interested in the topics

of stress, the affects of stress, and stress management (Hubert, 1984; Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980; Selye, 1974, 1980). The stress experienced by teachers is no different (Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996; Farber, 1984; Kyriacou, 1987). Teacher stress has continued to be studied since the 1930s, when articles on the health and happiness of teachers began to appear in various educational journals (Smith & Milstein, 1984).

Theoretical Framework

Hans Selye (1974), father of the study of modern stress, found that stress is caused by physiological, psychological, and environmental demands. When confronted with stressors, the body creates extra energy; and stress occurs because our bodies do not use up all of the extra energy that has been created. Selye (1974, 1980) first described this reaction in 1936 and coined it the General Adaption Syndrome. General Adaption Syndrome includes three distinct stages: (a) alarm reaction, (b) stage of resistance, and (c) stage of exhaustion. Our bodies are alerted and activated during the first stage, and stress levels are the highest during this stage. The body's defenses attempt to adapt during the second stage, and stress levels begin to reduce. The stage of exhaustion happens when the body's defenses toward stress become totally depleted. It is during this stage that physical and mental breakdown occurs, individual performance plummets, and illness develops (Hubert, 1984).

Many researchers contend we need certain amounts of stress to remain productive (Alley, 1980; Goodall & Brown, 1980; Kaiser & Polczynski, 1982; Kreitner, 1989; Schamer & Jackson, 1996; Selye, 1980; Terry, 1997). Selye (1976, 1980) used the term eustress to describe good or productive amounts of stress. Distress is the term he used to describe bad stress. Productivity levels decrease when individuals are over or under stressed (Alley). Even though there is both good and bad stress, few people regard stress as a pleasant experience (Terry, 1997). It is extremely difficult to study stress because individuals tend to experience and react differently to the stressors they encounter. The amount of stress we need to be productive and the amount of stress that causes us to be unproductive can be as individual as our own personalities (Terry, 1997). Researchers have continued to express the importance of analyzing teachers' internal characteristics when evaluating stress (Fielding & Gall, 1982). Internal characteristics tend to dictate how individuals will react to stressful events (Fimian, 1982).

Conceptual Framework

The Teacher Proximity Continuum, developed by Camp and Heath-Camp (1990), was used in this study to organize and categorize teacher stressors identified in the literature. The continuum, a conceptual framework for the classification and analysis of teacher-related phenomena, includes eight separate domains (internal, pedagogy, curriculum, program, peer, student, school system, and community). It has been used to classify over 5,000 events and influences affecting teachers' behaviors.

Many of the teacher stressors discovered in the literature were ultimately grouped in the internal domain. Likewise, a study conducted by Heath-Camp and Camp (1990) on beginning vocational teachers found a variety of negative influences associated with teaching also to be classified in this domain. The internal domain is described as those experiences arising from factors within the teacher. Six variables (role preparedness, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, illness symptoms, locus of control, self-esteem) corresponding to the internal domain of the Teacher Proximity Continuum and found in the literature to be linked to teacher stress emerged from the categorization process. These variables were used to construct a model to analyze the relationships among identified internal characteristics and vocational teacher stress.

Related Literature

Stress can be defined as "an adaptive response, mediated by individual characteristics and/or

psychological processes, that is a consequence of any external action, situation, or event that places special physical and/or psychological demands upon a person" (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980, pp. 8-9). This definition includes three concepts important to the overall study of stress: (a) situational demands or stressors cause persons to adapt; (b) individuals tend to react and adapt in different ways to the stressors they are presented, and (c) some form of physical and/or psychological responses will occur (Alley, 1980; Eskridge & Coker, 1985; Fimian, 1982; Kreitner, 1989). Therefore, internal characteristics may determine physical and emotional responses exhibited by individuals as a result of stressors (Eskridge & Coker). According to Goodall and Brown (1980) there are two distinct types of stressors, those without and within. Without stressors originate outside individuals and include such things as environmental or work-related demands. Within stressors are those from within individuals. These stressors tend to include individuals' personal values, attitudes, and self-concepts. According to Gutpa (1981), there are three major types of stressors: environmental, organizational, and individual. Smith and Milstein (1984) found stressors to emerge from the environment and individuals. Internal characteristics would be stressors from within individual teachers.

