

ANALYSIS OF STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AMONG PRINCIPALS OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN OYO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Secondary school principals are increasingly experiencing work-related stress; a trend which is having negative effects on their health status and successful execution of their duties and responsibilities as well as the overall performance of the secondary school system in Nigeria. This, therefore, raises the concern among stakeholders for the need to assist the principals to manage stress-related issues affecting them; consequently this also raises the need to have a better insight into the existing strategies adopted by these school principals in managing their stress. Previous studies on managing work-related stress in Nigerian schools have focused more on the general stress management techniques with little emphasis on the three principal strategies highlighted in stress management extant literature namely, the primary, secondary and tertiary strategies of stress management. This study, therefore, explores the various stress management strategies among public secondary school principals in Ibadan metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria.

The study adopts the descriptive survey research design. Ninety-one public secondary school principals from two purposively selected zones of All Nigeria Confederation of Principals of Secondary Schools (ANCOPSS) in Ibadan metropolis were totally enumerated and used as participants. Stress Management Strategy Scale ($r=0.74$) was the main instrument used for data collection. Data were subjected to descriptive statistics.

The secondary school principals mostly adopted the self-management and self-care strategies, the secondary stress management technique in extant literature, which seem to be common in stress management in managing their work-related stress, neglecting both the primary and tertiary strategies. Therefore, government should provide a conducive and friendly work environment that can better promote the effective use of the various self-management techniques among all secondary school principals in reducing stressful work situations associated with school leadership.

Keywords: *Stress management strategies, Stress tolerance, Secondary schools, principals*

Background to the Study:

Stress is an occurrence that is widely recognised and addressed in the teaching profession (Oliver & Venter, 2003). The secondary school principals' work is becoming more complex and demanding; and this is continually impacted by various social, political and economic factors that exert pressures on their leadership skills and consequently affect them personally and professionally (Norton, 2005). Secondary school principals and their assistants are expected to execute various activities which involve enormous volumes of individual, social and professional responsibilities in today's fast – paced world which often lead to their experience of stress (Adams, 2001). Secondary schools' principals experience stress as a result of heightened accountability and expectations for students' achievement (Wells, 2013). In addition to the daily rigors of maintaining the operations of a school, they have to cope with such demands as increase changes in education policies, curriculum and society. Various studies have highlighted that time pressure with regards to administrative demands and excessive paper work are major sources of stress for school administrators generally, as there is inadequate time for preparation; unrealistic deadlines imposed and issues concerning shortages of teachers (Kyriacou, 2001; Ako, 2010).

Besides, students are now more numerous and more diverse than ever, with many societal problems being brought to school (Ibrahim, 2011).

Secondary schools principals with the complexity of their roles often feel besieged and have difficulty finding adequate time to efficiently handle every aspect of their job (Carr, 1994; Brock & Grady, 2002; Queen & Queen, 2005). Hughes and Norris (2004) stress the magnitude of the roles of principals by indicating that the principal is the key element in school success and that it is in the public best interest for principals to be highly effective.

Further, studies have reported that the responsibilities and problems inherent in the position of school principalship are wide in scope and variety. Often times, they lead in an environment in which they are isolated, where the responsibilities are numerous and where they have limited number of allies and supports (Litchka, Fenzel & Polka, 2009). This environment, however, made researchers (Cooper & Schabracq, 2000; Fullan, 2003; Glass & Franceshini, 2007) to assert that school leaders encounter considerable stress in their work that is directly related to the roles and responsibilities of their position. Increases in delinquency, students and teachers indiscipline, conditions of service, new rules, regulations and policies, demands of unions, inadequate and ageing school facilities, inadequate teachers, and large classes are some of the reasons that have been accounted for secondary school principals' stress (Niehaus, Myburgh & Kok, 1996; Mestry, 1999; Mali 2011; Perry 2011; Uba-Mbibbi & Uwamuo, 2013).

