



STRESS AND BURNOUT IN TEACHERS HANDLING CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES.

Sapna.C.B, Achala Umopathy and Sudha Bhogle*

Abstract

The present study was designed to explore the incidence of stress and burnout in teachers of children with learning disabilities (LD). It also attempted to investigate the effect of - (a) age of the teachers, (b) special training and (c) years of experience in teaching LD children on the stress level of these teachers. The sample for the present study included 44 female teachers from various institutions for children with learning disabilities in Bangalore. Stress & burnout level in teachers was assessed through a semi-structured interview schedule, Teacher Stress Scale (modified Wilson Stress Profile for Teachers, 1979) and Burnout Inventory (Maslach's Burnout Inventory, 1981). Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were made. The results revealed that of the total 44 teachers, 45.45 percent (20 of them) experienced moderate level of stress and only 2.27 percent (one teacher) experienced high level of stress. The results also revealed that age did not have a significant effect on the nature of stress, stress management and burnout level. It was seen that there is an effect of special training in teaching children with learning disabilities on the nature of stress, stress management & burnout level in terms of managing students in the class. There was a

Sapna.C.B, is a Post Graduate from the Department of Psychology, Bangalore University. Dr. Achala Umopathy is a Retired Professor of Psychology. Dr. Sudha Bhogle is Reader, Department of Psychology, Bangalore University.

significant difference in the stress and burnout level in teachers with regard to years of experience. It was also found that emotional exhaustion was significantly higher among teachers who reported moderate level of stress as compared to teachers reporting low level of stress. A qualitative analysis of the interview data suggests that there is a significant amount of denial in the teachers, in terms of their rating on the level of stress experienced by them.

Introduction

Learning Disabilities (LD) represent a broad group of developmental disorders that have a deficit in a particular area of learning; individuals with LD display some type of academic or achievement problem which is not due to mental retardation, emotional problem, educational deprivation, socio-cultural deprivation and / or sensory or motor loss (Encyclopedia of Psychology, 2000). Students with LD have average to above average intelligence but are unable to adequately process the information to the extent that learning is often hindered (Nakra, 1996).

Teachers of LD children have to prepare individualized education programmes that address the unique learning needs of the individual involved (Henson and Eller, 1999). The teacher has to try to also meet the psychological and educational needs of a child with LD. This is both difficult and challenging. Very often, problems like hyperactivity, emotional liability and general co-ordination deficits, characteristic of children with LD, nullify the efforts of the teachers.

The situation becomes more stressful when it does not meet the individual's needs. When an individual continuously faces situations that induce stress, one resort to different coping strategies. One type of chronic response to the cumulative/long term, negative impact of stress is burnout (Posen, 1995). Research has shown that the experience of stress over time often leads to burnout in teachers. Six major sources of teacher stress have been identified: time pressures, low status, pupil indiscipline, poor working conditions, poor motivation in pupils and conflicts with colleagues. (Kyriacou in Cole & Walker, 1989, p.30)

Pajak and Blase (1989) report that teachers typically perceived their personal lives as beneficial to their interactions with students in terms of greater sensitivity, empathy, caring, and receptivity. Negative outcomes relating to interactions with students resulted from aspects of teachers' personal lives that took time, energy, and attention away from classroom responsibilities. Littrell et al (1994) found that those general and special educators' who reported more emotional support also reported fewer health problems. Burke et al (1996) suggest that the strongest predictors of burnout

are disruptive students and excessive workload. Male and May (1997) report that Emotional Exhaustion is high for special educators and SLD teachers were subject to high workload and long hours of work. Galvez (1998) predicted that job satisfaction and positive attitude toward teaching were increased through formal training in the instructional needs of special needs and special education students. Engelbrecht et al (2000) indicate that the most stressful issues for teachers during inclusion related to some administrative issues, particular behaviors of the learner, perceived self-competence and the parents of the learner with a disability. The least stressful issues however, related to the other behaviors of the learner and health and safety issues. Forlin et al (2001) report that teacher's professional competence and the behavior of the child with the intellectual disability were the most stressful for teachers.

The present study is an attempt to explore the prevalence of stress and burnout in teachers of children with learning disabilities (LD) in India. It also investigates the nature of stress, stress management and burnout among these teachers, and the effect of factors like age, years of experience and the effect of special training on the nature of stress, stress management and burnout in these teachers especially in the Indian setting.

