

## **Causes and Effects of Stress on Secondary School Principals in Meru, South District, Kenya.**

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### **Abstract**

In Kenya today, the most dominant feature of the education system is academic performance. High academic achievers in the society are considered successful in life, while low academic achievers are seen as failures. To achieve such success, it all depends on the teachers in our schools. Demands for this success are so much that they are likely to make the teachers stressed. Actually, teaching has been ranked as one of the most stressful careers. In this same society, Principals of secondary schools are facing pressures from such as having more courses to teach, handling large classes, administrative duties, school finances, and dealing with difficult parents, students and teachers. They may therefore, experience both internal and external stressors. This study therefore, aimed at examining causes and effects of stress on these school Principals. The study established that considerable number of the secondary school Principals fall within high levels of stress. Much stress was attributed to factors like lifestyles, personality type, employment work load, personal health, home environment and relationships. Majority of the Principals had their cognitive, emotional and behavioral areas adversely affected by stress. The study recommends that all Secondary school Principals should be sensitized on balancing work loads and lifestyle. The Kenyan government will need to take action to address this if teacher stress is to be reduced.

**Keywords:** Stress, Secondary Principals, Effects, Lifestyle, Relationships, Home Environment.

## **Introduction**

Teacher stress can be defined as the experience by a teacher of unpleasant negative emotions such as anger, frustrations, anxiety, depression and nervousness resulting from one aspect of their work (Kyriacou 2001). However, very few studies reported to date have explored teacher stress in Kenya. Social, cultural, economic and educational differences between countries mean that one must be very cautious in generalizing from research done in one country to another. Teachers' studies by researchers began in 1930s in developed countries and later into developing countries. Now it is a major research topic in the world due to unpleasant negative emotions experienced by teachers in their work. Principals of secondary schools are teachers by profession and therefore the stress they experience falls under these studies. As such, the problem addressed by this study was to explore this headship stress among Principals of secondary schools in Meru- South District in Kenya. If left undiagnosed and untreated, it can have long term negative consequences to both teachers and the entire education institution.

## **Statement of the problem**

Secondary education in Kenya is the base for future careers. Principals of Secondary schools must therefore produce good results. This is a stressful task since for all activities in the Secondary school the buck stops with the principal. It is with this in mind, that the researcher conducted a secondary schools Principals stress levels assessment, in Meru- South District, Kenya. Headship is often exciting and challenging and consequently stressful. While every job has its stressors, stress among principals often goes undiagnosed and untreated due to several factors that include among others assumption that principals are self sufficient, an academic culture that discourages open, honest dialogue or interprets complaints of stress as a sign of inadequacy and the misconception held by many outside the profession that teaching is stress free. Thus, the study sought to establish these stress effects on principals of Meru- South secondary schools.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The study was guided by the following objectives:-

- To determine the causes of stress on secondary school principals in Meru- South District.
- To determine the effects of stress on Secondary school Principals in Meru- South District.

## **Methodology**

The study used the ex-post facto research design. This design was suitable because it was carried out within a naturalistic occurrence. There was no treatment given to the respondents before the study. The phenomenon was described as it was because it was

already in existence, or already occurring. That is, the stress levels were already in existence. Stress is the independent variable in the study, and had already occurred and was therefore not manipulated by the researcher. Kathuri and Pals (1993) asserts that the purpose of this design is to find out after the fact phenomenon, where treatment was induced by selection rather than by manipulation.

The study was done on secondary school Principals in Meru- South District, Kenya. The schools were conversant and accessible to the researcher and the area was a suitable representative to other Districts. From the population of 80 Principals drawn from 80 public secondary schools in Meru- South District was used. Out of these, a sample size of 66 principals was involved as suggested by Kathuri and Pals (1993).

A stress inventory was used to measure stress effects. This inventory measured individual stress set in the context of a normal and habitual lifestyle. It comprised six categories that were in lifestyle, home environment, personal health, relationships, employment and personality. Each category has sixteen items. Respondents were required to respond by selecting the word that best explained how they felt. Validation of the instruments was confirmed by research supervisors and other research experts of Egerton University. A pilot study was also done. Reliability of the instruments was tested with Cronbach coefficient alpha which involved a single administration of the instrument. This was found to be highly reliable. Once the researcher got to the sampled schools, the principals agreed on the dates to be contacted on order to allow for the stress inventories to be administered to them for data collection. The researcher administered them in person and the response rate was 100%. Data collection took one month. Descriptive statistics using frequencies and percentages was used to analyze data on effects of stress. The results were in turn used to generalize from the sample to the population.

