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Dearbhail Buckley

*University of Bristol*, drdearbhailbuckley@gmail.com

David Abbott

*University of Bristol*, d.abbott@bristol.ac.uk

John Franey

*University of Bristol*, john.franey@bristol.ac.uk

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## **An Exploration of Irish Teachers' Experiences of Stress**

Dr. Dearbhail Buckley, Prof. David Abbott & Dr. John Franey  
School for Policy Studies, The Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, University of Bristol.  
drdearbhailbuckley@gmail.com

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### **Abstract**

Only limited research is available on teacher stress in Ireland. This study explores teachers' individual experiences of stress, the supports they recommend in schools to help them cope with stress and any differences apparent in stress levels based on experience: a) working as a primary or secondary teacher and b) working as a recently qualified or experienced teacher. It utilises interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to do so. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted which suggested that teachers have different interpretations of stress and an influencing factor in teacher stress is the self. The teachers recommended a range of supports to help reduce stress, including support from professionals, collaboration and recreational activities. Although all of the teachers experienced stress to varying degrees, stress levels varied depending on experience, due to a range of different factors. These factors included relationships, lack of control and power, and identity. One recommendation is that educational psychologists collaborate with school staff on the area of stress management.

**Key words:** Stress, primary teachers, secondary teachers, supports, experience, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

### **Introduction**

Teachers are among one of the professions that report the highest level of work-related stress (Billehoj, 2007). Understanding and endeavouring to improve the health and overall well-being of individuals at work has been an important focus for psychologists for some time (Arnold et al., 2010). Although the area of teacher stress has been researched at length internationally; there is still limited research available on teacher stress in Ireland. Most of the previous research on teacher stress conducted in Ireland has been quantitative (Darmody & Smyth, 2011; Morgan & O' Leary, 2004; Wynne et al., 1991) and the limited qualitative research has focused solely on secondary teachers (Foley, 2013; Kerr, Breen, Delaney, Kelly & Miller, 2011). Furthermore, only limited quantitative research (Darmody & Smyth, 2011; Jepson & Forest; Koruklu et al., 2012) and no qualitative research has been conducted internationally or in Ireland which looks at differences in stress levels between teaching groups (primary, secondary, recently qualified, experienced). This paper considers some of the current literature in these areas and then describes how the following research questions were examined with a group of primary and secondary teachers:

1. What are teachers' individual experiences of stress?
2. What supports would teachers recommend in schools to help them cope with stress?

3. Is there a difference in stress levels based on experience: a) working as a primary or secondary teacher, b) working as a recently qualified or experienced teacher?

## **Literature review**

### *Stress*

There are a number of different definitions of stress. According to the American Institute of Stress, a widely accepted definition for the term ‘stress’ is not available. Stress is a term with different connotations for different people (American Institute of Stress, n.d., para. 8). The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), UK, define stress as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them” (HSE, n.d., para. 1). Alternatively, Palmer, Cooper and Thomas (2003) focus on the cognitive definition of stress, emphasising the perceptions of the individual, where it is stated that stress occurs when the perceived pressure exceeds one’s ability to cope. For the purposes of this research, the definition of stress which has been employed is that of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who suggest that psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is considered to exceed the person’s resources and affect his or her overall well-being. Based on this definition of stress there remains substantial individual variations in the extent to which events are appraised as being stressful. These variations are due to factors that are specific to the individual which shape its personal significance.

### *Teacher stress in Ireland*

According to Fitzgerald (2008), 11% of all retired secondary teachers in Ireland retired due to ill-health, with stress, anxiety and depression attributing to 50% of disability retirements. A report compiled by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on behalf of the teaching council in Ireland indicated that 45% of primary teachers experienced occupational stress (Darmody and Smyth, 2011). The Millward Brown Poll, commissioned by the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) in April 2014 found that 60% of secondary teachers stated that they were feeling continuously stressed (Humphreys, 2014). Therefore, the statistics on teacher stress in Ireland are concerning.

