

PERCEIVED JOB RELATED STRESSORS OF NEW AND BEGINNING AGRISCIENCE TEACHERS IN GEORGIA

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Abstract

The average teacher in this study was a white female, 25-34 years old, married, and living in a rural area. The average participant had a bachelor's degree from an agriculture education program and had been teaching for two years with no teaching experience prior to their current employment. Participants in this study felt that time constraints, overburdened workloads, and demands on class load/time caused the highest amounts of stress. In general, participants indicated that the construct of administrative support was most stressful. They also indicated that while support was available from university faculty, state department of education staff, and local school districts, participants experienced the most interaction with state department of education staff. It should also be noted that only 31% of the respondents indicated that their school districts had a mentor program to assist new teachers with acclimating to the school district and job expectations. Conclusions of this study support in-service opportunities to become more proficient with FFA related applications and also workshops relative to time management skills and communicating with administrators. By identifying, preparing, and potentially alleviating stressors, first year and beginning teachers will not feel as stressed, and burn out will be less likely to occur.

Introduction

Teachers are the foundation of a successful agricultural education program. Behind the closed doors of the classroom, it is the teacher who stimulates new ideas and concepts and encourages students to look beyond the ordinary into the extraordinary. Instead of being viewed as the preparation for a more productive adulthood, education is now seen as a lifelong necessity for personal and social well-being (Rachal, 1989). In today's growing demand of meeting benchmarks and deadlines, teachers are now faced with the challenge of not only providing an adequate learning environment for their students, but to prepare students for more productive lives in our fast-paced world (Layfield & Dobbins, 2002). For a new teacher entering the agricultural education setting, demands and expectations can seem overwhelming and stressful.

Stress has many definitions. For the purpose of this study, Seyle's (1974) definition of stress is most appropriate - stress is the "nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it to adapt, whether that demand produces pain or pleasure" (p. 692). Further, to truly understand stress from such a basic definition, one must understand the psychological basis in which stress occurs in our daily lives. Stress can be triggered by a cadre of events: death of a spouse, personal injury, health issues, change in financial state, change in residence, and change in responsibilities at work (Denhardt, Denhardt, & Aristiquets, 2009). Symptoms of stress can be as basic as sweaty palms, loss of appetite, and tense muscles, to as severe as deteriorating health, lack of productivity in the workplace, and depression (Reglin & Reitzammer, 1998). Teachers who are vulnerable to high levels of stress are more likely to suffer from fatigue, burnout, and leave the teaching profession.

To aid in the prevention of high levels of stress and teacher burnout, several researchers have focused on the in-service needs of beginning agriscience teachers identifying competencies in need of more training (Garton & Chung, 1996; Edwards & Briers, 1999; Layfield & Dobbins, 2002; Joerger, 2002; and Duncan, Ricketts, Peake, & Uesseler, 2005). Among the most commonly mentioned competencies that need to be included in in-service programs were completing reports for local and state administrators, motivating students to learn, preparing FFA degree applications, developing effective public relations programs, preparing proficiency award applications, developing SAE opportunities for students, developing local adult education programs, developing performance based assessment instruments, utilizing a local advisory board, and organizing fund-raising activities for the local FFA chapter.

On the other hand, several studies have focused on tasks and factors which prove to be difficult and/or problematic for new teachers (Greenan, Wu, Mustapha & Ncube, 1998; Henderson & Nieto, 1991; Burke & Hillison, 1991; Fritz & Moody, 1997; Trexler & Hikawa, 2001; Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004; and Myers, Dyer, & Washburn, 2005). These tasks and factors are referred to as stressors. They include but are not limited to lack of student interest, lack of administrative support, poor discipline/student management, time demands, lack of instructional equipment/supplies, lack of resources and curriculum, inadequate class length, lack of support from curriculum coordinator, lack of in-service education, curriculum development and lesson planning, managing paperwork and finances, working with parents, teachers, and administrators, recruitment of students and alumni, working with special needs students,

organizing an effective advisory committee, organizing an effective alumni chapter, and the establishment and management of support groups.

