
Stress Management Strategies Employed by Lecturers of Special Education in Selected Public Universities of Ghana

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ABSTRACT: *The study investigated stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana. It adopted a descriptive survey research design. A sample of 22 lecturers of special education students was selected from three (3) public universities using census technique. A four-point likert scale questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. The study revealed that the teachers experience stressful situations in their duties, and they used various stress coping strategies known to them. The study recommended that management of the universities should employ additional special education lecturers to reduce the workload of individual lecturers. Also, that management of the universities should sensitize lecturers to make use of counselling services provided by the universities.*

KEYWORDS: stress management, strategies, lecturers, special education, public universities

INTRODUCTION

Efficient and effective performance in any job depends largely on the good psychological well-being of the workers. Other factors include a conducive environment, good interpersonal relationships, adequate communication among staff, and management and staff, workload, remuneration and a host of other physical and psychological boosting variables. Work becomes very uninteresting and stressful when all or some of the conditions stated earlier are not in place. Stress constitutes a serious work hazard. In fact, without stress, the complacency of many workers may not be punctured, thereby leading to low productivity and inefficiency, however, a high degree of stress may mar the whole process of performance.

Stress has been defined by different authors in different ways. Borg, Riding and Falzon (1991) defined stress as a physical, emotional or mental reaction resulting from one's response to certain pressures in the environment and how well one can manage those pressures. Onyemerekeya (1996), perceives stress as the reaction or response within an individual that occurs when some

kind of external event threaten him. It should be noted that all events of life present stress at one time or another. This is because stress is an everyday “guest” in the life of everyone. A situation in which one’s behaviour is subjected to evaluation by somebody else can be stressful. However, different jobs present different degrees of stress but a high degree of stress impedes performance. Frankly speaking, teaching is among the jobs that are stressful.

Teaching as a profession is highly demanding. It tasks all human domains and demands a lot of effort in order to achieve a definite goal. Therefore, meeting the daily learning and behavioural needs of students makes teaching onerous and stressful owing to the divergent individual differences that exist in classroom situations. Hastings and Brown (2002), Nagel and Brown (2003) and Brown and Nagel (2004) are of the opinion that teachers generally experience a higher level of job-related stress compared with professionals in other fields. If teaching, according to these scholars, is stressful, teaching exceptional or special needs individuals could be more stressful owing to the peculiar nature of the learners and their different learning difficulties. According to Danku et al. (2017), the most stressful aspect arises from the workload and work environment. A Study by Hastings and Brown (2002) indicated that Special Education teachers have higher levels of anxiety, feel less supported and have lower job satisfaction than their contemporaries. All the factors stated above are stresses and strains on special needs teachers.

It is noteworthy to state that the roles of special educators in the educational system are both complex and multifaceted. These include skilful anticipation of students’ difficulties, helping in adaptation and accommodation of special needs in the society especially in this era of total inclusion, knowledge of general education curriculum and adaptation to suit the needs of the exceptional children, and assisting in homework as well as the adequate linkage between school and home. Such expectations may also constitute stress or burnout for teachers of special needs children.

In addition, teachers are the focal centre of interactions with parents, their own and other students, and other faculty members especially when teaching students with learning difficulties. Research suggests that special education teachers exhibit higher levels of stress than mainstream education teachers (Lazarus, 2006). This readily brings to mind how teachers cope with stress in course of their duties. In this regard, this research investigates stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana.

Statement of the Problem

It is obvious that special education lecturers are among the most stressed in the teaching profession. This is due to the huge workload, emotional/ psychological pressures, especially in dealing with students with various degrees of disabilities, and a high level of frustration experienced by lecturers. This makes the job highly demanding, with those who cannot cope seeking alternative employment and job satisfaction outside the field of teaching special needs students. Humara (2002) contends that lecturers go through activities such as listening to music, positive thinking, reading for pleasure, relaxation, focused attention, and imagery and mental rehearsal to reduce

stress. Being a lecturer comes with a lot of prestige and respect. Nonetheless, the workload is so enormous since the number of students per class is always large. This makes lecturers experience a lot of burnout moments. This study therefore, attempts to investigate the stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public universities in Ghana.

Purpose of the Study

The study sought to investigate stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana.

