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## Assessment of stress levels among teachers of learners with special needs in primary schools in Mbarara District, Uganda

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### ABSTRACT

*Teachers of learners with special needs in primary schools are faced with different stress levels associated with special needs learners, for example, limited support, poor students' behavior, un friendly classroom environment and poor professional competency. This paper explored the levels of stress among teachers handling learners with special needs in primary schools of Mbarara Municipality-Uganda. Census was used on the entire population of 53 teachers, purposive sampling was used to select schools handling learners with special needs. Data was collected using a cross-sectional survey design with quantitative and qualitative methods, a structured and open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire composed of demographic section including total number of years in teaching, positions held in school, highest academic qualification, and formal education under taken for teaching special needs cases. Results show that majority of the respondents were males 27(50.9%), teachers who had an experience of teaching for ten years and above (56.6%), class teachers (52.8%), teachers with diplomas (54.7%), and teachers who had informal education on handling learners with special needs (56.6%). It was further discovered that teachers experienced high levels of stress due to limited support ( $M = 32.92$ ,  $SD = 9.52$ ), and due to behavior of the students ( $M = 61.25$ ,  $SD = 15.92$ ). The study recommends that teachers handling learners with special needs be supported by school administrators through refreshers courses to adequately handle learners in a friendly environment.*

**Keywords**— *Stress Levels, Teachers, Special needs*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Stress is not something strange to our daily life. Individuals may feel stressed not only by facing a bad situation but also work load such as that experienced by teachers. Teaching has been ranked among the top 5 most stressful careers in the world (Lewis, 2006), with between 33% and 37% of teachers studied regularly reporting being 'very or extremely' stressed (Griffith, Steptoe & Cropley, 1999). Smith et al., (2000) study on occupational stress in the United Kingdom revealed that among the groups, teaching is ranked first on highest levels of stress. Compared to other teachers in the United States, those handling learners with special needs experience the highest levels of stress (Cooper, 1988). Equally so, in Nigeria teaching learners with special needs is more stressful. This could be attributed to the unusual nature of the learners and their different learning difficulties (Adeniyi, Fakolade, Olufemi & Tella, 2010). The authors further explicate that poor teacher working conditions contribute to the high levels of stress of teachers handling learners with special needs. The teachers manifest stress symptoms such as anxiety, frustration, impaired performance, and ruptured interpersonal relationship at work, which point to substandard quality of education for students with special needs. This appears to be a disturbing lack of awareness and skills for dealing with diversity among learners, for identifying needs within learners of special needs and within the system, and for evaluating support effectiveness (Leko and Brownell, 2009).

This paper assesses the levels of stress among teachers handling learners with special needs.

### 2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study was informed by the theory of psychological stress and coping by Lazarus and Folk man's (1984). The theory emphasizes the dynamic relationship between the individual and the environmental demands. Research has found out that stress could be thought of as resulting from an imbalance between demands and resources or as occurring when pressure exceeds one's perceived ability to cope (Lazarus & Folk man 1984). The theory of psychological stress and coping was preferred over the revised stress and coping model (Folk man, 2008) because the latter only considered stress as a result of how a stressor is appraised by an individual and how the individual appraises his or her resources to cope with the stressor at hand and ignored the

environmental demands. As applied to this study the theory holds that when the environmental demands exceed one's adoptive capacity then an individual will end up experiencing stress of handling special needs learners in primary schools.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

A stressed teacher is someone with uncontrollable emotion towards changes in education culture which requires a teacher to give their knowledge, and at the same time, they have to educate a learner with special needs to be a good community member. Adeniyi, Fakolade, Olufemi & Tella, (2010) argued that, teaching exceptional or special needs individuals could be more stressful owing to the peculiar nature of the learners and their different learning difficulties. Hastings and Brown (2002) asserted that Special Education teachers most especially females experience higher levels of stress, they feel less supported and have lower job satisfaction than their counterparts.

According to the study carried out by Beena and Poduval (1992) on sample of 80 (40 male and 40 female) in different schools handling learners with special needs, female teachers showed higher levels of stress because women experience greater amount of work change than men. Irrespective of gender special needs teachers have to work more, do office jobs, prepare teaching aid materials, and attend courses or educational workshops on handling learners with special needs (Azizi, Yahaya & Hartika, n.d).