Stress on principals can produce a range of undesirable, expensive, and debilitating consequences which affect both the principal and the entire secondary school system (Ross, 2005). Richardson and Rothstem (2008) views job stress as a situation where job-related factors interact with the worker to change his or her psychological and/or physiological condition such that the person is forced to deviate from normal functioning. It is very important that a principal has to adopt strategies of coping and adjustment to his or her work related stress. If the ability to cope is low or dependent only on basic and not well-developed coping strategies, this might lead to negative emotional reactions and burnout among principals (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005), with grave consequences on the entire school system.

Stress management involves the ability to mobilize and successfully or unsuccessfully deal with stress factors. It also refers to all the means used to objectively or subjectively respond to a stressful situation perceived by the individual (Stoica & Buicu, 2010). Occupational stress management intervention is any activity or programme that focuses on reducing the presence of the work-related stressors which aim to assist individuals to minimize the negative outcomes of exposure to these stressors. The stress management intervention may attempt to change these work-related factors, assist employees in minimizing the negative effects of these stressors, or both (Newman & Beehr, 1979). Therefore as a result of the application or non-application of coping techniques, and sometimes as a direct result of stressful

events, the individual is likely to experience either positive emotions such as hope, pleasure, desire, enthusiasm, or negative emotions such as dread, frustration, disappointment, depression and even suicidal thinking (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). The individual can also experience feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction in work or in life in general, which influences his commitment towards his job. Finally, he may experience a feeling of exhaustion, depersonalization, or lack of fulfillment as aspects of burnout (Zedan, 2012).

Studies have identified different type of stress management strategies. Kyriacou and Chien (2004) in Zedan (2012) found that the best way to overcome stress was to adopt coping strategies such as “ensuring a healthy family life”, or alternatively having someone to stand by you and understand you. Other coping means are: “to ensure a good understanding of the material you have to teach”; “to learn how to control your emotions”; “to see the humor in the situation”; and “to rest after work”. Bindhu and Sudheeshkumar (2006) discover that there are two main strategies to cope with stress: to give maximum attention to the stressful event, or not to think about it at all. According to Hemmings and Hockley (2002) various ways to cope with stress are communication with others; self-help; relaxation; organisation; engaging in sports and so on. Fun and entertainment also reduce stress and improves the quality and enjoyment of life (McKay, 2008). Also, there is a noticeable influence in self-care (regular exercise and sport, eight

hours of sleep a day, preserving a correct diet, applying relaxation techniques) on the reduction of stress and improvement in the quality of life (Yang, Ge, Hu, Chi & Wang, 2009). Lewis, Romi, Qui and Katz (2005) submit that teachers who find it difficult to cope with the behaviour of pupils and experiencing from it, take various measures to disregard it, either by concealing the problem and pushing it away (not telling anyone about it); then result to self-blaming, worrying and anxiety as well as development of eating and sleeping disorders and sometimes they end up being ill.

Montgomery and Rupp (2005) define two main categories of coping strategies, active coping strategies and passive coping strategies. Active coping strategies can be cognitive strategies (changes in perspective, imposing self-control, rational distancing of oneself); behavioural strategies (determining borderlines to the job, requesting advice from others, engaging in relaxation exercises); emotional strategies (remaining calm and quiet, thinking positively). On the other hand, passive coping strategies such as resignation, drinking, wishful thinking, and avoidance, are characterised by lack of engagement with the stressful event. Arikewuyo (2004) in the study of stress management strategies of secondary school teachers in Nigeria find that teachers of secondary school in Nigeria frequently use the active behavioural and inactive (escape) strategies in managing stress. He further states that it is an indication that the average Nigerian teacher prefers to organise him/herself in

such a way that his/her pedagogic duty will not be hampered by chores.

Further, majority of the teachers never engage in physical exercises or watch films in order to manage any stressful situations. They prefer to keep away from situations that could cause stress. Therefore, active cognitive strategies are rarely used by the teachers. Litchka, Fenzel and Polka (2009) report that school administrators take steps to care for themselves when experiencing stress by taking time to relax and engage in satisfying personal activities and, therefore, use effective problem solving approaches to challenges to a greater extent. Those who employed stress management strategies moderate the potentially damaging effect of occupational stress and it serves as a positive independent contributor to well-being. Stress management interventions generally can be grouped into three; primary, secondary, and tertiary (Murphy, 1995; Murphy & Sauter, 2003; Richardson & Rothstem, 2008).