### *Supports for coping with stress*

There are many different forms of support to help teachers cope with stress. Social support has been identified as a crucial factor in stress reaction, where perceived social support reduces stress and lack of support intensifies teacher stress (Kyriacou, 2001). Richards (2012) revealed social support as one of the most effective coping strategies for dealing with stress. The initiation of formal and informal staff interaction through activities such as social outings and birthday celebrations could help to promote a more sociable working environment and improve teacher well-being (Jarzabkowski, 2002).

Collaboration, in the form of informal peer collaboration and mentoring were found to be useful strategies to help alleviate teacher stress in the USA (Fisher, 2011). Friedman (2000) states that peer-professional help groups help teachers to cope with professional difficulties and stressful

circumstances. However, Fisher (2011) remarks that it is imperative that this form of collaboration avoids negative feelings that will only increase teacher stress.

Stress management is another approach for coping with stress. Individual stress management involves learning about the nature of stress, understanding how to recognise stress and creating strategies to avoid stress, in addition to interventions to cope with prevailing stress (Harris, 2011). Ravichandran and Rajendran (2007) suggested the need for periodical stress management programmes to help alleviate stress among teachers which will subsequently improve their functional skills and result in enhanced teaching and learning in the classroom.

Mixed results in the literature (solely quantitative) suggest that teacher stress levels vary due to: a) working as a primary or secondary teacher, and due to b) working as a recently qualified or experienced teacher. Jepson and Forest (2006) discovered that primary teachers reported higher levels of stress than secondary teachers in the UK. However, the significant relationship was weak and may not be representative across samples. Conversely, Chan, Chen and Chong (2010) indicated that secondary teachers reported a higher level of stress than primary teachers in Hong Kong.

Antoniou, Polychroni and Vlachakis (2006) revealed that younger teachers and teachers relatively new to the profession in Greece presented with higher levels of stress and burnout than more experienced teachers. However, a study on occupational stress and job satisfaction of Irish primary teachers discovered that stress levels were slightly lower for recently qualified Irish teachers than experienced teachers (Darmody & Smyth, 2011).

## **Methodology**

### *Research approach*

A qualitative framework was chosen for this research. This was believed to be the most appropriate to capture teachers' individual experiences of stress and the supports they believed would be most beneficial to help them cope with stress. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the chosen methodology as it is concerned with how individuals make sense of their world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Furthermore, IPA was chosen as it stems from the theoretical position of interpretivist, phenomenological epistemology which is in keeping with the interpretivist stance of the research which suggests that reality is socially constructed (Ponterotto, 2005). The study is phenomenological as it is concerned with the participants' responses to stress in school. The study is interpretative as gaining access to the participant's world was dependent on the researchers own preconceived ideas. Hence, IPA was ideally suited to address the research questions previously outlined. Semi-structured interviews were the chosen method for this research as IPA is suited to a data collection approach which invites participants to offer a rich, in-depth, first person account of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). All potential participants were briefed on the nature and purpose of the research and signed informed consent prior to any research being undertaken.

### *Sample selection*

This research used a small, purposive sample due to IPA's utilisation of small, homogenous samples of participants (Smith et al., 2009). The sample size was purposive, consisting of ten participants (5 primary teachers, 5 secondary teachers) recruited from primary and secondary schools in the Cork region in Ireland. Both recently qualified (<5 years teaching experience) and experienced (>20 years teaching experience) teachers were interviewed. This study only interviewed female teachers, not by choice, but merely because those who volunteered to participate all happened to be female.

### *Data collection*

Each interview was approximately one hour in duration, giving participants sufficient time to expand upon their answers. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was analysed in accordance with the IPA steps outlined by Smith et al. (2009):

- Engage with the text through listening, reading and re-reading;
- Create and analyse initial notes and exploratory comments;
- Develop and search for connections across emergent themes;
- Create a table of super-ordinate themes for each participant;
- Look for patterns across cases;
- Create a master table of themes for the group.