Internal characteristics were identified in numerous documents and cited as major sources of teacher stress (Bennett, 1997; Blase, 1986; Byrne, 1992; Farber, 1984, 1991; Fimian, 1982; Fimian & Santoro, 1983; Goodall & Brown, 1980; Gutpa, 1981; Iwanicki, 1983; Kaiser & Polczynski, 1982; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977, 1978; Maslach, 1982; Pettegrew & Wolf, 1982a; Phillips, 1993; Schamer & Jackson, 1996; Terry, 1997). Researchers have found that internal characteristics could contribute to teachers' susceptibility to stress and that these factors may even dictate how teachers handled the stress that they encountered (Byrne; Fimian). Kaiser and Polczynski (1982) stated that internal characteristics actually contributed to the amount of stress teachers were able to tolerate. Heath-Camp and Camp (1990) found that a large number of the negative experiences of beginning vocational teachers emerged from internal characteristics.

Iwanicki (1983) found that role-related stress was a function of the teacher's personality and teaching preparation. Perceived professional competence has been found to be a source of stress for many teachers (Fimian & Santoro, 1983). Teachers have been known to experience stress because of their lack of occupational confidence in a particular work or instructional environment. Rapid changes in the world and technologies have caused teachers to feel incompetent and experience stress due to their inability to always remain current and up-to-date in their areas of expertise (Fimian & Santoro; Terry, 1997).

Pelsma and Richard (1988) found job satisfaction and teacher stress to be strongly correlated. They also noted that the amount of stress and degree of job satisfaction experienced by teachers directly influenced the quality of teacher work life. Hittner (1981) revealed a list of events related to teachers' life satisfaction that could affect their stress and performance at work. These events included marriage, divorce, pregnancy, death of a loved one, and change of residence.

A survey conducted by the Chicago Teachers' Union (Landsmann, 1979) disclosed that 56.6% of the participating teachers had suffered physical or mental illness symptoms related to their teaching occupations. Blase's (1986) qualitative study found illness symptoms to be linked to stress reported by teachers. The Instructor directed a survey in 1977 (Landsmann) that uncovered specific illness symptoms associated with teacher stress. These symptoms included migraine and sinus headaches; allergies; colds; post nasal drip; hypertension; bladder; kidney, and bowel disorders; colitis; nervous stomach; acne; and weight problems. Hittner (1981) and Terry (1997) also noted many of these in their reports. Fielding and Gall (1982) and Halpin, Harris, and Halpin, (1985) found locus of control to be a characteristic bearing a strong correlation with teacher stress. Teachers having an external locus of control have been found to experience greater stress than teachers with an internal locus of control (Byrne, 1992; Farber, 1991; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1979).

Self-esteem, as an internal characteristic, has been reportedly linked to teacher stress (Byrne, 1992; Farber, 1991). Persons possessing low self-esteem tend to be more susceptible to stress than those having high self-esteem (Byrne). Teachers with high self-esteem tend to handle stressors in a more productive manner.

In summary role preparedness, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, illness symptoms, locus of control, and self-esteem are internal characteristics that tend to influence teacher stress and the way teachers handle the stress they face (Burke et al., 1996; Fimian, 1982; Fimian & Santoro, 1983; Terry, 1997). A situation that causes one teacher to experience stress may or may not cause another teacher to experience stress (Fimian; Terry). Examining internal characteristics can provide teachers with insight to the levels of occupational stress that they endure. The professional literature indicates that it is not necessarily the stress that is harmful but the levels of stress experienced.

Purpose and Objectives

A search of the professional literature on teacher stress and teacher burnout was unsuccessful in uncovering any documents that dealt specifically with the relationship of teacher internal characteristics and vocational teacher stress. Research conducted by Heath-Camp and Camp (1990) on the problems of beginning vocational teachers was the only research found that even related to the area of vocational teacher stress. The vast amount of research conducted on teacher stress in general, other teaching areas, and in other areas of employment make it evident that research related to stress is of great importance. Therefore, it was the purpose of this study to examine the relationship between identified teacher internal characteristics (role preparedness, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, illness symptoms, locus of control, and self-esteem) and stress in vocational teachers. The specific objectives of the study were to (a) identify variables emanating from teacher internal characteristics that explain vocational teacher stress and (b) build and test a model to explain the inter-relationships among internal-related variables and vocational teacher stress.