The primary interventions attempt to alter the sources of stress at work (Murphy & Sauter, 2003). An example of such interventions programme includes redesigning jobs to modify workplace stressors (Bunce & Stephenson, 2000), increasing workers' decision – making authority or providing co-worker support groups. The secondary interventions attempt to reduce the severity of stress symptoms before they lead to serious health problems (Murphy & Sauter, 2003). Tertiary intervention is in a form of employee assistance programmes which are designed to treat the employee's health

condition via free and confidential access to qualified mental health professionals (Arthur, 2000).

The secondary prevention programmes are viewed as the most common stress management intervention because they aim at the individual and involve instruction in techniques to manage and cope with stress. Examples are cognitive – behavioural skills training, meditation, relaxation, deep breathing, exercise, journaling, time management and goal setting (Giga, Cooper, & Faragher, 2003). Cognitive behavioural interventions, however, are designed to educate employees about the role of their thoughts and emotions in managing stressful events and to provide them with the skills to modify their thoughts to facilitate adaptive coping (Bond & Bunce, 2000). These interventions are intended to change individual situations and their responses to them. For examples employees are taught to become aware of negative thoughts or traditional beliefs and to substitute positive or rational ideas (Bellarosa & Chen, 1997).

Sadri (1997) and Allison (1997) also highlight 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. Stressor reduction methods would include changes in organisation design and structure; enhanced communication levels; increased employee participation and employee empowerment (Sadri, 1997). Stress management methods include meditation, deep relaxation, exercise, better nutrition,

and other preventative stress management techniques (Sadri, 1997).

In the study on administrator stress and burnout, Gmelch and Torelli (1994) find that principals tended to choose secondary (stress managers) rather than primary strategies to reduce stress. Chyuan (1998) in the study of managing occupational stress among school administrators finds that one of the ways of managing stress is through self-management. Effective self-management, according to Chyuan (1998) can be achieved by adhering to a number of rules which include the following: develop a clear overall plan by setting yourself objectives and sub-objectives in each of the key result areas which are, developing action plans which convert goals into action, establishing a clear system of priorities, using time effectively by avoiding time-wasters such as interruptions, procrastination, lack of organizations, delegate as much work as you can, identify the time of the day when one should work most effectively and schedule difficult work at that time regularly review personal progress and make improvements for self-management when necessary, develop a time management system which works for oneself, have an effective system for coping with paperwork and learn to say no when necessary.

Chyuan (1998) suggests that it is sensible to approach stress from two directions. One approach is usually referred to as stressor management and focuses on situational factors and methods of reducing demands of the situation on an individual (Kelehear, 2004). The other

stress management approach, focuses on the behavioural cognitive or the physiological components of an individual's response in an effort to permit calmer response to the demanding situation. The coping strategies are: maintaining good physical health programme, withdrawal and re-charging, intellectual, social and spiritual support, positive attitude, realistic perspective, increased involvement, time management and organisation.

Reddy and Anuradha (2013) assert that occupational stress can be conveniently managed at different stages through various institutional interventions such as:

- (a) prevention of stress through organisational interventions at the management level, like, selection of suitably qualified teachers, proper job designing and training, adequate work conditions, effective supervision and incentive system, effective communication system and participative management;
- (b) minimizing the frequency and intensity of stressful situations integral to the job at the organisational level; and
- (c) moderating the intensity of integral job stressors and their consequent strains through the effect of other variables of positive values, such as high or extra salary, non-financial incentives, social support, generating team feeling and participative decision making.

In essence, since stress cannot be avoided, identification of effective coping strategies may provide schools' administrators with the tools which can be used to reduce the amount of stress in their

environment and to moderate the effect of stress on them.

Statement of problem:

Stress reactions on secondary school principals may be emotional behavioural, cognitive and/or physiological in nature. When such stress reactions persist over a longer period of time, they may develop into more permanent irreversible health implications such as chronic fatigue, musculoskeletal problems or cardiovascular diseases. Stress on school principals can undermine the achievement of goals, both for individuals and for the attainment of the goal of the secondary school system.