## Results

The results are described using the five potent over-arching themes identified in the interviews: the stressed self, desire for control, significance of relationships on self, identity and beneficial supports in profession. These broad themes and their related sub-themes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Over-arching themes identified and related sub-themes

| Theme                                 | Sub-Theme   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| The stressed self                     | Different interpretations of stress<br>Stress in profession                               |
| Desire for control                    | Lack of control<br>Lack of power<br>Desire for perfectionism                              |
| Significance of relationships on self | Positive relationships<br>Desire for positive affirmation<br>Relationships as problematic |
| Identity                              | The questioning self<br>Societal influence on self<br>Identity challenges                 |
| Beneficial supports in profession     | Recreational activities<br>Professional support<br>Collaboration                          |

### 1) The Stressed Self

This theme identifies how many teachers felt stressed and how the teachers perceived that stress. The majority of the teachers stated that their job caused them stress irrespective of working in a primary or secondary school, or being a recently qualified or experienced teacher. Evidently the degree of stress varied depending on each individual and how they perceived stress.

#### *Different interpretations of stress*

This sub-theme was evident in the transcripts of all the participants. Seven of the teachers perceived stress as impacting on their mental well-being, whilst three of the teachers perceived stress as feeling under pressure and did not appear to view it as seriously. An example is provided by one of the teachers who believed that stress impacts her mental well-being, causing anxiety in particular. She perceived stress as being triggered by incidents that have occurred or internal worries. She used the terms “anxious” and “worried” to describe stress reactions:

Stress so....I suppose it's a time maybe when you're very anxious about something or worried about something. Em...I suppose it can take a lot, like span over a long period of time. Em...and it's usually triggered by something that would have happened maybe, or something you're worrying about.

Three of the teachers defined stress as feeling under pressure and not being fully in control of situations. This appeared to often relate to pressure to complete a number of tasks. One of the teachers described stress as causing an “uncomfortable feeling”. Their definitions of stress appear to be less acute than the other teachers, who believed that stress can have a negative impact on one’s mental well-being:

I suppose it’s probably a build-up of pressure where, em...where you kind of feel very often it’s related to things that need to be done. Where you have a big long list of things that you want to do, or you want to fix, or you want to sort and you’re kinda feeling you’re not really getting there.

Em...stress for me is feeling under pressure. Em...it’s an uncomfortable feeling. Em... and it’s usually, yes it’s usually to do with something putting pressure on a person.

The difference in how the teachers’ defined stress suggests that the term stress is very subjective as it holds different connotations for different people. Seven of the teachers’ definitions of stress appear to be more acute than that of the other three teachers. Consequently, it may be that the seven teachers perceive themselves as having fewer resources to cope with stress than the other three teachers.

### *Stress in profession*

Seven of the participants perceived their job as stressful, whilst three of the participants perceived their job as having minor stresses, but yet it was manageable. However, as stress is based on how the participants perceived their capability to cope with situations, each experience of stress was very individualistic:

It can be stressful when you’re sort of conscientious and dedicated about it and want each child to achieve their potential.

The teacher’s remark on being “conscientious” and “dedicated” may indicate that she believes her personality is a significant determinant in how much stress she experiences in her profession. Conscientious, dedicated teachers care about their students and will endeavour to ensure they achieve their potential. Consequently, this has the potential to impact on the teacher’s mental well-being.

Three of the teachers spoke about their enjoyment of the profession, which suggests that it is important to have a passion for your chosen career for your overall mental well-being:

Well, personally now, I really enjoy it (teaching), but there are times when it’s more stressful than others. I don’t think that it’s one of the most stressful jobs.

It is apparent that a number of the teachers interpreted stress differently. As the term stress is utilised frequently and can be very subjective, the degree of stress felt by each individual was entirely personal. Some of the teachers may have perceived themselves as having fewer resources to cope with stress than others. Seven of the teachers stated that their job was stressful, whilst three of the teachers stated that the stresses were only minor. It appears that the teachers' inherent traits have a role to play in the degree of stress they encounter in their profession.

