

# A Qualitative Analysis Of The Coping Strategies Of Kenyan Teachers

<sup>1</sup>ADEN ALI ABDI, <sup>2</sup>BRINDA BAZELEY KHARBIRYMBAI

<sup>1,2</sup> Department of Education, North Eastern Hill University, India  
Email: <sup>1</sup>abdi.aadeen@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** The current school context with its growing emphasis on quality and accountability is exerting significant performance pressure on teachers. It is important to understand how teachers cope with stressors in their every-day duty of teaching. Since the phenomenon of coping strategies among school teachers has received little attention in Kenya, this study sought to qualitatively explore the coping strategies used by teachers of secondary and primary schools when facing stressors in their working conditions. Eighteen teachers were purposively sampled through maximal variation sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Each interview was audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and coded according to the constant comparative method of data analysis. Results showed that teachers used two problem-focused strategies and two emotion-focused strategies as the primary coping approaches to various problems they encountered in the course of duty. While some of the coping strategies used by the teachers in this study were valuable in the short term, they were not necessarily effective in the long term. As such, the implication for policy is that teachers need support to cope with stressors exceeding their coping resources by being provided with instructional resources, reduced workload, enhanced compensation and adequate participation in decision making in the school.

**Keywords:** Coping strategies, working conditions, stress, teachers.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The current school context with its growing emphasis on quality and accountability is exerting significant performance pressure on teachers (Richards, 2012). The recent introduction of teacher appraisal systems, policy changes in teacher management and the introduction of a new curriculum are shaping the working conditions of Kenyan teachers. In addition to these recent changes, teachers also face poor administrative support, high workloads, lack of resources, inadequate time to prepare for instruction, poor professional relationships with colleagues, difficult interactions with parents, student misbehaviour and inadequate compensation (Howard & Johnson, 2004).

The levels of stress of teachers have escalated with increased teacher performance expectations but supportive conditions and resources have not (Richards, 2012). Persistent exposure to occupational demands is interpreted by individuals as stress. Occupational stress resulting from aspects of working conditions of teachers involves unpleasant emotional experiences such as frustration, tension, anxiety, anger and depression (Boylard, 2011). While a certain level of stress exists in any profession, evidence suggests that teachers suffer more work-related stress than non-teachers (Blase, 1986). Consequences of stress and burnout include reduced productivity, efficacy, illness, psychopathology and deterioration in social and family relationships (Harlow, 2008).

Teaching stress is a function of exposure to the sources of stress and the employment of coping resources (Callan et al., 1994). The conditions that cause teachers immense stress are largely beyond their power to control when such conditions are the result of policy changes within and outside the school system (Richards, 2012). For instance, Kenyan teachers can neither alter the country's financial realities nor decide how many more students will be added to a classroom. But they can look for ways of coping with their earnings and manage their workloads. As such the only real power stressed teachers possess is their choice of coping strategies. This study was prompted by an interest in the successful coping strategies teachers use in their working conditions. Finding out how teachers master different coping strategies can help to improve the perceptions and realities of problems in the work environments of teachers.

While previous research on teacher stress in Kenya has primarily focused on the sources of stress (Jeserem, 2006), minimal research attention has been directed toward coping with stressors in the working conditions of teachers. In addition, research into teacher coping has relied largely on quantitative methods that employ highly structured survey instruments which may greatly limit the research participant's responses. Consequently, in the area of teacher coping, using qualitative methods which give research participants opportunities to explain in detail the coping strategies have rarely been used in Kenya. By examining multiple views through qualitative approaches, we can better understand the conceptions teachers hold about their coping strategies. With this understanding, researchers can better isolate variables and develop models about coping strategies.

Coping is a way people consciously choose to reduce stress by altering its causes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress plays an important role in the coping process as individuals within organizations enact strategies to ease or completely alleviate stressful events in their job contexts (Griffith et al., 1999).

While the findings of different studies on the coping strategies used by teachers reveal a diversity of strategies, two main categories manifest: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping, is aimed at problem solving or doing something to alter the source of the problem. Emotion-focused coping, is aimed at reducing or managing the emotional distress that is associated with a problem. People use problem-focused approaches when they believe a problem can actually be changed (Vorell, 2012). Conversely, when someone believes a situation cannot be changed, he or she enacts an emotion-focused approach and works to change his or her internal appraisal of the stressor (Griffith et al., 1999).

Coping resources such as psychological, social and organizational means available to a person influence whether a particular coping strategy can or will be implemented (Callan et al., 1994). This study defines coping as the process in which teachers engage to manage the stressors in their working conditions that they identify as exceeding their personal or organizational resources.