Roach (2009) found out that teachers handling learners with special needs are highly stressed by organizational conditions, lack of control or autonomy in one's job, the absence of a support group, reward and punishment structures in organizations, background and personal characteristics, age of teacher, and the expectations one has for what can be accomplished on the job. High levels of stress lead to work dissatisfaction, absenteeism from work, and abandoning work. Teachers who experience moderate and low levels of stress perform better at their jobs than those who report high levels of stress. However, moderate levels of stress sustained over a long period of time, ultimately takes its toll and performance declines.

It is vital that teachers are able to recognize the levels of stress so that they can take the appropriate steps to deal with it in a positive manner. Increasing attention has to be given to understanding teachers' levels of stress to further study this alarming phenomenon.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

#### 4.1 Research Design

Cross-sectional survey research design was used in the study. This enabled the researcher to collect data from different categories of schools and teachers at a single point in time, and thus saving time. The study used qualitative and quantitative approaches, quantitative data allowed the researcher to meaningfully describe the distribution of the variables using standard procedures such as frequencies, and percentages. The qualitative data provided detailed information about the phenomenon that was studied.

#### 4.2 Population

Only primary school teachers handling learners with special needs participated in the study. This population was chosen because the study was limited to teachers of learners with special needs. There are only four schools that handle learners with special needs in Mbarara District and all of them were involved in this study. This study targeted 53 teachers.

#### 4.3 Sampling Strategy

The researcher used purposive sampling of only the schools handling learners with special needs and for the study sample census was used on the entire population of 53 teachers, with 27 males and 26 females. Therefore, data were collected from the study population.

#### 4.4 Methods of Data Collection

Interview guide and self-administered questionnaire with open ended questions was used in data collection. A self-administered questionnaire containing a brief explanation of the purpose of the study was given to the respondents to complete. The researcher was present during the data collection process to rectify any concerns a raised by the respondents.

Completed questionnaires were received from respondents immediately at the end of every session by the researchers who cross checked for completeness and accuracy. And any identified errors and omissions were rectified by the respondents. Interviews were administered to teachers who were visually impaired.

#### 4.5 Validity of data collection instrument

This instrument was piloted and the reliability of the whole scale of stress was calculated using Cronbach Coefficient alpha.

**Table 1: Showing Reliabilities of the Instrument and Subscales**

| Variables               | Tested items | Chronbach $\alpha$ |
|-------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Stress                  | 48           | .93                |
| Support                 | 10           | .86                |
| Students' behavior      | 19           | .82                |
| Classroom environment   | 6            | .90                |
| Professional competency | 8            | .70                |
| Personal competency     | 5            | .83                |

These reliabilities attested to the acceptability of internal consistency of the instrument for use in research.

**4.6 Data analysis**

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as, frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation, for interviews data were analyzed manually, field notes from the interviews were written down during the process of interviewing, and data were edited at the end of the day to ensure accuracy. Qualitative data were categorized in themes, sub-themes and categories which were later analyzed. The obtained information supplemented the quantitative findings as described by teachers through their responses.

**5. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS**

**5.1 Social demographic characteristics**

The teachers' age ranged from 23 to 50 with a mean age of 34.5 years (SD = 6.63). The number of children in classes ranged from 6 to 684 with a mean of 141 pupils. The number of special needs cases ranged from 1.00 to 100, with a mean of 11. Majority of the teachers reported having spent 23 years in handling learners with special needs.

Majority of the respondents were males 27(50.9%). More than a half of the respondents 30 (56.6%) had taught for more than 10 years. The majority of the teachers 29(54.7%) had attained diploma level of education. More than a half of teachers 30 (56.6) had informal education in handling learners with special needs. Also, majority of the respondents 28 (52.8%) were class teachers.

**Table 1: Types of Special Needs Learners Handled in Inclusive Classes**

| Types of Special Needs | F   | %   |
|------------------------|-----|-----|
| Speech Problem         | 25  | 25  |
| Deaf                   | 19  | 19  |
| Visual Impairment      | 56  | 56  |
| Total                  | 100 | 100 |

In Table 1 results show that learners with visual impairment were the majority in class, followed by those with speech problem and the deaf. Teachers reported experiencing high levels of stress because of these different types of Special Needs. This information gives an understanding on the types of Special Needs learners from whom teachers experience the stress levels.