## 2) Desire for Control

Another central theme that emerged from the interviews was the teachers' desire for control within the classroom, which appeared to significantly contribute to their overall stress levels. This was apparent in the teachers' perceived lack of control and lack of power over aspects of school life, as well as the desire to have everything in line with acceptable personal standards.

### *Lack of control*

A lack of control emerged in the transcripts of nine participants and seemed to contribute to their stress levels. The teachers displayed a desire to control all aspects of school life, including inspections, pupil behaviour and how other teachers undertook their work. However, this was not always possible and seemed to create stress for the teachers. Two of the participants experienced a lack of external control in school. They believed that being inspected, be that during the diploma year, or as a result of a Whole School Evaluation (WSE), placed a person in a very vulnerable position as a teacher and created immense stress:

Obviously in the first year out waiting for an inspector. Em...I think that's a big stress factor...Of being a newly qualified teacher and pressure from an inspector.

I knew we'd get caught for the geography because we were thirteen geography teachers, but I definitely thought I wasn't going to get caught the second time. And, the next thing, the list went out and my name was picked for a maths class. There was an awful lot of work and stress.

The six recently qualified teachers spoke about a lack of control over the students in their classroom. As the teachers are new to the profession and are completing their diplomas, their confidence in their abilities as young teachers may still be developing:

He could be on top of a window sill throwing stuff. You know this inspector's going to think I've lost all control of my classroom.



An experienced teacher also displayed a lack of internal control in school; however, it was somewhat different to the recently qualified teachers. The experienced learning support teacher believed that the workload assigned by class teachers to students who required learning support was excessive and needed to be reduced. However, the class teachers appeared to be inflexible in relation to workload and did not always adhere to her requests:

Sometimes you're kind of like a go-between for the child. You're trying to get the teacher to see that, look, maybe you need to lessen the work, and then teachers can be traditional in their outlook, and they don't always want to do it.

### *Lack of power*

Six of the participants felt a lack of power over aspects of school life which appeared to contribute to their stress levels. The teachers believed that they held a certain position in the school which resulted in a lack of power over many aspects of school life. The teachers viewed the principal in the school as a greater power and one that made many decisions for them, although they may not always be pleased with those decisions:

Suddenly there's a teacher out, so your role (in learning support) is seen as less important. And you're thrown in there (mainstream classroom).

It could be stated that the teacher is already feeling less important in her position as a learning support teacher, and the principal removing her from her role and placing her in the mainstream classroom when there is a teacher absent, may further enhance these feelings.

Differences were evident between the recently qualified and experienced teachers' reactions to a lack of power in school. The recently qualified teachers displayed a lack of power over significant school decisions. They appeared to feel unworthy of any power within the school system as they were newly employed at their respective schools:

I didn't have to be making a big deal out of it either 'cause I obviously don't have the respect in the school.

The experienced teachers also appeared to display a lack of power over school decisions. However, they seemed frustrated and angered by the lack of power they were given in the school:

There were a few of them and they were suspended, and I had a major problem with that. I was sat at home here giving out.

### *Desire for perfectionism*

Eight participants placed immense pressure on themselves which appeared to contribute to their stress levels. They displayed a desire to have everything 'ideal' or to try and control every situation with the intentions of the pupils at heart:

Things as you see as not the ideal, that would not be acceptable to your standard and that can create stress.

Another experienced primary teacher not only desired to have everything in keeping with acceptable personal standards, but others perception of her keeping with acceptable personal standards seemed to play a role in her stress levels:

People's perception that you kind of should be doing everything to perfection, and even maybe your own perception that you should be too, puts additional stress on yourself.