The time constraints of developing additional curriculum, insufficient school administration support, the lack of model curriculum or outline and the lack of support for selecting benchmarks and standards were found to be the most unhelpful to the six first year teachers in a study conducted by Trexler and Hikawa (2001). All teachers indicated that they needed more time and more support from the curriculum coordinator for the programs to be more successful. Specifically, support with identifying benchmarks, developing curriculum scope and sequence, help with searching for resources and preparing activities and in-service training were identified as actions that could most improve the curriculum for the future.

Henderson and Nieto (1991) conducted a study evaluating the morale levels of first year agriscience teachers in Ohio. Inadequate school facilities, a heavy teaching load, getting along with other teachers or principals, community pressures, teacher salary, and community support were possible sources of frustration (Henderson and Nieto, 1991). The most common frustrations expressed by agriscience teachers in a study conducted by Burke and Hillison (1991) were the lack of student interest, the lack of administrative support, poor discipline and student management, time demands, and lack of instructional supplies. Garton and Chung (1996) cited completing reports for local and state administrators, motivating students, preparing FFA degree applications, developing public relations programs and preparing proficiency award applications as the in-service needs of the first year agriscience teachers.

Conceptual Framework

Predicting and preventing employee burnout is an essential component of organizational survival. Research by Maslow and Herzberg more than 50 years ago suggest that satisfied and stress free employees tend to be more productive, creative, and committed to their employers' (Alshallah, 2004). Unfortunately, to be truly stress free in an organization is an impossibility (Moorhead, 2007).

Quick and Quick (1984) developed a model of organizational stressors and the consequences of the stressors on the individual and the organization. Quick and Quick identified four types of organizational stressors: task demands, physical demands, role demands, and interpersonal demands. Task demands are stressors specifically associated with the job a person performs. These include occupation typology, job security, and overload (having more work assigned than the person is capable of completing). Physical demand stressors include the physical requirements of the job including temperature of working conditions, strenuous labor, office design and space, and work hours. Role demand stressors are identified as the set of expected behaviors, written or insinuated, associated with the position including role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload (expectations for success exceed the capability of the individual). Group pressures, leadership style of the manager/superior, and personality conflicts are identified by Quick and Quick as interpersonal demands and potential stressors. Individual stressors or life stressors are categorized as life change and life trauma.

Quick and Quick (1984) conclude that each type of stressor has unique consequences. These consequences can impact the individual as well as the organization. Behavioral, psychological, and medical are individual consequences of both organizational and life stressors. Organizational consequences including burnout and organizational mortality as well as organizational decline are detriments caused by organizational and life stressors.

Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine what the most common stressors new and beginning agricultural education teachers are faced with. It is the researchers' intent to identify the main sources of strain and stress and provide suggestions on how these stressors can be limited. Upon the identification of these stressors, recommendations can be provided to guide teachers, administrators, and support staff in making decisions that can potentially alleviate the stress new and beginning teachers feel. The following objectives guided this study:

1. Describe new and beginning teachers using selected demographics;
2. Identify the common stressors new and beginning agricultural education teachers face in the classroom;
3. Determine which construct of stressors has the greatest impact on new and beginning agricultural education teachers; and
4. Discover what current support is offered to new and beginning teachers

Procedures

This study was a descriptive study of early career agriscience teachers in Georgia, defined as those in their first to fifth year of teaching. A list of all the new and beginning agricultural education teachers in Georgia was obtained from the Georgia department of education staff. There were approximately 142 agriscience teachers who fit the criteria for this study (Georgia Agriculture Education, n.d.). In order to reach a large number of potential participants, a convenience sample of beginning teachers in attendance at the 2009 Georgia Vocational Agriculture Teachers Association Summer Conference was selected to be given the questionnaire. A total of 77 questionnaires were collected which accounted for 54% of the total population being studied. As this was a one shot approach to collecting data, no attempt was made to address non-response.

