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Marion Shields

Avondale College, marion.shields@avondale.edu.au

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‘Can I last the distance?’ Stress and school leadership

Marion Shields

Director of Education, Seventh-day Adventist Schools, SA

Abstract

This research study investigated how principals in a national, Christian independent school system cope with stress. Using a double-phased, mixed-methods approach combining questionnaires and in-depth interviews, school principals’ stressors and their reactions to these stressors were examined. Coping strategies used by principals to reduce or manage their stress were also explored. Forty-seven principals participated in the study and of these, 23 indicated a serious level of stress. The study highlighted a preference for using stress managers (a secondary approach), rather than stress reducers (a primary approach). Specific grouping of stressors into ten clusters suggested particular areas to be targeted for professional development and systemic reform.

Introduction

Stress is part of people’s daily lives in our fast-paced and ever-changing environment in the Western world. Within the education scene, stress has become a serious issue in recent years as school principals attempt to cope with frequent change, increased demands from parents and employing authorities, and students from dysfunctional homes. Stress in the teaching profession is also a focus for teacher unions as they seek to support educators in their attempts to cope with work-related stress. In this context, a research study was conducted during 2005 and 2006 within Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) to determine stress and satisfaction levels of principals, causes of their stress, and preferred coping strategies.

Rationale for the study in the context of the literature

Gold and Roth describe stress as

a condition of disequilibrium within the intellectual, emotional and physical state of the individual; it is generated by one’s perceptions of a situation, which result in physical and emotional reactions. It can be either positive or negative, depending on one’s interpretations (1993, p. 17).

Stress in the principalship is a serious issue in western education systems (Green et al., 2001). Important areas affected by the extent to which the principal of a school experiences work-related stress include health, welfare, financial and educational issues.

Both the health of the principal and the health of staff members may be negatively affected by a principal experiencing serious work-related stress. Westman and Etzion, (1999) in their study of 83 primary school principals and 340 of their teaching staff in Israel, found that work-related stress crossed over to teachers, from principals with whom they worked. The study also found that a ‘ping pong’ effect existed where the teachers’ stress then rebounded onto the principal, causing further stress. Lane (2000) noted that for stressed principals there was a negative correlation between stress and productivity, and that subjects experienced difficulty in using intellectual skills in management and in dealing with subordinates.

Principals’ stress is contributing to an enormous rise in indirect financial costs associated with education (Brown et al., 2002). This occurs on account of high levels of stress-related sick leave for the principal as well as affected staff members, premature resignation, and subsequent training of new staff. Further, the core business of schools is to facilitate good quality educational outcomes for students in a safe, secure learning environment (Victorian Dept of Education, 2005); unfortunately schools with seriously stressed principals and affected staff are less likely to maintain high educational standards and achieve quality outcomes (Alison, 1997, Lane, 2000).

There is a lack of data on stress and coping within the principalship of ASA, and it is unknown whether the findings of existing studies apply to them. Neither is it known whether similar coping mechanisms to those described by Allison in his 1997 Canadian-based study of school principals are used. Further, the ASA principals’ own perceptions of causes and possibilities of reducing stress have not been explored previously in any empirical research.

“Principals’ stress is contributing to an enormous rise in the financial cost of education”

It is also important that employers in the education sector, such as ASA, have knowledge regarding the incidence, levels and causes of work-related stress experienced by principals, in order to provide meaningful support for them.

Stress literature makes a distinction between stress reducers and stress managers. Sadri (1997) and Allison (1997) highlighted the use of stress reducers (a primary approach), and stress managers (a secondary approach) in their studies. A stress reducer is a coping strategy that seeks to reduce the stress before it has a negative effect on the subject. Sadri points out

Stressor reduction methods would include changes in organisation design, structure, enhanced communication levels, increased employee participation and employee empowerment (Sadri, 1997, p. 33).

By contrast, stress management methods 'include meditation, deep relaxation, exercise, better nutrition, and other preventative stress management techniques' (Sadri, 1997, 33). In their study on administrator stress and burnout, Gmelch & Torelli (1994) found that principals tended to choose secondary (stress managers) rather than primary strategies to cope with their stress.

Research questions & methodology

Phase one—survey

A combination of questionnaire instruments and in-depth interviews was used to collect data in relation to:

- whether the ASA principals felt they experienced work-related stress (and if so);
- the nature and extent of the stress;
- how satisfied principals felt with their roles.

