

Stressors and Coping Mechanisms among Teachers of Special Schools

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to find out the coping mechanisms used by teachers against the challenging environment of special schools. The subjects for the study consisted of 20 school teachers related to special schools taken from special schools of Meerut and Moradabad city. The selected teachers were in the age group 30 ± 5 years and were having teaching experience of not less than two years in special schools. These subjects were belonging to similar educational status, that was graduation with experience in special education or they were having the required qualification for special education schools in India. The data was collected individually through comprehensive interviews of teachers of special schools after developing healthy rapport with them. The stressors related to mentally disabled children, parental expectations and support from colleagues, social response, and school environment were discussed. About this, the consequent use of coping mechanisms was also discussed. Obtained data were analyzed by two experts using content analysis and the contents in the common consensus of both experts were analyzed and discussed. The obtained results indicated that the teachers of special schools experience neglect and rejection from society, failure of efforts, negative response from parents and sometimes feeling of worthlessness. Further, it was also obtained that the teachers use emotional coping mechanisms most often to deal with the stressors of the school environment.

Keywords: *Stressors, Coping Mechanism, Intellectual Disability, Special School Teachers*

Every human being has to acquire to cope up with various stressful situations of life for survival. However, how well one cope in any aversive situation can vary from person to person and situation to situation. These abilities also rely on subjective experiences, level of tolerance, and internal strengths as well as environmental resources available to deal with those stressors. The intellectual disability disorder primarily called mental disorder is a very common developmental disorder found in every society across the world. DSM-5 defines intellectual disabilities as neurodevelopmental disorders that begin in childhood and are characterized by intellectual difficulties as well as difficulties in conceptual, social, and practical areas of living (DSM-5, 2018). It is a condition of retarded mental development, combined with

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the difficulty in adaptation marked by lower-than-normal intelligence and limited daily living skills of a similar age group (Ingram, 1953). This condition may occur due to many developmental factors, eating habits, or environmental conditions but it may develop early in life after a normal birth too. The causes of mental disability involve an abnormality in the genetic framework from parents, problems related to pregnancy, maternal nutrition during pregnancy, or any infection that may cause serious damage to the central nervous system (Morgone, *et al.*, 1993). Such children have limited abilities therefore, parental support and special care are required for shaping desired behavior (Gustafson & Harris, 1990; Bijou, 1968).

The intellectual disability is classified because of variation in IQ range and cognitive-behavioral functions. According to DSM-V there are four types of mental disabilities, they are mild (50-70; can learn and trainable to semi-skilled work), moderate (35-50; can learn words and meanings, earn unskilled work with or without supervision), severe (20-35; assisted self-help skills and minimum speech) and profound (Below 20; poor speech, non-trainable) (AAIDD, 2010).

Normally, a special education teacher spent a lot of time with intellectually disabled children, who most often vary in behavior, emotional stability, reactivity (slow or aggressive), sometimes with physical deformity or disability as well. Thus, teaching these children becomes a job involving many stresses locally and globally (McIntyre, 2015). The researches revealed that the teachers of special schools reported increased occurrences of psychological distress, physiological illness, and job dissatisfaction (Kyriacou, 1987). Stressors related to the school environment may affect teacher's capacity to fulfill their duties effectively. Thus, increased absenteeism, reduced quality of teaching, disinterest in work, and poor relationship with children are also observed in researches. Although the teachers used to have more issues a few decades back increased awareness of sources, availability of information through multimedia means, and resources to cope up with stress has assisted them a lot in building personal resilience and the capacity to respond more appropriately.

Coping is a fundamental psychological process that helps individuals to deal with routine stresses. The scholars observed that people's skills are commensurately sophisticated (Snyder, 1999). It also refers to how people deal with challenging situations (Hayes & Stratton, 2012). They are the strategies used in the face of stress and/or trauma to help manage painful or difficult emotions. Coping mechanisms can help people adjust to stressful events while helping them maintain their emotional well-being (Coping Mechanisms, 2018). Regarding gender, Al-Diyar and Salem (2013) revealed that male teachers are more sensitive to sad feelings and lack of accomplishment, low motivation than that their female counterparts. They also revealed that the female special education teachers are more sensitive to physical symptoms, emotional catharsis, and weak work relations. Weiten & Lloyd (2008) identified four types of coping strategies:

1. **Appraisal-focused strategies** (adaptive cognitive) occur when the person modifies the way they think, for Example: employing denial or distancing oneself from the problem.
2. **Problem-focused strategies** try to deal with the cause of their problem by finding out information on the problem and learning new skills to manage the problem, i.e., taking control, information seeking, and evaluating the pros and cons.

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3. **Emotion-focused strategies** try to releasing, pent-up emotions, distracting oneself, managing hostile feelings, crying, meditating and using relaxation procedures.
4. **Occupation-focused coping** is about being self-sufficient or confident enough to reduce stress levels related to the workplace and life.