Research Objectives

The study sought to find out about the:

1. Stressful situations experienced by lecturers of students with special educational needs in the public Universities of Ghana.
2. Special education lecturers' knowledge about indications of stress.
3. Various ways special education lecturers deal with stress

Research Questions

1. What stressful situations are experienced by lecturers of students with special educational needs in the public Universities of Ghana?
2. What is special education lecturers' knowledge about indications of stress?
3. In what ways do special education lecturers deal with stress?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A research design is the researcher's plan of how to proceed to gain an understanding of some group or some phenomenon in its context (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson & Walker, 2014). Based on that theory, this study employed a descriptive survey research design to explore the stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana. Descriptive survey research portrays an accurate profile of persons, events, or situations (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Miller, 1991). This design offers to the researchers a profile of described relevant aspects of the phenomena of interest from an individual, organizational, and industry-oriented perspective. Therefore, this research design enabled the researcher to gather data from a wide range of respondents on the stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana.

Population

Population consists of all the units in which the findings of the research can be applied (Shukla, 2020). In other words, population is a set of all the units which possess variable characteristics under study and for which findings of the research can be generalised. The study population for

this study consisted of the twenty-two (22) lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana.

Sample and Sampling techniques

A sample is a group of people, objects, or items that are taken from a larger population for measurement (Vogt & Johnson, 2015). The sample should be representative of the population to ensure that we can generalise the findings from the research sample to the population as a whole. Sampling is the selection of a subset of the population of interest in a research study (Turner, 2020). In the vast majority of research endeavours, the participation of an entire population of interest is not possible, so a smaller group is relied upon for data collection.

There are fifteen public universities in Ghana. Out of this number, the researcher purposively selected three of them; the University of Cape Coast, University of Development Studies, and, the University of Education, Winneba. This is because, these universities are the only ones that have established Department of Special Education. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers rely on their judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in their surveys (Schwandt, 2014). Census technique was employed in including all the twenty-two (22) members of the accessible population (from the three purposively selected public universities) in the study. Census technique is a technique in which all the elements in the population are involved in a study (Best & Khain, 2006). This implies that, with census technique, all the participants of the accessible population are involved in the study.

Instrumentation

Questionnaire was used in the collection of data for the study due to the fact that the entire population for the study were literate. The reason for using a questionnaire was that, it consists of questions and statements relating to the aims or research questions of the study which makes it possible for verification to take place. Again, the use of questionnaire ensured consistency, uniformity and stability in response. Its usage made respondents complete answering the questionnaire at their convenience and also ensured the respondents greater anonymity. The two forms of a structured questionnaires (closed-ended and open-ended) were used. The open-ended questions allowed respondents to express their views freely on issues raised. The closed-ended questions were used when the researcher needed specific answers which did not require explanation.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 displays the distribution of respondents' background information. From Table 1, majority of the respondents (n = 12; 54.5%) were males. More than half of the respondents (n = 14; 68.6%) were between the ages of 31-40. This was followed by those aged between 41-50 (n = 6; 27.3%).

Also, a greater number of the respondents (n = 16; 72.7%) were married. The majority of the respondents (n = 11; 50.8%) fell in the category of assistant lecturer rank. Eight (8) respondents representing (36%) had a working experience of 5-10 years whereas six (6) respondents representing (27.3%) had worked for 1-4 years.

Table 1: Distribution of the Respondents based on Demographic Characteristics (N =22)

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	12	54.5
Female	10	45.5
Age		
21-30	1	4.5
31-40	14	68.6
41-50	6	27.3
51-60	1	4.5
Marital Status		
Married	16	72.7
Widowed	2	9.1
Single	4	18.2
Academic Rank		
Senior Lecturer	4	18.2
Lecturer	7	31.8
Assistant Lecturer	11	50.8
Working Experience		
1-4	6	27.3
5-10	8	36.4
11-14	1	4.5
15-20	5	22.7
Above 20	2	9.1

Research Question 1

What stressful situations are experienced by lecturers of students with special educational needs in public Universities?

The purpose of this research question was to identify some of the stressful situations lecturers of students with special educational needs experience. Based on this purpose, respondents answered eight questions relating to the stressful situation on a four-point Likert scale type of measurement as 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree. For the purpose of analysis and discussions, the average mean score for all the responses is 2.5. Hence, a mean value of 2.5 and above suggest an agreement that the statement is a stressful situation they experience. In contrast, a mean score below 2.5 suggests disagreement. The same measurement and interpretation were given to research question 3. Table 2 shows the details of responses to the stressful situations lecturers of students with special educational needs experience.