The teachers' desire for control appeared to impact on their experiences of stress in school. This arose from a desire to have everything in keeping with acceptable personal standards, a lack of control over particular aspects of school life, and also a lack of power due to their positions in the school. It could be interpreted that a lack of confidence in the teaching ability of the recently qualified teachers in particular, has a role to play in their desire for control in school.

### **3) Significance of Relationships on Self**

The positive relationships that the teachers experienced with colleagues appeared to play a role in reducing stress for the teachers. The recently qualified teachers in particular also desired to be positively affirmed not only by their colleagues, but also by management in order to feel confident in their teaching ability. On the contrary, the negative relationships that the teachers experienced with colleagues appeared to significantly contribute to their stress levels.

### *Positive relationships*

Positive relationships were evident in the transcripts of all the participants and seemed to contribute to the reduction in stress for the teachers in school. The teachers identified the support of colleagues both in school and outside of school as being very beneficial:

Our staff, on the other hand then, I suppose, would be very supportive of each other and that does help. Like any situations like that, you can bank on getting good advice.

The fact that I get on so well and I'm so friendly with the people at school as well. Like, I would ring one of them up at 9 o'clock at night and say, "Oh my God, I'm freaking out about this, what am I going to do?", and they'll talk it through with me for as long as I need to.

### *Desire for positive affirmation*

All of the recently qualified teachers had a desire for positive affirmation from others. They desired to be positively affirmed not only by colleagues, but also by management, to feel more reassured about their work:

Talking to other members of staff, and kind of, I suppose, not even get their opinions, but, just you know, having somebody say "No, you are dealing with this in the right way.

Another recently qualified teacher, although also seeking positive affirmation, approached the matter differently. Anger and frustration is clearly evident from her transcript as management failed to acknowledge all the work and dedication of the staff members:

There's a lot of really good things happening, but there's never really a chance to acknowledge that. Em... and I think that frustrates and annoys people too, 'cause opposed to talking all the time about discipline issues, there's really good things happening in our school and they are never acknowledged.

Although the teacher stated "annoys people", this could be interpreted at a personal level to her annoyance that her work and dedication to the school is not being acknowledged. This may make her feel inferior as a teacher in the school.

### *Relationships as problematic*

Five of the participants discussed problematic relationships with colleagues in school, which appeared to contribute to their stress levels. Negative relationships with colleagues in school were only evident amongst the secondary teachers:

He's just...he wasn't doing what he was supposed to be doing and he just kind of ruined everything. As in like, I was sharing a class with him.

There's some people inside in work who really probably shouldn't be there still teaching and that does create stress for other people because everyone is picking up on their...slack.

The secondary teachers were distressed by colleagues in school not undertaking their job effectively. This may have been evident predominantly in the secondary teachers as they share classes with other teachers. These problematic relationships could be interpreted as secondary teachers who are very conscientious and dedicated to their profession compared to their colleagues.

It is apparent that relationships were very significant in each teacher's school life. The teachers desired positive relationships with colleagues in order to feel supported in school. The recently qualified teachers in particular, had a desire for positive affirmation from colleagues and management in order to feel more reassured about their work. Furthermore, it appears that the teachers are very conscientious and dedicated to their profession which can result in problematic relationships with colleagues, which appears to contribute to their stress levels in school.

#### **4) Identity**

Another very relevant theme that emerged from the interviews was the teachers' sense of identity. The search and confusion over their professional identity appeared to have a significant impact on a number of the teachers' stress levels, as it resulted in them questioning their chosen career path. Moreover, the societal changes and the identity challenges that the teachers encountered in school seemed to impact on their sense of self and hence appeared to contribute to their stress levels.

### *The questioning self*

The sub-theme of the questioning self emerged in the transcripts of four participants. The teachers appeared to be questioning their career choice and their suitability to the profession. The recently qualified teachers seemed to be unaware of the stresses associated with the profession, when they discussed their teaching career:

Obviously there's good bits to it, but I think I didn't realise going into it, how stressful it would be.