The Administrative Stress Index Questionnaire (Gmelch & Swent, 1982) was used to ascertain principals' responses to a list of common stressors; respondents were invited to suggest any additional perceived stressors. Participants were also asked to rate a list of common coping strategies according to their perceived usefulness (Allison, 1997) and then describe any additional coping strategies they may have used. Links between the demographic variables (e.g. age, gender, experience, size of school etc) and particular stressors and coping strategies were examined. Participants were then asked to suggest any systemic support which would be helpful in coping with work-related stress.

Phase two—interview

Phase two consisted of individual in-depth interviews, beginning with an invitation for the interviewee to talk about their personal perspectives and to comment on their stress

levels. The interviewee's questionnaire responses were then discussed, in particular those that were predominantly 'high' or 'low'; and also the perceived causes. Finally, interviewees were asked to comment on their perceptions of work-related stress in ASA principals and make suggestions for organisational change and professional development to address this need.

Findings

Demographic Results

Forty-seven from a possible 53 principals participated, covering a broad range of ages, experience, qualifications and types of schools as shown in Figure 1 and Table 1 & 2, as described below. Regarding 'school type', 29 (62%) were principals of primary schools, 2 (4%) were principals of 'stand-alone' secondary schools, while 16 (34%) were principals of K-10, or K-12; combined primary and secondary schools. Enrolments ranged from 20 schools (43%) with less than 100 enrolled students, to 15 schools (32%) with an enrolment between 100 and 199, to 7 schools (15%) with an enrolment of between 200 and 349, while 5 (10%) schools had an enrolment of over 350 students.

Stress and satisfaction results

Seventeen percent of the principals considered that they had a low level of stress by scoring 1 or 2 on a 5-point Likert Scale. By contrast 49% of the principals considered they had a high level of stress by scoring 4, 4.5, or 5 on the scale. An 'intermediate group' (34%) of principals scored 2.5, 3 or 3.5 for their perceived stress levels. The results show that a majority (83%) of principals reported experiencing moderate to high levels of stress (see Figure 2), yet 33 of the 47 principals (70%) reported that they had a high level of satisfaction and rated their satisfaction level at 4 or 5 (see Figure 5).

Stressors results

The sum of all principals' rating scores (0-5) for each stressor in the Administrative Stress Index was calculated and then used to order the stressors by severity as shown in Table 3. 'Feeling that I have too heavy a workload, one that I cannot possibly finish during the normal working day' was considered to be the most severe stressor by the principals in the study. This result reflected the findings of related studies in the UK (Cooper & Kelly), USA (Brown, 1996) and in Victoria, Australia (O'Reilly, 2004). It should be noted however, that there is very little difference between the rating totals for some of the other stressors, and therefore undue emphasis should not be placed on the exact order of many of the closely ranked individual stressors.

The individual stressors were then grouped

“Principals tended to choose secondary rather than primary strategies to cope with their stress”

according to conceptual similarity. These, at a later point, might provide guidance for professional development and indicate possible directions for systemic change. The stressor groupings are displayed in order of severity in Table 4, and again, 'workload' was the most serious issue.

Additional stressors results

A number of additional stressors were mentioned and two scored highly. First, responsibilities connected with the home, parenting (an addition to the principal's role, mainly reported by women) were mentioned, and also transfers for promotion. Second, the issue of additional church

responsibilities such as conducting Bible studies, preaching and organising students to present programs and musical items at services was raised.

Coping strategies results

The Coping Preference Scale (Allison, 1997) was used to examine this aspect of the principals' reaction to stress. Table 5 displays the ten most preferred coping strategies in the current study.

Principals were also given the option of indicating the extent to which aspects of their Christian beliefs assisted them in managing stress. Five aspects were provided: Christian beliefs and world view (192), Prayer (192), Bible reading (169), Christian books or music (167) and Church Life (141). The bracketed numerals indicate the sum of scores for each 'aspect' on the 1-5 Likert Scale. The maximum possible score (if every principal had scored it at the maximum of 5) was 220. These results indicate that for the majority of respondents their Christian faith and perspective, as well as their prayer life were perceived as very valuable in helping them cope with stress. However their church life was perceived as not being of comparable benefit and this may be due to expectations by their local church community.