Methodology

Population and Sample

The population of the study was all vocational teachers in public schools in Virginia. Two separate samples were included in the data collection process. The first sample consisted of all the vocational teachers teaching in five targeted school systems located in central and southwest Virginia ($n = 182$). The second group was a stratified, randomly selected sample of 182 vocational teachers identified on lists provided by the Virginia Department of Education. Teachers employed by the five targeted school systems were eliminated from the random-selection process. Seven vocational areas were represented in both samples: (a) Agricultural Education, (b) Business Education, (c) Family and Consumer Sciences, (d) Health Occupations, (e) Marketing Education, (f) Technology Education, and (g) Trade and Industrial Education. The five targeted school systems were originally selected to participate in the study because of the researcher's involvement with a consortium formed by these systems. The random selection from the remainder of the state was added to increase the number of participants as well as to produce a more inclusive study of vocational teachers in the state. The response rate achieved was 65%. It included 235 usable instruments, representing 85 males (36%) and 150 females (64%).

Instrumentation

Independent variables. Scores for role preparedness, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and illness symptoms were obtained from four sub-scales of the Teacher Stress Measure (TSM) (Pettegrew & Wolf, 1982a, 1982b). The TSM is a 70-item, self-report instrument developed by Pettegrew and Wolf. Stressors are measured on an additive, 6-point Likert-type scale. Responses can range

from 6 = strong agreement to 1 = strong disagreement, indicating the higher the score the greater the teacher's role preparedness, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and types of illness symptoms experienced. Pettegrew and Wolf reported good internal consistency estimates using Cronbach's alpha. The instrument's structural reliability and construct validity was determined by two separate three-dimensional smallest space analyses. Its predictive validity was judged by a stepwise discriminant analysis. All correlations were significant at the .001 level (Pettegrew & Wolf).

The Personal Behavior Inventory (PBI) (Collins, 1974a, 1974b) was used to measure vocational teachers' locus of control. Developed by Collins, the PBI is a self-report instrument based on Rotter's (1966) Internal-External Scale. It uses an additive, 5-point Likert-type scale to measure 46 items related to either external or internal locus of control. Responses can range from 1 = I disagree very much to 6 = I agree very much, signaling the greater the teacher's agreement with the statements the more external the locus of control. According to Collins (1974a), the PBI was extensively validated in 1977 by Duffy, Shiflett, and Downey, in 1983 by Fleming and Courtney, and in 1983 by Fleming and Spooner. Rotter's original instrument also has undergone validation with teachers (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1979).

Rosenberg's (1989a, 1989b) Self-Esteem Scale (SES) was used to assess vocational teachers' self-esteem levels. The 10 items compiled in the SES are measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale. Responses can range from 1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree, indicating the lower the score the higher the teacher's self-esteem level. Byrne (1992) conducted an extensive review of the SES and reported a test-retest reliability of .62 and convergent validity coefficients ranging from .56 to .79.

Dependent variable. The Tennessee Stress Scale-R (TSS-R) (McWilliams, 1984; Schnorr & McWilliams, 1988) was used to measure vocational teacher stress levels. The TSS-R, developed by McWilliams, was designed to measure the stress levels of professionals in selected service-oriented professions. It includes 60 additive statements and respondents are directed to answer yes or no to each of the items presented. The higher the respondents' score the greater the stress. Schnorr and McWilliams administered the TSS-R to over 800 professionals in business, education, government, industry, social work, and corrections counseling. Their work was successful in establishing and validating national stress norms for professionals working in these occupations. A test-retest reliability conducted on the TSS-R resulted in a reliability coefficient of .88.

Data Collection

Teachers identified for this study were forwarded the instruments described above. Enclosed with the instruments was a letter that described the study and solicited the voluntary participation of the teachers. Non-respondents from the five targeted school systems were identified and personally contacted by telephone. Non-respondents from the randomly selected sample were mailed an additional letter two weeks following the original mailing. Vocational teachers who failed to return the instruments following the phone calls or second mailing were sent reminder post cards within three to four weeks.

A follow-up of non-respondents from both groups was conducted. A stratified random sample of non-respondents including 28 teachers (14 from each sample and 2 from each service area) was identified and contacted by telephone. Each was asked to respond to one question related to the six independent variables. Respondent responses were compared to non-respondent responses, and no significant differences were discovered.

Data Analysis

A thorough investigation of the research literature on teacher stress, teacher burnout, and

overall model. Table 3 presents the analysis of variance summary table. The F for this overall model based on teacher internal characteristics was calculated and found to be significant ($F = 47.87, p < .000$).

