Work-related stress: the experiences of polytechnic teachers: literature review

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Literature Review

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Introduction

There is an enormous body of research literature on the subject of work-related stress, mostly from the 1960s onwards. This review will focus on the research literature relevant to teacher stress; it will begin with an overview of the main current theoretical models and conceptualisations of occupational stress, followed by an analysis of the research approaches to the field of teacher stress. With this contextual framework established, the research literature on teacher stress will then be examined in some detail, focussing in turn on each of the aspects of work-related stress under study: the incidence, effects and causes of stress, the moderating factors involved, and coping strategies employed. For each of these aspects, discussion of the research findings for teacher stress generally and in the compulsory sector will be followed by particular examination of research in the tertiary sector, and when available, in polytechnics. Particular attention will be paid to New Zealand research.

Theoretical models and conceptualisations of work-related stress

A useful overview of current research is provided by Dollard (2001). She identifies a range of theoretical approaches which seek to explain work-related stress - in terms of stimulus- response combinations, sociological or psychological paradigms, or emphasis on factors in the environment or in the individual as the source of stress. Most current theory is psychologically-based, according to Cox, Griffiths and Real-Gonzalez (2000), and “conceptualises work-related stress in terms of a negative psychological state, and the dynamic interaction between the person and their work environment. (Dollard, 2001; p.16).
Dollard (ibid.) examines in detail two psychological theories of work-related stress, *interactional* and *transactional* approaches. *Interactional* models emphasise the work environment and an individual’s interactions with it as the source of stress: *burnout*, for example, “a state of emotional, physical and attitudinal exhaustion” (Kyriacou, 2001; p.28), is a model frequently used to analyse stress in social service occupations such as teaching (ibid.; Whitehead, Ryba and O’Driscoll, 2000). *Job-person fit* is another *interactional* model, which attributes stress to a mismatch between work and the individual’s needs, goals, aspirations and values. Another example is the *demand-control/support model*, which suggests that stress is caused by the demands of work, moderated by the level of control and support which the person has in their job.

*Transactional* theories, in contrast, focus on the thoughts and feelings of the individual in response to their interaction with their environment, and the meanings they ascribe to what happens; they emphasise the importance of the individual’s coping resources (Dollard, ibid.). An example is the *effort-reward imbalance model*, according to which stress is experienced by an individual who perceives that the effort required at work is not matched by the rewards received. Since these perceptions are clearly influenced by the individual’s own values and aspirations, personal variables are seen as significant (Guglielmi and Tatrow, 1998). A further example is the *cognitive model* where the individual’s cognitive appraisal of the stressor is identified as the source of stress, rather than the objective stressor itself (Dollard, 2001).

Although these theories are not mutually exclusive, they differ in emphasis on whether the locus of stress lies primarily in the individual’s perceptions (*transactional*), or in the
work environment and the individual’s interactions with it (*interactional*). This key difference is highlighted by Kenny and Cooper (2003), who refer to two competing conceptualisations of work-related stress – stress as “personal trouble”, in other words originating in the individual’s attitudes, abilities, personality, and so on; or stress as “public trouble”, caused by the work environment and therefore a matter of public responsibility (p.276). They assert that the differences between them are crucial in the development of workplace interventions (and presumably, national policy and legislation).

In this context, then, it is revealing to examine the definitions of stress adopted by national occupational health and safety agencies, since these definitions represent official government policy on occupational stress. In the Guidance on Work-related Stress issued by the European Commission in 2002, for example, work-related stress is defined as “a pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions to adverse and noxious aspects of work content, work organisation and work environment” (p.7); the emphasis is on the workplace as the source of stress. The United States National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety, on the other hand, in its 1999 publication entitled “Stress at Work”, defines work-related stress as “the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker” (p.6), and expresses the view that working conditions are a primary factor, but that personal factors are also influential. This is the *job-person fit model*: still *interactional*, but placing more emphasis on the individual. While they differ in emphasis, both these definitions clearly view stress as “public trouble”.


