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## **Positive stress: Using Positive Psychology to explain the relationship between Teacher Burnout, Self-Renewal and Positive Affect**

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### **Background**

This paper will highlight instances where teacher stress and teacher burnout has contributed to self-renewal and positive affect in teachers. The ideas from this paper developed from an initial quantitative analysis of 1187 survey responses of teachers and will eventually help to form an overall sequential mixed method design.

The paper is based on the indepth narrative and semi-structured interviews on 10 teachers conducted between June 2009 to January 2010. The research tries to create a theoretical model which helps to explain the different types of stress and the role it plays in the everyday working lives of teachers. The topic is of importance as there is much focus on fixing what is going wrong with teachers working lives, with little focus on the parts of stress that work in a positive light and my research begins to draw the two together. My research is in line with the positive psychology movement which advocates that more attention ought to be given to positive growth and wellbeing rather than simply focusing on human pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

### **Research Questions**

I had previously theorized and understood stress to be a dichotomous construct, one which served a role in a negative way or a positive way, which is the conclusion that was supported by the findings of the quantitative analysis of the survey work I had presented at BERA two years ago. The qualitative work has further developed my conceptualisation of teacher stress and I have moved away from my dualist conception of stress and that in some instances it appears in the form of 'mixed bi-polar stress'. My original work did not explain the relationship between negative states (caused by distress) and why in some instances teachers persevered in order to produce positive outcomes.

My focus of enquiry is therefore;

1. Establishing the existence of positive teacher stress
2. Highlight the differences between how positive and negative stress work
3. Give instances of how the two occur together 'mixed bi-polar stress' in order to produce positive affect and positive outcomes
4. Why is it that some teachers can turn a distressing experience into one with positive outcomes more readily than others.

### **Methods**

Stress is a response to things around people that cause stress, such as pressure from work or family. Within the literature on teacher stress burnout is generally characterized as a negative life event and that once teachers get to this stage they either leave the profession having lost their enthusiasm for teaching, or remain in teaching but as a shadow of their former selves. Stress has been defined as an "adaptive response, mediated by individual characteristics and/or psychological processes, that is the consequence of any external action, situation or event that places special physical and/psychological demands upon a person" (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980, pp. 8-9). This definition would fit in with how

stress can be utilized in order to benefit teachers. The interesting point here is that research on teacher stress nor teachers opinions of stress focus on how reactions to stress can be adaptive.

My research has returned to the original stress conceptualisation as proposed by Selye (1976) and will explore eustress, the positive affective reaction to the stress process. Distinctions between different types of stress have indeed been recognized as a positive concept (eustress) and a negative one (distress) within the psychology of emotions which was not a theory specific to teachers (Seyle 1974).

## **Frame**

Positive psychology is the global term used for the study of positive emotions, human characteristics and the positive ethic of institutions that facilitate the development of individuals (Seligman & Steen 2005). Positive psychology is an emerging tradition that is shifting from the conventional concerns of the psychological tradition in repairing issues that are wrong in the lives of people, to that of having a focus on constructing positive qualities to help provide a buffer against illnesses caused by distress. This movement moves shifts from viewing human issues from a negative perspective to that of a positive stance. The theoretical frame I am using is the one from the positive psychology tradition, in that we ought to focus on what is going right for individuals in order to help with teacher personal and professional growth.

## **Research findings**

My interviews begin to unearth some of the issues surrounding the different forms of stress within the teaching profession that have to date not been abundantly explored. Support for positive teacher stress comes from distinguishing between the different types of themes that were emerging within the data that support positive stress and confirm distress;

- Trust/mistrust
- Benefit-detriment
- Self-worth-Low self worth
- Social support-isolation
- Proving skills and affirmation of skills
- Reflection and lack of reflection
- Autonomy and lack of autonomy

Further support was derived from positive stress by looking into the coping styles of teachers, affective responses and outcomes.

- Some teachers were able to recognize that positive stress functioned in their roles as a teacher.
- Indicators of positive stress was positive affect.
- Positive affect were significant indicators of eustress and teachers used meaningfulness, hope as a psychological 'belief' coping mechanism that they had the will and the way to succeed. State positive affect reflects a condition of pleasurable engagement, energy and enthusiasm.
- Positive stress was also associated with task engagement or absorption .
- Reappraisal of distressing situations using positive reframing enabled teachers to overcome distressing situations with gains instead of losses.
- Reflection on distressful events lead to positive outcomes and thus the reframing of distressing situations took place in a reflective manner post the event but which led to positive gains in future situations.
- Some distressing events are related to teachers self esteem and self worth. Awareness of the value of knowing one-self, of one's own values as a teacher enabled teachers to

reappraise situations which could have had an impact on their self-efficacy and thus avoided distress induced by personal values.

- Acceptance of distressful events as a learning experience helped teachers grow both as people and teachers. A recognition that without the experience of distress such growth would not have been possible.