

## TEACHER STRESS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA: AN INTERVIEW STUDY.

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### Introduction

Throughout 1991 an extensive investigation into teacher stress among primary school teachers involved the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data was collected during the first five weeks of term two through the use of a structured questionnaire. Information obtained from the questionnaire included socio-biographical details; perceived levels of occupational satisfaction and stress; and perceived importance of a range of potentially stressful events.

Qualitative data was obtained by conducting interviews with twenty-four teachers during the period June to December. The aim of the interviews was to elicit further detail on the nature of stressful events as perceived by teachers. The framework for the analysis of the information obtained by interview was the result of a factor analysis applied to the quantitative data obtained during term two.

### Literature Review

#### Definition of Teacher Stress

Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of teacher stress is that proposed by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978a) who stated:

Teacher stress may be defined as a response of negative affect (such as anger or depression) by a teacher usually accompanied by potentially pathogenic physiological and biochemical changes (such as increased heart rate or release of adrenocorticotrophic hormones in the bloodstream) resulting from aspects of the teacher's job and mediated by the perception that the demands made upon the teacher constitute a threat to his self-esteem or well-being and by coping mechanisms activated to reduce the perceived threat. (p.2)

This definition, or derivatives thereof, appear frequently in the literature on teacher stress. Apart from the use of this definition by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe in other studies (1977, 1978b) and by Kyriacou (1987, 1989), other researchers (Bernard, 1990; Laughlin, 1984; Manthei and Solman, 1988; Mykletun, 1988) have either quoted directly or used definitions based on the work of Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978a).

The definition of teacher stress proposed by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978a) emphasises the subjective nature of the

appraisal of a potentially stress producing situation (or stressor). Aside from those researchers discussed previously, support for the subjectivity of teacher stress appraisal is forthcoming from, among others, Fimian (1982), Finlay-Jones (1986), and McCormick and Solman (1990). Indeed, these latter researchers suggested strongly that subjective appraisal of a potentially stress producing situation in teaching frequently coincided with objective reality.

### Sources of Teacher Stress

Four examples of quantitative research conducted in Australia and New Zealand into the sources of teacher stress solely among primary school teachers are summarised in Table 1.

Studies which have acquired qualitative information on sources of

stress among Australian teachers appears to have been confined mainly to the use of open-response questions. Such research has included that conducted by Fordham and Hunt (1984), which involved high school teachers in the Australian Capital Territory; the University of Melbourne (1989), which surveyed teachers in all types of schools; and Van Schoubroeck and Tuettelman (1986) whose report included comments specifically on primary school teachers. The study conducted by the University of Melbourne (1989) also included interviews with seventy-one teachers. The results of these investigations confirmed the outcomes obtained by quantitative methods. Although the ranking of stressors has varied, the identified sources of stress were very similar. Essentially, such sources were concerned with time pressures; pedagogical tasks; school- and system-related influences; and professional concerns.

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Table 1.  
Sources of Occupational Stress Among Primary School Teachers

Researcher	Sample Size	Questionnaire Characteristics	Results
Galloway et al. (1984)	296	Rated 34 items (modified from Pratt, 1978).	Children's behaviour and progress emerged as the sources of stress.
Chiu et al. (1986)	1370	13 stress factors the factors listed: closed-overload; discipline; too	In order of importance were - role

response items. many changes too quickly; lack of support from senior staff; negative community attitudes; attendance at meetings; frustration in career opportunities; conflict with other staff; lack of equipment; integration of disabled children.

Dewe 800 60 closed-response 6 factors identified, in order of (1986) items frequency - work overload; expectat- ions of parents; relationships in the classroom; unsupportive parents and difficult children; physical demands teaching; little individual control over school events.

Van Schoub- 881 Closed-response 7 factors were significant, in order roeck and items on the of importance - student misbehaviour; Tuetteman work environment; lack of emotional support from other open-response teachers; invasion of spare time by item on causes work; involuntary transfer; poor of stress. classroom design; undesired full-time

work; involvement in educational research projects.

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\* This sample was part of a larger study involving 2036 teachers from all types of schools.

