

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Background of the Study

Over sixty years ago, Hans Selye – the pioneer of studies on the phenomena of stress - wrote his first article on the subject. Forty years later, Morse and Furst (1979), counted over 110,000 scientific publications related to stress. Studies of stress have included such diverse topics as: men who are under battlefield conditions; mice rotating slowly on a drum; commuters languishing in traffic jams; animals being shipped to market; students taking exams; people who work on bomb squads; workers on assembly lines; the effect of drought on trees; and the effects of stress on administrators, managers and executives.

Interest in occupational or work stress, which is stress arising from a person's interactions with his/her workplace, is not new. It dates back almost three hundred years, probably due to the observed negative effects stress had on people who worked. Vecchio (1991), says that in the 1700's, Bernardino Rammazini, the Father of Occupational Medicine, attributed certain diseases to certain work aspects. Vecchio (1991) also says that in the 1900's, Hugo Munsterberg found that rest periods greatly improved the effects of fatigue in various jobs. Clearly, it was being recognized that work, or some aspects of work, caused certain people more harm than good. This generated a lot of research into which people were susceptible and what jobs or what areas of the job were responsible for this harm.

Although it is a subject that has been so widely researched, Morse and Furst (1979), also found that there has been some confusion in defining stress. They say some researchers use stress to describe the causative factors that induce a particular response from an individual, while others use the term stress in reference to that response. Hence, the current situation, where both the cause and result are called "stress" by different investigators. This would not have been the case if they had used the term "stressors", originally coined by Selye, to mean causative factors, and thereby clearly differentiating it from stress which refers to the response.

Aldwin (1994) provides another view of stress. Known as the transactional definition of stress, she says stress is :

That quality of experience, produced through a person-environment transaction, that, through either over arousal or under arousal, results in psychological or physiological distress.

This indicates that there are actually three ways to term stress. Stress can refer to :

- 1) an internal state of the organism person, sometimes called strain;
- 2) an external event (stressor); and
- 3) an experience that arises from a transaction between a person and the environment.

Mintzberg's (1973) study on work stress found that executives and managers, whose work primarily involved dealing with people, suffered from a great deal of work stress. Breslow and Buell (1980) concur with this fact. Their study indicated that jobs that entailed a higher

responsibility for people was significantly more likely to lead to coronary heart disease, a disease attributed to stress, as opposed to jobs that involved responsibility over equipment or machines.

These findings suggest that the school administrator's job is highly likely to be a stressful one, seeing as how all aspects of his/her job involve communicating with, managing, and the supervision of people. Cooper, Sieverding & Muth (1988) say that school administrators are expected by the public to shape the ethos of the school, manage all factions and accompanying political conflict while keeping staff motivated. Furthermore, Cooper, Sieverding & Muth (1988) also say that as the key people in the global school improvement issue, school administrators are experiencing increased pressures that seriously threaten their well-being.

Interestingly, there is a duality to stress. It can be both a stimulant to growth and development, and a major causal factor in a variety of physical and emotional disorders. Sarros (1988) says stress can be both distressful or eustressful; it can lead to feelings of anxiety and lowered self-esteem, or it can give an individual the desire to achieve.

An individual's perception of a situation – as presenting a threat or a challenge, or as being distressful or eustressful - would determine his or her stress response. Not surprisingly, Bergin & Solman (1988) say that stress arising on the job is widely perceived to be distressful. It significantly lessens well-being and causes physical illness. Wong (1997) notes that most studies on work stress concentrate on distress and that the word "stress" is used synonymously with the word "distress". This is

probably largely due to the fact that distress is the stress that causes negativity and harmful effects and therefore needs to be studied, so it can be controlled.

Gmelch (1982) used the Administrator Stress Cycle as a model to serve as the conceptual framework to study stress. The first of the four stages of this model begins with the administrator experiencing stressors. Next, comes the individual's perception or interpretation of the stressor. Administrators who perceive stressors as harmful or demanding will experience stress and approach their work with intensity. Friedman and Rosenman (1974) report that this is a crucial point in the cycle as the impact of an individual's perception greatly influenced their behavior and health.

The third stage of the cycle is where the administrator responds to the stressor, based on their perception. In responding, individuals use coping strategies when they believe they can counteract the stressor. Gmelch (1988) in his study, identified 156 coping techniques that he clustered into seven coping categories. They are :

1. Social (having lunch, playing cards, talking with friends).
2. Physical (boating, fishing, team sports, camping).
3. Intellectual (studying, attending conferences, cultural events)
4. Entertainment (watching TV, dining out, movies).
5. Personal (playing music, gardening, hobbies)
6. Managerial (delegating, prioritizing, planning).
7. Attitudinal (optimism, crying, laughing, acceptance)

A coping strategy is said to be effective to the degree that it assists the individual positively to alleviate perceived work stress.