School principals when affected by work stress, often become increasingly distressed and irritable, unable to relax or concentrate; have difficulty thinking logically and making decisions, feel less committed to their duties, feel tired, depressed and anxious, have difficulty sleeping and also experience serious physical problems such as heart disease, increase in blood pressure and headache. Since stressors are inevitable for a secondary school principal, they, therefore, adopt some coping strategies that can help in managing and coping with their job stress.

There have been vast literature generally on occupational stress and its different coping strategies and intervention among teachers generally without giving much consideration for the existing stress management strategies employed by their school principals within the same work environment. It is on this basis that this study explores the various stress

management strategies among public secondary schools principals in Ibadan metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria. Thus, the study was epitomised on the research question: what are the stress management strategies that are adopted by public secondary school principals in Ibadan metropolis?

Methodology:

The study adopts the descriptive survey research design. Ninety-one public secondary school principals from two purposively selected zones of All Nigeria Confederation of Principals of Secondary Schools (ANCOPSS) (Ibadan Zones 1 and

6) in Ibadan metropolis were totally enumerated and used as participants for this study.

The main instrument used for the study is a 22-item Stress Management Strategies Scale adapted from Boyland (2011). It contains questions on the individual school administrator's strategies adopted in reducing work-related stress. The drafted scale was piloted tested on 10 principals from Ogbomoso 1 ANCOPSS zone; the reliability co-efficient yielded 0.74. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency count, percentages and mean.

Results and Discussions:

Table 1: Stress Management Strategies adopted by Secondary Schools Principals

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	P	$\bar{x}$
1.	I drink alcohol under intense pressure and frustration at work	9.9	0.07
2.	I journal after a tough day to relieve stress and reflect	43.0	0.92
3.	I do not think about school problems when I am at home	52.1	1.22
4.	I go for vacation when I need one	52.9	1.25
5.	I play a relaxing or inspirational music in my office during the day	53.0	1.30
6.	I force myself to set aside some time to eat and take a break each day	57.0	1.37
7.	I get out of office to be with the students so as to adjust my focus	57.0	1.37
8.	I write out tomorrow's "to do" list before I leave school each day	57.0	1.37
9.	I increase my daily level of communication with staff and parents	58.7	1.41
10.	I build a supportive network by finding other school administrators I can talk to	60.0	1.72
11.	When I can't leave work, I take regular exercise by taking a brisk walk in or outside the school	63.0	1.99
12.	I do not dwell on my mistakes because I learnt to forgive myself	63.6	2.01
13.	I have a deep sense of humor	71.1	2.11

14.	I do not make snap decision unless it is emergency	72.7	2.15
15.	I slow down my reaction to emotional situation	73.6	2.21
16.	I do not take things personally	75.2	2.45
17.	I stay organised and plan ahead by taking each day at a time	76.9	2.36
18.	I organize my office, my desk filing system etc, so that I do not waste time and energy looking for items	77.7	2.68
19.	I gather input and data before I make a big decision	78.5	2.71
20.	I balance my life by making time for family, friends, recreation and a hobby	79.3	2.63
21.	I surround myself with good staff and allow them to do their jobs	80.2	3.09
22.	I am optimistic	81.0	3.13

Items 1-22 of the table above indicate the coping strategies adopted by school principals with the percentage and the mean scores respectively. The findings indicated that item 1 was the least while item 22 was the common strategy employed by the respondents. The respondents were 33 males and 58 females with a mean age of 57 ± 3 years; and average principal ship designation tenure of five years. Most of the secondary school principals tend to use the secondary stress management techniques of self-management and self-care than using the primary and the tertiary interventions. Majority of the respondents agree that it is almost difficult to alter the various sources of their work-related stress as it is being done in the primary stress management technique because it is out of their control. And their employer (government) finds it difficult to bend the rules. Also, they can never allow their situations to get worst by being hospitalised to adopt the tertiary stress management technique by seeking for medical interventions.