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## Methodology

### Sample Characteristics

Two hundred and sixty-four primary school teachers, female and male, completed a questionnaire in the first five weeks of terms two, 1991. This represented an effective return rate of thirty-five per cent. Schools selected to participate in the research were non-priority schools in the Perth metropolitan area. Furthermore, all schools had non-teaching principals.

### The Research Instrument

Two sections of the questionnaire are relevant to the present discussion. The first is section four of the instrument, which comprised sixty-five potentially stressful events in the teaching environment. These items were selected from the results of interviews conducted with teachers in 1990 and a review of the literature.

Respondents were asked to rate the degree of stress which they perceived each item caused them on a five-point Likert-type of scale -- "no stress", "mild stress", "moderate stress", "much stress", and "extreme stress". Scoring for each item ranged from one for "no stress" through to five for "extreme stress".

The second relevant section of the questionnaire was a removable page on which respondents could acknowledge their willingness to be interviewed. This page, which could be placed in a sealed envelope to maintain confidentiality, contained space for the volunteer to record his/her name and a contact telephone number. The selection of those to be interviewed involved classifying each potential interviewee by sex and then randomly selecting the desired number from each category. The only constraining criteria on the selection process was to ensure a similar sex ratio as was evident from the total number of collected, usable questionnaires. Such a practice was undertaken to control any bias, due to gender, from emerging in the qualitative data.

The second step in the acquisition of qualitative information was to contact the potential interviewees by telephone. This enabled a confirmation of the willingness to be interviewed, as well as the arrangement of a time and location suitable to the interviewee. All interviews occurred either after school or during the evening and were located at either the home or the school of the interviewee. Each interview followed a set five-question format: the question relevant to this particular discussion relating to a detailed exploration of the situations listed in section four of the questionnaire which the interviewees believed caused them "much" or "extreme" stress.

The responses to this question were recorded in writing by the

interviewer. Such a process allowed for clarification of opinions and a summary of the salient aspects of the discussion to be noted. A copy of the transcript of each interview was mailed to the interviewee to confirm the accuracy of the recorded information and to allow for any changes which may have been requested. No interviewee indicated a desire to alter the written report.

## Results

### Quantitative Analysis

From the responses, collected in second term 1991, to the sixty-five potentially stressful items, eight factors were extracted by principal component analysis and varimax rotation. Table 2 reveals the factor names, the proportion of variance explained by each factor and cumulative variance totals.

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Table 2. Stress Factors

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Factor Number	Name	Proportion of Variance	Cumulative Variance
1	School-level concerns	7.44	7.44
2	Issues external to school	6.25	13.69
3	Time	5.79	19.48
4	Student-related	5.76	25.24
5	Interference with classroom activities	2.98	28.22
6	Role expectations	2.80	31.02
7	Industrial action	2.28	33.30
8	Employment conditions	2.04	35.34

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### Qualitative Analysis

As discussed previously, the factors shown in Table 2 formed the framework for an analysis of the information obtained from the interviews. This analysis will concentrate on the first three factors, those which accounted for slightly under twenty per cent of the variance.

### Factor One: School-Level Concerns

Three themes, including the role of the principal, staff-related issues and dislike of the school, emerged within this factor. The number of responses to the items in this factor is presented in Table 3.

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**Table 3**  
Frequency of Responses to Potentially Stressful Items  
for School-Level Concerns (N=24)

Item	Frequency
7. Lack of support from the principal.	
6	
11. Principal displaying favouritism towards some staff members.	
2	
15. Feeling socially isolated from the staff.	
1	
16. Inadequate school-level discipline policy.	
2	
24. Inadequate communication system within the school.	
3	
29. Student-free days are inappropriately used.	
2	
31. Feeling professionally isolated from the staff.	
1	
35. Failure of the principal to provide adequate resources.	
2	
44. Having some teachers in the school who are perceived not to do their share of the workload.	
5	
48. Lack of definitive school policy on pastoral care.	
0	
49. Lack of participation in decision-making at the school-level.	
2	
53. Lack of co-operation between the staff.	
1	
56. Being unsatisfied with my job.	2
57. Working in a poorly managed school.	3
63. Difficulty in obtaining transfer from unhappy school situation.	1

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Teachers described lack of support from the principal in relation

to parent-related issues, with one incident of a principal revoking a commitment to staff over parents having to make appointments for interviews. Another principal was described as an autocrat, yet gave a different appearance. According to this interviewee, teachers feared recrimination if they disagreed with this principal. While criticising principals for lack of support, two teachers blamed this on the frequent absences of principals due to attendance at conferences, courses and Ministry of Education business. However, probably the worst instance of lack of principal support was related by a teacher who was subjected to harassment and vindictive treatment by the principal due to a friend of the principal wanting this teacher's job.