The coping strategies adopted for interpretation of the interview data in this study are based on the theoretical categorization of Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub (1989) which identifies the particular coping responses under problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Typical responses in problem-focused coping are active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping and seeking of instrumental social support. Coping responses of emotion-focused coping are seeking of emotional social support, positive reinterpretation, acceptance, denial, turning to religion, focus on and venting of emotions, behavioural disengagement, mental disengagement.

## 2. METHOD

**Research Design:** A qualitative research methodology was employed to gain insight into the nature of coping strategies employed by teachers to respond to the stressful occurrences in their working conditions. The study was designed to focus on the general question, What strategies are used by teachers to cope with stressors in their working conditions? Collective case study method was used to provide vivid descriptions and explanations of coping strategies (Stake, 2005).

**Participants:** Data for this study were gathered from a population of 427 teachers in two sub-counties of Garissa county in North Eastern Kenya. Eighteen (18) teachers were purposively sampled through maximal variation sampling based on the characteristics of school level, gender and school locale (Creswell, 2015). In addition, sample size was determined by Data Saturation Point.

**Interviews:** Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews of 30 to 90 minutes length. The single-participant interviews consisted of broad, open-ended questions designed to describe the day-to-day coping strategies of teachers. Prompts were used to elicit more detailed information. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and coded according to the constant comparative method of data analysis.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The general research question addressed by this study was: What strategies are used by teachers to cope with stressors in their working conditions?

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that teachers used two problem-focused coping strategies and two emotion-focused strategies as the primary coping approaches to various problems in their working conditions. The problem-focused coping strategies were: active coping and planning, while the emotion-focused strategies were: acceptance and behavioural disengagement. The strategies employed by teachers to cope with stress problems experienced in their working conditions are presented below.

**Time Constraints:** Data show that teachers used problem-focused strategies in order to deal with problems of inadequate time in their daily teaching chores. In particular, teachers who had difficulty covering the content of the syllabus actively coped by creating additional teaching time in order to complete the syllabus. While non-regular teaching time for boarding secondary schools was Saturdays and evenings, day secondary schools and primary schools used early morning sessions before the start of regular lessons. The inability to cover the syllabus by teachers was a more pressing problem in secondary schools than primary schools because in secondary schools there is potential for students to be sent away for outstanding school fees within the school term. The extract below from a day secondary school teacher explains inadequate teaching time as a consequence of learning interruption when students are sent home for unpaid school fees or for short mid-term holidays and their coping responses.

“We are not able to cover the syllabus on time because there are many breaks in between. Sometimes students are sent for fees, there is a long period of half term lasting a week. So, teachers have decided to create extra time either early in the morning on school days, Saturdays or use PE lessons”.

A boarding secondary school teacher also elucidated on how the teachers struggled in a race against time to utilize non-work hours to complete what they consider as voluminous curriculum content.

“The syllabus is very wide in most subjects and the regular time given is not enough. So, we manage to cover the syllabus because of teaching on Saturdays. We also teacher after 4:30 pm and at night during preps, all sponsored by the school”.

Even though the teaching time is affected by factors beyond the control of teachers, they are compelled to espouse ways of coping so as to meet the expectations of the curriculum in as far as content handling is concerned. Teachers use personal, planning and collaboration time to cope with limited instructional time. This finding corroborates another revelation by the teachers that there was lack of adequate time to collaborate with colleagues and prepare for teaching. Government policy prohibits teachers from teaching outside the regular hours but teachers must cover the curriculum content so that students are prepared for national examinations.

**Lack of Parental Involvement:** Interview data revealed that teachers relied on acceptance and active coping strategies to deal with lack of parental involvement in student learning. Interview data revealed that most parents did not follow up with the learning of their children as most did not visit schools to monitor their children’s progress and find solutions to academic or discipline problems. Teachers coped with this problem by accepting and tolerating the situation and working with the few who demonstrated concern for the studies of their children as one teacher put it: “We work with the few parents who turn up”. Teachers also coped actively by taking audacious measures to get parents to respond to calls from the school. Among the measures was denying students access to class until their parents appeared in the school to engage the teachers on issues affecting their children as described by one teacher.

“Before the students went on strike we suggested a parents’ meeting. We had 480 students. Out of 144 parents of form one students only 20 parents turned up. In form two out of 100 parents only 7 turned up for the meeting. After they struck we told parents we would not allow a student into the school who is not accompanied by his parent. So, we got the majority of the parents and guardians”.

**Student discipline problems:** In coping with student discipline problems, teachers depended primarily on acceptance and behavioural disengagement strategies to reduce the effects of the stressors. Interviews also revealed that teachers adopted acceptance coping with student apathy by becoming accustomed to the situation since they could do nothing about it. One secondary teacher, for instance, explained how students wasting time was a prevailing problem rooted in school culture about which teachers could do nothing to change but reconcile to.

“We have become used to students wasting time. It is like we have developed immunity. It is like after all that is how things are and as an individual I can do nothing about it. It is not that I lack the passion and the zeal to teach but the system is not supportive”.

