

CHAPTER ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Stress is considered one of the main causes of absenteeism and ill health among people who work in the public sector, according to the United Kingdom based Health and Safety Executive survey. A report in the *Sunday Times* (13 January, 2002) showed that 5.2 million people in the United Kingdom were ill from stress and 1.8 million people took time off from work due to stress. The nature, duties and responsibilities of South African secondary school educators are complex and demanding. The public educator is supposed to engage in class teaching, including academic, administrative, educational and disciplinary aspects, to organise extra and co-curricular activities so as to ensure that education of the learner is promoted in a proper manner (ELRC 1998:11).

In the *Daily News* (1 April, 1998) only four (4) percent of South African educators were satisfied with teaching as a career. The main reasons for the educators' dissatisfaction are as follows:

- long working hours;
- unfavourable policies;
- fewer staff;
- larger class sizes;
- poor administration; and
- multicultural classes.

While educators are under stress they are intolerant, impatient, less caring and not fully involved in their work (Smith & Bourke 1992:42). A study by McCormick and Solman (1992:202) showed that these negative behaviour characteristics are often caused by illness of varying degrees, for example headaches, backache, nervous tension, anxiety attacks, burnout, depression and in severe cases, heart attacks.

In becoming aware of the problem of stress among secondary school educators in South African schools, preliminary interviews with officials of the South African Democratic Teachers Union, North Durban Region in July 2001 showed principals caused stress among educators for the following reasons:

- failure to inform staff of the relevant educational circulars;
- protecting ‘key’ members of the staff when implementing the rationalisation and re-deployment policy;
- autocratic leadership style;
- lack of transparency and accountability; and
- manipulating the promotion process in favour of a candidate of his or her choice.

In the *Natal Mercury* (6 October, 2000) a school principal was arrested and released on bail for theft and fraud relating to the use of school funds in a school in Kwa-Zulu Natal. In the *Coastal Weekly* (29 March, 2002) the principal was found guilty and fined R4000 or twelve months imprisonment for defrauding the school fund account in September 2000. In handing down sentence the magistrate said, “You enriched yourself out of public funds, which you were entrusted to protect, therefore you are guilty of a very serious offence.” Principals who lack accountability for resources are a source of dissatisfaction and stress among staff.

In preliminary research with secondary school matric educators, the researcher found that matric educators have a heavy workload and inadequate teaching time. A study by Hawkins and Klas (1997:5) found that working under time pressure is a cause of stress among educators. Secondary school matric educators are pressurised to work long hours after school and during weekends to complete the syllabus on time. Furthermore, the marking of the matric external examination papers are scheduled to start before the end of the fourth term. This means great pressure is placed on matric educators to complete the task of setting, marking internal examinations, preparing progress cards and schedules before taking leave to mark the final examination papers. An added task for matric educators is to moderate written and oral work of matric pupils within a cluster of three to four schools in a district.

A preliminary interview with grade nine educators by the researcher showed grade nine educators were dissatisfied with the quality of workshops received in Outcomes-Based Education. Most educators felt that the facilitators were inadequately equipped to conduct these workshops. Some educators attended only one training session while others had not attended any at the time of this study. Principals of schools were not targeted to attend these workshops therefore managing the learning programmes became difficult in schools. Overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms make it extremely difficult to implement Outcomes-Based Education. The *Independent on Saturday* (24 October, 1998) reported that two grades were squeezed into one classroom in a school in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The two classes shared one teacher who worked on two chalkboards standing side by side in front of the class. A study by Burns (2003:9) showed that stress at work can be made worse by cramped working conditions such as these.

Lack of proper structures to deal effectively with the problems of discipline, drugs and crime among secondary school pupils is a threat to the well-being of educators. The *Independent on Saturday* (15 May, 1999) showed that half of Gauteng's secondary school learners are experimenting with drugs, of those about ten (10) percent are regular users. The fear is that in the next four years ninety (90) percent of the learners will be experimenting with drugs.

A study by Hayward (1997:144) found that educators who work in a school, which is neat, pleasant and has modern facilities, are more likely to experience job satisfaction than those working in an unpleasant school environment. The researcher's observation shows that many public schools have poorly maintained gardens, broken window-panes, lack of proper sanitation facilities and inadequate water supply.