TABLE 2

Instrument Used, Means, Variables Range, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Product-Moment Correlations of Internal-Related Variables and Vocational Teacher Stress

Variable	Instrument Used	Mean	Variables Range	Standard Deviation	Correlation With Stress
Role Preparedness	TSM ^a	11.81702	6-30	3.597917	.384
Job Satisfaction	TSM ^a	15.67660	6-42	5.824873	.368
Life Satisfaction	TSM ^a	10.69787	6-30	5.098830	.542
Illness Symptoms	TSM ^a	15.34043	6-30	6.358508	.689
Locus of Control	PBI ^b	172.4638	46-276	18.75009	-.375
Self-Esteem	SES ^c	15.59575	4-40	4.282042	.504
Stress	TSS-R ^d	25.48511	0-60	10.232070	

Note.

a TSM - Teacher Stress Measure

b PBI - Personal Behavior Inventory

c SES - Self-Esteem Scale

d TSSR - Tennessee Stress Scale-R

TABLE 3

Teacher Internal Characteristics--ANOVA Summary Table

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Model	13657.27	6	2276.211	47.87*
Error	10841.43	228	47.55014	
Total	24498.70	234	104.6953	

* $p < .05$

The contribution of each independent variable was evaluated. The multiple regression report is in Table 4. The multiple R for this equation was .746659. Therefore, this regression model was successful in explaining approximately 55.75% of the variance in vocational teacher stress. Role preparedness, illness symptoms, and self-esteem were found to be significant. According to the standardized estimates (beta weights), illness symptoms contribute the most to explaining vocational teacher stress when evaluating the effects of teacher internal characteristics. Those wanting to use regression as a predictive model may compute any individual's predicted stress score on the TSS-R by using the Metric Regression coefficients and the individual's raw scores on each of the six independent variables. Further examination of the standardized estimates in Table 4 reveal the relative importance of these teacher internal characteristics in explaining vocational teacher stress. According to the data collected for this study, the variables in this model follow this order of importance: illness symptoms ($b = .5180$), self-esteem ($b = .1586$), role preparedness ($b = .1344$), locus of control ($b = .0813$), life satisfaction ($b = .0673$), and job

satisfaction (b = .0056).

TABLE 4

Teacher Internal Characteristics--Multiple Regression Results of Internal-Related Variables on Vocational Teacher Stress

Variable	Metric Regression Coefficient b	Standard Error	Standardized Regression Coefficient bβ	t-test	Probability
Intercept	8.325430	5.852203	0.0000	1.42	0.1548
Role Preparedness	.382202	.1468646	0.1344	2.60	0.0092
Job Satisfaction	.009817	.099590	0.0056	0.10	0.9215
Life Satisfaction	.135020	.136599	0.0673	0.99	0.3229
Illness Symptoms	.833539	.086980	0.5180	9.58	0.0000
Locus of Control	-.044400	.027119	-0.0813	-1.64	0.1018
Self-Esteem	.379038	.136080	0.1586	2.69	0.0053

R² = .5575

Conclusions and Discussion

The correlations associated with vocational teacher internal characteristics are all in the expected direction. Vocational teachers having the least amount of preparation in their teaching roles suffered the greatest amount of job-related stress. The lack of job or life satisfaction increased vocational teachers' stress. Vocational teachers experiencing illness symptoms reported greater stress. Stress increased as vocational teachers' locus of control moved toward the external realm. In other words, the less control vocational teachers believe they have over the events that occur in their lives, the more intense is their stress. Vocational teachers having lower self-esteem had higher stress scores.

Role preparedness, illness symptoms, and self-esteem were found to be significant contributors in explaining vocational teacher stress. An assessment of the questions or statements related to these stressors and posed to vocational teachers when completing study instruments leads to some very intriguing conclusions.

First of all, with regard to role preparedness, vocational teachers who feel unprepared or incompetent in their teaching occupations encounter stress. Inadequate teacher preparation can lead to stress. Teachers report less stress when they and their peers believe them to be capable of completing school assignments. Vocational teachers who are often compelled to ask others for job-related assistance experience stress. Those teachers who are unable to adapt quickly to changes in the work environment exhibit higher stress levels. This study indicates that vocational teachers who are well prepared and competent in their teaching roles will experience less occupational stress.

