Understanding occupational stress among educators: an overview

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Abstract

International studies reveal that occupational stress among educators has been researched for a number of decades. As a result of a drastically changed working environment in the teaching profession in South Africa, stress as a phenomenon has also received attention. Since valuable studies have been undertaken on certain aspects of educator stress, this article attempts to provide an overview of the occurrence of stress among educators. In the light of this, the article focuses on different models of occupational stress and identifies key factors that may have an impact on occupational stress among educators.

keywords: educators, occupational stress

Introduction

Stress as a phenomenon has been researched in various professions and the teaching profession is no exception. It has been a common finding that educators experience higher levels of stress than other professional groups (De Jesus and Conboy 2001, 131). As early as the 1930s studies of the health and happiness of educators appeared in various educational journals (Adams 1999, 7). A survey in 1933 revealed that 17 per cent of educators were unusually nervous and that a further 11 per cent had suffered a nervous breakdown (McEwen and Thompson 1997, 57).

Studies have investigated various aspects of educators' stress, including its prevalence (Ngidi and Sibaya 2002; Adams, 2001; Brouwers and Tomic 2000), its effects (Abel and Sewell 1999; Conley and Wooseley 2000; Jeena 1998; Saptoe 2000; Olivier and Venter 2003; Van der Linde, van der Westhuizen and Wissing 1999; Van

Zyl and Pietersen 1999) and the strategies that educators can use to cope with stressful situations (Bemansour 1998; Engelbrecht and Eloff 2001; Jacobsson, Pousette and Thylefors 2001; Mills 1995). Studies also indicate that educators are committed to the teaching profession, but find that some aspects of their work are becoming increasingly stressful (Wilson and Hall 2002, 185).

The influence of stress has been researched in a variety of fields in South Africa, including the occurrence of stress among house mothers in a children's home (Erasmus 1997), the role of the educator in identifying and supporting children suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Human 1998), the effects of supplementary multivitamins on stress (Southgate 1998), stress as a source of injury among ballet dancers (Dennil 2000), the implications of adolescent stress for parents, educators and educational psychologists (Roets and Lewis 2002) and student–educator anxieties relating to practice teaching (Ngidi and Sibaya 2002).

Since democracy in 1994 South Africans in the working environment have been facing major changes triggering the experience of stress. Educators can be included in the group of South Africans enduring high levels of stress (Van Zyl and Pietersen 1999, 74; Jonas 2001, 26). Research indicates that educators are faced with various stressors in the work environment, such as unsatisfactory working conditions, role conflict, learner misbehaviour, threat of redundancy, inadequate salaries and time pressures (Engelbrecht and Eloff 2001; Ngidi and Sibaya 2002; Olivier and Venter 2003).

Since valuable studies have already been undertaken on certain aspects of educator stress, this article attempts to provide an overview of the occurrence of stress among educators. In the light of this, the following research question is posed: how is occupational stress experienced in the teaching profession? Related questions emerging from this are: how do different models explain the occurrence of occupational stress among educators? Which stressors can be identified for the teaching profession? How do individual differences and coping mechanisms influence the occurrence of stress among educators? The purpose is not to outline all the factors that influence occupational stress, but to identify key factors that may have an impact on occupational stress among educators. The key factors predominantly represented in the literature were discussed. Although the article mainly focuses on international research on stress in developed countries, it also endeavours to include research in a developing country. As such it provides a brief overview of South African studies in this regard. The aim is not to take a restricted approach to stress, but to attempt to classify the stressors into meaningful categories and to identify areas for future research.

Researching stress: South African studies

Similar to research on educator stress in other countries, studies in South Africa reveal that educators face a variety of stressors in their work. Moreover, challenges facing educators have changed drastically with the passing of the South African Schools Act, 1996 (Ngidi and Sibaya 2002, 7). Innovations such as inclusive education, the abolition

of corporal punishment, additional mediums of instruction, lack of discipline, learner problems, unmotivated learners, large learner–educator ratios, redeployment and retrenchment of educators, time pressure, the threat of redundancy, inadequate salaries and the new curriculum approach are often blamed for rising levels of stress among South African educators (Saptoe 2000, 6; Jonas 2001, 27; Olivier and Venter 2003, 190; Ngidi and Sibaya 2002, 7). In the last-mentioned case Curriculum 2005 with its outcomes-based education (OBE) and continuous assessment of learners' performance has created more responsibilities for educators (Ngidi and Sibaya 2002, 7). Some of these studies are highlighted in the ensuing discussion.

In his study Motseke (1998) investigated stress among 368 educators who work in township secondary schools in the Free State Province. He identified organisational, personal, interpersonal and environmental stressors that contributed to their stress. Jeena's study (1998) among 217 educators in the Pietermaritzburg North region indicated extremely high levels of stress for all respondents, irrespective of age, gender and post level in comparison with published findings of other studies.

Van Zyl and Pietersen's study (1999) among 66 white secondary school educators who attended a workshop on life-skills endeavoured to determine educators' stress levels and the effect of biographical factors and the working climate on educator stress (Van Zyl and Pietersen 1999, 74). They indicated that educators were experiencing high levels of stress. It was particularly attributed to changes in the teaching profession, such as the possibility of retrenchment or transferrals, a change in the approach to teaching (OBE) and the increasing shift to English as the medium of instruction (Van Zyl and Pietersen 1999, 77).