Another recently qualified teacher appeared extremely despondent whilst discussing her career. Her response is concerning with regard to her mental well-being and her suitability to the profession:

I went through a phase of being "God I don't know"...and my parents were saying it to me, "Is it worth this like?" You kind of don't know if there's a light at the end...

One experienced secondary teacher also appeared to be questioning her career choice during the interview. However, whilst the recently qualified teachers appeared unaware of the impending challenges whilst embarking on their career, the experienced teacher seemed to be fully aware of the challenges in the profession at this stage, but continued to question whether it was the most appropriate career path for her:

The workload. Em...to come home every evening and have two or three hours' work...copies, tests and that's every single night. I would love to have a job that I could finish. Ya, and it's a stress in the house. You know if there's something else going on you know you're saying 'Right, I've a bundle of tests there that must be done for the morning'. Em...somebody here needs to go to a match...those things.

### *Societal influence on self*

The sub-theme of societal influence on self emerged in the transcripts of seven participants. The secondary teachers believed that the changes in society, such as the increased prevalence of social-media and an increase in the number of marital breakdowns have created additional stress for them in the secondary school classroom:

And with the kids, and with the kind of...I mean you've everything to contend with. You've kind of like, you know, social media, and like these cameras could pop up from anywhere.

I would think that the stress levels have increased because society has changed so much, em...since I started teaching. Em...society has broken down so much that em...the parental involvement can be very em...a complex issue. That you have so many families that are em...very often quite dysfunctional.

In contrast, a primary teacher viewed the societal changes much more positively than the secondary teachers. The teacher was of the opinion that recent changes in society and the advent of resource teaching, has made life less challenging for the primary teachers. She believed that the availability of extra support for students with additional needs has relieved some of the burden on the class teacher:

And still the supports weren't there to the same degree at all like, and like it's extraordinary really with the advent of resource teaching and resource hours, and access to outside services.

The advent of resource teaching may be more beneficial as a primary teacher, as they teach the same students for the entire day, whereas secondary teachers change classes.

### *Identity challenges*

The sub-theme of identity challenges was evident in the transcripts of eight participants. The secondary teachers spoke about disguising their identity in the classroom, as if teaching was a performance and they were actors. However, the primary teachers did not feel they were disguising their identity, but they felt they had to contend with multiple roles in the classroom. Both disguising their identity and adopting multiples roles appeared to contribute to the teachers' stress levels in school:

You're literally putting on a smile and not being yourself, like a performance, ya, it's like acting and it takes it out of you.

You're on show!

The fact that the students the secondary teachers teach are in the midst of adolescence may be why the secondary teachers in particular feel the need to disguise their identity as they feel they are "on show".

The primary teachers did not believe that they were performing in the classroom, but they felt that they had to adopt multiple roles, not just being a teacher, but also a counsellor to both children and their parents, and felt it could be very challenging:

Or, you know a child whose parents have split up and they're being hugely affected, and they're lashing out in school. You know it's all these small things that are not technically to do with you, or your job, but they feed in so much and have such an impact.

Contending with multiple roles may only be apparent in the primary teachers as they have sole responsibility for one class and hence must deal with all of the issues encountered within that class.

The theme of identity resonated strongly with the teachers. The search and confusion over their professional identity, felt by the recently qualified teachers in particular, appeared to contribute to their stress levels, as it resulted in them questioning their chosen career path. Furthermore, the societal changes and the identity challenges encountered by the teachers in the classroom all seemed to contribute to their stress levels in school.

## **5) Beneficial Supports in Profession**

The teachers discussed both the existing supports in their schools and those they believed would be beneficial, if available, to help teachers cope with stress. They discussed recreational activities, external supports, such as external professionals, as well as internal supports, such as collaboration with colleagues.

