

CHAPTER TWO

A LITERATURE SURVEY OF EDUCATOR STRESS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Kyriacou (1998:1) recognises that the educator's job is a difficult one: "What is not so evident to the general public is the distressing state of mind in which a very large number of educators carry on their work."

The aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical overview on the role of the principal in managing work-related stress and the causes of work-related stress among secondary school educators by discussing the following aspects:

- perspectives of educator's stress;
- burnout among educators;
- the process of educator stress;
- the role of the principal in managing work-related stress;
- causes of work-related stress among secondary school educators; and
- coping strategies for secondary school educators.

2.2 PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATOR STRESS

The study by Kyriacou (1998:4) found that there are four major issues concerning the development of a perspective on educator's stress. These issues are as follows:

- the level of demands made on the educator;
- the nature of demands which could be both positive and negative, or only negative;
- educators' emotional responses which depend on their perception of a specific situation and their ability to cope; and
- the balance between the level of demands made and the ability to meet the demands.

The phenomenon of stress is complex and multifaceted. Hans Selye, one of the most prominent early specialists on stress, described it as the person's response to his/her environment and Cox (in Downtown 1987:12) exemplified this view as the reflection of 'lack of fit between the person and his environment.' McGrath's view (in Downtown 1987:12) suggests that an individual has the potential to experience stress when a situation is seen to present a demand that threatens to exceed the person's capabilities and resources for meeting the demand. Kyriacou (1998:4) argues that an acceptable definition of educator's stress needs to take into account that the educator's perception of his or her circumstance plays a major role in explaining his or her emotional experience.

Downton (1987:12) found that stress is necessary, even inevitable, and that it exists in most human activity regardless of occupation. People need moderate levels of stimulation to function effectively. Some stress is an important part of the creative process as total absence of stress produces boredom and apathy. Fairley (1991:42) found "anxiety to improve performance until a certain optimum level of arousal has been reached. Beyond that point performance deteriorates as higher levels of anxiety are reached." Tyrer (2003:6) found that the effects of stress can be positive or negative and can affect both the body and the mind.

2.3 BURNOUT AMONG EDUCATORS

The connection between stress and burnout is fairly well established. Kyriacou (1998:6) refers to educator's burnout as a state of emotional tiredness, following the experience of excessive stress.

The most common symptoms of educator's burnout are as follows:

- a marked lowering of job commitment;
- loss of enthusiasm and interest;
- feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation;
- feelings of physical and emotional fatigue;
- the development of negative or cynical attitudes towards colleagues; and
- a loss of self-esteem and faith in one's achievement (Sarros & Sarros 1987:217).

Gmelch and Torelli (1994:342) describe the educator's stress process as an interaction with the environment in a four-stage cycle. The stages are as follows:

- stage one is the situation in the environment;
- stage two is the perceived situation;
- stage three is the response situation; and
- stage four is the behaviour.

Various processes connect these stages. The processes are as follows:

- appraisal process;
- decision making process;
- performance process; and
- outcome process.

The individual educator with all his or her characteristics, beliefs and personality encounters a situation in stage one of this four-stage cycle stress process (as discussed above). The situation could be either physical or psychological. The educator then appraises the situation and reaches stage two, which is the perceived situation. The perceived situation could be either threatening or not. The educator has to make a decision on the viable and available alternatives to respond to the undesirable situation. This leads to the response situation (stage three).

The final stage (stage four) is described as the behaviour, resulting in the consequences for both the individual and the situation, which closes the loop of the educator. The linking process of cognitive appraisal, decision, performance and outcome connect each of the four stages (Gmelch & Torelli 1994: 342).

2.5 THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL IN MANAGING WORK-RELATED STRESS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATORS

The stress process explains the different stages of the stress process of an educator in an interactive manner (Gmelch & Torelli 1994:342). The researcher is of the view that a very important component, namely the role of the principal in absorbing, modifying or suppressing stressors among educators should be included in this paradigm (figure 2.1).

The principal of the school is an important catalyst in functioning as a ‘stress filter’ between the educator and the perceived ‘threat’ in the environment. The principal may therefore moderate the levels of stress experienced by educators. According to the researcher, a working definition of the ‘stress filter’ would refer to the principal who absorbs, modifies or even suppresses stressors not required for the well-being of an educator.

Mampuru (1992:6) argued that the principal is one who is the allocator or withholder of resources and information that can make a difference to the educator. The individual principal with all his or her characteristics, beliefs and personality, can consciously shape the intensity of stress perceived by the educators and determine how educators will finally behave. To be able to fulfil these tasks, the principal needs to be a resourceful person who needs to provide appropriate leadership, be supportive, motivate educators, reflects on one’s own stress process and that of the educators in a positive way. These characteristics of the principal will be discussed in chapter three.

2.6 CAUSES OF WORK-RELATED STRESS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATORS

Benmansour (1998: 29) found that the four main sources of stress among Moroccan high school educators are as follows:

- curriculum changes;
- an emphasis on quantity over quality;
- working under time pressure; and

- teaching mainly for examinations.

According to Smith and Bourke (1992: 39) the five main sources of stress among Australian high school educators are as follows:

- conflict;
- students and conditions;
- lack of rewards and recognition;
- time pressure; and
- staff cutbacks.

Furthermore, Keyter (1990:7) found that beginner educators experience stress as a result of inadequate orientation programmes.