In contrast, the *transactional* or “personal trouble” approach has been predominant in New Zealand and Australia, where in comparison with the U.S. and the European Commission, national policies define stress as primarily due to factors within the individual rather than in the workplace, and adopt an essentially *cognitive model*. In Australia, the definition of stress used by the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission is “the body’s natural response to pressures or stressful situations we find ourselves in and which we are not certain we can cope with effectively” (NOHSC, undated). In New Zealand, the Occupational Health and Safety Service’s guidelines define work stress as “the awareness of not being able to cope with the demands of one’s environment, when this realisation is of concern to the person, in that both are associated with a negative emotional response” (1998, p.7; 2003, p.6). This approach places the locus of the problem even more unequivocally in the individual than the Australian definition, and is at the other end of the “public-personal trouble” continuum from the position adopted by the European Commission.

These definitions, underpinned as they are by conceptualisations of the origins and causes of workplace stress as located in the individual or in the workplace, form the basis on which national and workplace policies and practices are developed and implemented, and reflect the different socio-political and cultural contexts in which research into work-related stress is conducted. It is likely that an individual’s perceptions of stress and its causes are shaped at least to some extent by the dominant public discourse about workplace stress in the media, in government policy and in the workplace: these definitions are thus of more than academic interest. They are the influential product of
powerful social and political forces, as Kenny and Cooper (2003) point out; yet their assumptions are rarely, if ever, subjected to critical scrutiny or public debate.

The “personal trouble” approach is widespread, and has been of concern to many researchers into teacher stress, especially in the U.K. Cole and Walker (1989) emphasise the dangers of this position, namely that it comes close to blaming the individual for their stress - stress “as a personal failure, as an essential inadequacy in the victim” (p.3); and Dunham (1998) also warns of the dangers of focussing stress interventions in teaching on the individual, rather than the organisation. In New Zealand this view is echoed by Manthei and Solman (1988), who contend that “while individuals can be taught to cope with stress more effectively, these techniques do nothing to change the stressors themselves” (p.161).

Wainwright and Calnan (2002), on the other hand, challenge the contemporary conceptualisations of work-related stress, and argue that the current discourse is based on selective interpretation of the empirical evidence, much of which is itself based on questionable presuppositions; and that it represents a reframing of the historical antagonism between worker and employer, in terms of the ability or inability of the individual to withstand the excessive demands of work. This, they argue, merely maintains the status quo and undermines the individual’s sense of agency, rather than encouraging the development of “more emancipatory modes of interpretation and opposition” (p.197).
In this review, the position adopted will be an *interactional* one: that is, that work-related stress is “public trouble”, a negative psychological state in response to aspects of the working environment. While it would be simplistic to ignore the significance of moderating factors such as personal differences, the idea that these are predominant – that the individual is primarily the source of their own stress - is rejected. This *transactional* or “personal trouble” approach discounts the objective existence of stressful work situations such as excessive workload, and ignores the political, social and economic realities and power differentials of the workplace. The definition of stress which will be used is Kyriacou’s: “the experience by teachers of unpleasant emotions such as anger, tension, frustration, anxiety, depression and nervousness, resulting from aspects of their work as teachers” (1989; p.27).

**Teacher stress**

*Research approaches*

Most published research into teacher stress since the 1970s has consisted of large-scale surveys, using questionnaire inventories and employing quantitative analysis. A sustained criticism of the literature is made by Guglielmi and Tatrow, in their 1998 review of research into teacher stress and burnout. They discuss a range of methodological issues, including the importance of moderating variables, which they believe to have been substantially overlooked; the problems inherent in the cross-sectional design used in almost all the empirical research in this field; and the lack of consensus about conceptualisations of stress and of uniform measures of stress. Their concerns are echoed by other researchers (Rudow, 1999; Byrne, 1999).
A fundamental criticism made by Guglielmi and Tatrow (1998) is the extent to which most research on teacher stress has consisted of what the authors refer to as a “fishing expedition” (p.82): numbers of stressors, personal factors and symptoms identified and correlated, usually by self-report, but with no valid investigation of the nature of the relationships between them. Several instances of this problem will be highlighted in the course of the present review. The alternative proposed by Guglielmi and Tatrow (ibid.) is a shift to multivariate, longitudinal and theory-driven research: a more rigorous approach, which is however unequivocally positivist and essentially views the self-reported perceptions of teachers as unreliable and of limited validity. With respect to the tertiary sector, Kinman (2001) also notes the limitations of cross-sectional data and proposes more large-scale, longitudinal research.