In instances where teachers felt they were likely to suffer retribution from students or the government for the corrective measures they took against misbehaving students, they resorted to behavioural disengagement by ceasing to make effort to institute disciplinary measures as elaborated by a teacher in the quote below.

“We read in the news yesterday that a teacher was jailed for three years for slapping a student. Such measures have discouraged teachers from getting involved in student discipline issues and the results is that students are all over the country burning schools. There is a lot of indiscipline problems among students because teachers no longer sacrifice to stay longer hours in school to monitor and deal with student issues. They only come to teach and don't have interest in managing student discipline including guidance and counselling students”.

**Teacher Empowerment:** Teachers who were frustrated by lack of consultation in school decision-making coped through behavioural disengagement by giving up the prospect of being engaged constructively by school authorities. Interview data showed that secondary school teachers were less likely to challenge unilateral decisions and less comfortable raising important issues and concerns in the school because some secondary schools lacked an open consultative environment where teachers could liberally raise matters of concern with the school administration. The comment of one teacher captures the problem and the disengagement strategy,

“What do you do? Your boss has decided. The moment you talk about it [a decision] you will be in trouble. We just keep quiet and suffer in silence. This has effect on the morale of the teachers”.

The disengagement strategy revealed by the participants is a demonstration of the teachers' lack of a strong belief in their ability to control what happens to them. This sense of fatalism can potentially breed indifference as teachers elect to completely not participate in decision-making in the school.

**Teacher compensation:** Teachers used a number of ways to cope with problems of compensation. First, to actively cope with inadequate remuneration, the teachers admitted to venturing into personal business and conducting private tuition for willing students to supplement their income from the government.

Secondly, teachers actively coped with the lack of promotion through optimism and unrelenting in applying for promotion as one teacher noted: “The teachers keep trying and continue to apply for promotion when TSC advertises. They don't give up”.

Thirdly, to cope with their dissatisfaction with the terms and conditions of service, teachers said they were always exploring options of getting out of teaching. This coping by planning was demonstrated by teachers pursuing higher academic qualifications in fields other than teaching as one teacher remarked,

“TSC said you wait for vacancies to be announced in a given establishment for a teacher with higher qualification to be considered. This is one of the areas that is now discouraging the teachers. So, some teachers are therefore opting to do non-education courses so that they are able to leave teaching finally”.

Fourthly, teachers also admitted to being in constant search of employment opportunities outside the government teaching sector. The statement of one teacher represents the planning that teachers were engaged in while searching for alternative employment opportunities.

“If I get another opportunity of employment even on contract today I will not think twice about it because of the poor terms and conditions of service. And by the way every teacher is a job seeker”.

These findings show that teachers preferred to maintain the current job while supplementing their income from other gainful engagements. The teachers also sought to improve future job prospects by studying courses in other fields and engaging in job search behavior (Astarlioglu et al., 2011). These coping strategies express teachers' proactive actions as they look forward to control either their current job or future job by taking behavioral actions.

To cope with poor medical services, the teachers reported seeking alternative services to what was offered under the insurance cover. They took active steps as individuals to spend personal funds to obtain services and medications that the health facility mandated by the insurer could not provide. One teacher observed that: “The medical insurance is a sham. The health facility that is accredited by the insurer to serve the teachers does not have the personnel, the service and medicines required. So, we go to other hospitals and use our money to get treatment”.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Learning to cope with stress successfully has benefits for teachers. While teachers may not be able to change the various factors in their working conditions such as the level of support from parents, the number of students in the classroom, or the availability of instructional materials, they have the power to practice coping strategies that either directly address the sources of job-related problems or minimize the emotional consequences of stress. Some coping strategies, such as active coping, reported in this study offer some valuable options that may improve a teacher's sense of well-being (Howard & Johnson, 2004). For example, the supplementary ways of earning an income may improve the pecuniary situation of teachers. Others, such as acceptance, are particularly important in circumstances in which the stressor must be accommodated to, as opposed to being changed (Carver et al., 1989). For instance, teachers accommodating to lack of involvement in decision-making in the school.

This study reveals that the fretfulness of stress in the lives and performance of Kenyan teachers cannot be ignored. From an organizational point of view, stress can lead to significant loss of skilled and experienced teachers from the teaching workforce (Richards, 2012). Stressed teachers who stay within the profession are likely to be increasingly less productive in their jobs. For the benefit of students as well as the society, the matter of teacher coping deserves the attention and support of employers and policymakers. While some of the coping strategies used by the teachers in this study were valuable in the short term, they were not necessarily effective in the long term. As such, policy implications are that the teachers need support to cope with stressors that exceed their coping resources by being provided with instructional resources, reduced workload, enhanced compensation and adequate participation in decision making in the school.

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