The study done by Van der Linde et al. (1999) among 560 female educators in the North West Province attempted to determine the occurrence of burnout among female educators. They found that almost one third of educators suffered from a high degree of emotional exhaustion (Van der Linde et al. 1999, 195). In particular Afrikaans-speaking women in Afrikaans-medium schools experienced educational changes as traumatic (Van der Linde et al. 1999, 195). This was attributed to a change to dual-medium and parallel-medium schools, enlarged educator–learner ratios, larger classes, work overload and general uncertainty. Their findings also revealed that more urban and semi-urban educators experienced a high degree of burnout compared with educators from country schools.

Jonas (2001) researched the relationship between perceived social support, stress levels and the general health of 104 black educators in the Pietersburg area in the Northern Province. He found that there is a direct relationship between the stress experienced by educators and their general health (Jonas 2001, 90). The study also indicated the relationship between stress and the perceived social support of friends and family members (Jonas 2001, 90). The factors contributing to educator stress identified in the study are age, gender, family size, family income, level of education, marital status, the support network and resources (Jonas 2001, 90).

Engelbrecht and Eloff (2001) investigated the stress and coping skills of educators

teaching Down's Syndrome learners in the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces. The categories identified in the study included administrative issues, support, learner behaviour, parents of Down's Syndrome learners, professional competence and personal competence. The overall theme reported by educators related to their perceived incompetence (Engelbrecht and Eloff 2001, 258). They indicated inadequate preservice and inservice training to prepare educators to cope with the needs of Down's Syndrome learners.

Working conditions for black educators in particular have not been favourable, since they have been confronted with overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of resources and facilities due to disparities during the apartheid dispensation (Ngidi and Sibaya 2002, 8). Such conditions aggravated problems related to covering the syllabi and maintaining an effective classroom environment for learning (Ngidi and Sibaya 2002, 8). Ngidi and Sibaya's study (2002) among 24 schools in KwaZulu-Natal researched the extent to which 444 black educators experienced stress from work-related factors. They found that a very high percentage of educators (67.1%) reported above average levels of stress (Ngidi and Sibaya 2002, 13). The following stressors were identified in their study: time pressures, poor working conditions, educational changes, administrative problems and learner misbehaviour (Ngidi and Sibaya 2002, 13). The common underlying cause of stress was the political change experienced in South Africa (Ngidi and Sibaya 2002, 13).

Eloff and Engelbrecht's study (2002, 97) aimed at determining if educators experienced stress when learners with physical disabilities were included in mainstream classrooms. An overwhelming number of responses among the 52 Grade 0 to 12 educators in the study indicated that educators did not find it stressful to include learners with disabilities in the classroom (Eloff and Engelbrecht 2002, 97). The researchers found that one of the most complicated issues in determining causal relationships in stress is the reciprocity between stress and personality. They found that individuals react differently to stress (Eloff and Engelbrecht 2002, 97).

Olivier and Venter's study (2003) focused on the levels of stress and the extent of the relationship between certain identified stressors and stress among 132 educators in five secondary schools in the George area. The results reveal that educators experience stress and that 20 per cent suffer from severe stress (Olivier and Venter 2003, 189). Their study identified the following stressors: professional distress, discipline and motivation, work-related stressors which included rationalisation, an increased learner–educator ratio and time management (Olivier and Venter 2003, 190).

In an attempt to understand occupational stress researchers have identified various models of stress.

What is occupational stress?

Research reveals the complexity of the stress phenomenon. In researchers' endeavour to understand it, they have developed different models of stress. Three main models of stress have been identified.

1 *Stimulus-based model of stress:* The stimulus-based model of stress emanates from physics, in particular the field of engineering (Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll 2001, 8; Rout and Rout 2002, 20). It views stress as a condition of the environment that is external to the individual and influences him or her in a disruptive way (Koslowski 1998, 12; Bemansour 1998, 15; Cooper et al. 2001, 4; James 1999, 552; Rout and Rout 2002, 20) (see Figure 1). The perceptions of the individual are not taken into account in this approach. According to this model the load or demand placed upon a person (known as a stressor) exceeds the 'elastic limit' of the person's ability to cope or adapt to it (Tosi, Mero and Rizzo 2000, 193; Wilson and Hall 2002, 176; Rout and Rout 2002, 20).

Stressors are defined as the agents or demands that elicit the stress response (Seley 1991, 29). Although there are weaknesses in this model, it has the potential for organisations (schools) to identify stressors that might affect most of their employees (Rout and Rout 2002, 21).

Educators in this model are viewed as passive recipients rather than as actors. Situations such as working with learners with special needs or during probation may give rise to demands above their elastic limits (Wilson and Hall 2002, 176).

