

Role of values in teacher stress

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Introduction

This paper presents the first stage of a small-scale research project into the relationship between teacher stress and personal values. It starts by outlining the problem of teacher stress and an overview of the literature investigating the sources of it. A particular combination of factors related to personal values that may increase vulnerability to stress is then suggested and a research project conducted to investigate this idea is described. The results of the research are discussed in the light of the relevant literature. Finally a speculative interpretation of the results is presented together with some tentative recommendations in relation to stress for individual teachers.

The problem of teacher stress

Teaching is traditionally considered to be one of the most stressful occupations (Cooper, 2000; Kyriacou, 2000). In the UK concern is growing regarding the steadily increasing costs and consequences of teacher stress (Carlyle and Woods, 2002; DfEE statistics, 2002). Early retirement on the grounds of ill health, long absence due to extended illness, new teachers leaving either during training or within five years of taking up their first post: all these factors are significantly increasing. Travers and Cooper (1996) found that two-thirds of their large national sample of British teachers had actively considered leaving teaching within the previous five years. Various sources show that teacher stress and its escalation is not specific to the UK; this is also a serious concern internationally. (Carlyle and Woods, 2002).

Workplace stress in Britain has recently been acknowledged as a health and safety at work issue signifying an important policy change. This change has been prompted by a number of recent cases in which employees have been awarded thousands of pounds, as a result of becoming ill through stress at work. More and more organisations are suffering the serious consequences of ignoring the issue of stress. But even when the extent of this problem is

acknowledged and attention is paid to research and theories explaining this phenomenon and measures are taken to reduce the level of stress at work, overall statistics show that the problem remains unresolved. This may indicate that research into the issue of work-related stress does not sufficiently inform practice and individuals. One possible reason for this is considered to be that traditional studies correlating self-reported symptoms of stress with a myriad of potential causes cannot produce meaningful results because they do not take into account different perceptions of these by different individuals at different times (Grimley, 2001; Reynold & Brinner, 1993).

However, the extent of the problem of stress dictates that it should be dealt with despite the lack of consensus about its causes. Sometimes even random measures of dealing with a problem can help to better understand it. For example, it has been discovered that various stress-management programmes are relatively effective for mitigating stress symptoms and providing useful strategies for dealing with existing stress. However, in order to *prevent* reoccurrence of stress, particularly after severe cases of burnout and stress-related illness, it was found that in-depth counselling is most effective (Shapiro et al., 1990; Carlyle & Woods, 2002; Grimley, 2001). Various sources of evidence show that counselling helps individuals to develop new mental models which allow them to return to their workplace with a greater sense of purpose, motivation and clarity about their own ability (Grimley, 2001; Carlyle and Woods, 2002).

The success of counselling is usually attributed to the fact that increased awareness that results from counselling often leads to the re-examination of and changes in personal values and priorities. This could suggest that personal values play a significant role in the occurrence of stress in the first place. Research into stress very often ignores the individual's pre-stress personality structure and belief system on which the stress was imposed. It could be argued, however, that the personal values factor represents a link between the social context on one side and individual characteristics and perceptions on the other side and so is crucial for an understanding of such a multidimensional and multileveled phenomenon as work-related stress.

Unfortunately, there is very little recent research into individual differences as a possible source of stress possibly because it can be interpreted as not helping but blaming those who are already suffering. Some researchers argue that “individual teacher-based solutions tend to depoliticise stress” and “a discourse of individual responsibility encourages individual pathologisation” (Carlyle and Woods, 2002). They imply that in this case it becomes the fault of particular individuals when they are affected by stress and not the fault of the system. I, however, agree with Bridgman (1961) that neglecting the role of the individual, with resulting overemphasis on the social, may well result in losing sight of the real problem. Various researchers claim that societal factors are fundamental in stress being ‘an ecological dysfunction’ (Hopkins, 1997). But it is important to see that this dysfunction is brought about by a combination of personal, organizational and societal factors.

I also believe that the search for fault rather than for responsibility in relation to stress tends to create helplessness in people and feelings of being victimised. Reforms that improve the political and organisational situation for individuals are important but eventually it is up to the individuals to raise their own awareness and to see as big a picture as possible of their stress including their own contribution. For this reason the purpose of this research is not to find some general laws about particular factors that cause stress but to help individuals to understand themselves better so they can make more informed choices and be more in charge of their lives.