### Findings

Table1 gives details of the analysis, where stress causing factors included home environment, personal health, and relationships both at home and work place, employment work load, personality type and lifestyle.

Table 1: Responses on factors that cause stress

Factors	Frequency (f)	Yes %	Frequency (f)	No %
Home Environment	46	70%	20	30%
Personal Health	22	33%	44	67%
Relationships	53	80.5%	13	19.5%
Employment work load	58	88%	8	12%
Personality type	52	79%	14	21%
Lifestyle	34	51%	32	49%

Table 1 shows that the main causes of stress are employment work load which was identified by 58 (88%) of the principals, relationships (80.5%), personality type 52 (79%) and home environment 46 (70%). A large number that is 44 (67%) of the principals felt that personal health did not influence much in causing stress. Mulligan (1998) asserts that stress among teachers is never the result of one single cause and gives other causes as personal conflict, lack of community spirit, feelings of isolation and lack of support. This is in agreement with what Fuster (2000) added to the list of causes that stress is a result of faulty heredity, faulty temperament, low level energy, sickness, poor diet, lack of sleep and fatigue, confusion about God, purpose of life and poor housing. Edworthy (2000) gives some more sources of work stress for principals which included; - Poor school environment as well as having no clear goals to work towards. There was work overload yet there was no motivation to look forward to. The teaching provided poor job satisfaction because of pressure from administrative duties. Ithinji (2001) concurs with these findings, adding that much of the principal stress was as a result of lack of student discipline, poor students' academic results, low student enrolments and low school finances. He also found that relationship was also a factor, because of the many conflicts principals suffered with school suppliers. There were also many conflicts the principal encountered with teachers, students and parents. At times there were difficulties with managers of the school such as the sponsor, PTA, BOG and even the employer TSC. The principal also suffered from internal school and external community politics because of the many unclear expectations from these communities. This made the principals' lifestyle difficult as a result of having too many roles at the same time such as administrator, teacher, and parent. Kinune & Leskinen (1989) also found that inadequate time for preparation of administrative tasks, school work, and excessive paperwork, unclear expectations, new policies, innovation and changes like transfers, headships role without any prior preparation, also cause stress. This is in line with other previous research findings which also indicated that, family demands, age issues, tribal and cultural differences, difficult parents and teachers, school being geographically isolated, poor communications, competitiveness in the school culture also added up in building stress among the principals (Fredman, 2000)

According to Melgosa (2000), stress normally affects three major areas of a person namely cognitive area, (thoughts and ideas), emotional area (feelings and emotions), and the behavioral area (attitude and behaviors'). This concurs with the findings of the researcher as seen from the following findings.

Table 2: Effects of stress on cognitive area

Statement		Responses (frequencies and percentages)			
		SA	A	D	SD
Difficulty in	f	30	21	15	0
Concentration	%	48	28	24	0
Decreased memory	f	36	18	7	5
	%	54	27	11	8
Low responses	f	29	21	10	6
Speed in solving Problems	%	46	28	16	10
Loss of attention	f	40	15	6	5
	%	58	24	10	8
Disorganized	f	37	17	9	3
Thinking	%	55	25	14	5
Difficult analyzing	f	33	17	11	5
Situations	%	49	26	17	8
Make mistakes	f	43	12	9	2
In solving problems	%	60	20	14	6

Key: SA – Strongly Agreed, A – Agreed, D – Disagree, SD – Strongly Disagree

Table 2 shows that majority of the Principals displayed severe stress effects on their cognitive area. Out of the sampled 66 Principals, 43 (60%) were found to be making mistakes when solving problems. Another 40 (58%) of the Principals felt that they had frequent loss of attention whereas, 37 (55%) had disorganized thinking. The Principals who felt that they had decreased short term and long term memory were 36 (54%). In support, Melgosa (2000) adds to say that stress affects so adversely to persons thoughts and ideas making one's mind respond at slow speed, resulting to illogical thinking and difficulties in concentration. The table also shows that none of the Principals objected to having no difficulties in concentrating on demanding activities. This is a clear indication that stress affects the majority of the Principals. This concurs with earlier researchers for instance Sinclair & Ryan (1992), who had noted that Principals find headship often exciting and any stress among them goes undiagnosed and untreated. This is due to factors including assumptions that Principals are self sufficient, an academic culture that discourages open, honest dialogue or interprets complains as a sign of inadequacy and the misconception held by many outside the profession that headship is stress free.

Table 3: Effects of stress on emotional area.

