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STRESSOR-MANIFESTATIONS IN A SAMPLE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS:
A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Volume One

Jack G. Holland
1991
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STRESSOR-MANIFESTATIONS IN A SAMPLE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Volume One

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

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1991
ABSTRACT

This thesis results from a longitudinal field study of stressfulness in nineteen New Zealand primary school principals. The study was located in a suburban area during the 1980s. After establishing a broad base of field work from the full sample, the researcher concentrated on a core of six principals, returning to the full sample in the later field work. The approach is in part retrospective as some members of the sample retired during the extended period of the study.

To focus the field study, the researcher formulated six broad research questions to gather data. The study found the incidence of manifested stressors to be widespread.

This thesis describes mainly 'on-job' stressors, including hassles, and identifies the stressor-manifestations sequence, including burn, burnout and pathological outcomes. Some principals displayed renewal in changed environments.

The researcher linked field data with current published research findings to make an awareness model combining the stressor-manifestations sequence with aspects of stress management.
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CHAPTER ONE

STRESSOR-MANIFESTATIONS IN A SAMPLE OF PRIMARY
SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

This thesis describes a longitudinal field study of a sample of primary school principals in which the researcher sought to identify stressors affecting the principals; to establish stressor sources; to define and describe stressor manifestations and to suggest professional techniques and modifications to lifestyle that might make perceived stressors less damaging in other principals.

Reasons Underlying the Research

This study was undertaken for three principal reasons. First, occupational stress is a recognized cause of physical illness and, recent evidence suggests, an important cause of morbidity and mortality (Haw, 1982; Kahn, 1973). Moreover, according to Cox (1978), Cooper and Marshall (1978a) and Kasl (1974), occupational stress affects mental health and well-being.

Secondly, teaching is widely recognized as a stressful occupation, especially classroom teaching. Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1977a, 1977b, 1978a, 1979a, 1979b) document perceived teacher stress and dissatisfaction with teaching. In 1981, when this study began, teacher stress was recognized widely.

Thirdly, school principals and classroom
teachers experience different stressors. Hence they require separate research undertakings because what is relevant to one group is not necessarily relevant to the other group. For example, a school principal's world, unlike that of a classroom teacher, involves professional interaction with an extended and complex range of people. Before 1981 research into primary school principal stress was limited; hence the researcher's decision to contribute to this specific research area.

The Researcher

The writer had twenty-four years' experience in educational administration, twenty-one of them as principal of large primary schools in New Zealand, with three years as an adviser overseas. In two extended study tours the writer studied educational administration in Great Britain, Scandinavia, Western Europe, North America, Israel, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, the Southern Pacific and Australia. It became apparent through these experiences and observations that school principals suffer from occupational stress.

This awareness led to the writer's project, 'Stress: Programme for Senior Teachers', in the Diploma in Educational Administration Programme at Massey University (Holland, 1980) and aroused the interest which led to the present thesis. An interest in administration and occupational stress has been maintained ever since and from 1984 to 1990 the writer tutored two part-time community college programmes, 'Management and Supervision' and 'Stress Awareness and Management'.
The Research Location

'Marina', the name adopted for this thesis, is a suburban area of approximately 12,500 hectares in the North Island of New Zealand, ranging up to 51 kilometres inland from a 27-kilometre north-south harbourside shoreline. In 1981, 31 primary schools, each with its own contributing area, served a population of about 135,000.

Any study of stressors must include interrelationships between individuals and their environment. Because socio-economic factors are essential aspects of every environment, the researcher carried out an elementary socio-economic study of the Marina area. Its socio-economic setting was identified by first interviewing Marina primary school principals and then matching interview data with information on buildings, equipment, socio-economic status and contributing district facilities given in the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) directory of primary schools. The researcher also had broad firsthand knowledge of each school district.

In 1981 some coastal areas of Marina included clifftop houses worth over one million dollars each, but they also included pockets of low-cost and State rental housing. Further inland, contributing areas were more homogeneous, with mainly middle-market housing ranging from $80,000 to $150,000 (Real Estate Abstracts, 1981). Occupational status within these areas varied predictably: the coastal fringe housed mainly doctors, lawyers, accountants and businessmen and the inland area housed mainly skilled tradesmen and clerical workers.