METHOD

Aim:

This study attempts to investigate the nature of stress, stress management and burnout level among teachers handling children with learning disabilities. The effect of age, experience and training on stress, stress management and burnout are also studied.

Hypotheses:

1. There will be no significant difference in the stress and burnout level in teachers with regard to age.
2. There will be no significant difference in the stress and burnout level in teachers with regard to special training in the field.
3. There will be no significant difference in the stress and burnout level in teachers with regard to their years of experience.

4. There will be no significant degree of influence of the level of stress on burnout among teachers of children with LD.

Sample:

All institutions in Bangalore dealing with LD children were approached for the study. However, three of the institutions did not show any favorable responses and hence were excluded.

The Inclusion criteria for selecting the teachers were

1. Female teachers
2. Teachers working in an organizational setting.
3. Teachers having proficiency in both written and spoken English.

The Exclusion criteria were

1. Teachers who are purely individual workers (i.e., who are not tied-up with any organization).
2. Teachers who are handling children with mental retardation, cerebral palsy, or any other severe impairments.

Description of sample:

Criterion	Mean	SD
Age	42.05	8.3
Years of experience	4.59	3.88

Tools and techniques:

Interview: The interview was primarily designed to elicit information about their attitude towards the profession. This was a semi-structured interview schedule with five questions. It tried to explore the attitude of the teachers towards the profession, their strengths and limitations, their self-concept and other intervening factors, which could play a crucial role in their career.

Teacher Stress Scale (modified Wilson Stress Profile for Teachers, 1979) was used to assess the nature of stress and stress management among teachers handling children with learning disabilities. The questionnaire has 36 questions in nine different

subscales that pertain to special teacher stressors. The nine subscales are: (i) student behavior, (ii) employee/administrator relations, (iii) teacher/teacher relations, (iv) parent/teacher relations, (v) time management, (vi) intrapersonal conflicts, (vii) physical symptoms of stress, (viii) psychological/emotional symptoms of stress and (ix) stress management techniques. The teacher has to indicate how often the source of stress occurs by circling the number that corresponds to the frequency of occurrence. The scale was found to be valid on basis of face validity, content validity and expert opinion of people in the field. The split-half reliability for the overall scale is 0.92.

Burnout Inventory (Maslach's Burnout Inventory, 1981) was used to assess teacher burnout. This inventory has three subscales: (1). Emotional exhaustion, (2). Depersonalization and (3). Personal accomplishment. There are 22 statements to which the teacher had to indicate the frequency by writing the appropriate number in the space provided. Reliability coefficients reported for the subscales were: 0.90 for Emotional Exhaustion; 0.79 for Depersonalization and 0.71 for Personal Accomplishment. Internal consistency was established by Cronbach's Coefficient alpha ($n = 1316$).

Procedure

Data was collected in two sessions. In the first session, teachers were met individually. The personal data sheet to elicit relevant information about one's personal life, essential for the study and the semi-structured interview schedule were administered to each teacher. In the second session, the teachers were assembled in small groups of two or three and the Teacher Stress Scale and Maslach's Burnout inventory were administered. The data thus collected was subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative analysis:

- Prevalence of stress and burnout among teachers of children with learning disabilities:

In order to study the prevalence of stress and burnout in teachers, the responses were analyzed and compared to the norms. It was found that of the 44 teachers, 52.27 percent (23 of them) experienced low stress, 45.45 percent (20 of them) experienced moderate level of stress and only 2.27 percent (one teacher) experienced

a high level of stress. None of these teachers reported experiencing of burnout. While ranking the three components of the burnout inventory it can be found from Table 1 that their sense of personal accomplishment stands highest, followed by emotional exhaustion and finally depersonalization.

Table: 1. Stress and Burnout Profile of the group. (N = 44)

Subscale	Mean	Standard Deviation
Student Behavior	8.84	2.4
Employee/Administrator Relations	5.11	1.63
Teacher/Teacher Relations	5.66	2.24
Parent/Teacher Relations	11.45	2.64
Time-Management	9.95	3.02
Intrapersonal Conflicts	8.82	2.9
Physical Symptoms	8.43	3.5
Psychological/Emotional Symptoms	6.8	2.99
Stress Management Techniques	10.68	2.49
TOTAL	75.68	16.51
Emotional Exhaustion	11.25	8.98
Depersonalization	1.7	2.93
Personal Accomplishment	36.84	6.61

- The nature of stress, stress management & burnout among teachers of learning difficulty children:

The mean and standard deviation were computed for the group in order to identify the nature of stress, stress management & burnout among teachers of children with learning disabilities. The results are depicted in table 1. The mean and SD is calculated for each area that the Teacher Stress Scale and the Burnout Inventory measures.