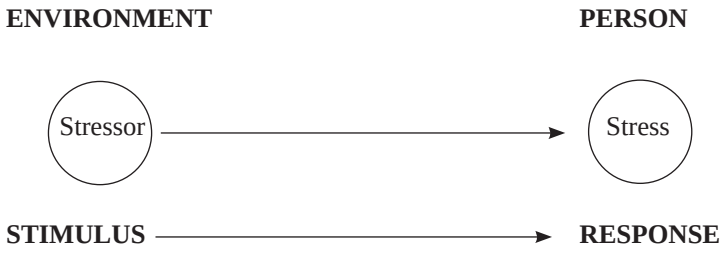

Figure 1: Stimulus-based model of stress

Source: Rout and Rout 2002, 21

2 *Response-based model of stress:* The response-based model emerges from the field of medicine and is explained from a physiological perspective (Cooper, et al., 2001, 4; Rout and Rout 2002, 18). It describes stress in terms of the individual's response to a threatening or disturbing stimulus (Bemansour 1998, 15; Rout and Rout 2002, 18). In this model the focus is on physiological, psychological and behavioural responses which may appear as consequences of stress (Pelletier and Lutz 1999, 485; Wilson and Hall 2002, 177) (see Figure 2). The physiological and psychological symptoms are not unique to stress and can therefore be attributed to other medical conditions (Wilson and Hall 2002, 177). Applied to the teaching profession the educator in this model is described as a passive recipient who is pressurised by resultant stress (Wilson and Hall 2002, 177).

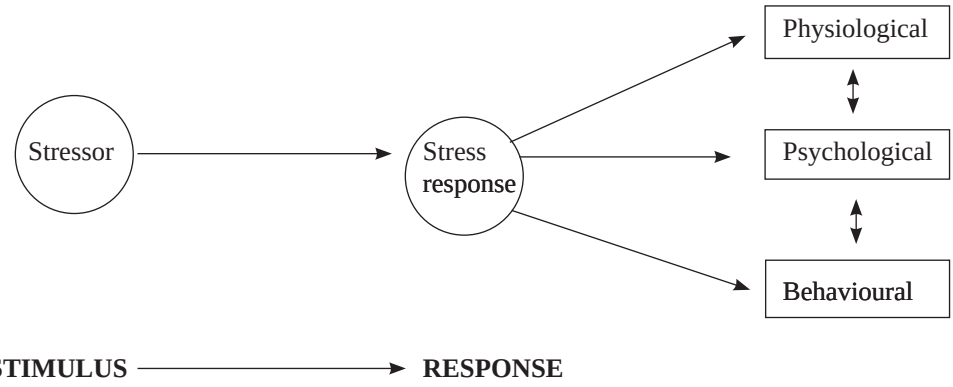

Figure 2: A response-based model of stress

Source: Rout and Rout 2002, 21; Cooper et al. 2001, 4

3 *Interactional and transactional models of stress:* The interactional model of stress is a psychologically based approach which views stress as an individual phenomenon which is both interactive and situational (Bemansour 1998, 15; Motseke 1998, 67; Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1999, 534; Rout and Rout 2002, 21; Wilson and Hall 2002, 177). It means that different individuals, when confronted with the same situation, respond differently.

The transactional approach views stress as embedded neither in the individual nor in the environment, but in the interrelationship between the stressor, the individual's perception of the situation and his or her subjective responses (Lazarus 1999, 13; Cooper et al. 2001, 11; Mills 1995, 51). In this definition the role played by self-appraisal in determining an individual's stress level is recognised (Lazarus 1999, 13). In a stressful situation the individual appraises the situation (primary appraisal) (Rout and Rout 2002, 22; Tosi et al. 2000, 196). Stress occurs when the individual perceives the situation as threatening to his or her important goals and feels unable to meet these demands (Rout and Rout 2002, 22). Secondary appraisals are made when the situation is judged as stressful (Rout and Rout 2002, 22; Tosi et al. 2000, 196) (see Figure 3). The individual determines the coping resources in the secondary appraisal, which can lead to psychological well-being if no stress is perceived or ill-health when stress is perceived (Rout and Rout 2002, 22; Tosi et al. 2000, 196). Therefore, the experience of stress arises from educators' perceptions of demands, the inability to meet those demands emanating from a lack of effective coping skills and the ultimate threat to the educators' physical or mental well-being (Abel and Sewell 1999, 287). In this model educators are actors and not passive recipients of the external pressures (Wilson and Hall 2002, 177).

The transactional model corresponds to that of Kyriacou and Sutcliff's (1978) view that the experience of stress is the result of an educator's perception that demands are being made on him or her, that he or she has difficulty or is unable to meet these demands and that failing to do so threatens his or her mental and/or physical well-being (Bemansour 1998, 15). This model acknowledges, on the one hand, that teaching and some schools in particular exert certain pressures on the educators and that educators, on the other hand, may react in different ways to bring a variety of adaptive resources to cope with the stressors (Wilson and Hall 2002, 177).

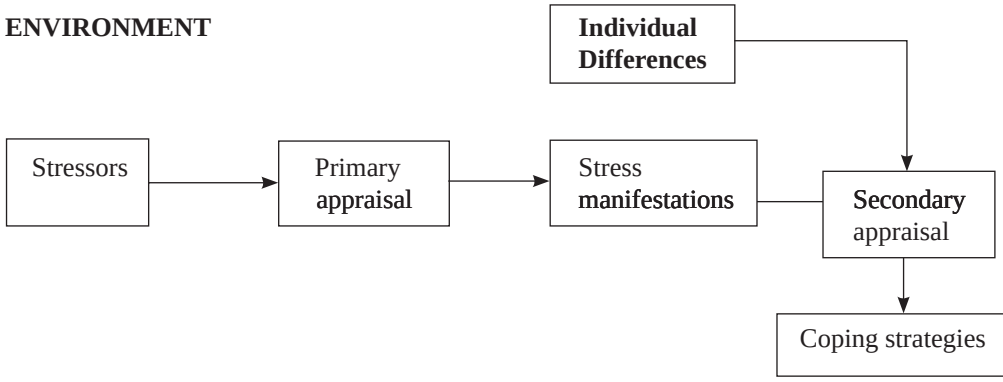

Figure 3: A model of stress and coping

Source: Rout & Rout 2002, 23; Tosi et al. 2000

From this model it can be seen that stress is a complex phenomenon. It is a process that involves a number of interacting, transactional elements encompassing stressors (environmental demands), individual perceptions, the coping resources available to the individual and the manifestations of the demands (Collins and Parry-Jones 2000, 770; Tosi et al. 2000, 194).