Research project

Having acknowledged the potential significance of personal values in stress development the research started with an idea there is a combination of particular values and personality characteristics identified by individuals themselves, that is most likely to contribute to the development of their stress. My experience of counselling people together with an analysis of relevant raw data in the literature on stress has led me to believe that these are the following three factors:

- a) compatibility between personal values and the corresponding values of educational authorities (either mismatch **mm** or match **m**);
- b) ambitions to succeed professionally (either high **A+** or low **A-**);
- c) sensitivity threshold (either low – ‘thin skin’ **S+** or high – ‘not easily upset/excited’, placid **S-**).

The idea was that teachers with a low sensitivity threshold, whose personal values on education clash with the values under which the system operates, but who want at the same time to succeed within this system, constitute the group that is most prone to stress. In order to explore this idea as a first step a very short and fairly transparent self-inventory (Appendix 1) was designed. Its aim was to compare teachers’ self-reported levels of stress with all possible combinations of the three factors introduced above which were also self-judged by teachers via giving answers to some fairly direct questions.

Ninety-seven invitations to take part in this research were distributed with questionnaires amongst lecturing staff at one of the schools of a new University and to teachers employed in partnership schools. The return rate was over 80%, which reflects the importance of the issue. Six questionnaires were invalid; the remaining 72 completed questionnaires were analysed (36 school teachers and 36 lecturers). The questionnaires were completed anonymously. Only those who expressed interest in being interviewed during the second stage of the project gave their names and contact details (three schoolteachers and 15 lecturers).

The level of stress was calculated as the sum of frequency of stress occurrences (from 0 – ‘never’ to 4 – ‘very often’) and intensity of it (from 0 – ‘low’ to 4 – ‘very high’) reported by the individual. The other three factors (a, b and c) were calculated on a dichotomy basis according to the answers to the three relevant questions (e.g. **mm** – questions 5, 8 and 11) and grouped according to the combinations of the three: e.g. **mm**, **A+**, **S-**. Table 1 reminds the meaning of the codes and table 2 represents the distribution of the results.

mm Mismatch between personal values and those of educational authorities	M Match between personal values and those of educational authorities
A+ High ambition to succeed professionally	A- Low ambition to succeed professionally
S+ Low sensitivity threshold ('thin skin', easily upset/excited)	S- High sensitivity threshold (placid, not easily upset/excited)

Table 1. Meaning of the codes

No	Combination	Teachers		Lecturers		Group
		M	n	M	n	
1	mm, A+, S+	4.75	20	4.95	20	Risk group (Inconsistent emotional)
2	mm, A-, S+	4	2	4	2	Consistent emotional
3	mm, A+, S-	4	3	2.8	5	Inconsistent placid
4	M, A+, S+	3.5	6	5.4	5	Loyal emotional
5	M, A-, S-	2.4	5	6	1	Loyal placid
6	mm, A-, S-			3.5	2	Consistent placid
7	M, A-, S-			3	1	Content

Table 2. Stress level in groups of teachers and lecturers

Teachers' results fell into five groups of different combinations of the three factors; lecturers' results fell into the same five and an additional two groups. The group **mm, A+, S+** for both teachers and lecturers was the most representative in the overall sample (20 out of 36) than the other groups all together and separately. All groups were provisionally named to indicate their main qualitative feature based on the combination of the three factors and to make them distinct from the others (e.g. 'inconsistent' indicates teachers

whose personal values do not match the values of educational authorities but who nevertheless want to succeed within this system).

The purpose of the analysis was to compare the self-evaluated stress factor with all combinations of the values and sensitivity factors that were indicated in the questionnaires as characteristic to participants. Data were analyzed with ANOVA using SPSS and results supported the initial idea that the group **mm, A+, S+** has a significantly higher level of work-related stress. The difference between the risk group and all other groups calculated together was statistically highly significant at the level $p < .001$ with an Eta Squared 16.8% indicating nearly 17% of the total explained variance (Appendix 2). For the group of teachers separately the explained variance was even higher 22.1%.

Numbers in the other groups were very small. Nevertheless, there was a trend in the means indicating level of stress in the groups with different combinations of the three factors. In the group of teachers three possible variations of the one of the factors from the combination **mm, A+, S+** (groups 2, 3 and 4) reduced the level of stress from 4.75 to 4, 4 and 3.5 accordingly. When two factors were different (group 5) the level of stress was even lower 2.4. The same comparison in the group of lecturers was not as 'neat' as in the one of the teachers, but still showed a similar tendency.

Discussion of the results

The questionnaire's high return rate and the high number of both teachers and lecturers in the most stressed group confirms, I believe, the seriousness of the problem of teacher stress at this particular time and in the context of the English educational system. I will proceed in this discussion by looking closely firstly at each identified factor and its relationship to stress, secondly at their combination and finally at a possible interpretation of the results of this study.