An instrument, developed by a panel of experts consisting of university faculty and Georgia Department of Education staff, compiled 34 stressors into six constructs. Participants were asked to indicate the level of stress for each stressor using a 5-point Likert-type scale with 1 being least stressful and 5 being most stressful. The instrument also asked for selected demographic data and information on support available from local school districts, state staff, and university faculty. As previously stated, paper copies were distributed to participants during the 2009 Georgia Vocational Agriculture Teachers' Association Summer Conference and collected upon completion. Data were coded and analyzed using SPSS 14.0 software. Frequencies, means and standard deviations were calculated and reported as appropriate.

Results

Objective one sought to determine specific demographic characteristics of Georgia agriscience teachers with one to five years of teaching experience. The average teacher in this study was a white female, 25-34 years old, married, and living in a rural area. The average participant had a bachelor's degree from an agriculture education program and had been teaching for two years with no teaching experience prior to their current employment. A breakdown of demographic statistics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Teacher Demographics

Characteristic	F	%
Gender		
Male	37	49
Female	39	51
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	75	98.7
African-American	1	1.3
Age		
<25	19	24.7
25-34	46	59.7
35-44	7	9.1
45-54	4	5.2
55+	1	1.3
Level of Education		
Bachelor's	45	58.4
Master's	25	32.5
Specialist	6	7.8
Doctorate	1	1.3
Marital Status		
Married	51	66.2
Unmarried	26	33.8
Size of Community		
Rural	48	62.3
Suburban	24	31.2
Urban	5	6.5
Years Teaching Agriculture		
1	16	20.8
2	23	29.9
3	14	18.2
4	14	18.2
5	10	13
Previous teaching Experience		
No	67	87
Yes	10	13

Research objective two sought to identify the most common stressors new and beginning agricultural education teachers face in the classroom. The stressors were categorized into six constructs (FFA Responsibilities, Time Constraints, Financial Constraints, Student Interactions, Curriculum Development, and Administrative Support). The stressors are ranked from most important to least important as identified by mean scores (Table 2). Preparing FFA proficiency applications ($M = 3.32$) and organizing FFA fundraisers ($M = 3.23$) were the top two stressors for the FFA Responsibilities construct. Time constraints ($M = 3.74$) and over burdened workloads ($M = 3.53$) were the top two stressors for the Time Constraints construct. Small operating budgets ($M = 2.56$) was the top Financial Constraint construct and creating curriculum from scratch ($M = 3.18$) was the top stressor for the Curriculum Development construct. For the final construct (Administrative Support), lack of administrative support ($M = 3.14$) and developing relations with administrators ($M = 3.14$) were the top two stressors.

Table 2
Stressors Listed by Construct

Stressor	M	SD
FFA Responsibilities		
Preparing FFA proficiency applications	3.32	1.46
Organizing fundraisers	3.23	1.16
FFA responsibilities	3.11	1.29
Planning FFA banquets	3.01	1.23
Developing SAE opportunities for students	2.87	1.08
Supervising SAE projects	2.71	0.97
Organizing student internships	2.35	1.16
Time Constraints		
Time Constraints	3.74	1
Over burdened work loads	3.53	1.13
Demands on class load/time	3.44	1.02
Excessive paperwork	3.39	1.1
Class scheduling	2.72	1.13
Inadequate class length	2.17	1.12
Teacher meetings/conferences	1.81	0.97
Financial Constraints		
Small operating budget	2.56	1.23
Lack of proper teaching materials	2.36	1.17
Inadequate school facilities	2.30	1.15
Student Interactions		
Student discipline	3.08	1.25