However, there is very little examination of the possibilities offered by qualitative research, of the kind conducted for example by Brown, Ralph and Brember (2002). In the intensive phase of their study the authors interviewed 20 Manchester primary and secondary teachers; in their report, which includes much direct quotation from the research participants, they refer to letting the teachers “speak for themselves”, and of “bringing into communal hearing voices that are often ignored or have become silent in the micro-political realities of institutional life” (p.4). This approach is in sharp contrast to much of the research into teacher stress.

**Prevalence and intensity**

There are nonetheless a number of undisputed findings about teacher stress – the most obvious being its prevalence and intensity, which have been reported internationally in
numerous studies since the 1970s. Studies have consistently concluded that teaching is a stressful occupation, and that a significant number of teachers, perhaps even a majority, are affected by work-related stress (Rudow, 1999; Dunham, 1998; Kyriacou, 1998, 1999, 2001; Guglielmi and Tatrow, 1998). Comparative studies have echoed these findings: for example, in a 2005 study in the U.S., Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor and Millet examined 26 occupations and concluded that teaching was one of the most stressful.

In the tertiary sector Abouserie (1996) found that 74.1% of the university teaching staff she surveyed were moderately stressed, and 10.4% severely stressed; and Blix, Cruise, Mitchell and Blix (1994) found that 66% of the university teachers in their study reported experiencing stress at work for at least 50% of the time. Similar conclusions were reported in New Zealand, where 53% of polytechnic teachers surveyed reported experiencing stress often or almost always at work (Hardie-Boys, 1996), and 48% of university teachers (Chalmers, 2004). Kinman (2001) cites a number of U.K. studies reporting high levels of teacher stress in the compulsory sector, but echoes the comments of Abouserie (1996) and Blix et al. (1994) that relatively little research has been conducted about occupational stress among tertiary teachers.

Effects on teachers

There is also almost universal agreement about the effects of stress. Although some researchers (Guglielmi and Tatrow, 1998; Wainwright and Calnan, 2002) question the reliability of findings about causality, research across several disciplines in the field of occupational stress has consistently confirmed the relationship between stress and
negative emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological responses (Travers and Cooper, 1998; Kinman, 2001; Hogan, Carlson and Dua, 2002). These responses include fatigue, substance abuse, appetite disturbances, heart disease, stroke, cancer, musculoskeletal and gastrointestinal problems, anxiety, depression, accidents and suicide (European Commission, 2002); hypochondria, loss of concentration, recall and creativity, inability to learn new things, indecisiveness, destructive behaviour, and refusal to seek help (Levi, 2002); headaches, sleep disturbances, low morale, irritability and relationship problems (NIOSH, 1999).

These findings are corroborated in the research literature on teacher stress. According to Hinton and Rotheiler (1998), research findings indicate that the most prevalent physiological stress responses among teachers are (in descending order) fatigue, skeleto-muscular tension and pains, heart symptoms and hypertension, headaches, digestive disorders, respiratory problems, sleep disturbances, and voice loss. Teachers in Whitehead and Ryba’s 1995 study reported a range of similar physical responses including sinus problems, sleep problems, headache and backache, as well as emotional responses such as guilt, resentment, frustration, self-pity, loss of confidence, and feeling overwhelmed. Other common responses listed by Brown and Ralph (1998) include reduction in work performance and output, inability to manage time or delegate, feelings of alienation and inadequacy, loss of confidence and motivation, increasing introversion, irritability with colleagues, unwillingness to cooperate, frequent irrational conflicts at work, withdrawal from supportive relationships, inappropriate cynical humour, persistent negative thoughts, increased substance use, loss of appetite, frequent infections, and accident-proneness.
In the tertiary sector, stress responses reported include anger, embitterment, feelings of being devalued, low job satisfaction and commitment, and feelings of detachment (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua and Stough, 2001); job dissatisfaction, psychological distress, negative affect, anxiety, absences and illnesses (Dua, 1994; Sharpley, Reynolds, Acosta and Dua, 1996); impacts on physical and emotional health, family life and leisure activities (Chalmers, 1998; Boyd and Wylie, 1994); and impaired work performance, decrease in productivity, disengagement, job dissatisfaction, psychological ill health, and loss of time and energy for personal and family life, contributing to family problems and relationship breakdowns (Kinman, 2001).