The various models of stress are indications of the complexity of the concept of stress. For the purpose of this article stress is defined as some type of response (e.g. physical, psychological, behavioural or organisational) to an external event or situation that imposes special demands on a person and causes a deviation from his or her normal functioning. The responses to the stressors are, however, influenced by individual differences and coping mechanisms. It should also be noted that there is a distinction between *eustress* (pleasant stress) and *distress* (unpleasant stress) (Seley 1976, 74). The term *eustress* is used to describe positive stress, the 'feeling' one gets when facing a challenging, yet positive situation, like receiving an award (Van Fleet 1991, 108).

Although there may be similarities between practitioners' experience of stress, it is important for the purpose of this article to explain occupational stress (distress) as it occurs in the teaching profession.

Definition of educator stress

Educators are expected to execute various and diverse activities while facing enormous volumes of individual, social and professional responsibilities in today's fast-paced world, which could lead to their experience of stress (Adams 2001, 223). Stress levels of educators depend upon the specific stressors that educators experience in the work, their appraisal of the stressor and their perceived ability in coping with it (Engelbrecht and Eloff 2001, 256). For the purpose of this article, *occupational stress among educators* is defined as the negative or unpleasant result of task demands that educators face in performing their professional roles and responsibilities (Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997, 325; Engelbrecht and Eloff 2001, 256; Kyriacou 2001, 28). It occurs when educators perceive an imbalance between situational demands and their ability to respond adequately to the demands (Nhundu 1999, 257). Intense and prolonged levels of stress may eventually lead to a condition known as burnout (Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997, 325). 'Burnout' is regarded as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes physical, emotional and psychological exhaustion (Koslowski 1999, 85; Motseke 1998, 76; Van der Linde, Van der Westhuizen and Wissing 1999, 192). Over time the effect of educators' responses may also influence their long-term commitment to teaching (Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997, 325; Nhundu 1999, 256).

Studies on educator stress reveal a number of factors of varying levels of significance that either increase or decrease the educator's stress response (Jacobsson et al. 2001, 38).

Main sources of stress (stressors) faced by educators

Many studies that have attempted to identify the main sources of stress have indicated that stressors vary and that they tend to change from one context to another (Harris and Hartman 2002, 400; Lazarus 1999, 57; Mills 1995, 8). Work demands seem to be the most scrutinised stressor. Jacobsson et al. (2001, 40) strongly support the notion that perceived work demands predict stress among educators. We can identify a number of work-related stressors, which include professional demands, career development, role-based stress, interpersonal relationships and the home-work interface.

Professional demands

Classroom teaching has been characterised as an occupation where many demands are present. Heavy workloads and time pressures are well documented in educational studies (Cohen 1997, 30; Motseke 1998, 83; Moriarty, Edmonds, Blatchford and Martin 2001, 37; Kinman and Jones 2003, 27; Kyriacou 2001, 29; Van Dick and Wagner 2001, 243; Wilson and Hall 2002, 179). Researchers have found that educators do not have enough time to achieve the standards of teaching and learning they want (Moriarty et al. 2001, 37; Kinman and Jones 2003, 26). This also includes enough time to meet

the needs of children they are teaching (Moriarty et al. 2001, 37). However, the most common source of stress in schools is work-overload, that is, situations where there are more expectations than individuals are able to fulfil (Benmansour 1998, 21; Cohen 1997, 30; Conley and Wooseley 2000, 194; Harris and Hartman 2002, 403; McEwen and Thompson 1997, 57; Wilson and Hall 2002, 179). This work overload encompasses curriculum-related problems, large classes and classroom-related problems, all of which have been identified as major sources of educator stress (Abel and Sewell 1999, 293; Adams 2001, 225; Benmansour 1998, 29; Koslowski 1998, 47; Olivier and Venter 2003, 190).

Wilson and Hall (2002, 179) and Kyriacou (2001, 29) believe that change itself is implicated in educator stress and could be either a problem or a challenge. Linked with new change initiatives, such as OBE, is the amount of paperwork which educators also indicate as a stressful aspect of their work (Cohen 1997, 30; Moriarty et al. 2001, 37; Wilson and Hall 2002, 185).

An aspect of change associated with stress is the effort to raise standards (Wilson and Hall 2002, 180). Nevertheless, educators have indicated that they experience personal fulfilment when watching children achieve and develop (Moriarty et al. 2001, 37). Moreover, personal performance as an educator emerged as the most satisfying aspect in Chaplain's study (1995). It may also be directly related to educators' perceptions of their professional competence.

Closely linked with the stressor of professional demands is a stress factor specific to the teaching profession, namely learner behaviour (Jacobsson et al. 2001, 38). Learner behaviour can be regarded as one of the aspects of interpersonal relationships that may cause stress.