Student recruitment	2.83	1.26
Lack of student interest	2.81	1.2
Teaching learning disabled students	2.79	1.2
Curriculum Development		
Creating curriculum from scratch	3.18	1.33
Teaching new content	3.11	1.1
Inexperience/unfamiliarity w/ course content	2.92	1.33
Spending time on curriculum development	2.81	1.16
Organizing and supervising teaching laboratories	2.75	1.17
Completing GPS requirements	2.68	1.21
Developing performance based assessment instruments	2.63	0.99
Graduation requirements	2.08	1.13
State funding applications	2.08	1.06
Administrative Support		
Lack of administrative support	3.24	1.92
Developing relations with administrators	3.14	3.32
Lack of support from guidance	3.08	2.52
Inability to collaborate w/ other teachers	3.01	1.54

Note. 5-point scale (1= least stress, 5= most stress)

Research objective three sought to determine which construct of stressors has the greatest impact on new and beginning agricultural education teachers. As evidenced in Table 3, the Administrative Support construct ($M = 3.14$) was the top ranked construct followed by Time Constraints ($M = 2.94$) and FFA Responsibilities ($M = 2.94$) rounding out the top three.

Table 3
Constructs in Order of Amount of Stress

Construct	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Administrative Support	3.12	.10
Time Constraints	2.97	.75
FFA Responsibilities	2.94	.33
Student Interactions	2.88	.14
Curriculum Development	2.69	.39
Financial Constraints	2.41	.14

Note. 5-point scale (1= least stress, 5= most stress)

Objective four was to determine what support is available for new and beginning teachers. This study looked at potential support offered by university faculty, state department of education staff, and local school districts. Sixty-seven percent of participants had been prepared to teach through a traditional undergraduate teacher preparation program. The teacher education programs were rated as good or excellent by over 72% of participants. Eleven respondents

(14.3%) indicated that they had been visited by university faculty during the previous school year with 90% of those being visited 1-4 times throughout the school year.

When asked if they had attended a new teacher orientation put on by state department of education staff, 88% indicated that they had. Of all the participants, 74% had been visited at least once by state staff, with over 34% having been visited three or more times the previous school year.

The final source of support studied was the local school district for each participant. Respondents indicated that less than eight percent had attended a new teacher orientation held by their school district. Just over 31% of respondents indicated that their school districts had a mentor program to assist new teachers with acclimating to the school district and job expectations. Table 4 shares the number and percent of responses for each question regarding sources of support for new and beginning teachers.

Table 4

Sources of Support from University Faculty, DOE Staff, and School Administrators

Support Available for New and Beginning Teachers	f	%
Support from University		
Were you prepared in a traditional undergraduate teacher education program?		
Yes	52	67
No	25	33
If so, rate the quality of the teacher education program		
Poor	2	2.7
Acceptable	18	24.3
Good	39	52.7
Excellent	5	20.3
Have you been visited by a university teacher educator?		
Yes	11	14.3
No	66	85.7
If yes, how many times?		
1-2	5	45.5
3-4	5	45.4
5+	1	9.1
Support from Department of Education State Staff		
Did you attend a new teacher orientation with state staff?		
Yes	68	88.3
No	9	11.7
How many times have you been visited by state staff this year?		
0	20	26
1-2	32	41.6
3-4	17	22.1
5-6	7	9.1
7+	1	1.3

Support from Local School District			
Did you attend a new teacher orientation at your school?			
Yes		6	7.8
No		71	92.2
Does your school have a mentor teacher program for beginning teachers?			
Yes		24	31.2
No		53	68.8

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

The average participant in this study was a white female; however it is of note that gender was split almost in half. Over 84% of respondents were less than 35 years old and most held bachelor's degrees from traditional agriculture education programs. Of those participating in this study, over 40% held advanced degrees. Further research should be conducted to determine what area of study new and beginning teachers choose for their continued education and if having additional training impacts their level of stress or which situations cause them stress. Another avenue of study should compare levels of stress by years of teaching experience to determine if there is a shift in priority or focus at a common point during a teaching career.