The fourth and final stage of the stress cycle, consequences, accounts for the long range effects of stress. Among the negative physiological effects of stress are muscular stiffness, headaches, ulcers and susceptibility to illness, hypertension and coronary heart disease (Breslow and Buell (1980)).

Long term stress, if not alleviated, can also lead to the negative psychological effect known as burnout. Maslach and Jackson (1981) separated the consequences of stress into three dimensions of burnout : emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low accomplishment. Gmelch and Gates (1997) say that emotional exhaustion identifies that aspect of burnout which is associated with low levels of energy and the feeling of being drained. This will obviously lead to low job productivity.

Depersonalization is the dimension of burnout that is connected to feelings of lost identity and meaningfulness. The result is that interpersonal relationship at work will deteriorate. Feelings of alienation and an inability to get along with one's colleagues, employees or supervisors (Parrino, 1979).

Low personal accomplishment is the third and last aspect of burnout. Individuals feel dissatisfied with their accomplishments and believe their actions no longer make a difference. Motivation and job satisfaction of the administrator will be low (Parrino, 1979).

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Confronted with a multitude of social and technological changes, the administrators of today's secondary schools apparently experience more conflict, pressure and a higher degree of stress than ever before. Gmelch (1988) says that if administrators do not alleviate some stressors and learn to cope, consequences in the form of serious mental, behavioral and physical illness may arise. Furthermore, Sarros (1988) says that mismanagement of stress results in burnout. Burnout, he says robs the individual of the will to achieve, and contributes to the development of a lowered sense of self-esteem, reduced work performance, cynicism, apathy and emotional ennui. This would obviously render the afflicted administrator incapable of carrying out his/her duties efficiently. In the long run this could also contribute towards the weakening of the country's education system, its human resource and thereby in all probability, impede development.

Furthermore, Abu Omar (1996) points out that efforts to develop Malaysia after her independence has resulted in the education system seeing many changes both in terms of the quality of the teaching profession as well as the multiplicity of educational demands in schools. Administrators have had to deal with concepts like accountability, zero-defect, effective schools, empowerment, decentralization and instructional leadership. All of these exert an enormous burden on the administrators.

Mohd Salleh (1999) also recognises that principals are a heavily burdened lot. In his paper entitled "Kepimpinan Pengajaran dalam Isu

Kepengertian : Antara Dilema dan Kekeliruan" at the National Seminar of Educational Development in November 1999, he said :

The new millennium principal has to equip himself with greater knowledge of new technology, electronic resources and the ways of speedy knowledge. His or her leadership must be brought into the teachers' staff room and the classrooms, and must not be confined to the four walls of the principal's office.

This hands-on leadership, known as instructional leadership, will probably result in unnecessary stress for the uninitiated principal. To prepare principals and other administrators of secondary schools for these challenges , potential stressful situations must be identified.

In view of the administrators key position, and its impact on all aspects of school life, it is reasonable to argue that a better understanding of the problems that lead to stress would make clearer the complex nature and the dynamics of administrative stress. Moreover, Borg & Riding (1993) claim that teachers and school administrators may be a mutual source of problems and stress. Since certain aspects of the work environment are bound to be common sources of stress, an investigation of stress among administrators takes on added importance.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study was to determine the stress levels and the major work stressors among secondary school administrators in Petaling Jaya.

This study also attempted to determine whether there was a significant difference between the stress levels of secondary school administrators with regards to various administrator demographic variables, namely, the administrators level of authority, the size of student enrolment, the number of staff they control, and the number of years of administrative experience.

## **1.3 Rationale of the Study**

While the occupational stress among teachers has been looked into by local researchers (Siti Rohani, 1991, Suseela Malakolunthu, 1994; Vickneasvari, 1997 and Low S. K., 1997, to name a few), this has not been the case for occupational stress among educational administrators. To date, research in the area of educational administrator stress has been confined to one study to determine stress among primary school principals (Abu Omar Mos, 1996) and another study to determine stress among assistant registrars of the University of Malaya (Wong Lee Lan, 1997). Both studies indicate that there exists a considerable amount of occupational stress among these educational administrators. This indicates that it is a research topic that requires the attention of more researchers.

A study of this kind will also serve to investigate the prevalence of school administrator stress in Malaysia, as it has been the focus of a substantial body of research and publications in other countries. It would be interesting and useful to be able to determine whether research findings in other countries are applicable locally. For example: Whether stress levels are comparable; whether major causes of stress or stressors are the same; or whether stress levels are significantly different for certain groups of school administrators.

Social and economic implications make the proper management of stress a governmental issue. The Star (22<sup>nd</sup> October 1996) – as cited by Wong, 1997 - quotes Professor Dr. M.P. Deva, head of the Department of Psychological Medicine, University Malaya, as saying that mental illness is on the rise and is expected to be the second largest factor of the world's economic decline by the year 2020. He is also of the opinion that ten per cent of the population, while not mad yet, are mentally ill.