Compatibility between personal values and corresponding values of educational authorities (mm or m)

This factor reflects a relationship between the sets of values that teachers hold and the values that inform current educational reforms. It was chosen as a focus in this study because of the current upheaval in the British educational system in relation to values. According to Carlyle and Woods (2002, p 138) current educational reform discourse in Britain is “totally at variance with that espoused by many teachers and central to their teaching practice and personal identities”. They illustrate this with the results of the study on the OFSTED inspection in primary schools (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998), which found considerable differences between OFSTED’s and teachers’ values in relation to a number of categories. Differences within some categories (Carlyle and Woods, 2002) are selected for the purpose of this analysis and set out in a table form (Table 3) for the convenience of comparing them.

Category	OFSTED values	Teachers values
Knowledge	Prescribed National Curriculum	Negotiated National Curriculum
	Controlled National Curriculum	Flexible and autonomous practices
	Emphasis on products	Emphasis on process
	Subject-based curriculum	Child-centered, holistic, integrative
	Systematization, standardization, uniformity	Differences, diversity
Pedagogy	Transmissional	Creative
	Behaviorist	Constructivist learning theory
	Formal	Informal
	Examination	Support
	Instant performance	Learning takes time
Assessment (of pupils and teachers)	Formal	Informal
	Quantitative	Qualitative
	Standardized	Localized

	Periodic tests	Continuous
	Hierarchical examination	Collective engagement, self-assessment
	Simplicity	Complexity
Culture	Competition	Collegiality
	Blame	Support
	Managerialism	Professionalism
	Control	Self-regulation
	Consumer	Producer

Table 3 Values differences (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998, pp 82-3)

The research argued, “There is a basic clash of values here. And it is a conflict where teachers are in the weaker position” (ibid, pp 83-4). Their conclusion is that the Government has to bear much of the responsibility for the dramatic increase in teacher stress, because promotion of its values creates not only unbearable pressure on teachers to ‘perform’ and heavy-duty accountability, but at the same time undermines teacher status in society thereby affecting their morale.

I want to emphasize at this point that this apparent clash of values for individual teachers may affect not only their working conditions, but may also create imbalance in the system in terms of the recognition of success and failure resulting in a threat to their social identity. It is very important for teachers to be aware of this conflict of values and its possible implications so they can identify personal strategies for dealing with this problem.

Ambition to succeed professionally (A+ or A-)

This is the most sensitive factor to discuss, because on the one hand it is strongly ingrained in our belief system and on the other hand, people in the teaching profession in particular do not like to be identified as ambitious. In Table 3 it can be seen, for example, that competitiveness, often associated

with ambition, is a characteristic that belongs to the set of values which conflict with those of teachers.

Ever since Fridman and Rosenman (1974) identified the type A personality, competitiveness has been recognised as a legitimate source of stress. This type of the male population was found to be three times more prone to stress-related heart diseases than other people. Type A was described as impatient, ambitious, aggressive, hostile, dominant, self-confident and preoccupied with time deadlines, challenges and responsibility. The image of a type A person is usually associated with the American style of life and indeed several studies (Cohen, 1975; Dodson, 1982) show that the percentage of this type of personality in the male American population is considerably higher than in other countries, e.g. 50% in California compared to 15% of Japanese men in Hawaii.

Even a superficial look at the description of this type of personality demonstrates the difference between the implied values of the type A person and teachers' explicit values described earlier in Table 3. It is unlikely that such an increase in teacher stress in Britain can be explained by a sudden increase in the number of type A personalities amongst them. It must also be noted that Fridman and Rosenman's research was carried out on the male population whereas teaching remains a female dominated occupation.

A review of available literature also shows an apparent contradiction between the results of the Fridman and Rosenman research and the results of a significant number of other studies on some of the particular characteristics that constitute type A personality such as locus of control and self-esteem and confidence. These studies show that subjects with an internal locus of control such as type A people are *less* anxious. Other studies suggest a close correlation between vulnerability to stress and *low* self-esteem (Dodson, 1982, Mruk, 1999).

These contradictory findings may indicate that it may not be the whole set of personality traits but some particular ones that have close correlation with vulnerability to stress and these may have more weight when related to teachers. I believe that one of these particular characteristics may be ambition, which does not have to be at the same time as explicit as in the type A personality. Ambitions as values could act as a very subtle factor that influences us through the belief system. For instance, there is universal agreement that it is better to have a high position in a socially approved occupation than a subordinate one. So the value of gaining or keeping a high position influences the person's self-esteem and in turn will lead to satisfaction or stress.