Two teachers complained of principals who displayed favouritism towards staff members. Instances of such favouritism were alleged to involve both male and female teachers, some principals favouring one gender over the other. Failure of the principal to provide adequate resources received comments in relation to the purchase of teaching equipment and lack of funds to attend professional development courses. The reason for the latter was suggested in terms of staff acquiring too much knowledge, thereby presenting a threat to the principal.

Other comments which can be related to the responsibilities of principals in schools included opinions on inadequate school-level discipline policies, inadequate communication within the

school, inappropriate use of student free days, lack of definitive school policies on pastoral care, lack of participation in school-level decision-making and working in a poorly managed school. Inadequate school-level discipline policies were blamed on frequent absences of the principal and lack of parental support. One teacher commented that the managing school behaviour program was not being implemented properly due to the lack of staff professional development. In addition, this teacher suggested that children were learning to push the system to the limit without suffering punitive action.

Examples to highlight inadequate school-level communication included reliance on written notes, lack of personal approaches, selective distribution of information and lack of notification on forthcoming events. Furthermore, one school was described as being too large, resulting in an extra staff meeting having to be scheduled each week.

Inappropriate use of student free days was exemplified by a too great a focus on school development plans at the expense of more practical issues, and a lack of serious application to set tasks. The lack of definitive school policies on pastoral care was

described by teachers as self-explanatory and, therefore, attracted no further comments.

Two main instances were cited in relation to lack of participation in decision-making. These included principal domination through information overload and pseudo-participation. The latter involved discussion on issues for which a decision had already been made.

In relation to the issue of a poorly-managed school, one teacher did not blame the principal, but the large size of the school. Other examples discussed included poor quality leadership and a principal who announced to his staff that because he was in the last five years of service his intention was not to do very much.

Of the four items pertaining to staff issues, two related to feelings of professional and social isolation. The former was exemplified by lack of teamwork and professionalism. In addition, the impact of professional isolation on the development of feelings of inadequacy and acquisition of relevant information was discussed. Comments on social isolation included missing out on social and professional information. One teacher stated that being a smoker contributed to social isolation.

One issue which received particularly strong comments related to having staff in the school who were perceived not to be doing their share of the workload. Examples of this included senior teachers not fulfilling their responsibilities, permanent teachers being unco-operative, specialist teachers being regarded as a source of duties other than teaching time and teachers being too concerned with petty issues.

The teacher who commented on a lack of co-operation between staff suggested that some colleagues were not willing to discuss their teaching methods for fear of criticism, while others tended to "grandstand" about their efforts. This teacher suggested that there was a need for professional development activities on this issue.

The third theme, dislike of the school, comprised two items. These included difficulty in obtaining a transfer from an unhappy school situation and job dissatisfaction. The former was described as self-explanatory, while the latter evoked responses which commented on the reality of teaching not equalling the pre-

conceived perception. An interesting comment on the job dissatisfaction item was the possible lack of alternative occupations due to being trained as a teacher.

## Factor Two: Issues External to the School

The overall number of responses to each of the items in this factor is indicated in Table 4. Three themes were evident in this factor, the most dominant, comprising seven of the eleven items, being the Ministry of Education.