Interpersonal relationships

Working with people can be a source of support and stress (Kyriacou 2001, 29; Cooper, et al. 2001, 40; Locke and Taylor 1991, 153; Rout and Rout 2002, 36). Studies indicate the negative influence of poor relationships with students and learner motivation on educator stress (Abel and Sewell 1999, 288; Kinman and Jones 2003, 27; Kyriacou 2001, 29; Olivier and Venter 2003, 190). Yoon's study (2002), however, revealed the opposite: educator stress, negative affect and self-efficacy predict the quality of learner–educator relationships.

Controlling and disciplining learners is another critical factor in the classroom (Adams 2001, 229; Brouwers and Tomic 2000, 242). Studies reveal that objectionable learner behaviour and poor discipline are important predictors of educator stress (Adair and Moore 2000, 204; De Jesus and Conboy 2001, 134; Jacobsson et al. 2001, 47; Olivier and Venter 2003, 190). This includes disruptive behaviour, negative attitudes towards work, aggression and violence against educators (Adams 2001, 229; Motseke 1998, 89; Olivier and Venter 2003, 190). Excessive stress is experienced by educators of learners who experience emotional or behavioural difficulties (Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997,

336; Abel and Sewell 1999, 288). Learners with special education needs may create additional stress for educators (Chaplain 1995, 474).

Interestingly, Jacobsson et al. (2001, 47) report that learner misbehaviour is not related to educators' feelings of mastery stress. In their view, learner misbehaviour provokes stress reactions because it disrupts teaching, but it does not affect the educators' perception of their own professional competence since they are performing their work according to their description of it (Jacobsson et al. 2001, 48).

McEwen and Thompson (1997, 57) indicate that learners' performance is a major cause of stress. Student failure is often viewed as failure on the part of the educators which may lead to educator stress (Motseke 1998, 90; Olivier and Venter 2003, 190). In other cases educators may blame learners' failure on inadequate educational materials or other constraints on their ability to teach (Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997, 331).

The study done by Van der Linde et al. (1999, 195) indicates that parent pressure causes educators to experience stress. Parents' attitude towards educators is a most disturbing factor and educators feel that they do not receive the necessary support and appreciation from parents, and the community poses a serious hindrance to learning (Pawlas 1997, 43; Motseke 1998, 97; McEwen and Thompson 1997, 62). Changes in family values and marital ethics also greatly impact upon educator stress (Motseke 1998, 90). Educators often have to nurture, counsel and be mother or father to certain learners due to family work factors or divorce (Motseke 1998, 90). This could lead to role ambiguity or role conflict both of which are also considered to be stressors (Motseke 1998, 90; Nhundu 1999, 257).

Role-based stress

Apart from work overload pressures, educators reported role conflict, role ambiguity and lack of principal support as vital causes of their stress (Adams 2001, 238; Van der Linde et al. 1999, 192; Kyriacou 2001, 29). Role-based stress which includes role conflict and role ambiguity, exists when educators do not have clarity on their responsibility, expectations or work objectives (Motseke 1998, 95; Tosi et al. 2000, 203; Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997, 325). Role conflict arises when the school provides information about educators' roles and responsibilities that conflicts with the reality of the daily professional life (Motseke 1998, 95; Tosi et al. 2000, 203; Rout and Rout 2002, 34; Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1999, 541; Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997, 325). Role ambiguity occurs when the responsibilities and duties are ambiguous and unclear, and it may include a lack of information needed to perform a certain role (Cooper et al. 2001, 38; Harris and Hartman 2002, 403; Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997, 325). It also arises when educators have to fulfil too many roles, for example, as counsellors, social workers, managers, examiners and secretaries, on the one hand, and creative educators who are concerned with the performance of learners, on the other (Motseke 1998, 98). Educators often have difficulty in performing their work effectively; they are expected both to meet learners' needs and to follow restrictive teaching methods (Conley and Wooseley 2000, 194).

Inherent in role-based stress comes from the educator's own learning and career development (Jacobsson et al. 2001, 40).

Career development

Although inadequate training can lead to educator stress, continuous learning and professional development as aspects of educator's own learning may also be stressful because this takes up its share of a busy time schedule (Adams 1999, 17; Jacobsson et al. 2001, 40). A higher degree of learning orientation reduces stress and increases feelings of mastery (Jacobsson et al. 2001, 48).

Career development as a source of stress includes three aspects; job security, performance appraisal and professional training.

- *Job security:* A component of many people's careers is the prospect of job loss or redundancy, which has also happened in South Africa (Cooper et al. 2001, 44; Olivier and Venter 2003, 190). The threat of losing one's job is a potential source of stress (Koslowsky 1998, 47; Cooper et al. 2001, 43; Tosi et al. 2000, 205; Olivier and Venter 2003, 190). The possibility of demotion can also lead to stress (Rout and Rout 2002, 31).
- *Performance appraisal*. The process and implementation of appraisal systems can be a source of stress to individuals, especially when the outcome may influence the person's salary or promotion (Rout and Rout 2002, 31).
- *Professional training:* Relevant training is required to meet the demands of the profession. Inadequate training programmes may directly or indirectly influence the development of stress because they often fail to provide educators with specific skills to meet the demands of teaching (Wisniewski and Gargiulo 1997, 333).

The ultimate aim of professional development is increased learner performance, but individual learner outcomes and the way educators teach learners are profoundly affected by the school culture in which educators work (Adams 2001, 225; King and Newman 2001, 87). In this sense the school itself may also affect educator stress.