Burnout is a particular combination of stress responses which has received a lot of attention in the U.S. research literature since the 1970s, and which is frequently associated with teacher stress. Maslach (1999) provides a useful outline of the work in this area over twenty years, to which she has made a central contribution. The model of burnout developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981), has now been almost universally adopted: it suggests that burnout is a stress syndrome experienced predominantly by people in social service occupations, and consists of three components: emotional exhaustion, a reduced sense of personal accomplishment and competence, and depersonalisation – i.e. detached, negative or uncaring attitudes towards those in receipt of the service. These three aspects of burnout are measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory or MBI (ibid.), a validated and widely-used multidimensional instrument. Sarros and Sarros (1992), however, suggest that some items in the MBI may be culturally
specific, an interesting observation in the light of the model’s predominance in occupational stress research.

Causes

Much of the research literature on the causes of teacher stress has focussed on the highly interpersonal nature of teaching, and in the compulsory sector has identified disruptive behaviour by students, dealing with parents, and conflict with colleagues to be among the major sources of stress reported by teachers (Kyriacou, 2001; Griffith et al., 1999). These findings have also been echoed in the New Zealand compulsory sector (Dewe, 1986; Manthei and Solman, 1988; Whitehead and Ryba, 1995; Hawe, Tuck, Manthei, Adair and Moore, 2000). Most of this research has also identified other major stressors, such as workload and time pressure, role conflict and ambiguity, the working environment, and organisational and educational change.

Some researchers have argued that structural rather than interpersonal factors are responsible for teacher stress; Manthei and Solman, for example, in their 1988 study of a group of New Zealand state schools, cite several other studies in support of their contention that “the major sources of stress for teachers are structural, and need to be recognised as such”. As an example, they point out that reducing class size would have a significant effect on two of the major stressors reported by teachers, disruptive student behaviour and the physical working environment. In other words, organisational structures determine the extent of the impact on teachers of the interpersonal stressors inherent in their role.
In the tertiary sector the causes of stress are overwhelmingly reported to be structural and organisational, rather than interpersonal (Kinman, 2001). Stressors consistently identified in the research literature are workload and time pressure, research, educational change, management styles, reorganisation and restructuring, and inadequate resources. (Dua, 1994; Winefield and Jarrett, 2001; Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua, Hapuarachchi and Boyd, 2003). These findings were corroborated in the first phase of a longitudinal study of Australian university staff which employed focus group methodology to examine the causes, consequences and moderators of stress (Gillespie et al., 2001). In the U.S., Hogan, Carlson and Dua replicated in part Dua’s 1994 study, with similar results. No major differences emerged in these studies between the stressors reported by academic staff, and those of other staff.

Abouserie (1996), in a large survey of academic staff in a U.K. university, found a number of similar stressors: conducting research, time constraints, and relationships with colleagues. Kinman (2001), in reviewing nine studies in the U.K. tertiary sector between 1990 and 1998, identified workload, particularly working hours; the encroachment of work into personal life; administrative work; and bureaucratic and mechanistic management styles, as among the main sources of stress. In contrast to findings in the compulsory sector, she also suggests that there is evidence that contact with students may be a positive factor in the work of tertiary teachers, rather than a stressor.

As already mentioned, there is very little research literature in the tertiary sector in New Zealand. Chalmers (1998), in a follow-up to an earlier survey of members of the Association of University Staff (Boyd and Wylie, 1994), reported that organisational
climate and morale, time pressure, management, interruptions to work, and continual change were the main causes of stress for academic staff. Ramage (2001) surveyed teaching staff at a polytechnic and identified organisational structure and climate, role conflict and relationships at work; and Hardie-Boys (1996) concluded similarly that institutional climate and morale, workload, interruptions to work, and management were among the major stressors for polytechnic teachers. Interestingly, in the latter study the lack of relief staffing was the most frequently-mentioned stressor; this is presumably not an issue of concern in universities, although it is mentioned in some studies of the compulsory sector. Funding and resourcing were also stressors mentioned in this survey, and a common factor, as elsewhere, was the impact of educational and organisational change.