The mean of the total score for the Teacher Stress Scale, for the group is 75.68, which is interpreted as moderate level of stress. Further, it can be seen from the group scores that uncooperative parent/teacher relationship, lack of proper time management and stress management techniques are the primary stress causing factors for teachers of learning difficulty children. The secondary stress causing factors are student behavior, intrapersonal conflicts and physical symptoms of stress. Employee/administrator relations, teacher/teacher relations and psychological/emotional symptoms of stress act as minimal stress causing factors.

The mean scores on the Burnout Inventory, for the group shows a score of 11.25, 1.7 and 36.84 on emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and the personal accomplishment subscales respectively. The scores indicate a high level of personal accomplishment and low level on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This shows the absence of burnout among teachers of children with learning disabilities.

- Comparison between the younger and older group of teachers in terms of the nature of stress, stress management & burnout:

In order to compare the nature of stress, stress management & burnout among the teachers of children with learning disabilities, of younger and older age group, the mean and standard deviation and the significance of difference in mean scores were computed. The groups were formed on the criteria of age; i.e., one group where teachers are less than or equal to forty years, and the other where age is greater than forty years. It was hypothesized that there will be no significant difference in the stress and burnout level among teachers with regard to their age. The results are depicted in table 2.

The t value obtained for all the subscales of the teacher stress scale and burnout inventory are non-significant. Hence, the null hypothesis, which states that there will be no significant difference in the stress and burnout level among teachers with regard to their age, is accepted.

Table - 2.

	Group 1		Group 2		't' value and its significance	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Student Behavior	9.11	2.13	8.64	2.68	0.64	NS
Employee/Administrator Relations	5.16	1.38	5.08	1.82	0.16	NS
Teacher/Teacher Relations	6.32	2.52	5.36	2	1.36	NS
Parent/Teacher Relations	11.21	2.82	11.64	2.51	0.52	NS
Time-Management	10.53	2.48	9.52	3.32	1.143	NS
Intrapersonal Conflicts	9.21	2.59	8.52	3.14	0.79	NS
Physical Symptoms	8.63	4.26	8.28	2.87	0.31	NS
Psychological/Emotional Symptoms	7.53	3.47	6.24	2.49	1.37	NS
Stress Management Techniques	11.4	2.01	10.08	2.69	1.96	NS
TOTAL	79.74	15.08	72.6	17.18	1.46	NS

Table - 2. (Contd..)

Emotional Exhaustion	12.26	10.77	10.28	7.44	0.77	NS
Depersonalization	2.52	3.73	1.08	2	1.53	NS
Personal Accomplishment	37.89	5.27	36.44	7.85	0.73	NS

Group 1 = Age less than or equal to 40 (N = 19); Group 2 = greater than 40 (N = 25).

- Comparison for the effects of special training in teaching LD children on the nature of stress, stress management & burnout.

In order to analyze the effect of special training in teaching children with learning disabilities on the nature of stress, stress management & burnout level, the mean and standard deviation and the significance of difference in mean scores were computed for the groups with and without training in special education. It was hypothesized that there will be no significant difference in the stress and burnout level in teachers with regard to special training in the field. The results are depicted in table 3.

Except for the subscale of student behavior and stress management techniques, the t values obtained for all the other subscales of the teacher stress scale and burnout inventory are non-significant. For the subscale "student behavior", the difference is significant at 0.05 levels, and for the "stress management techniques" subscale the difference is significant at 0.01 levels. The teachers who have undergone special training find student behaviors less stressful and they can manage stress better compared to teachers with no special training. The null hypothesis, which states that there will be no significant difference in the stress and burnout level in teachers with regard to the remaining variables, is accepted.

Table - 3. Comparison of teachers who have done / not done LD course.

	Group 1		Group 2		't' value and its significance	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	SD		
Student Behavior	9.82	2.24	8.22	2.39	2.25	*
Employee/Administrator Relations	4.84	1.07	5.3	1.9	1.05	NS
Teacher/Teacher Relations	5.88	2.18	5.7	2.35	0.26	NS
Parent/Teacher Relations	11.88	2.96	11.19	2.43	0.814	NS

Table - 3. (Cont'd...)