Statement		Responses (frequencies and percentages)			
		SA	A	D	SD
Difficulty in relaxing	f	43	12	9	2
	%	60	20	14	6
New illness	f	33	17	11	5
	%	49	26	17	8
Thoughts of Worthlessness	f	37	17	9	3
	%	55	26	14	5
Increased Discouragement	f	30	21	15	0
	%	48	28	24	0
Impatience/intolerance	f	40	15	6	5
	%	58	24	10	8
Less self Control	f	40	16	7	3
	%	58	26	11	5

Table 3 shows that the Principals who felt that their self esteem had been so affected, felt increased discouragement, decreased desire to live and had thoughts of worthlessness were 37 (55%), whereas 33 (49%) felt that their health had deteriorated as a result of stress. It can be observed that majority of the sampled Principals 43 (60%) had difficulty relaxing emotionally and physically. Another 40 (58%) of the Principals felt that there was less self control on ethical and moral principles which govern life. In general, the table shows that stress had also greatly affected the Principals personality traits making 40 (58%) of them develop impatience, intolerance, authoritarianism, and lack of consideration for others.

Table 4: Effects of stress on behavioral area.

Statement		Responses (frequencies and percentages)			
		SA	A	D	SD
Thoughts of suicide increases	f	49	10	5	2
	%	73	16	8	3
Inability to speak	f	30	26	7	3
	%	48	36	11	5
Lack of enthusiasm	f	40	10	10	6
	%	58	16	16	10
Increased consumption Of alcohol	f	50	9	4	3
	%	75	14	6	5
Low energy levels	f	42	10	8	6
	%	63	16	12	9
Change in sleep patterns	f	25	20	14	7
	%	38	30	21	11
Suspicion in Relationships	f	23	20	14	9
	%	35	30	21	14

Key: SA – Strongly Agreed, A – Agreed, D – Disagree, SD – Strongly Disagree

Table 4 shows that high stress level adversely affected their behaviors' and attitudes. The findings as seen in the Table, shows that majority 50 (75%) of the sampled Principals had turned to increased consumption of alcohol, tobacco, coffee and drug use resulting to absenteeism from school. In addition, 49 (73%) of the Principals had thoughts of suicide increasing along with suicide attempts. Another 42 (63%) of the Principals felt that they had low energy levels, which was fluctuating from day to day whereas, the Principals who lacked enthusiasm for preferred activities such as hobbies of favorite past times were 40 (58%).

## **Conclusions**

Based on findings of the study, the researcher concludes:-

Teachers are among the professionals who are burned out and are characterized by physical depletion and by feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Stress experienced by Principals is work and lifestyle related. Secondary school Principals in Meru- South District were negatively affected by stress. Behaviors symptomatic of teacher stress include poor time management; inability to concentrate; job dissatisfaction; irritation and aggression; introversion and withdrawal from supportive relationships; inappropriate; cynical humor; abuse of alcohol, caffeine or tobacco; and if left untreated, absenteeism, resignation and withdrawal from the profession. Emotional consequences include fatigue and low energy; frequent colds; irregular sleeping patterns, insomnia and bad dreams; appetite disorders; and potentially, psychosomatic illness and heart disease (Brown & Ralph, 1998; Hinton & Rotheiler, 1998; Travers & Cooper, 1998).

## **Recommendations**

From the findings of this study, it was evident that stress affects Principals of secondary schools in Meru South District. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, the researcher made the following recommendations:

- Ministry of Education, TSC and other stakeholders should provide seminars and workshops for the Principals to sensitize them on stress management
- Secondary schools Principals should take vacations and learn to delegate responsibilities effectively in order to relax.
- Secondary schools, especially the day schools, should have improved working conditions and increased teaching resources, in order to make Principals' lives more bearable and at the same time, help them to work efficiently to improve the quality of education as a whole.
- Secondary school female Principals should be sensitized on balancing work loads and lifestyle. They also need the emotional support of people who love them, in order to help them to re-establish their self-esteem.
- There is need for the Teachers Service Commission to increase teachers' salaries in order to motivate and retain teachers in the profession.
- In addition, the ministry of Education should see to it that there is reduction of

extra activities during the school term and changes in Educational policies are less frequently made.

- Professional Principals should attempt to learn more about their own stress levels; abilities to manage and reduce their stress and their individual psychological; physical and emotional reactions to the stress they experience. By reducing or limiting the stress they experience, they may be able to avoid Principal burnout; a situation cited by Schwab (1983) as one of the most significant challenges facing the future of education.

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