School factors

A restrictive bureaucratic environment with low levels of participation may influence staff's experience of stress, while participation may give the feeling of some control of the stressors in the environment (Adams 2001, 225; Tosi et al. 2000, 204). Excessive rules and requirements in large schools can be stressful (cf. Harris and Hartman 2002, 407). Furthermore, the school culture has the potential to act as a stressor (Koslowsky 1998, 45). It refers to the common norms, values, beliefs and assumptions shared by role players of the school that shape decision-making and practices (Yu, Leithwood and Jantzi 2000, 370; Duff in Smith and Lawrie 1998, 7).

Since schools do not function in a vacuum, factors such as the community, the legal

system and economy within which schools function may have a profound influence on them. Working conditions related to shortages in resources have the potential to be stressors to educators (Adams 2001, 225; Abel and Sewell 1999, 293; Kyriacou 2001, 29; Olivier and Venter 2003, 190). Another finding among educators is the stress impact of salaries as determined by the education system (Koslowski 1998, 34).

Although educators are professionals, they also have a personal life outside schools. In the study done by Hawe, Tuck, Manthei, Adair and Moore (2000, 202) educators attributed a high proportion of personal stress in their lives to their jobs.

Home-work interface

Although the home-work interface is a significant source of stress for both males and females (Rout and Rout 2002, 37) twice as many females reported 'home' as a source of stress (Collins and Parry-Jones 2000, 786). Many married women with young children enter the labour market and married women often carry a disproportionate share of household chores (Rout and Rout 2002, 38). Spouses may have egalitarian attitudes towards work and family roles, but in reality the division of labour at home continues to be unequal.

The above-mentioned stressors have the potential to influence educators' experience of stress, but individuals may be influenced by their own job-related stressors. As such, differences in stressors may be related to individual differences in educators (Abel and Sewell 1999, 288).

Individual differences which influence the experience of stress

The individual brings certain characteristics to work and these individual characteristics determine how the individual will respond to stress (Harris and Hartman 2002, 399; Eloff and Engelbrecht 2002, 97). An individual's perception of stress is influenced by factors including personality characteristics, personality types, social support, gender, age and sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Lazarus 1999, 57; Locke and Taylor 1999, 155; Mills 1995, 8; Folkman and Lazarus 1991, 217; Kyriacou 2001, 29; Harris and Hartman 2002, 400). It means that a situation that causes a stress reaction in one educator may not necessarily cause it in another (Adams 2001, 229). Consequently responses to potentially stressful situations may vary greatly from person to person and will depend on the complex interaction between their personality, values, skills and the relevant conditions (Ngidi and Sibaya 2002, 7; Kyriacou 2001, 29).

Personal and personality characteristics

The individual's age, gender, background, previous experience and the degree of social support he or she receives may affect stress vulnerability (Rout and Rout 2002, 41). Furthermore, the personality characteristics the person brings to work have the potential to moderate the stress level of the individual (Nhundu 1999, 257; Eloff and Engelbrecht

2002, 97). These factors may feature prominently in individuals' experience of stress by influencing their exposure to stressful events, by affecting their response to these events or by affecting both these processes (Cooper et al. 2001, 118). Such characteristics include negative attitudes, anxiety, tolerance and perceptual styles (Koslowski 1998, 142; Nhundu 1999, 257; Tosi et al. 2000, 212).

Personality types

Type A people are hard driving and competitive people who are involved in an incessant struggle to achieve more and more in less and less time (Tosi et al. 2000, 209; Rout and Rout 2002, 42; Cooper et al. 2001, 121). They often get aggressive, impatient and irritable if people interfere with their work. The Type A personalities respond with more agitation to stress than the Type B personality (Harris and Hartman 2002, 400; Tosi et al. 2000, 209). Although research findings differ, Type A individuals seem to be more at risk of succumbing to several illnesses related to stress (Tosi et al. 2000, 210; Rout and Rout 2002, 44).

Social support

Social support, including administrative and collegial support, refers to help from other people (Chaplain 2001, 208; Cooper et al. 2001, 143; Hawe et al. 2000, 203; Rout and Rout 2002, 52). It is often viewed as crucial to the buffering of the experience of stress (Adams 2001, 229; Engelbrecht and Eloff 2001, 258; Jonas 2001, 78). Although such studies indicate that colleague support can buffer stress reactions among educators, the study carried out by Jacobsson et al. (2001, 39) reveals that colleague and principal support were not among the more important stress buffers, as expected. Nevertheless, researchers have found that people who lack support from others also have more physical and psychological symptoms than those with support (Rout and Rout 2002, 55).

Studies reveal that a lack of principal support was a cause of educator stress reactions (Jacobsson et al. 2001, 38). Van Dick and Wagner's study (2001, 258) shows that the principal's support can even reduce the perception of educators' workload.

Gender

With the rapid change in society the role of women is changing. Various studies indicate that women reported significantly higher levels of stress (Bemansour 1998, 28; Hawe et al. 2000, 204; McEwen and Thompson 1997, 63; Ngidi and Sibaya 2002, 14). Women are often expected to meet domestic commitments, and conflicting work and family demands may add to their stressful responses (Rout and Rout 2002, 59). This is confirmed by Jonas's study (2001, 84) which reports that female educators experienced higher levels of stress, while male educators reported higher perceived social support from families and friends, explaining their lower level of stress. Van Zyl and Petersen (1999, 77) report that married female educators in particular experienced high levels of

stress. They have to be the homemaker, a supportive wife and mother and at the same time a competent professional educator (Van Zyl and Pietersen 1999, 77; Van der Linde et al. 1999, 195).