Moderating factors

It is generally accepted that there are a number of moderating factors involved in work-related stress – that is, factors which influence the extent to which an individual perceives and responds to stress. There is, however, no universal agreement about what these factors are, how they are interrelated, or precisely how they are related to stress levels. Some, for example, are classified as stressors by some researchers and as moderating factors, independent variables or outcome variables by others. This lack of consensus means that there is considerable inconsistency in the findings in this area.

Gillespie et al. (2001) point out that there has been little investigation of the potential moderators of stress in the tertiary sector, and list the most commonly-identified factors as social support, level of control, coping style, and emotionality. Others have identified
organisational factors such as role conflict and ambiguity (Capel, 1989; Walsh, 1998; Byrne, 1999), although these are elsewhere identified as causes of stress (Gillespie and Walsh, 2001; Kinman, 2001). In this paper, the moderating factors which will be examined are workplace social support, level of autonomy, individual personality factors, and professional satisfaction. Coping strategies, including personal social support, will be discussed under a separate heading.

*Workplace social support*

The importance of workplace social support in moderating teacher stress is widely argued, for example by Kyriacou (1998) and Griffith et al., (1999). Sarros and Sarros (1992) cite several studies in support of this conclusion, adding that common sense indicates that people with a high level of social support are physically and psychologically healthier than those without. Their study surveyed a large group of Australian secondary teachers in order to examine the relationship between burnout and social support. Their findings indicate that the source and type of workplace support are crucial factors, and that not all support from colleagues is necessarily positive: some types of support, for example the sharing of negative experiences, may exacerbate stress (see also Walsh, 1998; Griffith et al., 1999; and Starnaman and Miller, 1992). They also concluded that support from the principal is crucial, a finding echoed by Starnaman and Miller (1992) in their 1989 survey of 182 U.S. primary and secondary teachers. (Interestingly, this latter study did not examine social support from colleagues, since the researchers concluded on the basis of previous research that it was unimportant). Byrne (1999), on the other hand, argues that the evidence about the importance of principal support is inconclusive.
In the tertiary sector, the findings about the efficacy of social support as a moderator of stress are also inconclusive. Gillespie et al (2001) found that social support from colleagues at work was reported by half the academic staff in their study as valuable in moderating stress, and that many reported the importance of support from their manager and/or senior management. Blix et al. (1994), however, concluded that social support does not seem to function as a buffer to stress, and suggest that this may be due to social support playing a different role in the post-compulsory sector, or to inadequacies in the survey instrument used. Hogan et al. (2002) also found no support for the hypothesis that social support is an important moderator of stress, although they based their hypothesis on findings from Dua’s (1994) Australian study, which they replicated in part. They also cite other findings suggesting that the prevalence of stress in universities may vary between countries. Given the differences in society, culture and the overall policy context, it is likely that there are other national differences, and an investigation of the role of workplace social support in the New Zealand education context might reveal some divergence from international findings. Open-ended comments from teachers in Whitehead and Ryba’s (1995) survey indicated the importance to them of supportive colleagues, but otherwise the role of social support has hitherto received scant attention in New Zealand research.

In addition to possible national differences, this range of inconsistent findings about the role of social support may also indicate its multidimensional nature, and reflect the lack of consensus in research design about its precise relationship to workplace stress (Byrne, 1998). Schwarzer and Greenglass (1998) point out that there is a difference between
perceived and actual levels of social support, and that the relationship between social support and stress can also be explained by reverse causation: that is, that highly stressed individuals are less likely to form or maintain supportive workplace relationships. It is also possible that the social withdrawal characteristic of the stress response (Brown and Ralph, 1998) means that a stressed individual either rejects or simply does not notice the social support on offer. It is apparent that this is a complex issue which needs more investigation. Qualitative research has a significant contribution to make, by paying attention to the ways in which teachers structure and interpret their own experiences, rather than attempting to make teachers’ experiences fit into existing theoretical frameworks.