The findings of objective two supported those reported by Burke and Hillison (1991). The top four stressors were time related. Those being 1) Time constraints, 2) Over burdened work loads, 3) Demands on class load/time, and 4) Excessive paperwork. The fifth ranked stressor was 5) Preparing FFA proficiency applications, an FFA responsibility, which was similar to the findings of Garton and Chung (1996) who stated that completing reports and FFA applications were among the top in-service needs of agriscience teachers.

Burke and Hillison (1991) included lack of administrative support as one of the most common frustrations of agriscience teachers. Objective three of this study concluded that administrative support was the construct of highest overall stress for new and beginning teachers. These findings support the practice of providing in-service opportunities for teachers to become more proficient with reports such as FFA proficiency and degree applications, and other FFA related administrative paperwork. While that will address the specific stressors of excessive paperwork and preparing FFA proficiency applications, more general in-service opportunities should also be developed to assist teachers in developing time management strategies and also learning how to effectively communicate with school administrators. Further research should be conducted to determine what can impact the relationship between an agriscience teacher and an administrator, how teachers go about developing relationships with administrators and perceptions held by both agriscience teachers and administrators about what and how information should be communicated between the two.

The findings of objective three ranked the six defined stressor constructs in order of greatest impact on beginning agriscience educators. The ranking from highest to lowest construct was found to be: administrative support, time constraints, FFA responsibilities, student interactions, curriculum development, and financial constraints. Comparing these results with

the Quick and Quick (1984) model of stressors, the researchers found administrative support is categorized as interpersonal stress, time constraints are categorized as task demand related stress, FFA responsibilities are categorized as task demand related stress, student interaction is categorized as interpersonal stress, curriculum development is categorized as role ambiguity stress, and financial constraints are categorized as physical demands. It can then be concluded interpersonal stressors and task stressors are the most common and are classified as having the greatest impact on stress in new and beginning agriscience teachers.

Quick and Quick (1984) as well as Moorhead (2007) note the consequences of these two types of stress include both individual and organizational ramifications. Educators with high identified stresses in interpersonal and task demands are more likely to incur individual consequences of sleep disturbances, depression, heart disease, headaches, and anxiety. Organizationally, these stressors result in a decline in personal job performance, absenteeism and turnover, decreased motivation and satisfaction, and burnout. These two stressors are detrimental to not only the individual, but also the school district, state and national FFA, and agricultural education programs.

Preparing new and beginning agriscience teachers for the stresses associated with interpersonal interactions and task demands is essential in lowering the perceived stress of the new teacher. Institutional programs for managing organizational stressors can and should occur before the teacher begins teaching (university level) and after the teacher begins (state and school level). These programs include work design and preparation, work schedules, organizational culture, leadership, and interpersonal learning sessions (Frey, Quick, & Nelson, 2007).

Objective four looked at the sources of support for new and beginning teachers and found that the greatest level of interaction for new teachers came from state department of education staff. The majority of participants attended an orientation session with state staff and had also been visited personally at least once by state DOE personnel. This being the case, research should be conducted to determine how to best capitalize on those interactions to fulfill the needs of new and beginning teachers. It is also important to determine if more support is available from university faculty and school districts that is not being taken advantage of by new teachers or if there is a need for additional support from these sources.

If young teachers are to be successful and continue a long-term career in the classroom, it is imperative agricultural education preparatory programs and state department of education staff conduct in-service programming that truly prepares teachers for the cadre of challenges they face in and out of the classroom. There is a need to inform new and beginning teachers of the strains and stressors teachers face during their first years in the classroom. The results of this study will help those preparing young agricultural educators for the organizational and life stressors that accompany teaching. By identifying, preparing, and potentially alleviating these stressors, first year and beginning teachers will not feel as stressed, and burn out will be less likely to occur. This will lead to less teacher turnover and strengthening of agricultural education programs.

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