A study by Macmbinji and Pwani (2018) indicated that the major challenge of teachers in special education is the inefficiency in learning and training mentally disabled students due to disabilities in cognitive and behavioral functioning. Thus, the repeated efforts of teachers are in vain. Although, most of the special educators surveyed use adaptive coping strategies to deal with their stress on a day-to-day basis (Edward, Larsen, et al. 2018). Besides, Antoniou, Polychroni, and Kotroni (2009) identified five key stressors, loading mainly onto the domains of working conditions, workload, and organizational problems, which appear to have an impact on teachers of special educational needs.

Salkovsky and Romi (2015) show that a coping style that includes strategies such as self-blame and wishful thinking relates to greater identification of both personal inhibitory factors (e.g., time and work demands), and broader factors (e.g., accountability to parents). In this concern, Kokkinos (2007) reported that classroom management and student misbehavior were significantly related to stress. Skinner and Edge, *et al.* (2003) commented that the hundreds of coping styles can be grouped into five: problem-solving, support seeking, avoidance, distraction, and positive cognitive restructuring. Alternatively, it has been argued that there are three negative styles (rumination, helplessness, and social withdrawal) and the positive one is emotion regulation (Newton, 1989; O'Driscoll and Cooper, 1994; Skinner et al., 2003). Recently, Lewis, Roache, and Romi (2011) conceptualized teachers' coping in terms of three styles: social problem solving, passive avoidant coping, and relaxation. Griffith, Steptoe, and Cropley (1999) assessed the association between teacher stresses, psychological coping responses, and social support. The results indicated that less social support at work, and the coping responses of "behavioral disengagement" and "suppression of competing activities" predict higher job stress independently of teachers' age, gender, class size, occupational grade, and negative affectivity (Lewis, Romi, and Roache, 2012). Considering the above discussion in mind the present study was planned to investigate the coping mechanism used by teachers of special education schools of the western UP state.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects for the study consisted of 20 school teachers related to special schools taken from Meerut and Moradabad district. The selected teachers were in the age range 30±5 years and were having teaching experience of not less than two years in special schools. These subjects were graduates with experience in special education not less than two years and they were having the required qualification for the special educator.

Design

It was qualitative research. Thus the comprehensive interview was done with the selected teachers of special schools to find out the stressors in the school environment and consequent coping mechanisms used by them.

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Tools

Following tools were used to collect data from subjects:

1. **Case record sheet:** The CRS includes basic information about subjects that can be used for classification of subjects, choosing control variables, and writing a discussion of the results.
2. **Comprehensive Interview Schedule:** To investigate the coping mechanisms of the teachers of special schools the open-ended question related to the following coping strategies were discussed:
 - A. Appraisal focused strategies**
 - a. Neglect or Denial avoidance
 - b. Rejection or distancing from problems
 - B. Problem Focused Strategies**
 - c. Information seeking
 - d. Evaluating pros and cons
 - C. Emotion-focused strategies**
 - e. Managing hostile feeling
 - f. Using physical and emotional exercise to paint up emotions

Procedure

For data collection first of all the investigator randomly selected the special schools of mentally challenged children from Meerut and Moradabad city for the maximum generalization of results. The data was collected individually after taking the required consent.

Data Analysis

Obtained data were analyzed by content analysis done by two analysts and the content which was in the common consensus of both analysts was used for further analysis done.

RESULT

The present study has attempted to investigate the stressors and coping mechanisms of a teacher of a special school. The data was obtained in the form of detailed stressors through a comprehensive interview of teachers individually and analyzed by content analysis and percentage. The detailed interpretation of results is presented as follows:

Stressors Experienced by Teachers of Special Schools

Table-1 Percentage of Teachers Experiencing Various Stressors at their Work Place (Special Schools)

S.N.	Description of Stressors	Percentage
1	Irritations related to handling the children	87.54%
2	Feeling of helplessness to make things done	84.45%
3	Un-predictive behavior of children.	83.80%
4	Feeling of tiredness of attempts	82.11%
5	Time pressures	81.74%
6	Social perception of worthless work	79.54%
7	Parent's over expectations	76.29%
8	Extra burden by administration	74.17
9	Poor reward in comparison to hard work.	72.22%
10	Negative social response to profession	53.54

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The study of Table-1 showing the percentage grid of teachers experiencing stressors at their workplace (special schools). The table-1 showing that the majority of special school teachers experience following cognitive-behavioral and emotional stressors in the school environment, they are irritations related to handling the children (87.54%), feeling of helplessness to make things done (84.45), un-predictive behavior of children (83.80), feeling of tiredness of making attempts (82.11), time pressures (81.74), social perception of the worthlessness of work (79.29, parent's expectations (76.29) and poor reward in comparison to hard work (72.22). Besides this teachers also viewed that negative social response to their profession hurt them too much to cause stress at work and in social life.