Autonomy and control

In the research literature on occupational stress, the level of control experienced by individuals over their work circumstances is often perceived as an important factor in moderating stress. The underlying theoretical construct is the demand-control/support model already discussed, which suggests that the demands of work can be balanced by the level of control experienced as well as by the level of social support. (Dollard, 2001; Guglielmi and Tatrow, 1998; Walsh, 1998). According to this model, if the high demands of a teacher’s job are not accompanied by a correspondingly high degree of control over their work and participation in decision-making, then stress will result. There is considerable support in the research literature for this view (Pearson and Moomaw, 2005; Kyriacou, 1989; Walsh, 1998; Cole, 1989; Starnaman and Miller, 1992; Brown et al., 2002; Dewe, 1986).
In the tertiary sector, this factor has also been identified as significant. Gillespie et al. (2001) reported that lack of consultation by management and lack of participation in decision-making was a major source of stress for the university staff surveyed, resulting in loss of the sense of autonomy and control. Kinman (2001) notes that university teachers have traditionally had a high degree of autonomy and control in their work, which has acted as a protection against stress; but that with the advent of managerialist, bureaucratic management styles and the adoption of business models, this autonomy has begun to be eroded, with consequences for the stress levels of teaching staff. It is likely that these results might be echoed in the tertiary sector in New Zealand, and in polytechnics as well as universities, given the similar direction of recent changes to organisations and structures.

**Personal factors**

A further generally-recognised moderator of stress is the contribution made by the individual: that is, the extent to which an individual’s personality influences their perceptions and experiences of stress. It makes intuitive sense that individuals may perceive and respond to identical stressors in different ways, because of differences in personality; however, the dimensions of these personality variables and the nature of their interrelationships have not been established with any reliability (Guglielmi and Tatrow, 1998; Woods, 1989). Bright (2001) argues that while there is good evidence that people vary in their perceptions of stress, the case for variations in reactions to stress is less clear, and needs further investigation. There is also the danger that overemphasis on personal factors will result in the victim being blamed (Woods, 1989) – the “personal trouble” approach described earlier.
Factors which have been suggested as moderators of stress include individual values, attitudes, beliefs, and perceived ability to cope (Capel, 1998; Kyriacou, 1998; Blix et al., 1994). Brown and Ralph (1998) identify the well-known Type ‘A’ and Type ‘B’ personality factors: according to this theory, Type ‘A’ people are busy, rushed, tense, self-confident and aggressive, and more prone to stress, whereas Type ‘B’ people, on the other hand, are slower, calmer, more secure, and less likely to experience stress.

Locus of control, that is, the extent to which an individual generally perceives that they can influence what happens to them, has also been identified as a significant personal factor (Travers and Cooper, 1998; Byrne, 1999; Capel, 1989). According to this view, an individual who has an external locus of control and believes that they have little if any control over their life, is more likely to experience stress and burnout (this is a personality trait, rather than an objective assessment of the level of autonomy offered by a particular job, as discussed in the previous section). Byrne (1999) also suggests self-esteem as an important personality variable; however, she also notes the possibility that stress and burnout may affect self-esteem, as well as vice versa.

In New Zealand research into teaching and in research in the tertiary sector generally, very little attention appears to have been paid to personality factors. Blix et al (1994) found that feeling able to cope appeared to be related to lower levels of stress in university teachers, and suggest that self-esteem is an important factor in coping ability; however, as they point out, the cross-sectional and self-reported nature of their methodology does not permit any causal relationships to be established. It is, for
example, entirely possible that the severity of the stressor accounts for the relationship they report: that is, a very stressful work environment results in lowered self-esteem and a reduced sense of being able to cope. The implications of such a simple alternative directionality are wide-reaching: once again, “personal trouble” or “public trouble”. The design of research and the interpretation of research findings are demonstrably dependent on the theoretical models adopted, and thus on the epistemological and ontological approach of the researcher and the social and political context in which they operate.