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The respondents agreed that limited time for submission of assessment mark ($M = 2.9, SD = .64$) was the most predominant stressful situation they encountered. This was followed by inadequacy of instructional material ($M = 2.8, SD = .85$), insufficient assistive devices ($M = 2.7, SD = .84$) and the low level of administrative support ($M = 2.6, SD = .66$). The respondents however indicated that having lecture sessions with their students with disabilities ($M = 1.7; SD = .94$) was the least stressful situation they encountered.

Table 2: *Stressful situations experienced by lecturers of students with special educational needs*

Statement	M	SD
I get stressed out when having lecture sessions that include students with disabilities	1.7	.94
I feel easily tired when I am assigned an extra teaching load	2.2	.87
Addressing concerns of students with exceptional needs presents stressful situations to me	1.8	.73
Inadequacy of instructional material for students with disabilities puts so much strain on me	2.8	.85
Insufficient assistive devices for students with disabilities puts me in stressful conditions	2.7	.84
Limited time for the submission of assessment marks for students stresses me out	2.9	.64
Low level of administrative support for lecturers overburdens me	2.6	.66
The time-consuming nature of teaching students with disabilities frustrates me	1.8	.73
Mean of Means	2.3	.78

Research Question 2

What is special education lecturers' knowledge about indications of stress?

The aim of this research question was to ascertain the knowledge special education lecturers have regarding indications of stress. In view of this, respondents were asked to indicate how informed they were on twelve (12) indicators of stress. The responses followed a four-point Likert scale type of measurement as 1 = “Totally Uninformed”, 2 = “Uninformed”, 3 = “Informed”, 4 = “Totally Informed”. For the purpose of analysis and discussions, the average mean score for all the responses was pegged at 2.5. Therefore, a mean value of 2.5 and above suggest that respondents

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are informed that the statement is an indication of stress. In contrast, mean scores below 2.5 indicated that respondents are uninformed. Results for research question 2 is presented in Table 3.

Results from Table 3 shows that generally, special education lecturers are highly informed about the indications of stress ($M = 2.8, SD = .82$). Specifically, respondents are aware that, feeling of frustration ($M = 2.8, SD = .91$), feeling of tension on the job ($M = 2.8, SD = 1.1$), frequent and prolonged headaches ($M = 2.9, SD = .75$), sustained trends of high blood pressure ($M = 3.0, SD = .65$), getting upset and either not eating or eating too much ($M = 2.8, SD = .81$), difficulty focusing on task ($M = 2.6, SD = .73$), as well as having heart palpitation and hurting stomach when thoughts of returning to work occurs ($M = 2.7, SD = .84$) are all indications of stress.

Table 3: Special education lecturers' Knowledge about indications of stress

Statement	M	SD
Feeling of frustration	2.8	.91
Feeling of tension on the job	2.8	1.1
The amount of work done falls short of how well it gets done	2.7	.88
Getting upset and impacting negatively on eating habits (either can't eat or eat too much)	2.8	.81
Finding it difficult to sleep/ do not sleep well at night (traces of insomnia)	2.8	.87
Difficulty focusing on task/ job	2.6	.73
Heart palpitation and hurting stomach when thoughts of returning to work occur after a weekend or a hard day's work	2.7	.84
Frequent and prolonged headaches	2.9	.75
Easily feels tired on the job	2.9	.83
Seeking medical care often but always told to take time off for rest	2.8	.75
Sustained trend of high blood pressure	3.0	.65
Intermittent drowsiness after executing a task.	2.5	.67
Mean of Means	2.8	.82

Research Question 3

In what ways do special education lecturers deal with stress?

This research question aimed at identifying the various ways special education lecturers handle stress associated with their work. The results for this research question is presented in Table 4. As shown in Table 4, there are various ways special education lecturers handle stresses they go through. The predominant ways include listening to music ($M = 3.1, SD = .75$), engaging in professional development both formal and informal ($M = 3.1, SD = .68$), relaxing after school hours ($M = 3.0, SD = .98$), engaging in reading for pleasure ($M = 2.9, SD = .83$) and outdoor activities ($M = 2.9, SD = .89$) and also involving in professional organisation activities ($M = 2.6, SD = .73$). On the contrary, respondents indicated that they do not take tobacco products ($M = 1.2, SD = .39$), alcohol ($M = 1.3, SD = .46$) nor prescribed medication ($M = 2.1, SD = .92$) when dealing with stress.