Less advantaged solo-parent families lived throughout Marina as did Maori and other Polynesian
families. In the coastal fringe these ethnic groups were represented usually by a single child in adoption and inland by family groups, often living in low-cost subdivisions.

Marina's recreational and community services varied but with no obvious pattern. However, where school contributing areas had grown around smaller, older schools, services had expanded with the population. By contrast, newer housing subdivisions usually had fewer facilities. Marina's schools were all within easy reach of recreational and service facilities.

Every Marina primary school had over 200 pupils in 1981. The largest roll was 650, the median roll 400. Rolls ranged from stable to falling, with one school administered as two separate schools in one set of buildings, preparatory to its division into two smaller schools, one to be in a new, wealthier subdivision.

In summary, no single school-contributing district was either entirely individual or homogeneous; all districts exhibited a range of socio-economic characteristics.

All of Marina's primary schools were fully staffed. Contributing areas were all generally accessible and socially pleasant and Marina as a whole was seen as a desirable place in which to live and work. Competition was intense to secure teaching positions in Marina, especially as principals.
The Research Questions

To focus the field study, the researcher formulated broad areas of enquiry questions from which six central questions finally evolved:

1. What are the on-job activities of a sample of New Zealand primary school principals?

2. What stressors are encountered by a sample of New Zealand primary school principals?

3. Do identifiable personal traits render some primary school principals more vulnerable than others to stressors and stressor manifestations?

4. Do identifiable organizational and environmental factors give rise to stressors and stressor manifestations in these primary school principals?

5. Can professional organizational approaches and personal lifestyles be modified in order to avoid or minimize stressors and stressor manifestations in primary school principals?

6. Can material from the researcher's field work and study of background literature be incorporated into a model that may help primary school principals learn techniques to nullify or reduce stressors and stressor manifestations?

Limitations of this Study

First, the study deals with a research sample of only twenty principals, all of whom were drawn from the Marina area and one of whom withdrew from the project in its early stages. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the study is relevant throughout New Zealand.

Secondly, principals were the sole source of data. There were no interviews with classroom teachers, parents, children, school committee members or principals' families.
Thirdly, as the researcher had to pay a general medical practitioner full fees, only a small number of the sample was medically examined and each person was examined only once. Monitoring the whole sample for a longer period would have been preferable but expensive.

Finally, there were no accessible medical records of stressor manifestations in Marina. Enquiries made to the Department of Health, the local hospital board and individual hospitals were discouraging for two reasons. Even when there was information, it was not readily released; and available information was uncoordinated, with no precise occupational details recorded. For example, the word 'teacher' could mean primary or secondary, principal or classroom teacher. Moreover information held by private medical practitioners is confidential.

Organization of Volume One

In this chapter the researcher has outlined reasons for undertaking this research, the scope and purpose of the thesis and relevant aspects of the researcher's background. The geographical and socio-economic location for the field study, identified as Marina, was described. Six research questions intended to help focus the study were set out. The limitations of the study were noted.

Chapter Two presents three aspects of the theories of stress: basic concepts; various models of stressor manifestation that helped formulate a working definition of stress for the Marina study; and research literature relevant to this thesis.

Chapter Three describes methodological approaches and practical issues of field work. It
concludes with a description of the researcher’s entry into the Marina field.

For descriptive purposes, the field research is set out, approximately in the order in which it took place, in three parts: early, middle and last. Chapters Four and Five cover the early part, Six and Seven the middle part and Chapter Eight the last. Chapter Nine contains an awareness model grounded in the research data and supplemented by research literature. Chapter Ten offers the researcher’s conclusions. Volume One ends with appendices and bibliography.

The Two Volumes of the Thesis

The thesis is presented in two volumes. Volume One stands alone as the thesis proper and contains processed field data in somewhat condensed form. Volume Two supplements the first volume with samples of the original data, including working field notes, journals, diaries, probes, questionnaires and tape transcripts, valuable but bulky material which would have overwhelmed the reader if presented alongside the researcher’s exposition and conclusions.