Eight of the principals registered low stress scores. Principals tended to explain these scores in terms of a conscious decision not to let their admittedly stressful role overwhelm their lives; and was linked to their Christian faith and world view. During the interviews, not one of the principals (under probing by the researcher) in this group

“*Their Christian faith and perspective, as well as their prayer life were perceived as very valuable in helping them cope with stress*”

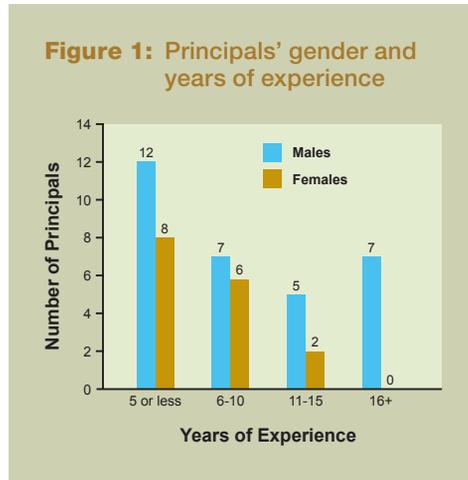


Table 1: Age of principals

Age of participants, n = 47		
Age	Number	%
20-30	3	6.4
31-40	13	27.7
41-50	21	44.7
51-60	10	21.3
61+	0	0

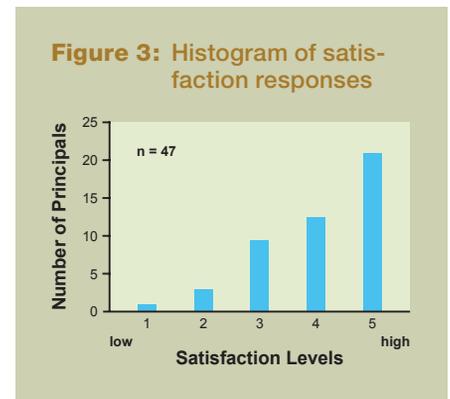
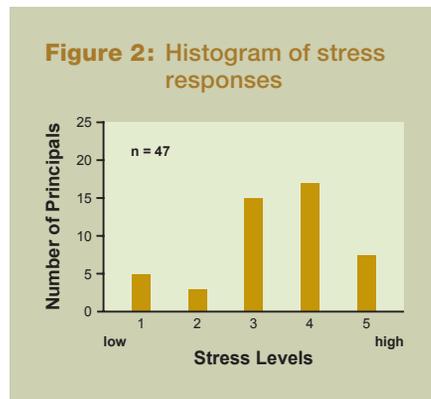


Table 2: Principals' qualifications

	Diploma of Teaching		Bachelor Degree		Masters Degree		Doctorate		Administrative Qualifications	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Number	3	6	16	8	8	2	4	0	10	3
Total	9 (19%)		24 (51%)		10 (21%)		4 (8%)		13 (28%)	

Table 3: The twelve highest ranking stressors

Stress Factor (abbreviated) (Potential of 235 if every principal scored the maximum rating)	Sum of all Scores	Principals Scoring 5	Principals Scoring 4
1. Workload too heavy	186 (79%)	40%	29%
2. Excessively high self-expectations	172 (73%)	22%	44%
3. Deadlines for reports and other paperwork	170 (72%)	27%	31%
4. Interrupted frequently by telephone calls	167 (71%)	13%	58%
5. Complying with state / federal rules and policies	164 (70%)	20%	33%
6. Resolving parent / school conflicts	163 (69%)	15%	41%
7. School activities outside of the normal working hours	157 (67%)	23%	25%
8. Feeling progress on my job is not what it should be	154 (66%)	22%	29%
9. Meetings take up too much time	152 (65%)	20%	27%
10. Decisions affecting the lives of staff / students etc	151 (64%)	8%	40%
11. Pressure for better job performance	149 (63%)	16%	29%
12. Preparing and allocating budget resources	145 (62%)	16%	24%

perceived that they were ‘placid by nature’. Instead, they spoke about their relationship with God and of their commitment in their lives to their schools and their Lord.

Suggestions for additional support included the facilitation of networks between the principals for information sharing and support, and a Principals’ Handbook to provide information and guidance.