A number of studies exist that show that some factors associated with ambition contribute to stress. For example, the relationship between stress and self-esteem attached to status is well known in occupational spheres where a person's status is regarded as important (Dodson, 1982). Research by Ruesh (1948) demonstrated that social strivers who were unsuccessful in acquiring the prestige they sought complained of psychosomatic ailments. Dodson (1982) claimed that it is not the person at the top of his career who is under great stress, but the person who is struggling to reach the top. Perfectionism could be seen as an externally imposed and internalized value that a person might hold. This is a form of ambition and well known as a source of stress. Some people regard themselves as failures if they are unable to live up to one of their positive characteristics, such as competence. Rosenberg (1963) found that people with low self-esteem might be vulnerable to any kind of evidence, which helps to emphasize their inadequacy, and this creates stress.

My point is that in spite of holding the values of non-competitiveness, acceptance of diversity and appreciation of process rather than results, a teacher could have a strong desire to reach or keep as high a position as possible and the prestige which comes with it. He/she could also be strongly

affected by the judgment about his/her competence and could strive to be better than his/her colleagues. It is also possible that these feelings and wishes are not immediately available for self-observation and so may be held in spite of the very different explicit values and preferences. The feelings associated with this subtle form of ambition inevitably makes a person vulnerable to stress as a reaction to external or internal judgment on his/her scale of success-failure. The sheer importance for the person of his/her self-image as a professional could be a source of vulnerability to stress.

Sensitivity threshold (S+ or S-)

This is not a value factor but rather a personality feature or even a physiological characteristic of the individual. I believe that it is more or less a given one within the discussed combination, however theoretically it can also change as a result of the profound transformation of the person.

Combination of factors (mm, A+, S+)

The following is a speculative interpretation of why the proposed combination of factors may increase teacher vulnerability to stress. It is based to some extent on the theory about the levels of psychological existence by Graves which was further developed by Beck and Cowan (1996). This theory is also supported by a wide and comprehensive range of other studies and research into the nature of human development (Kolhberg, 1976; Lovinger, 1987; Kitchner, 1986), an overview of which can be found in Wilber (1999). This theory describes the evolution of human systems through the levels of increasing complexity. "Each upward turn of the spiral marks the awakening of a more elaborated version on top of what already exists" (Beck and Cowan, 1996, p 4).

A big MEME in this theory is an organizing principal that acts like attractor for the small memes as units of cultural information such as politics, music, philosophy, fashion, life style, etc. It represents a belief system, a way of thinking, a core intelligence, a discrete structure that is more than a set of ideas and values. "Individuals possess dominant MEMEs which shape their life priorities and values, from the most basic survival to global villager and beyond. Child development involves the awakening, guidance of, and learning

to express MEMEs in healthy forms at appropriate times. The appearance of new MEMEs often provokes a personal crisis in family and work relationships” (Beck and Cowan, 1996, p 33). Societies, whether local or national, are also grounded in a particular MEME or undergo a stormy process of change from one to another. One important construct of Graves relevant to this paper proclaims that “an individual, a company, or an entire society can respond positively only to those managerial principles, motivational appeals, educational formulas, and legal or ethical codes that are appropriate to the current level of human existence” (ibid, p 29).

Comparing the values in table 3 and table 4 reveals that OSTED values clearly belong to the Orange MEME, whereas teachers’ value are mostly representative of the Green one with probably very few elements of the Yellow. This is not surprising as most western and westernized societies are operating in the Orange band. Beck and Cowan argue that this does not mean that most human being alive today are thinking at the Orange level. But the First World leadership and political power have much more pragmatic, economic, multiplistic Orange thinking than their predecessors. They also claim that the Green MEME will gather strength next.

MEMEs	Characteristics	Thinking, structure, processes	Education
Purple Safety	Mystical spirits, signs Safe clans and nests Powerful elders Our people vs. them	Thinking animistic Structures tribal Processes circular	Paternalistic teachers Rituals and routines Passive learners Family-like learning
Red Power	Raw power displays Immediate pleasure Unrestrained by guilt Colorful and creative	Thinking egocentric Structures empires Processes exploitative	Rewards for learning Tough-love tactics Work on respect Controlled freedom
Blue Truth	Only one right way Purposes in causes Guilt on consequences Sacrifice for honor	Thinking absolutistic Structures pyramidal Processes authoritarian	Truth from authority Traditional stair steps Moralistic lessons Punishment for errors
Orange	Competes for success	Thinking multiplistic	Experiments to win

prosperity	Goal-oriented drives Change to progress Material gain/perks	Structures delegative Processes strategic	High-tech, high status How to win niches Mentors and guides
Green Communi- arian	Seeks inner peace Everybody is equal Everything is relative Harmony in the group	Thinking relativistic Structures egalitarian Processes consensual	To explore feelings Shared experiences Social development Learn cooperation
Yellow systemic	Big picture views Integrative structures Naturalness of chaos Inevitability of change	Thinking systemic Structures interactive Processes integrative	Becomes self-directed Whole-day package Tuned to interests Non-rigid structure
Turquoise holistic	Scans the macro Synergy of all life Safe, orderly world Restore harmony	Thinking holistic Structures global Processes ecological	Access to world Blend feelings & tech Bring past in life Maximize the brain