Table 4: Ways special education lecturers deal with stress

Statement	M	SD
I engage in reading for pleasure	2.9	.83
I engage in writing/ journaling	2.5	.74
I listen to music	3.1	.75
I engage in outdoor activities	2.9	.89
I engage in yoga/meditation	2.0	.82
I go for counselling	2.0	.95
I relax after school hours	3.0	.98
I involve myself in a professional organisation's activities	2.6	.73
I talk to my immediate superior	2.3	.94
I engage in professional development (formal or informal)	3.1	.68
I take prescribed medication	2.1	.92
I eat regularly without skipping meals	2.1	.71
I get some nap	2.8	.75
I take tobacco products	1.2	.39
I take alcohol	1.3	.46
Mean of Means	2.4	.78

DISCUSSIONS

These data provide important insights concerning stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana. Regarding the stressful situations experienced by lecturers of students with special educational needs, the study revealed that there are stressful situations that these lecturers experience. The respondents indicated that limited time for the submission of assessment marks for students, inadequacy of instructional material for students with disabilities, insufficient assistive devices for students with disabilities, low level of administrative support, and extra teaching load were often stressful circumstances they experienced. In line with this finding, Hastings and Brown (2002) indicated that special education teachers have higher levels of anxiety, feel less supported and have lower job satisfaction than their contemporaries. These stressful situations experienced by the teachers arise from the workload and work environment (Danku et al., 2017).

Analysis of the findings further revealed that special education lecturers have an appreciable information about the indications of stress. The highest indications of stress that could be associated with special education lecturers of public universities of Ghana included sustained trend of high blood pressure, frequent and prolonged headaches, easy tired-feeling on the job, feeling of frustration, feeling of tension on the job, seeking medical care often but always told to take time off for rest, traces of insomnia and intermittent drowsiness after executing a task.

Again, it could also be inferred from the study that special education lecturers of universities of Ghana adopt some strategies to deal with the stress they face. Some effective stress coping strategies adopted by special education lectures of universities of Ghana included engaging in reading for pleasure, engaging in writing/journaling, listening to music, engaging in outdoor activities, relaxing after school hours, involving in a professional organisation's activities, talking to my immediate superior, engaging in professional development (formal or informal), and getting some nap. This finding is partly consistent with Humara (2002) who indicated listening to music, positive thinking, reading for pleasure, relaxation, focused attention, and imagery and mental rehearsal are the most effective strategies used for reducing stress.

KEY FINDINGS

The following were the main findings of the study:

1. It was realized that lecturers of students with special educational needs in universities of Ghana experience some stressful situations. The reported stressful situations include limited time for the submission of assessment marks for students, inadequacy of instructional material for students with disabilities, insufficient assistive devices for students with disabilities, low level of administrative support, and extra teaching load were often stressful circumstances they experienced.

2. The study also revealed that special education lecturers of universities in Ghana have an appreciable information about the indications of stress. The highest indications of stress that are associated by lecturers of students with special educational needs in universities of Ghana included sustained trend of high blood pressure, frequent and prolonged headaches, easy tired-feeling on the job, feeling of frustration, feeling of tension on the job.
3. The study showed that lecturers of students with special educational needs in universities of Ghana used various stress coping strategies. Some effective stress coping strategies adopted by special education lectures of universities of Ghana included engaging in reading for pleasure, engaging in writing/journaling, listening to music, engaging in outdoor activities, relaxing after school hours, involving in a professional organisation's activities, talking to my immediate superior, engaging in professional development (formal or informal), and getting some nap

Recommendations

1. The study recommends that the management of universities in Ghana should employ additional special education lecturers so as to reduce the workload of individual lecturers.
2. Again, they should employ graduate assistants to assist lecturers in the marking of scripts, especially the multiple-choice based questions and support them with minor administrative work.
3. The study also recommends that the management of universities of Ghana should sensitize lecturers to make use of counselling services provided by the universities to enable them manage the stress they go through.
4. Again, management should also have a recreational centre where lecturers can relax when they are stressed from their work.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Respondents were treated as autonomous individuals, and their consent was sought before the instruments were administered. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. On the basis of this, I have adhered to the ethical principles described in the aforementioned in the conduct of the research.

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