The presence of a variety of illness symptoms often indicates stress in vocational teachers. This study found that teachers who have trouble sleeping, those who worry a lot about their work, those who suffer from work-related headaches, and those who have stomach upsets are the ones who are dealing with the largest amounts of stress. Illness symptoms related to teacher stress

should be monitored and not ignored. Implications can prove emotionally, physically, occupationally threatening to vocational teachers, their students, and their school systems.

Vocational teachers' self-esteem was found to be important when explaining vocational teacher stress. Teachers with high self-esteem were found to be confident in their teaching occupations. These teachers reported less stress than those reporting lower self-esteem.

Locus of control, life satisfaction, and job satisfaction were not found to be statistically significant in this model. However, other researchers have identified these variables as very important to the study of stress. Therefore, the influence impacted by these variables should not be ignored or minimized. While a statistical significance was not found based on this particular model, a practical significance is possible.

It should be noted that the findings associated with this study should not be generalized to other populations including other school systems, other states, other types of public school teachers, and other vocational teachers in general. However, these findings are important to the overall study of teacher stress and may be used in the development of other teacher stress research. These findings should prove beneficial to the application of stress theory and in developing increased knowledge about a complicated, perplexing, and often damaging phenomena affecting teachers in our society.

Implications and Recommendations

Stress is a phenomenon that can produce both positive and negative results in teachers. According to [Schamer and Jackson \(1996\)](#), teachers tend to be affected by burnout (the extreme results of stress) more than any other public service professional. The effects of extreme or unproductive levels of stress can cause teachers to have negative attitudes toward students and to lose their idealism, energy, and purpose (Schamer & Jackson). Stress can make teachers become ineffective and inefficient in their teaching roles ([Eskridge & Coker, 1985](#); [Farber, 1984](#)). It can have a negative influence on schools, overall teaching performances, the physical and emotional well being of teachers, and students ([Kyriacou, 1987](#); [Phillips, 1993](#)). Teachers require good coping skills and support if they are not to succumb to the physiological and psychological problems associated with stress ([Schamer & Jackson](#)). The findings of this study indicate that vocational teacher internal characteristics affect their stress levels. Therefore, these, as well as other findings in the professional literature, pose a variety of subsequent suggestions and recommendations.

Vocational teachers should monitor the stress they experience and the results that this stress imparts on their teaching roles and abilities. They need to consider undertaking strategies that can help reduce the extreme levels of stress they might experience.

Previously conducted studies indicate that stress tends to affect individuals differently ([Eskridge & Coker, 1985](#); [Fimian, 1982](#); [Fimian & Santoro, 1983](#); [Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980](#)). Knowing one's self and one's emotions is extremely beneficial in stressful situations ([Schamer & Jackson, 1996](#)). Vocational teachers should attempt to learn more about their own stress levels; abilities to manage and reduce their stress; and their individual psychological, physical, and emotional reactions to the stress they experience. By reducing or limiting the stress they experience, teachers may be able to avoid teacher burnout; a situation cited by [Schwab \(1983\)](#) as one of the most significant challenges facing the future of education.

Role preparedness is a variable that can be somewhat controlled by school systems. For example, since this study indicates that the lack of role preparedness induces stress in vocational teachers, school systems could require that all teachers have a teaching certificate, preparation, education, and/or training prior to being hired. School systems also could provide opportunities for vocational teachers to gain additional education or training related to their areas of expertise.

School systems could encourage and make it possible and feasible for vocational teachers to be given time to reenter the workforce on an internship basis to gain additional skills and knowledge. All of these suggestions would aid in better preparing vocational teachers for their teaching roles, hence, reducing their levels of stress.

Illness symptoms can occur because of vocational teachers' levels of stress. Administrators could observe the amount of sick days taken by vocational teachers. They could watch for physical and mental signs of distress. By being conscious of their vocational teachers' illness symptoms, they could possibly identify unproductive levels of stress and help to alleviate eventual burnout or even departure of the teacher from the teaching profession.

Vocational teachers' self-esteem can be improved by providing them with encouragement, feedback, and support. Providing vocational teachers with opportunities to improve their technical and teaching skills and abilities (role preparedness) may eventually ameliorate self-esteem levels.

More research should be conducted on job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and locus of control to determine how these variables affect vocational teacher stress levels. Additional information regarding these variables may uncover findings not established by this particular model.

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