The report goes on to say that the World Bank reported that fifty billion working days a year are lost due to mental illness and that it is the fourth contributing cause to economic decline. It is also hoped that the findings of this study will be useful in the formulation of policies and in the planning of related training programs by the relevant authorities.

#### 1.4 Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions :

- 1) What were the stress levels among administrators of secondary schools in Petaling Jaya ?.
- 2) What were the ten major work stressors of administrators of secondary schools in Petaling Jaya ?.
- 3) Was there any significant difference in the stress levels
  - a) between Principals and Assistant Administrators?
  - b) between administrators with less than ninety staff and more than ninety staff to control?
  - c) among administrators with a student enrolment less than one thousand, one thousand to two thousand and more than two thousand to oversee? and,
  - d) among administrators with less than seven, seven to eleven years and more than eleven years of administrative experience?

## 1.5 Significance of the Study

The large body of research in the area of school administrative stress has already identified stress to be a very real problem. In 1986 educational psychologist and researcher Feitler, reports that there are more than 500 ERIC (literature search in education) articles with stress and school administration as their key word identifiers. Many of these articles report that a high stress level was prevalent among school administrators at work, very often leading to burnout (Maslach and Johnson, 1981; Gmelch, 1988; Gmelch and Gates, 1997). These studies also attributed stress to low job satisfaction, low job productivity, low motivation, and ailments like headaches, ulcers and hypertension, and burnout.

According to researchers and writers on the subject of school administrative stress, understanding of the sources and types of stress would help administrators formulate strategies to overcome stress, or the necessary coping mechanisms. This would help minimize the adverse effects of stress that gives rise to unproductivity and ineffectiveness. Understanding will also prepare administrators such that optimizing of stressful situations (to make it eustressful) is possible. In this way a potentially stressful situation could be turned around so it becomes a challenge or motivation to administrators.

An assessment of this kind is the first step towards creating a healthy work environment for secondary school administrators, so that the necessary strategies could be developed to remove or reduce the effects of these work stressors.

## 1.6 Limitations of the Study

The survey for this study was carried out in the Petaling Jaya district in the state of Selangor. It involved almost all the principals and as many assistant administrators as were accessible to the researcher. Petaling Jaya was an urban area and this would delimit the generalizability of the study to all school administrators especially those who serve in rural schools.

The work stress levels were measured using the ASI as an instrument. This instrument measured the psychological response of respondents to a particular item or work stressor. The measurement of the physiological response to a stressor would require some form of clinical measurement like the pulse rate. Thus, the stress levels were only limited to the perceptions of the respondents towards work related situations.

The problems with self-report stress questionnaires in general were that: a) people are often unwilling to reveal personal problems; b) they might not understand exactly the types of information that the researcher was looking for, or c) they might have compartmentalized their emotions so well that it simply did not occur to them to report something (Aldwin, 1994).

## 1.7 Operational Definitions

The following terms were defined and used in this study.

### Work Stress or Occupational Stress

Work stress or occupational stress is an experience arising from transactions between a person and his/her work environment. As individuals perceive and react to situations differently, hence they have different experiences or intensity of experiences. For example, experiences include (psychological) feelings of harm, threat, loss, challenge, benignness, elation, concern for others or irritation that may be weak, moderate, strong or ambiguous. Experiences could also be physiological like increased heart rate and blood pressure, sweating and hypertension.

### Stressor

A stressor is a potentially stressful situation that can amount to an individual feeling stress. For example, a physical stressor could be cramped conditions or noise, a social stressor may be in the form of relationships with colleagues or boss, and an emotional stressor may be in the form of meeting deadlines and feelings of inadequacy. Stressors are capable of generating physiological or psychological stress reactions in the body as mentioned above. In this study the stressors are the events as represented by the ASI items.

### Dimensions of Administrative Stress

Previous studies indicate that stressors can be categorized into the range of four to eight dimensions, depending on conditions of the particular study. This study employed the Administrative Stress Index (ASI) as the survey instrument. The ASI was created by Koch, Gmelch and Tung (1982) and it contained 35 potential stressful work situations (stressors). They identified four categories or dimensions that encompass these 35 potential stressful work situations.

This study used the four dimensions of administrator stress as identified by Koch, Gmelch and Tung (1982) which were:

(a) Role Based Stress (RBS)

This is stress arising from the administrators role-set interactions and beliefs or attitudes about his or her role in the school;

(b) Task Based Stress (TBS)

Stress arising from the performance of day-to-day administrative activities, from telephone and staff interruptions, meetings, writing memos and reports to participating in school activities outside of the normal working hours;

(c) Boundary Spanning Stress (BSS)

Stress emanating from external conditions, such as negotiations and gaining public support for school budgets; and

(d) Conflict Mediating Stress (CMS)

Stress arising from the administrator handling conflicts within the school such as trying to resolve differences between and among personnel, resolving parent and school conflicts, and handling student discipline problems.