Table 4. Characteristics of MEMEs (adapted form Beck & Cowan, 1998)

My interpretation of this comparison is that teachers are and should be one of the most progressive parts of society. They model and promote the values of the coming level of thinking. That is why their values clash with those of the current governing system. Could it be because of this progressiveness that they are victims of stress? My answer would be “yes” and “no”. Yes, because the conflicts and tension are natural elements of the process of change in the belief system whether within individuals or society, and teachers seem stuck between the two. But also “no”, because the **mm, A+, S+** combination discussed here suggests that within this ‘human bond’ level which is representative of teachers’ values, their transformation is not complete. High ambitions are clearly a relic of the previous level. If we look again at teachers’ values in Table 3 we can see that they do not sit well with individual ambition. They emphasize the values of collegiality, support and human relationship as opposed to ambition and competition. This indicates possible value conflict within individual teachers themselves which could be an additional factor contributing to stress.

Realization of the above may be helpful for teachers in terms of clarifying their position and its possible implications. To assist this process of self-understanding the proposed combination of factors describing the risk group of teachers can suggest possible ways of preventing or dealing with stress. As was already mentioned, the sensitivity factor (**S+**) is the least prone to change, which leaves us with the necessity of looking at the other two more closely.

One possible way of preventing stress for individuals is to change an **A+** factor in order to bring it more into alignment with the value of the next level and teachers' own more desired value system. This is what probably happens sometimes during in-depth counselling and also, possibly, through various forms of personal development. The other possible strategy of dealing with stress for the risk group is to change the **mm** factor not to **m** however, but to move further along to the next higher level of thinking. The values of this level are less rigid. They allow for a genuine acceptance of the variety and diversity of the other levels as the result of the 'big picture' view. In any case, an understanding of the discussed phenomena and of the various sets of consequences may be important for the process of eliminating stress from individual lives.

These suggestions do not mean 'depoliticising' the issue of stress and so do not exclude active involvement on behalf of individuals in changing society on a bigger scale or championing reform in the educational system or particular organizations on the smaller scale. They reflect a particular view that society is not an abstract mass, but consists of us, individuals, which means that the obvious way of transforming society is through change within the critical mass of individuals. It also implies that individuals with a clearer understanding of the discussed phenomena through the big picture view and who are not entangled in their own value conflicts are less stressed and therefore more likely to contribute effectively to the desired reform and changes in the

educational system as well as in society. This process of individual development would be important not only for the elimination of work-related stress, however valuable, but also could contribute to the fulfillment of the higher mission of teachers in the evolution of humanity.

Conclusions and future research

This paper discussed the results of a research project into the issue of personal values in teacher stress. A combination of factors was discovered that might not only shed some light on teachers' vulnerability to stress but also indicate possible individual strategies for eliminating stress. I do not claim great novelty in the position that is articulated here. In a number of ways the conclusions are obvious. But I believe that results have shown that conflict over values can be elicited by individuals themselves through a self-analysed tool designed for this purpose (see Appendix 1).

I aim to develop this project further by exploring in depth the groups formed by all combinations of values factors found in the study. I hope that through interviewing those who expressed interest in this research I may find some meaningful patterns in the development of the self through adversity that could illuminate and enrich this process for those who are prepared to get involved and learn from others.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Please tick one answer for each question

1. There are considerable periods in my working life when I am stressed
 never
 rarely
 from time to time
 often
 very often
2. When I experience stress it is usually
 low
 moderate
 considerable
 high
 very high
3. It is important to me what other people think about me as a professional
 true false
4. I am not easily upset when things go wrong at work or I've been criticised
 true false
5. By and large my views on the educational system are the same as those held by educational authorities
 true false
6. It is not important to me how well I do my job in comparison to other people
 true false
7. I would describe myself as a laid-back, placid person in terms of my attitude to work
 true false
8. I strongly disagree with some principles on which the current educational system is built
 true false

9. In my job I try to reach/keep as high a position as I am able to live up to
 true false

10. Problems at work don't get me down
 true false

11. I find it difficult sometimes to reconcile my personal values about
education with those that drive current educational reforms
 true false