2.6.1 Curriculum changes

In the research mentioned above, changes in the educational curriculum taught by Moroccan high school educators are perceived as the most stressful facet of teaching. Most educators asserted that the decisions about changes in the curriculum were imposed on them, and that they (the educators) had hardly any influence on what to teach, how to teach and how much time to spend on teaching (Benmansour 1998:29).

2.6.2 Emphasising quantity over quality

The baccalaureate examination system appears to be largely responsible for the pressure put on high school teachers in Morocco. The examination extends over the three-year period of high school and involves two types of assessment, formal examinations set twice a year by the academy and continuous assessment set by the teacher. Learners have to write the same formal examination therefore the curriculum should be uniformly implemented. Accordingly, teachers are required to work according to specific time limits and allocate a specific number of hours for each lesson (Benmansour 1998:29).

2.6.3 Working under time pressure

Educators of these Moroccan schools have to work under pressure to cover the entire curriculum for fear that examination questions might cover something not treated in class. Very often, at the end of the semester, teachers have to arrange extra hours in order to complete the syllabus (Benmansour 1998:30).

Moroccan educators expressed their frustrations at having no time to do what education really is about (Benmansour 1998:30). Similarly, Smith and Bourke (1992:40) found that educators in Australian schools experience stress caused by time pressure. Limits set for the completion of work left insufficient time to talk to colleagues during working hours and made inroads on their performance of home duties. The study also showed that Australian female educators felt more stressed than their male colleagues.

2.6.4 Teaching mainly for examinations

Educators interviewed in Moroccan secondary schools held the view that the main object of education seemed to be to enable learners to pass examinations (Benmansour 1998:29).

A Moroccan educator puts it as follows: “Everything is determined by examination, the curriculum, the teaching methods and even the future students. Access to higher education is dependent upon grades. This is why students and parents become obsessed with grades” (Benmansour 1998:29).

2.6.5 Conflict

The researcher is of the opinion that stress from conflict may arise from having to follow an ideology inconsistent with personal viewpoints. Educators, for example, who were longer-term residents at Australian secondary schools were more frustrated in their work and more inclined to experience interpersonal conflict (Smith & Bourke 1992:43).

2.6.6 Students and conditions

The study by Smith and Bourke (1998:29) showed overcrowded classrooms, difficulty in class control and lack of available help as the possible reasons for stress in the areas of students and conditions.

2.6.7 Lack of rewards and recognition

The highest levels of educators' stress were caused by lack of rewards and recognition, items such as lacking the chance of promotion, lack of appreciation, and pay not in line with skills and responsibilities among Australian educators (Smith & Bourke 1992:43). According to Smith and Bourke (1992:43) male educators suffer more from stress-related problems arising from lack of rewards and recognition than females. Promotion provides intrinsic motivation and job enrichment prospects for educators, but it is only available to a minority (Smith & Bourke 1992:43).

2.6.8 Staff cutbacks

Part of an Education reform programme in Australia was a reduction in staff, which meant that when the staffing ratio was reduced, educators' workload increased. Staff cutbacks implied that some form of excess capacity existed and educators interpreted it as a lack of appreciation of what they were doing (Smith & Bourke 1992:43). Arguments supporting these staff cutbacks were budgetary in nature. Higher workloads led to more stress and less satisfaction for those engaged in the profession. Both factors, can result in less effective teaching (Smith & Bourke 1992:43).

2.6.9 Beginner educators

Beginner educators in secondary schools who are not adequately orientated could experience stress in the work place (Keyter 1990:7). According to (Keyter 1990:7) the sudden change from training to practice can lead to practice shock, occupational stress and possibly early resignation for beginner educators.

2.7 COPING STRATEGIES

While the principal of a school plays an important role in managing work-related stress among educators, educators need to develop individual coping strategies to manage their own levels of stress. Such strategies are classifiable as direct and indirect (Kyriacou 1998:9).

Managing stress directly refer to practical actions that educators can use to reduce the source of stress. According to Kyriacou (1998:9) stress can be managed directly by using the following techniques:

- organising oneself more effectively;
- developing new insights, skills and working practices; and
- negotiating with colleagues, so that stress aspects of one's situation are changed or managed by others.

Kyriacou (1998:10) identified the most effective direct coping strategies for educators at work as follows:

- Understand the work you are about to teach.
- Prepare lessons thoroughly.
- Abandon sessions that are not going well.
- Discuss your concerns with other educators in the school.
- Get to know your learners as individuals.
- Set priorities.
- Make lists of priorities.
- Share your failures.
- Talk to colleagues about recreational interests.

Managing stress indirectly is aimed at reducing the discomfort associated with stress. According to Kyriacou (1998:9) the indirect strategies to cope with stress are mental and physical.

Mental strategies may involve:

- putting the source of the stress in perspective;
- realising that the problem is not as great as it first appears; and
- seeing the humour in the situation.

According to Kyriacou (1998:9) the physical strategies may involve:

- activities that help the educator to regain a sense of composure;
- having a hot bath while listening to relaxing music; and
- taking part in recreational activities.

2.8 CONCLUSION

Perspectives on educator's stress, educator burnout, the process of educator stress, the role of principal in managing work-related stress, the causes of stress and coping strategies among secondary school educators provides a theoretical understanding of the main and sub-research questions of this study.

Chapter three contains a surveys of the literature on the 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.