Stress reducers and stress managers

In the literature a distinction was made between stress reducers and stress managers. The data in the present study indicated that ASA principals primarily utilised stress managers rather than stress reducers (marked by an asterisk in Table 5). The former are less effective and rely on addressing the stress reaction rather than addressing the stress-causing mechanism first.

Links between demographics and stress categories

The workload issue was given the highest total stress rating by the principals in this study, and a higher percentage of women scored it at the highest level (56% of women as against 32% of men). Further, none of the women scored it at level 1 or 2, as did 6% of the men. In almost every category, women felt more stressed than their male counterparts. Further, young, inexperienced principals of smaller schools indicated a higher degree of stress than their colleagues in almost every category.

Conclusions and recommendations

There are some clear general conclusions that can be drawn from the findings of this study.

First, while on the one hand principals experienced a high level of job satisfaction, an even

Table 4: Grouped stressors ordered by severity

Rank	Stress Grouping	ASI Factor Number
1	Time (includes workload)	27, 33
2	Organisation	1,9,12,34
3	Financial	21
4	Personal Inadequacy	4, 10, 16, 29
5	Marketing and Community	15, 18, 37, 38
6	Supervision	2, 26
7	Policy	24, 25, 28, 30, 32
8	Power, Autonomy, Independence	5, 6, 11, 22, 36
9	Communication and Conflict	3, 7, 13, 14, 20, 23, 35
10	Responsibility	8, 17, 19, 31

Table 5: The ten preferred coping strategies

Rank	Preferred Coping Strategy
1	Maintain a sense of humour
2	Practice good human relations skills *
3	Approach problems optimistically
4	Work harder (including evenings and weekends)
5	Talk with family members or close friends
6	Maintain regular sleep habits
7	Set realistic goals (recognise job limitations) *
8	Engage in activities that support spiritual growth
9	Maintain good health habits
10	Engage in less active non-work or play activities

“
Too heavy a workload was identified as the most significant work-related stress factor”

larger majority experienced moderate or high levels of stress.

Second, ‘too heavy a workload’ was identified as the most significant work-related stress factor. Additional stressors included home and parenting responsibilities, particularly for women principals, and also church duties.

Third, principals listed ‘maintaining a sense of humour’ and their Christian beliefs and practices, among others, as effective strategies in managing stress. It is of interest that principals primarily utilised stress managers rather than stress reducers, an aspect that has implications for principals’ professional development.

Finally, it is important to note that two groups of principals were most vulnerable to work-related stress: women principals and young principals.

Twenty-eight separate recommendations were made as a result of the study. They included the following:

For principals

1. Develop and maintain good habits of nutrition, and a balanced lifestyle, including exercise.
2. Develop good habits of active and non-active leisure activities and recognise that these are legitimate and appropriate activities in the management of stress.
3. Become familiar with, use, and contribute to relevant education websites.

For conference education directors

4. Make regular visits to schools, show an interest and give support. Make phone calls and pray with principals regularly; provide pastoral care for all principals and mentors for beginning principals.
5. Support new principals in building up local networks, to provide the social support which acts as a vitally important buffer against the negative effects of stress in times of difficulty.

For the national system

6. Reduce the load for beginning principals by 10% in their first year.
7. Improve preparation of administrators (understanding of the principal’s role, likely conflicts, and skills in communication, conflict resolution, mediation and confrontation).
8. Provide training for principals in understanding stress, stress reducers and stress managers.
9. Provide workshops on assessment procedures, Church education policies, regulations and organisational change and collaborative decision making.

For Pacific Schools Australia—systems level

10. Facilitate the development of a partnership between educators and the pastoral ministry to promote the value of the Church’s Christian education system; including:
 - a. A strengthening of relationships between principals and pastors with an increased understanding of, and support for, each other’s roles.
 - b. Marketing the local church school.
 - c. ‘Skilling’ and supporting rural pastors in their occasional role of mediator between the school and parents/church members.
 - d. Regular, public, articulation of the value of the Church’s education system and affirmation of its leaders.

It is believed that implementing these recommendations should increase the likelihood of principals ‘lasting the distance’, reduce their work-related stress, and make for more effective leadership in ASA schools particularly and perhaps in the broader Christian schools community generally. **TEACH**

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