Time-Management	9.53	2.65	10.22	3.25	0.772	NS
Intrapersonal Conflicts	9	2.76	8.7	3.04	0.333	NS
Physical Symptoms	8.29	3.92	8.52	3.27	0.196	NS
Psychological/Emotional Symptoms	6.94	3.58	6.7	2.61	0.236	NS
Stress Management Techniques	11.82	2.24	9.96	2.41	2.603	**
TOTAL	77.06	15.95	74.81	17.1	0.441	NS
Emotional Exhaustion	11.71	11.27	10.96	7.41	0.241	NS
Depersonalization	2.41	3.86	1.26	2.12	1.129	NS
Personal Accomplishment	37.05	4.9	36.7	7.58	0.189	NS

Group 1 not done LD course (N=17); Group 2 = Done LD course (N=27).

- Effect of years of experience in teaching children with learning disabilities on the nature of stress, stress management & burnout in teachers.

In order to analyze the effect of years of experience in teaching children with learning disabilities on the nature of stress, stress management & burnout in teachers, the mean and standard deviation and the significance of difference in mean scores were computed. It was hypothesized that there will be no significant difference in the stress and burnout level in teachers with regard to years of experience in teaching children with learning disabilities. The results are depicted in table 4.

The t values obtained for the subscales of the teacher stress scale and burnout inventory are non-significant, except for the subscale of time management on the teacher stress scale. The difference is significant at 0.05 levels indicating that teachers with more than five years of teaching experience are better able to manage time, whereas for those who have put in less than five years of experience, managing time is a stressor. The null hypothesis, which states that there will be no significant difference in the stress and burnout level in teachers with regard to years of experience, is accepted with regard to the remaining variables.

Table - 4. Comparison of two group based on years of experience

	Group 1		Group 2		t' value and its Significance	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Student Behavior	9.13	2.24	8.21	2.81	1.08	NS
Employee/Administrat or Relations	5.27	1.76	4.79	1.31	1.011	NS
Teacher/Teacher Relations	6.03	2.34	5.21	2.04	1.18	NS
Parent/Teacher Relations	11.43	2.84	11.5	2.24	0.084	NS
Time-Management	10.6	3.04	8.57	2.56	2.302	*
Intrapersonal Conflicts	9.17	2.63	8.07	3.41	1.064	NS
Physical Symptoms	8.77	3.56	7.71	3.36	0.95	NS
Psychological/ Emotional Symptoms	6.87	3.05	6.64	2.95	0.231	NS
Stress Management Techniques	11.03	2.47	9.93	2.46	1.384	NS
TOTAL	78.03	15.18	70.64	18.65	1.295	NS
Emotional Exhaustion	12.73	8.87	8.07	8.68	1.65	NS
Depersonalization	1.63	2.74	1.85	3.42	0.215	NS
Personal Accomplishment	37.23	5.41	36	8.84	0.481	NS

1 = less than or equal to 5 (N= 30); 2 = greater than 5 (N= 14).

- The influence of stress level on the Burnout scores of teachers.

In order to find out the influence of stress level on the Burnout scores of teachers, two groups were formed depending on the level of stress as rated by the teachers on the Teacher Stress Scale. It was hypothesized that there will be no significant difference in burnout between the two groups

The results are depicted in table 5. The mean and SD is calculated for each of the three areas of the Burnout Inventory measures. The t value obtained for all the subscales of the burnout inventory are non-significant except for the emotional exhaustion subscale where the difference is significant at 0.01 level. That is, emotional exhaustion is significantly higher among teachers who reported moderate level of stress as compared to teachers reporting low level of stress. The null hypothesis,

which states that there will be no significant degree of influence of the level of stress on burnout among teachers of children with LD, is accepted with regard to depersonalization and personal accomplishment.

Table - 5. Comparison of groups with low and moderate stress level on indices of burn out

	Emotional Exhaustion		Depersonalization		Personal Accomplishment	
	Low Stress	Moderate Stress	Low Stress	Moderate Stress	Low Stress	Moderate Stress
Mean	6.09	16.6	0.96	2.25	37.39	36.75
SD	5.85	8.65	1.87	3.51	7.93	4.42
t'	4.632	**	1.476	NS	0.321	NS

Low stress (N = 23); Moderate stress (N = 20).

Qualitative analysis:

A semi-structured interview schedule with five questions, which had been used, tried to explore the attitude of the teachers towards the profession, their strength and limitations, their self-concept and other intervening factors, which could play a crucial role in their career.

Of the 44 teachers interviewed, 100 percent found the job satisfying and reported that it gave them a sense of happiness. They reported that though the job was challenging, it gave them a great sense of joy to cater to these children who were easily misunderstood.