**Table 2: Levels of Stress among Teachers Handling Learners with Special Needs**

|                                       | Minimum | Maximum | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Mean stress level |
|---------------------------------------|---------|---------|-------|----------------|-------------------|
| Stress due to the limited support     | 17.00   | 50.00   | 32.92 | 9.52           | High              |
| Stress due to students' behaviors     | 28.00   | 95.00   | 61.25 | 15.92          | High              |
| Stress due to classroom               | 9.00    | 30.00   | 19.47 | 6.05           | High              |
| Stress due to professional competency | 11.00   | 40.00   | 26.55 | 7.07           | High              |
| Stress due to personal competency     | 6.00    | 25.00   | 17.09 | 4.95           | High              |

In Table 2 above results show that respondents reported high levels of stress due to limited support (M = 32.92, SD = 9.52). The majority of the teachers were highly stressed due to bad behaviors of the students (M = 61.25, SD = 15.92). Most of the respondents experienced high stress levels due to unfriendly classroom environment in inclusive schools (M =19.47, SD = 6.05). A number of teachers also reported high stress due to lack of training to handle learners with special needs (M =26.55, SD = 7.07). Some of the teachers reported having high stress due to poor personal competency (M = 17.09, SD = 4.95).

**Table 3: Stress Levels in Relation to Gender, Years in Teaching, Qualification, Positions Held and Education for Teaching Special Needs**

|                                |                 | Support |        | Students' behavior |        | Classroom |        | Professional competence |        | Personal competence |        |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|---------|--------|--------------------|--------|-----------|--------|-------------------------|--------|---------------------|--------|
|                                |                 | Low     | High   | Low                | High   | Low       | High   | Low                     | High   | Low                 | High   |
|                                |                 | f (%)   | f (%)  | f (%)              | f (%)  | f (%)     | f (%)  | f (%)                   | f (%)  | f (%)               | f (%)  |
| Gender                         | Male            | 13 (25) | 14(26) | 13(25)             | 14(26) | 15(28)    | 12(23) | 11(21)                  | 16(30) | 15(28)              | 12(23) |
|                                | Female          | 9(17)   | 17(32) | 5(9)               | 21(40) | 9(17)     | 17(32) | 11(21)                  | 15(28) | 8(15)               | 18(34) |
| Years in teaching              | Below 10        | 9(17)   | 14(26) | 10(19)             | 13(25) | 12(23)    | 11(21) | 8(15)                   | 15(28) | 11(21)              | 12(23) |
|                                | Above 10        | 13(25)  | 17(32) | 8(15)              | 22(42) | 12(23)    | 18(34) | 14(26)                  | 16(30) | 12(23)              | 18(34) |
| Position                       | Subject teacher | 9(17)   | 16(30) | 9(17)              | 16(30) | 13(25)    | 12(23) | 11(21)                  | 14(26) | 12(23)              | 13(25) |
|                                | Class teacher   | 13(25)  | 15(28) | 9(17)              | 19(36) | 11(21)    | 17(32) | 11(21)                  | 17(32) | 11(21)              | 17(32) |
| Highest academic qualification | Grade 3         | 9(17)   | 10(19) | 5(9)               | 14(26) | 8(15)     | 11(21) | 5(9)                    | 14(26) | 8(15)               | 11(21) |
|                                | Diploma         | 12(23)  | 17(32) | 10(19)             | 19(36) | 15(28)    | 14(26) | 16(30)                  | 13(25) | 14(26)              | 15(28) |
|                                | Bachelors       | 0(0)    | 2(4)   | 2(4)               | 0(0)   | 1(2)      | 1(2)   | 1(2)                    | 1(2)   | 1(2)                | 1(2)   |
|                                | Masters         | 1(2)    | 2(4)   | 1(2)               | 2(4)   | 0(0)      | 3(6)   | 0(0)                    | 3(6)   | 0(0)                | 3(6)   |
| Education for teaching SNE     | Informal        | 10(19)  | 20(38) | 10(19)             | 20(38) | 15(28)    | 15(28) | 13(25)                  | 17(32) | 14(26)              | 16(30) |
|                                | Formal          | 12(23)  | 11(21) | 8(15)              | 15(28) | 9(17)     | 14(26) | 9(17)                   | 14(26) | 9(17)               | 14(26) |

From Table 3, results show that females were highly stressed (65.3%) than males (51.8%) due to limited support. More so females reported experiencing high stress (80.7%) than males (51.8%) due to learners' bad behaviors. Majority of males (55.5%) reported

experiencing low stress due to unfriendly classroom environment, while majority of the females (65.3) reported experiencing high levels of stress due to unfriendly classroom environment. Males (59.2%) experienced stress levels slightly higher than those of females (57.7%) due to poor professional competency. Males experienced low stress (55.5%) while females experienced high stress (34.6 %) due to poor personal competence.