Coping Mechanism Used by Teachers of Special Schools

Table-2 Percentage grid of coping mechanisms used by teachers of special schools

S.N.	Coping Mechanism	Percentage
Appraisal focused strategies		
	Neglect or Denial, avoidance	77.34
	Rejection or distancing from problems	70.50
Problem Focused Strategies		
	Information seeking	69.50
	Evaluating pros and cons	88.50
Emotion focused strategies		
	Managing hostile feeling	84.54
	Physical and emotional exercise to paint up emotions	79.45

The table-2 is showing the percentage of coping mechanisms used by teachers of special schools. The table indicated that the majority of teachers use emotion-focused coping mechanisms more often than other coping mechanisms, they include evaluating the pros and cons of their profession (88.50%), managing hostile feeling (84.54%), and involving in physical and emotional exercise (sharing and crying as well as yoga, meditation, relaxation, etc.) to paint up emotions (79.45%). Further, they also expressed that problem-focused coping was used by them to come out of stressors related to the school environment. The related coping included information seeking (69.50%) for resolving issues related to intellectually disabled children. Further, Table-2 also indicated that Appraisal focused coping included, neglect or denial or avoidance (77.34) and rejection or distancing from problems (70.50) were used less often as compared to the other two coping mechanisms. This means that a less number of teachers of special schools do not get time to appraise their performance.

DISCUSSION

Stressors among Teachers of Special Schools

The results indicated that the majority of teachers experience stressors like irritations related to handling the children, feeling of helplessness to make things done, un-predictive behavior of children, feeling of tiredness of making attempts, time pressures, etc. This means that a lot of psychological stressors are experienced by teachers of special schools that have no option to ignore or delay and continuous unavoidable conditions are created by intellectually disabled

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children. This is the challenge that every teacher in special schools experience in the school environment (Macmbinji and Pwani, 2018; McCaslin, Bozack, Napoleon, *et al.*, 2006).

This is well known that mental disability is a condition in which a child has cognitive and adjustment deficits, as compared to the children of his or her age. Teachers of these schools need a lot of patience, strong emotional maturity to deal with these children; they most often play the role of second guardian and teacher for children. But in many cases, they experience difficulty in developing healthy interactions with these children (Lin, 1996). Educating these children requires a lot of consistent effort to fulfill the expectations of the school administration as well as parents too. Epstein (1992) pointed out that the families have lost their original teaching function with the origin of public schools and social evolution. This has led families to put lesser attention on children, in which children with mental disability suffer a lot, and teachers are forced to bear that parental pain too in addition to teaching and managing their disability. Moreover, personality itself plays an important role in responding to stress (Carver and Connor-Smith, 2010). Every morning, these teachers have the novel challenge to teach these children and bring desired changes after a lot of practice, which also gives rise to untended stress and the need of coping (Austin, Shah, and Muncer, 2005).

Coping among Teachers of Special Schools

From the results, it is being observed that the majority of teachers most often use emotional-focused coping and needful problem-focused coping, whereas appraisal-focused coping is used comparatively less often. The results are quite interesting about the teachers of special schools. This is true that mental retardation is a condition of developmental problem characterized by cognitive and adjustment deficits in the child. In such a condition, it requires consistent efforts and unquestionable dedication to the work.

Epstein (1992) pointed out that, the family has an important influence upon children as they stay at home much longer than at school as well as more in-family interaction than schooling. However, the families are failing to play their role for these children, but the dependency of parents on teachers and schools has increased much that has also reduced the intrinsic motivation and efforts to work for long in parents. Besides, they are discouraged by society due to low awareness (Zeidner and Endler, 1996). The parental orthodox thinking and external attribution (god, prelife sins, punishment, etc.) concerning the pity condition of a child reduces their interest in children. Consequently, either these children are not sent to schools or their parents get fully dependent on teachers of special schools. Thus, the teachers of special schools have multiple responsibilities to bear and unavoidable expectations from parents. We all know that the teacher always plays the role of guide, mentor, and guardian for the child but repeated failure increases the possibilities of emotional dissatisfaction, and makes them more prone to use emotional copings (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Elias and Schwab, 2006).

It can be observed that the student-teacher relationship in special schools relies on the child's cooperation, efforts in learning, parental support, and administrative help. As far as India is concerned, administrative pressure for teachers remains consistently on the head and parental opinion towards teacher's effort is not much favorable. Thus, these teachers require a lot of patience and hard work without any care for other's comments, and hindrances. They have to have independent work orientation for better performance of the child but how mental health

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remains in question and sometimes they experience burnout too (Bonnie, 2015; Kyriacou, 1987). At this moment, problem-solving coping may play an important role in reducing stress in teachers, but social rejection, parental over expectations, administrative pressure, and limitation of time for self-appraisal threaten the possibilities of goal attainment. Thus, they need more catharsis than problem-solving gives mental relaxation and peace. Therefore, the teachers use emotional coping mechanisms to deal with generated stress among these teachers of special schools. The need for coping among teachers of special schools can be explained in terms of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping, which explains that how threatening demands give rise to coping behavior.

CONCLUSION

So from the above results and discussion, it can be concluded that the teachers of special schools experience a variety of stresses in the school environment. They are irritations related to handling the children, feeling of helplessness to make things done, feeling of tiredness of making attempts, time pressures, parental over expectations, and poor reward in comparison to hard work. In response to this teachers use emotionally focused coping more often than other coping mechanisms and it is empirically discussed.

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Conflict of Interest

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