Among the teachers, 85 percent reported that the job gave them scope to develop a one-to-one relationship with the children and that it demanded a stronger creative self and great amount of patience and understanding of the child's problem in order to cater to the needs of the child. The rest reported that it gives them a sense of happiness.

Among these teachers, 83.33 percent of them reported that the positive assets they saw in themselves in handling these children were patience, understanding and tolerance. Here it was observed that nearly 50 percent of the samples were themselves parents having a LD child. The minus points they noticed in themselves while handling these children was when they observed a lack of motivation in the child, due to his/her past learning experience. This along with sudden and quick mood changes made them feel incompetent.

With regard to the most difficult/irritating aspect about handling the LD children, 96 percent teachers reported that - firstly, parents did not accept the fact that the child had a problem and secondly, teachers at the normal/regular school failed to understand the problem and wanted immediate and drastic changes in the child's level of performance. The rest of the teachers reported that nothing about the job was difficult / irritating.

An important aspect noticed in these teachers was that there was a high degree of denial present in them. Observations revealed many physical symptoms of stress during the interview but these were not reported in the ratings that were given in the questionnaire. Nevertheless, it is equally and more important to consider the fact that since most of the teachers themselves had a child with learning difficulty, their motivation to work with these children was high. They were committed to the cause and perceived the situation as challenging. This hardy character required in the situation has probably brought down the level of stress experienced.

Special training provides information regarding LD and techniques of handling these children. The training lacks an important component in the management of stress. Therefore, information and training on stress management techniques will be a value addition that definitely will enhance the quality of service.

Conclusions:

From the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that

1. There is low to moderate level of stress among teachers handling children with Learning Disabilities.
2. Uncooperative parent/teacher relationship, lack of proper time management and ineffective stress management techniques are the primary stressors for teachers of learning difficulty children.
3. Age of the teacher does not have any significant effect on the level of stress experienced by them.
4. The teachers who have undergone special training to teach LD children find student behavior less stressful and they can manage stress better compared to teachers with no special training.
5. Teachers who have put in less than five years of experience find managing time as a stressor.

6. Teachers experiencing moderate level of stress experience greater degree of emotional exhaustion in comparison to teachers experiencing low level of stress.
7. There is no evidence of depersonalization while a high degree of personal accomplishment is observed.

References

- Burke, Ronald J., Greenglass, Esther R., and Schwarzer, Ralf. (1996). Predicting teacher burnout over time: Effects of work stress, social support, and self-doubts on burnout and its consequences. *Anxiety, Stress and Coping: An International Journal*. 9(3):261-275.
- Cole, M. & Walker, S. (1989). *Teaching and Stress*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press
- Encyclopedia of Psychology. (2000). *Learning Disability*. American Psychological Association: Oxford University Press. 3: 8-9.
- Engelbrecht, P., Swart, E., Eloff, I and Farlin.C. (2000). Identifying Stressors For South African Teachers In The Implementation Of Inclusive Education. Presented at ISEC 2000
- Forlin, Chris., Hattie, John., and Douglas, Graham. (1996). Inclusion: Is it stressful for teachers?. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*. 21(3):199-217.
- Galvez, Lei, Ann. (1998). Job satisfaction and attitudes toward teaching of elementary regular education teachers who serve special needs and special education students. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section-A:-Humanities and Social Sciences*. 58(8-A): 3092
- Henson, Kenneth F., and Eller, Ben F. (1999). *Educational Psychology for Effective Teaching*. London: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Littrell, Peggy C., Billingsley, Bonnie S., and Cross, Lawrence H (1994). The effects of principal support on special and general educators' stress, job satisfaction, school commitment, health, and intent to stay in teaching. *Remedial and Special Education*, 15(5): 297-310.
- Male, D B and May, D S. (1997). Burnout and workload in teachers of children with severe learning difficulties. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*. 25(3): 117-121.
- Nakra, Onitha. (1996). *Children with Learning Difficulties*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Ltd.
- Pajak, Edward., and Blase, Joseph J. (1989). The impact of teachers' personal lives on professional role enactment: A qualitative analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*. 26(2): 283-310
- Posen, D B. (1995). *Stress Management for Patient and Physician*. The Canadian Journal of Continuing Medical Education, www.mentalhealth.com.
- Truch, Stephen. (1980). *Teacher Stress & Burnout*. California: Academic Therapy Publication