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Table 4  
Frequency of Responses to Potentially Stressful Items for  
Issues External to the School (N=24)

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Item	Frequency
10. Failure of the Ministry of Education to provide adequate resources.	7
12. Changes initiated by the Ministry of Education are expected to be implemented too quickly.	4
22. Lack of appreciation of teachers by the general community.	9
25. Poor Union-Ministry relations.	3
28. Inept leadership by the Ministry of Education.	4
34. Inadequate communication between the Ministry of Education and classroom teachers.	7
40. Lack of support from the Union.	4
41. Having little influence over political decisions in relation to education.	7
46. Lack of professional development activities which do not interfere with private time.	6
55. Lack of recognition of good teaching by the Ministry of Education.	7
59. Political interference in education.	3

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In relation to the Ministry of Education, seven teachers criticised this organisation for failing to provide adequate resources. A frequent comment was that this problem was becoming more noticeable, particularly with the introduction of new courses and the mandated timetable for the introduction of such courses. Consultation between the Ministry and teachers about resource provision was urged, while one teacher was particularly

critical of Ministry demands upon teachers in relation to course development. Two teachers commented cynically about the increased publication of glossy literature at the same time as resources to schools are being decreased.

The speed with which the Ministry expects changes to be implemented attracted critical observations. Examples of such changes included the art, handwriting, language and mathematics syllabi. One teacher believed that this situation was complicated by a lack of relevant in-service courses. Furthermore, fulfilling normal school duties was seen as time-consuming enough, without the added pressure of implementing change.

Inadequate communication between the Ministry and classroom teachers received some disparaging remarks. One teacher related this issue to inept Ministry leadership. Another commented that

there was no effective communication, while two teachers discussed the use of glossy literature as being worthless for the purpose of communication. The lack of in-service courses for new curricula was cited by one teacher as an example of the lack of communication, and the use of non-descriptive titles, such as Ms, caused stress to another teacher.

The issue of inept leadership by the Ministry of Education evoked a variety of responses. These included the need for more consultation with teachers; perceived wastage of money and resources; a perceived lack of priorities being demonstrated by the Ministry; and the apparent lack of concern about the impact of decisions on children and teachers.

Two teachers blamed the occurrence of poor Union-Ministry relations on the Union. One other teacher was stressed by the results of this situation - having to decide whether or not to participate in industrial action.

Lack of recognition of good teaching by the Ministry resulted in almost a standard comment. Teachers suggested that there was no effective recognition, the current system of honour certificates and stars in the staffing book being regarded as a joke. Sincere incentives and recognition of good teaching were requested by those teachers who commented on this item.

A lack of professional development activities which do not interfere with private time received a variety of responses including one which related this issue to budgetary cutbacks. Two teachers commented on interference with their private lives, while another suggested that, if some professional development

activities are considered to be important, then relief should be provided for teachers to attend during normal working hours. One teacher stated that teachers already work very hard; therefore having to attend professional development activities in private time was unfair. A preference for a longer working day was expressed by another teacher, professional development activities to be included in the extra time.

Two items comprised the theme concerned with lack of appreciation or support from groups outside the school. Responses to the item on the lack of appreciation of teachers by the general community were concerned with the provision of examples. These included no respect for teachers; constant criticism of teachers' holidays; unsympathetic media reports; attacks on teachers by the Government and Ministry of Education; lack of support from the Ministry; and general constant criticism. Parents were also mentioned in several comments, including complaints about having to pay small amounts for special school activities; blaming teachers for their child's lack of progress; treating teachers with contempt; and lack of parental support. One further example was criticism from parents emanating from the teaching of non-traditional subjects such as sex education.

Two teachers described lack of support from the Union as resulting from the Union executive being too concerned with their own political futures. Results of the lack of Union support were cited as an erosion of working conditions and the lack of effectiveness of the 1989 strike. One teacher described a specific situation in which no support was received from the Union, while another suggested that the only reason for Union membership was job security. Furthermore, this teacher stated that the Union executive was not in touch with the general membership.

The final theme in this factor, politics and education, attracted

a comment stating that this phenomenon had become more noticeable, education having become a vote-catching issue. Political party statements were described as more rhetoric than reality. One teacher related political interference in education to the declining amount of resources being made available and suggested that teachers are now expected to do more for less. A second item in this theme was concerned with having little influence over political decisions in relation to education. Essentially, the seven teachers who commented on this item believed that because they have the practical experience, some form of consultation should occur. One teacher suggested that the Ministry of Education was more concerned with public relations exercises, while another was critical about decisions

being made solely on monetary grounds.