*Professional satisfaction*

Professional satisfaction, a sense of achievement and of one’s work being of value, is distinguished here from ‘job satisfaction’, which is a wider concept encompassing all aspects of work. Professional satisfaction has not generally been identified as a moderating factor in the theoretical literature, which has tended to focus on ‘job dissatisfaction’ as a correlate of occupational stress; but it has received some attention in the research on teacher stress at all levels, because of its unique relationship to teaching. Travers and Cooper (1998) describe as one of the “complexities of teaching as a profession” (p.63) that teachers can be very stressed and still experience satisfaction with some aspects of work. Dewe (1986) emphasises the importance when considering teacher stress of “the distinction between the presence of negative job aspects and the absence of positive ones”, and of “being aware not only of the things which cause stress but also of those aspects which offer support, satisfaction and joy” (p.156). Farber (1999) also notes that “it is the student-teacher relationship that offers the greatest opportunity for stress as well as the greatest opportunity for reward and gratification (p.165).
In the tertiary sector, Kinman (2001) suggests that contact with students may protect teachers from stress; she notes that professionals can find some aspects of their work intrinsically satisfying, despite high levels of stress and dissatisfaction with other extrinsic aspects, for example workload and pay. She reviews findings indicating that academic staff in universities are generally enthusiastic about their work and find it rewarding and satisfying, despite also reporting high levels of workload and burnout. In New Zealand, Chalmers (1998) reports similar conclusions. It is apparent that more research is needed into the complexities of professional satisfaction and its relationship to teacher stress, which may have some features unique to the profession.

**Coping Strategies**

Coping strategies adopted to deal with work-related stress are generally classified in the research literature as problem-focused or emotion-focused (Greenglass, 2002) – that is, aimed at managing the source of the stress, or the individual’s response to it. Edwards (1992) describes four coping mechanisms: changing the situation, changing one’s expectations, making the problem less important to one’s well-being, and enhancing one’s well-being. Walsh (1998) also mentions the importance of preventive coping – that is, taking steps to minimise the impact of anticipated stress. Categories proposed by Kyriacou (1998; 2001) for coping with teacher stress are what he refers to as direct-action and palliative techniques; he further classifies palliative techniques as either mental or physical. Direct-action techniques address the problem by means such as changing the situation, acquiring new skills, or consulting colleagues; mental palliative techniques aim
to change the way in which the individual appraises the situation, and physical palliative techniques to help the individual relax.

Comparatively little research has been conducted into the coping strategies employed by teachers (Griffith et al., 1999; Dunham, 1989). Most studies report a range of both emotion-focussed and problem-focussed strategies (Kyriacou, 2001; Dunham and Bath, 1998; Dunham, 1989); an exception is the survey of 532 New Zealand teachers conducted by Whitehead and Ryba (1995), where only emotion-focussed strategies were included in the checklist used, which had been compiled from items previously nominated by five teachers. In the tertiary sector, a range of both emotion- and problem-focussed strategies has also been reported (Abouserie, 1996; Gillespie et al., 2001).

There has been even less research into the effectiveness of different coping strategies. In one study, however, Griffith et al. (1999) surveyed the coping strategies of 780 U.S. teachers and investigated both emotion-focussed and problem-focussed strategies in relation to their stress levels. They concluded that strategies which involved disengagement (such as turning to other activities, sleeping, reducing effort, giving up) or suppression of competing behaviour (concentrating, preventing distractions) were associated with higher levels of stress. Active planning and seeking social support appeared to be more successful in moderating stress. Greenglass (2002) notes that problem-focussed strategies and preventive coping are generally perceived in the occupational stress literature as more successful, because they are associated with lower stress levels, whereas emotion-focussed coping is associated with higher levels of stress. However, the question of directionality arises again: it is possible, for example, that the
level of stress experienced by an individual also influences their choice of coping strategy, rather than the reverse.