Cox (in Travers and Cooper 1994:143) found that educational change is a major source of stress among educators and adds that it is "not only change, but change on change beyond the control of most educators that is the cause of stress." Major changes are taking place in the education system of the post-apartheid era in South Africa. In particular, the Ministry has established a new National Qualifications Framework (NQF), a new curriculum framework for schools as well as a new framework for governance of public schools based on partnership between government and school communities (Bengu 1998:6). Educators are overwhelmed with these changes occurring simul-

taneously and at a very fast pace. Coping with change and transition is a major challenge facing educators today (Gibson et al. 2002:103). The study by Hayward (1997:143) showed that undue teaching stress occurs when the leadership style of the manager is outmoded or somehow inappropriate to the prevailing circumstances and context within which the school operates.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

This study investigates the following problems:

Main research question:

- What is the role of the principal in managing work-related stress among secondary school educators?

Two related research questions are distinguished:

- What are the causes of work-related stress among secondary school educators?
- How does the leadership style of the principal motivate educators?

1.3 AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The main aim of this study is as follows:

- To investigate the role of a school principal in managing work-related stress among secondary school educators.

The secondary aims are as follows:

- To investigate the causes of work-related stress among secondary school educators;
- To investigate the type of leadership style of the principal that will motivate educators;
- To make recommendations with regard to improving organisational strategies designed to minimise work-related stress among secondary school educators.

1.4 CHOICE OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Frankel, Devers and Kelly (2000:5) the most useful guideline for selecting a research method is based on the type of research questions one is asking and the extent to which the method will inform the research questions. The type of research questions as stated above in this study are exploratory in nature and will therefore require a qualitative research methodology. The essence of qualitative research is the in-depth study, which yields a wealth of data, therefore permitting a fuller understanding of what is being studied. According to the qualitative approach the researcher plays a central role. Through his or her direct involvement the researcher is able to capture direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge (Best & Kahn 1993:184).

One of the advantages of a qualitative study is its capacity to understand and represent points of view, which are often obscured or neglected (Hammersley 2000:2). The manner in which points of view are presented in qualitative studies is illuminating because the participant's own words are used (Hammersley 2000:2). Qualitative research can also offer new insights about theoretical, methodological, solving practical problems and conducting future educational research (Frankel et al. 2000:3). According to Hammersley (2000:3) qualitative research has the capacity for reflective activity and can help secondary school principals and educators to reflect on their practices in a holistic way.

Qualitative inquiry can make an important contribution towards the correction of micro and macro-educational perspectives through grounded theory (Hammersley 2000:5). Grounded theory develops from the "bottom up" where the researcher reconstructs a picture that takes shape as the parts are collected and examined (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:13). The openness to find whatever there is to find is unique to qualitative research. It permits the researcher to discover reality without having to fit into a preconceived theoretical perspective (Best & Kahn 1993:186).

Although qualitative data cannot be generalised, the reason that qualitative data are so powerful is that they are sensitive to the social, historical and temporal context in which the data are collected (Best & Kahn 1993:186). The focus of qualitative research is on the holistic perspective adopted with a view to understanding the complex nature of many aspects of human and organisational

behaviour. Design flexibility is critical for qualitative research which is subject to change throughout the data collection process, with the result that the researcher can adjust the direction of the ongoing experience of collecting and thinking about the data (Best & Kahn 1993:186).

Validity and reliability are important criteria in a qualitative research study. The validity of qualitative research design is the degree to which the interpretations and concepts are shared by the participants and the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:404). Qualitative research favours the use of a variety of strategies to collect data such as interviews, documents and artifacts (Devers, Kelly & Frankel 2000:4).

According to Chenail (1995:1) reliability of qualitative research design refers to the researcher's ability to be transparent, consistent and dependable in his or her research activities so that research bias is minimised. The researcher's interactive style, data recording strategies, data analysis, interpretation of participant's meaning and presentation of the results contribute towards the reliability of qualitative research (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:408).

Chapter four will focus on a more detailed discussion on this qualitative research design and methodology.

1.5 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

1.5.1 Stress

Stress is defined in this research study as unpleasant emotions experienced by educators such as tension, frustration, anxiety, anger and depression as a result of his or her interaction in the workplace (Smith & Bourke 1992:31). Prolonged experience of these unpleasant emotions could lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, muscle pains, colds, virus, chest pains or discomforts, back or neck pains, skin problems, gastrointestinal problems, breathing difficulties or dizziness. Selye (1976:57) found that stress is an inherent element of every illness. Prolonged stress may cause medical conditions such as hypertension (high blood pressure), coronary heart disease, asthma, bronchial infection, rheumatoid arthritis, cirrhosis (liver problems), diabetes, thyroid

disease and migraine. Excessive stress can cause psychological illness such as depression and burnout.