The results of this study show that most secondary school principals adopt the secondary stress management techniques of self-care because more than anything it help the individual to develop stress tolerance, an ability to always withstand adverse events and stress situations without falling apart. Besides, the findings reveal that most of these 'self-care' coping strategies of the secondary school principals give the individual effective impulse control; an ability in stress management that help an individual to develop a capacity for being composed and controlling aggression, hostility and irresponsible behaviour regardless of the level of the stress situation the individual is experiencing.

This result reveals that the participants of the study are aware of their job related stress; therefore the training further assisted the principals to develop or add more to their coping strategies in managing their work related stress. This is in line with the submission of Chyuan (1998) and McKay (2008) that one of the effective ways of managing stress is self-

management or self-care, which will involve adhering to a number of personal rules. The findings reveal that principals use secondary stress management intervention to manage and cope with their occupational stress as observed by most previous studies (Murphy & Sauter, 2003; Richardson & Rothstem, 2008; Giga, Cooper & Faragher, 2003). All these previous studies have agreed that the secondary prevention programmes whether active or inactive are the most common and effective stress management intervention because it aims at the individual and involves instruction in techniques to manage and cope with stress (Gmelch & Torelli, 1994; Hemmings & Hockley, 2002; Arikewuyo, 2004; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Bindhu & Sudheeshkumar, 2006).

The result of the study shows that 9.9% of the respondents agree that they drink alcohol under intense pressure and frustration at work. 43.0% after a stressful day engage in journaling by writing out all stressful situations/events as well as their stressors, and subsequently reflecting on such. Forty-three percent of the school principals play relaxing or inspirational music in their offices during the day. Also, 52.1% of the school principals said they do not think about any school problem(s) once they leave school and are at home. They express the fact that they are not in the habit of taking school work to their homes. Another 52.9% of the school principals interviewed said they prefer going on vacations, travelling and visiting during the holidays. Fifty seven percent of the school principals said they have formed the habit of forcing themselves to

set aside time to eat and take a break each day during the school hours.

The findings further show that 57.0% get out of the office and stay around the students; this they said helps them to adjust their focus on the goals of the school. 57.0% write out what they plan to do the next day before they leave school each day. According to this category of school principals, this helps them to start the next day being prepared. 58.7% managed their work-related stress by increasing their daily level of communication with staff and parents. More communication to them means fewer problems. About 60.0% build a supportive network by finding other school administrators to talk to; they love to attend conferences/seminars/workshops occasionally.

Sixty three percent of the school principals managed their work-related stress by taking regular exercises. They take a brisk walk round the school. This provides a physical release from tension. Majority of the school principals (63.6%) interviewed do not dwell on their mistakes, because they learnt to forgive themselves and move on with their work; seeing it as an opportunity to improve them. Results show that 71.1% have deep sense of humour; they have formed the habit of using humour and jokes to reduce tension and stressful situations. Also, the findings show that 72.7% do not make snap decisions unless it is an emergency. 73.6% slow down their reactions to emotional situation. Some (75.2%) were of the view that they do not take things personally; they plan to serve others and realise that reactions of people to them is a result of

their position as a principal. 76.9% stay organized by planning ahead; they try to take each day at a time. While 77.7% organise and continually reorganise their offices, desks and filing systems. This is with a view to not wasting time and energy looking for documents, records and items. 78.5% gather information before they take a major decision.

Further, 79.3% of the secondary school principals manage their stress by balancing their work-life conflicts by having more time for their families and friends; in addition they find time to recreate and relax with a particular hobby. To 80.2% of the respondents, surrounding themselves with good staff and allowing them to do their jobs is a good way to manage work-related for an experienced school principal. 81.0% of the school principals make use of being optimistic, in trying not to lose their positive attitude; knowing that getting annoyed all the time does not solve their problems.

Conclusion:

The secondary school principals mostly adopt the self-management and self-care strategies in reducing occupational stress, the secondary stress management technique in extant literature, which seem to be common stress management techniques in managing their work-related stress, neglecting both the primary and tertiary strategies. Therefore, Government should provide a conducive and friendly work environment that can better promote the effective use of the various self-management techniques among all secondary school principals in

reducing stressful work situations associated with school leadership.

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