Age

Age may play a moderating role on the perception of stress (Koslowski 1998, 41; Harris and Hartman 2002, 400; Rout and Rout 2002, 60). The 'mid-life crisis', for example, has the potential to increase a person's sensitivity to stress regardless of occupation (Rout and Rout 2002, 59). Chaplain's study (1995), however, revealed that no significant differences in respect of occupational stress were found between the subgroups *gender* and *age*. However, Jonas's study (2001, 78) reports that the group of educators younger than 30 years indicated higher levels of stress. The principle of 'last in and first out' tends to be applied in the process of employing younger educators, which explains why mostly younger educators are affected (Jonas 2001, 78). This is in contrast to the study of Jacobsson et al. (2001, 49) who found that increased age was related to increased work demands, which explains why experienced educators perceived higher work demands.

Self-esteem and self-efficacy

The relationship between self-esteem or self-efficacy and stress has been documented in many studies (Monat and Lazarus 1991, 3; Cooper et al. 2001, 129; De Jesus and Conboy 2001, 132; Tosi et al. 2000, 210; Van Dick and Wagner 2001, 243). Self-esteem refers to the way individuals perceive themselves (Harris and Hartman 2002, 400). High self-esteem people are less prone to environmental events than low self-esteem people (Cooper et al. 2001, 129; Tosi et al. 2000, 208). Conversely, people with low esteem are more reactive to adverse conditions (Cooper et al. 2001, 129). Educators with high self-esteem seem to cope more productively with stressors in the work environment (Adams 1999, 10). Educators who feel incompetent in their work encounter stress (Adams 1999, 17).

Self-efficacy refers to people's ability to produce certain actions and make themselves believe that they are able to perform the task or to cope with stress (Tosi et al. 2000, 197; Chaplain 2001, 202). These beliefs in individuals are based upon the evaluations of their performances (Brouwers and Tomic 2000, 249). Educators' perceived self-efficacy will probably decline as a consequence of decreased performance (Brouwers and Tomic 2000, 249). When educators have little confidence in their classroom management skills, they will probably give up easily when confronted with disruptive learner behaviour. This will consequently lead to feelings of ineffectiveness in maintaining classroom order. Inadequately trained educators lack self-confidence and also doubt their ability to communicate effectively with learners (Motseke 1998, 85). Tang's study reveals that the insufficient self-efficacy among Chinese educators contributed to their burnout and was negatively associated with their mental wellbeing (Tang 2001, 892).

Coping strategies

The cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage stressors are known as *coping* (Folkman and Lazarus 1991, 210). Lazarus (1999, 114) identifies two functions of coping: problem-focused and emotion-focused. In the problem-focused function the person obtains information about what to do and acts accordingly to change the reality (Lazarus 1999, 114; Tosi et al. 2000, 199). It includes making plans, coming up with different solutions to the same problem and concentrating on what to do next (Engelbrecht and Eloff 2001, 258; Kyriacou 2001, 30). The emotion-focused function is aimed at controlling the emotions linked with the stress situation by, for example, denying the existence of a problem without changing the reality of the situation, maintaining a sense of humour and being optimistic (Engelbrecht and Eloff 2001, 258; Kyriacou 2001, 30; Lazarus 1999, 114).

When considering the above, it appears that stress has certain consequences depending on the particular circumstances and the individual's characteristics. Once the perceptual process is accomplished, the consequences of stress appear (Harris and Hartman 2002, 407; Tosi et al. 2000, 198).

Consequences of stress

For the sake of the article, the different categories are briefly described: physical, mental, behavioural and organisational (Harris and Hartman 2002, 407; Tosi et al. 2000, 198). Physical manifestations include cardiovascular and gastro-intestinal disorders, headaches and physiological fatigue (Harris and Hartman 2002, 407). Some psychological consequences include anger, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and inability to concentrate (Harris and Hartman 2002, 407). Behavioural reactions include drug and/or alcohol abuse, overeating or under-eating, aggression, vandalism and poor interpersonal relationships (Harris and Hartman 2002, 407). Organisational effects include tardiness, absenteeism, missing deadlines, forgetting appointments and making unnecessary mistakes (Harris and Hartman 2002, 407).

Although negative stress has the potential to be destructive, there are ways in which stress can be managed for the benefit of both the individual and the system.

Adaptive responses

The consequences of stress may be managed by adaptive responses from the individual educator, the school or factors outside the school. By managing stress effectively the individual educator and the school can benefit by allowing a more productive personal and professional life and limiting absenteeism, turnover and poor performance (Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1999, 543). The two methods of managing stress to increase performance and personal effectiveness are reducing sources of stress and building resistance to stress.

Reducing sources of stress: Individuals can reduce personality stressors by seeking counselling and by being trained, learning new skills, including skills relating to assertiveness, managing time, managing disruptive learner behaviour and developing a higher degree of learning orientation (Adams 2001, 241; De Jesus and Conboy 2001, 133; Jacobsson et al. 2001, 49; Kyriacou 2001, 30; Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1999, 543). Educators can clarify personal values while school principals can clarify educators' job descriptions and, by communicating expectations, reduce educators' role conflict and role ambiguity (Adams 2001, 241; Jacobsson et al. 2001, 49; Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1999, 543). School principals can also provide a positive atmosphere of social support, review the workload of educators, improve relationships through team building and conflict management and assist in providing up-to-date resources and technologies (Adams 2001, 241; Jacobsson et al. 2001, 49; Kyriacou 2001, 30; Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1999, 543).