1.5.2 Eustress

Selye (1976: 74) distinguishes between eustress, which is pleasant or positive stress, and distress, which is unpleasant or harmful stress. The term “eustress” is used to describe positive stress; the ‘feeling’ one gets when facing a challenging, yet positive situation such as receiving a promotion or experiencing success (Gray & Starke 1998:89). According to Corey, Corey and Corey (1997:253) the term “eustress” refers to stress that produces positive results by providing the motivation a person needs to improve in some respect. Eustress is often viewed as a motivator since in its absence, the person lacks the cutting edge necessary for peak performance. In life, an absence of eustress is just as disastrous as too much stress. In this study the term ‘eustress’ will be used to refer to stress that has a positive impact on the educator.

1.5.3 Burnout

Burnout is defined by Maslach and Jackson as a tripartite syndrome comprising of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Whitehead & Ryba 2000:52).

- Emotional exhaustion: This is the core component of burnout, is characterised by fatigue and weariness that develops as emotional energy is drained. When these feelings become chronic, educators find they can no longer give of themselves to students as they once could (Whitehead & Ryba 2000:52). Burnout educators tend to feel helpless and even hopeless (Corey et al.1997: 254-256).
- Depersonalisation: Depersonalisation is the second characteristic of burnout where an educator begins to experience negative feelings and display negative reactions towards students as a result of emotional exhaustion. Educators may use a number of ways to display indifferent, negative attitude towards their students such as using derogatory labels for example, “they are

all idiots;” exhibiting a cold attitude or distancing themselves from their students through physical and psychological withdrawal (Whitehead & Ryba 2000:52).

- Low personal accomplishment: This is the third characteristic of burnout where an educator feels that he or she is no longer helping students to learn and ‘grow’, and there are few alternative areas on which they can focus to receive rewards (Whitehead & Ryba 2000:52).

1.5.4 Secondary school

In this study a secondary school is defined as a public schooling system for grade 9 to grade 12, which is administered by the Department of Education. Grade 9 corresponds with the final phase of the General Education and Training Certificate band (GETC) which include learning programmes registered on the (NQF) at level 1. The present grades 10 to 12 corresponds with the proposed Further Education and Training Certificate band (FETC) in the white paper which will include a learning programme that will be registered on NQF framework from levels 2 to 4 (Department of National Education 1998:iii).

1.5.5 Secondary school principal

In this study a secondary school principal is defined as one who is a primary administrator and chief education officer. He or she provides support that influences the feelings that educators have about themselves and their work. Principals show educators that they are esteemed, trusted professionals and worthy of concern by such practices as maintaining open communication, showing appreciation, taking an interest in the educator’s work and considering the educators’ ideas (Littrell, Billingsley & Cross 1994:297).

1.5.6 Secondary school educator

In this study a secondary school educator is defined as one who is a competent subject specialist in one or more learning areas from grades 8 to 12. His or her tasks include class teaching, academic work, administrative tasks, disciplinary aspects and organising co-curricular and extra-curricular activities so as to ensure that the education of the learner is promoted in a proper manner.

1.6 RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The dissertation will comprise of six chapters. Chapter one is an overview of the study, problem formulation, problem statement, choice of research methodology, definitions of concepts and aims set for this research.

Chapter two mainly comprises a literature survey of various aspects of educator stress, educator burnout, the process of educator stress, the principal's role in managing work-related stress among secondary school educators, and the causes of work-related stress among secondary school educators and coping strategies for educators.

Chapter three contains a survey of the literature on different leadership styles of principals, support for principals, theories of motivation, the process of stress suffered by principals, causes of stress among principals, burnout suffered by principals and coping strategies for principals.

Chapter four presents the qualitative research design and methodology, procedures followed to collect and analyse data, sampling techniques, research instrument, validity and reliability of qualitative research design.

Chapter five is an analysis and discussion of data.

Chapter six provides the findings and recommendations of the study.

1.7 CONCLUSION

A preliminary investigation of current information derived from interviews and a literature survey shows secondary school educators experience stress in the work place. Chapter one formulated the research problem, aims, research methodology, definition of concepts and the research programme. Chapter two will focus on the theoretical perspectives of the study to address the role of the principal in managing work-related stress among secondary school educators and the causes of work-related stress among secondary school educators.