### *Recreational activities*

One sub-theme that emerged from the interviews was the recreational activities which the teachers found beneficial to help them reduce stress, a sub-theme which was evident in the transcripts of nine participants. The teachers discussed birthdays and staff evenings as being a positive asset to their lives as teachers:

We've a good staff, so we do a lot of things with our staff in after school, like in the evenings and that's good support, I suppose. It does relieve stress 'cause you can enjoy each other's company, and, ya, you might have a bit of a vent, but after that it's done.

An experienced teacher also valued recreational activities, but having a busy home life, believed that the term was too demanding for recreational activities:

You're on the road and you're doing the parenting role at that point in time, so it can be busy. In the summer there's probably a bit more time for, you know, going for a walk, going to the beach, going for a holiday.

### *Professional support*

Another important sub-theme that emerged from the interviews was professional support which the teachers found beneficial to help them cope with stressful situations. This sub-theme was apparent in the transcripts of eight participants. Two of the main forms of professional support the teachers identified were a counselling service and a psychologist. The teachers spoke about how beneficial the psychologist was in their schools, not only for working with the students, but also for working with the staff members.

Em...our school psychologist, we found him very helpful. Em...in a certain amount of cases you knew that if there was something you couldn't tap in on and we found that support invaluable.

There's a psychologist visiting our school at the minute...em...and even though I suppose you think you've no issues, or you think you've no suggestions for the school that was very beneficial. Just to take thirty minutes away from the school day...And, you kind of think about the positive and you do think about the negatives (ways to improve the school).

The teachers suggested that professional support such as a counselling service would be effective for teachers as teaching is a stressful profession. They believed that an external professional counselling service would be more beneficial compared to a fellow staff member, as they would be specifically trained to deal with issues such as stress:

If it were a permanent member of staff who was a teacher themselves, maybe it could be difficult for people. So maybe it would be good if someone visited the school. Em...maybe a school could request a visit from somebody like a counsellor. Somebody who...em...had some experience in counselling and listening.

### *Collaboration*

The sub-theme of collaboration was apparent in the transcripts of all of the participants. All of the teachers viewed collaboration in the form of mentoring and team teaching as beneficial to them in school. The teachers spoke about how valuable a mentoring system is to new teachers in a school. The mentoring system is the advising and supporting of inexperienced teachers by more experienced teachers in a school setting:

I really like the mentoring element, but I know that's not available in every school. But, you know, say the teacher who was my mentor in school now, she'd be...em...fourth most senior teacher in the school, so you know she's really good because she has a really good understanding of how the school operates. You know she knows all the ins and outs of the school and has taught most class levels. So you know it was really helpful talking to her because she could really advise me on Junior Infants.



Another important source of collaboration between work colleagues that the teachers discussed was team teaching. During team teaching two teacher's work together in the one classroom, subsequently reducing the workload and providing support for one another. The teachers believed that this was a very valuable resource in the school to reduce the burden on teachers and provide them with additional support in the classroom:

Em...they never used it in senior classes where it probably would have been even more beneficial. Especially for,...I would have thought like in Geography say...would have been unreal for field work to have, to be able to team teach. Em...but in Junior Cert., oh, it worked a dream.

Beneficial supports for the teachers in the profession is a very important theme as it provided an insight into both the existing supports in the teachers' schools and those they believed would be beneficial, if available, in helping them to cope with stress. The teachers valued both internal supports, such as collaboration and recreational activities and external supports, such as external professionals.

## **Discussion**

This research has explored teachers' individual experiences of stress, the supports they would recommend in schools to help them cope with stress and any differences apparent in stress levels based on experience: a) working as a primary or secondary teacher and b) working as a recently qualified or experienced teacher.

Stress is a term with different connotations for different people and the teachers in turn had different personal interpretations of stress. Although the majority of the teachers stated that they found their job stressful, the level of stress perceived was entirely dependent on the individual and their personal resources for coping with stress. This is congruent with Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who state that psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is considered to exceed the person's resources and affect his or her overall well-being. As some of the teachers' definitions of stress appeared more acute than others, it is possible that a number of them perceived that they had fewer resources to cope with stress compared with other teachers.