#### Factor Three: Time

Two themes could be discerned in this factor, with the number of responses to each of the items summarised in Table 5. The first of these themes included items which related to duties other than teaching. Spending time on duties other than teaching was cited as interfering with marking and preparation. One teacher related this issue to a lack of duties other than teaching time.

Examples of duties other than teaching included playground supervision, completing surveys, tending to the welfare needs of students, deciding on performance indicators, sport, book-week, dealing with principal-generated communications, voluntary extra-curricular work and assembly items.

Having to spend time on duties other than teaching was an item closely related to the issue discussed previously. Similar examples were cited, but also included were committee work and attendance at professional development courses. One teacher suggested that release time for committee work and professional development courses was limited by funding. Another teacher stated that the principal refused to support time off to attend professional development courses.

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Table 5  
Frequency of Responses to Potentially Stressful Items for Time  
(N=24)

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Item	Frequency
1. Spending time on duties other than teaching.	6
13. Not having enough time during the school-day for marking and preparation.	8
18. Intrusion of school-related work on private time.	8
26. Being expected to fulfil a number of conflicting roles.	3
32. Pressure on time due to increasing workloads.	6
37. The repetitive nature of having to prepare teaching programs.	2
39. Having to undertake duties other than teaching.	4
45. Pressure on time due to increasing expectations.	6

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46. Lack of professional development activities which do not  
6 interfere with private time.

60. Pressure on time due to having to meet deadlines.

0

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Being expected to fulfil a number of different roles was related, by one teacher, to being expected to fulfil a number of different expectations from a variety of sources. Two other teachers gave examples of the conflicting roles which they faced including social control, evaluation responsibilities, clerical duties and collecting money. Such roles also appeared to be increasing, according to one teacher, and combined with the constant criticism, made teaching difficult.

The second theme was concerned more directly with teaching duties. Not having enough time during the school-day for marking and preparation was related commonly to a lack of duties other than teaching time. This was compounded by other demands made upon teachers during the school-day. One teacher posed the question about why pre-primary teachers have one day a week for preparation and a full-time aide, while other primary teachers did not enjoy such privileges. A senior primary teacher discussed the large amount of time required to mark students' work.

Three teachers related pressure on time due to increasing expectations to the items on increasing workloads, duties other than teaching time, lack of resources, curriculum changes and different expectations. Examples discussed by teachers included the increase in the number of subjects which have to be covered in the classroom and accountability. Those teachers who mentioned the former suggested that this reduced the enjoyability of school for both students and teachers.

Comments about the intrusion of school-related work on private time were grouped in two main categories. First, three teachers were concerned about the impact of this aspect on their family lives and the contribution of this issue to tiredness. The second category was concerned with the provision of examples which included preparation, marking, programming, obtaining resources, parent interviews, attending professional development courses, writing reports and arranging exhibitions. The use of private time on school work was expected by one teacher, but not to the extent being experienced, while another suggested that this was an increasing occurrence.

Lack of professional development activities which do not interfere with private time was related to the "time" factor, as well as to the second factor - "issues external to school". As such the responses to this item have already been discussed.

The repetitive nature of having to prepare teaching programs was discussed in terms of boredom and the non-provision by the Ministry of a programming format such as that prepared by the South-West regional educational office. The latter was of particular importance to a temporary teacher.

The final two items in this factor, pressure on time due to increasing workloads and having to meet deadlines, were related together by two teachers. The issue of increasing workloads was also related to other items including changing curriculum, lack of duties other than teaching time, intrusion on private time and changes being implemented too quickly. One teacher noted that the workload issue was increasing, while another could see no adequate solution to this problem.

### Summary

The aim of this paper was to review the information obtained from interviews conducted with twenty-four primary school teachers about the nature of events in the teaching environment which caused stress. The framework of this review was based on the stress factors derived from quantitative data collected during April and May, 1991. Responses to the items in three of the identified stress factors, namely "school-level concerns", "issues external to the school" and "time", were discussed. This discussion revealed that, within each of the individual items in each stress factor, teachers encountered a variety of situations.

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