Building resistance to stress: Many stressors cannot be reduced and should therefore be addressed. A primary method of developing resistance to stress is to achieve mental and physical health (De Jesus and Conboy 2001, 133; Kyriacou 2001, 30; Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1999, 544; Rout and Rout 2002, 115). This includes meditation, relaxation and the development of a strong social support network (De Jesus and Conboy 2001, 133; Kyriacou 2001, 30; Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1999, 544; Rout and Rout 2002, 115).

In the light of the aspects described above, it is possible to depict the stress aspects in a schematic presentation. This illustration (Figure 4) does not take a revolutionary approach to stress, but it rather attempts to reorganise the stressors into new categories. It recognises certain individual differences as explained above. It shows that an individual with certain personality traits may experience stress differently from another. Each of these differences by themselves may not be predictive of a specific stress response, but the combination is. However, it is difficult to calculate the contribution of each source of stress although it is possible to theorise about their relative contributions.

Conclusion

Transformation and transition in the South African education system, and simultaneous problems and uncertainties experienced by educators can contribute to educator stress. The outcome of unproductive levels of educator stress can be harmful to educators and may have destructive effects on teaching and learning, their personal lives and most importantly, the learners. As such, educator stress is a matter of concern and needs to be addressed.

When future studies regarding educator stress are considered, it is important to take into account possible focuses of research that could lead to a deeper understanding of the educator stress phenomenon. Considering the extensive research on stress, it is no easy task to suggest areas for future research in South Africa.

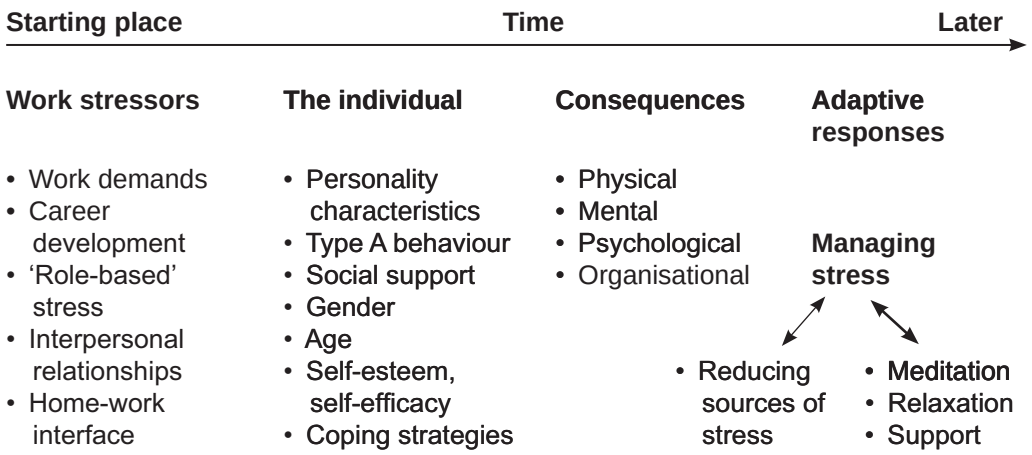

Figure 4: A presentation of occupational stress

- Stress-coping research should adopt a holistic approach that considers the totality of the educator's life space rather than simply assessing one domain in isolation from others (Cooper et al. 2001, 427). Although researchers acknowledge the dynamic interplay between various life domains, researchers interested in job stress tend to focus on what happens in the school and to ignore, for example, the influence of family life.
- It is always vital for studies to continue exploring the occurrence of educator stress, the sources of stress and the coping mechanisms employed by educators (Kyriacou 2001, 32). Since stressors from various sources may impact on the individual, it is important that they are continuously identified in order to develop the necessary strategies to assist educators experiencing stress. Such studies are necessary to update the data of this phenomenon and to explore developments and changes in the education system. Studies may be helpful in identifying changes in schools that create high levels of stress. These need to be addressed. Specific research on stress caused by educational changes is essential so that the education department and schools can be informed of how these changes affect educators. The unstable nature of teaching in South Africa will continually confront educators and challenge them to cope with the changes they face in their profession.
- Research is also required into the role successful coping mechanisms play in educators' careers (Kyriacou 2001, 32). A major problem our education department faces is the large number of qualified educators leaving the profession and the few excellent learners aspiring to become educators. Research on educators with five to ten years of experience may shed light upon effective ways to encourage commitment among educators.
- Studies are required to assess the effectiveness of intervention strategies to assist

educators and schools to alleviate stress (Kyriacou 2001, 33). The role that the senior management team can play in reducing stress among staff members cannot be over-emphasised.

- A research topic that has been overlooked is the impact of educator–learner relationships and classroom climate on educator stress (Kyriacou 2001, 33). Studies to investigate the way negative and unproductive levels of educator stress and learner stress may influence educator-learner relationships are equally indispensable.
- Research needs to become more 'proactive' by examining stress management systems that would yield benefits for educators, schools and education as a whole (Cooper et al. 2001, 427).

The challenge is for researchers to strive towards making a significant and practical input into the health and wellbeing of educators in the education system in which they are functioning.

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