Teachers with informal education on handling learners with special needs reported high levels of stress (67.5%) and those of formal education reported low levels of stress (48.7%) due to limited support. In addition, teachers with informal education reported slightly high levels of stress (67.5%) than their counterparts (67.5%) due to bad students' behavior. Furthermore, teachers with formal education experience high levels of stress (61.7%) than those with informal education (50%) due to unfriendly classroom environment. Results also report that teachers with formal education experience high levels of stress (61.7%) than those with informal education (57.5%) due to poor professional competency. Majority of the teachers with formal education reported high levels of stress (61.2%) than those with informal education (53.3%) due to poor personal competency.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

Results show that females were highly stressed than males due to limited support. These findings are in agreement with Wong et al., (2017) who assert that when teachers were provided with enough instructional support to ensure high teaching quality and student engagement, as well as emotional support to monitor students' long-term progress, they were likely to experience reduced work-related stress. This could be by the nature and character of men, the majority of them do not mind or care about the classroom environment and the behavior of the learners compared to women who extend their roles as mothers to classroom.

In addition, results show that, males experienced stress which is slightly higher than that of females due to professional competency while females experienced high stress due to personal competence than men. These findings are in agreement with Sahu and Mishra (1995) in their study of exploring the life stress and coping styles on a sample of 120 male and 120 female teachers. The males experienced high stress in the work-related areas, while females experienced high stress in personal and family areas. Female teachers' experiencing high levels of stress in personal and family areas could be as a result of their many responsibilities they have to fulfill as mothers and wives in the home.

Experienced teachers had low stress due to limited support and professional competency compared to teachers with less experience in handling special needs learners in an inclusive class. These findings are in agreement with those of Roach (2009); Jalongo and Heider (2006) who found out that teachers with less experience are still learning how to teach. This implies that such teachers need support from senior teachers so as to become more resilient in handling an inclusive class. Majority of the subject teachers experienced high stress levels while class teachers experienced slightly low stress levels due to limited support. This is in agreement with a series of studies (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997) on higher level of stress experienced by special education teachers in relation to their job responsibilities and limited support.

Results show that, majority of the class teachers were highly stressed by classroom environment and professional competency than classroom teachers and these findings are supported by Reddy and Ramamurthy (1990) who reported that class teachers experience high levels of stress because they are top-level managers who have to work hand in hand with teachers to put in practice what they learnt, this is because subject teachers teach and go but the class teacher have to carry the burden of the whole class and they are always answerable to whatever happens in class.

Teachers with informal education on handling learners with special needs reported high levels of stress and those of formal education reported low levels of stress due to limited support, and students' behavior, this report was in agreement with a study (Roach, 2009) that teachers experience high levels of stress with regular education teachers having higher levels due to lack of education on handling learners with special needs than the special education teachers who learnt how to handle those learners. Teachers who never had formal education on handling learners with special needs experience high levels of stress because they were not taught how to handle these learners therefore whatever these learners do stresses them.

Furthermore teachers with formal education experienced high stress levels than those with informal education due to classroom environment, professional competency, and personal competency these results are supported by Mold, Azan and Suzan, (2014) who found out that in terms of training, majority of the teachers are highly stressed due to not having undergone a great deal of pre-service training.

From the interviews, teachers also reported that handling learners with special needs stresses them differently, majority of the respondents said that they are highly stressed by the limited time allocated to them, in completing given work, teaching learners with short attention span who require the content to be repeated for them time and again, and signing hard words for the learners. These results are in disagreement with several findings for example Roach (2009) that teachers handling learners with special needs are highly stressed by organizational conditions, lack of control or autonomy in ones job, the absence of a support group, reward and punishment structures in organizations, background and personal characteristics, age of teacher, and the expectations one has for what can be accomplished on the job.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION**

Teachers handling learners with special needs experienced high and moderate levels of stress. Handling learners with special needs exposes teachers to stressful situations; that is, limited support, administration, professional competency, personal competency and class room environment. Female teachers, grade 3 teachers and teachers who had informal education on handling learners with special needs were found to be having high levels of stress. Since they have to deal with things they had not studied.

Male teachers and teachers who had formal education on handling learners with special needs had moderate and moderately high levels of stress. Male teachers take things lightly and could be the reason of their moderate levels of stress.

The study recommends that administrators should organize necessary support, conducive environment and refresher courses for teachers handling learners with special needs.

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