The "self" was an influencing factor in teacher stress; namely the level of control the teachers believed they held in school, their identity challenges, the impact of society on them and their uncertainty over their professional identity. As Kyriacou (2001) suggests, the main sources of stress experienced by teachers will be influenced by their personalities, values and skills. A number of supports were suggested for helping teachers to cope more effectively with stress. Supports that were already in place in their schools and supports that the teachers believed would be beneficial to help them cope with stress were suggested. External supports such as a counselling service (Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland, 2007) and the psychologist (Gibbs & Miller, 2014) were viewed as valuable in helping to reduce teacher stress. Internal supports such as collaboration of staff members (Fisher, 2011), support from colleagues (Richards, 2012) and recreational activities (Jarzabkowski, 2002) were also observed to be beneficial for supporting the well-being of staff.

A number of differences in stress levels were apparent between the primary, secondary, recently qualified and experienced teachers in this study. Stress levels varied due to different factors. Some of the main differences that emerged from the interviews are outlined below:

- Problematic relationships were more apparent among the secondary teachers than the primary teachers. As the secondary teachers share classes with other teachers, this proved challenging;
- The recently qualified teachers had a greater desire for positive affirmation of their school work than the experienced teachers in order to gain reassurance;
- The primary teachers felt they had to contend with multiple roles in the classroom, which seemed to be because they have sole responsibility for one class. However, the secondary teachers felt teaching was more like a performance, which may be because they teach adolescents and believe they are “on show”;
- The recently qualified teachers perceived a greater lack of control over the students in their classes than the experienced teachers, which appeared to be because they are new to the profession and lacking confidence in their teaching ability;
- Both the recently qualified and experienced teachers perceived a lack of power in school. However, the experienced teachers reacted more negatively to this issue;
- The recently qualified teachers questioned their professional identity more than the experienced teachers, as they appeared unaware of the challenges facing them;
- Societal changes had more of a negative impact on the secondary teachers than the primary teachers.

## **Limitations**

This research could be criticised from a quantitative or empirical perspective as the findings are not generalisable. IPA focuses on the idiographic as opposed to the nomothetic, which implies that generalising the findings to the wider population may be problematic (Smith et al., 2009). However, this research was committed to the detailed examination of particular cases and provided intimate and personal descriptions of participants' accounts, which would be impossible in quantitative research.

## **Recommendations**

The teachers interviewed stated that the psychologist could be utilised effectively to support teachers' well-being in school. They believed that the psychologist could assist teachers in the area of stress management, where stress management techniques could be taught to the whole staff by the psychologist. However, it was acknowledged that schools only receive minimal training sessions from the psychologist; hence the principal would have to agree to allocate time to such an initiative.

In relation to school-based initiatives, the teachers stated that collaboration was invaluable in a school setting to reduce stress levels. Team teaching occurs in numerous schools in Ireland. It helps to reduce workload for teachers and provides them with the additional support of a second teacher to help manage their class. Consequently, it would be a beneficial school-based initiative to help improve teachers' overall well-being.

Mentoring was also stated as a useful support for teachers. Mentoring involves more experienced teachers providing newly qualified teachers with advice and support. Although, it was acknowledged that not all schools have a mentoring programme, as it only requires one or two teachers to volunteer, it does not appear like an unreasonable request for schools. A mentoring programme would be beneficial for every school, on a formal or informal basis to support new teachers in the profession.

All of the teachers stated that recreational activities were essential to reduce stress levels. Many of the teachers believed this worked better on a more informal basis, for example, arranging a staff social evening once a month for teachers who wish to attend. This could easily be implemented in every school and would be beneficial for the teachers' well-being and also for boosting staff morale, particularly for newer members of staff.

Consequently, many of the findings could be used realistically in practice through both the psychologist and school-based initiatives to reduce teachers' stress and improve their overall well-being.

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