**Conclusion**

Current theoretical approaches to work-related stress employ the concept of stress as a negative psychological state connected with the individual’s interactions with work. For reasons already outlined, this review has adopted the *interactional* position, which views stress as essentially “public trouble” – that is, as originating primarily in the workplace, while also moderated to some extent by other factors including the individual and their coping strategies. The “personal trouble” or *transactional* approach, on the other hand, views stress essentially as the product of the individual’s thoughts and feelings about work situations, and therefore sees the individual as primarily responsible. These two fundamentally divergent concepts underpin much of the research into work-related stress, and should be borne in mind when considering the theoretical basis and methodological approach for research studies, and the inferences drawn from the reported results.

As the research literature makes clear, teaching is a highly stressful occupation at all levels, and in the tertiary sector stress has been found to be widespread and sometimes severe. The effects of stress are well-documented, and include negative emotional, cognitive, physiological, and behavioural symptoms, which have a serious impact on the individual, their work, their personal lives and their families. *Burnout*, a manifestation of severe stress in social service occupations and particularly in teaching, consists of a combination of distressing psychological symptoms - emotional exhaustion, a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, and depersonalisation. It has received a lot of
attention in the literature on teacher stress, especially in the U.S.; but in the light of social and cultural differences, the concept of burnout and the way it is measured may need revision and adaptation for use elsewhere.

The major sources of stress identified in the research which are common to both the compulsory and post-compulsory sectors are workload, time pressure, and organisational and educational change. In the compulsory sector the other main stressors which have been identified are interpersonal, for example to do with student behaviour and parental expectations; but in the tertiary sector they are predominantly structural and include low organisational morale and climate, inadequate funding and resources, and bureaucratic or mechanistic management styles.

A number of factors are widely believed to moderate stress: the most common of these are workplace social support, the level of workplace autonomy and control, and individual personality factors such as the individual’s locus of control, their level of self-esteem, and their ability to cope. Professional satisfaction is another aspect of teaching which has also been suggested as a moderator of stress, particularly in the tertiary sector. These moderating factors have been consistently found to be negatively correlated with stress, but there is some uncertainty about their precise role, since the cross-sectional nature of most of the research means that causal relationships between variables cannot be established and research results are thus open to a range of different interpretations, depending on the researcher’s own ontological approach and the theoretical models adopted. For example, research findings indicate that low self-esteem and high stress are correlated: but whether one causes the other, or whether they are both influenced by some
other unidentified factor such as job insecurity, workplace bullying or an impossible workload, is not yet established. The interpretation depends on the researcher’s own position. A “personal” trouble” approach would support the interpretation that low self-esteem makes the individual prone to perceive aspects of work as stressful; whereas the “public trouble” approach would see negative, stressful features of the workplace as the starting point, and might view low self-esteem as a consequence of the resulting stress, or perhaps as a moderating factor.

Coping strategies have received comparatively little attention in the research literature, particularly in the tertiary sector, and are another area where the research tends to be inconclusive, for the reasons discussed above. While a range of both problem-focussed and emotion-focussed strategies have been identified, their relative effectiveness has yet to be conclusively investigated. Problem-focussed strategies tend to be more associated with lower levels of stress than emotion-focussed strategies, and active strategies more so than disengagement strategies, but valid conclusions about causality cannot be drawn from the evidence so far.

As discussed, research into the work-related stress of teachers is comparatively new and, as with occupational stress research generally, plagued by the problems of interpretation inherent in the cross-sectional studies so prevalent in the field. More longitudinal studies would enable detailed analysis of the relationships between the numerous factors involved. Further, since much of the research has been quantitative and in the form of large-scale surveys, it is important that more qualitative studies are conducted to examine teacher stress from the perspective of teachers themselves. This is especially indicated
since it appears that teaching may present some atypical features and constitute a ‘special case’ in occupational stress research.

The need for more longitudinal and qualitative research is also particularly applicable to the tertiary sector and to research in this field in New Zealand, where little is known about the stressors involved in tertiary teaching, especially in polytechnics. It is likely that there are significant socio-cultural and sectoral differences in the expectations placed on teachers and in their expectations of themselves, which makes local and sector-specific research important. The level and intensity of stress reported among teachers at all levels in New Zealand is of serious concern. Further research is needed to enable us to understand more about teacher stress, and to develop effective policies and strategies to manage and reduce its incidence.

References


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