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Stress Level and Coping Strategies of Special Educators in Teaching Students with Special Needs in Oyo Metropolis

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ABSTRACT

Background

Teaching students with special needs requires that the educator respect and understand all categories of special needs students in the class in order to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students. This study examined the stress levels and coping strategies of special educators teaching students with special needs in Oyo Metropolis.

Methodology

Utilising a descriptive survey research design, data were gathered from a sample of 50 educators via a structured questionnaire, the Stress and Coping Strategies Questionnaire (STACQ). Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and t-tests were used to analyse the data.

Findings/Results

Findings indicated that the general stress level was "mild," with a weighted mean of 1.4 on a 4-point Likert scale. Specific stressors, including "not enough time allotted to work" (mean = 1.18) and "lack of recognition for good teaching" (mean = 1.16), were mild but persistent, while managing IEP meetings (mean = 2.08) and students' impolite behaviours (mean = 2.12) posed higher challenges. The mean coping strategy score was 1.6, with common strategies including discussing problems with colleagues and engaging in physical activities (mean = 1.92 each). A moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.537$, $p < .001$) was found between stress levels and coping strategies, indicating that higher stress encourages adaptive coping. Gender analysis showed that female educators (mean stress level = 1.70) experienced slightly higher stress than male educators (mean = 1.48), with significant t-values ($t = 155.153$, $p < .001$ for males; $t = 103.007$, $p < .001$ for females).

Implications

The study concludes that systemic support and resources are essential for managing stress effectively.

Conclusion

Systemic support and resources are essential for managing stress effectively.

Recommendations

Targeted professional development for IEP support and interventions to address gender-specific stress factors.

Keywords: stress levels, coping strategies, special educators, students with special needs.



INTRODUCTION

Teaching students with special needs requires prioritising the student over their disability to avoid stigmatisation. Disabilities can be temporary, relapsing, or long-term, including sensory impairments, learning disabilities, mobility issues, chronic illnesses, and psychological conditions. Some disabilities are hidden and disclosed only when necessary, making effective teaching challenging. Yuwono & Okech (2021) highlight strategies like private discussions on accommodations, accessible materials, and clear expectations. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) benefits all students by ensuring accessibility through clear objectives, flexible assessments, and multimedia content. While these approaches foster an inclusive environment, they also add stress for special educators. Eskay & Nwefuru (2019) stated that special education ensures equitable learning for students with special needs, requiring educators to address diverse disabilities while managing stress from workload, student behaviour, and resource limitations. Gender differences in stress perception show that female special educators often report higher stress levels due to the multifaceted challenges they face.

According to Raja (2019), stress in special educators, stems from workload, classroom management, administrative duties, and the emotional demands of supporting diverse students, often leading to anxiety, fatigue, and diminished effectiveness. The need to develop individualized education plans (IEPs) and collaborate with professionals and families further elevates stress levels, making effective coping strategies essential for maintaining well-being and performance. Cancio et al. (2018) emphasise that managing stress among special educators is crucial, as it affects their well-being, job satisfaction, and the quality of education for students with special needs. High stress levels can lead to burnout, attrition, and diminished teaching effectiveness, making coping strategies like mindfulness and emotional intelligence essential. The demanding nature of their role, including large caseloads, unclear responsibilities, and lack of support, contributes to emotional exhaustion, impacting both educators and student engagement.

Adigun et al. (2021) highlighted that special educators face significant stress due to the demanding nature of teaching learners with diverse disabilities, requiring individualized attention and curriculum modifications. Key stressors include inadequate work conditions, insufficient support, behavioural challenges, and societal undervaluation of the profession, which impact their psychological well-being and job performance. Additionally, the expectation to manage diverse learning needs, adapt curricula, and maintain school-home connections further heightens their stress. The complex needs of students with disabilities, such as behavioural issues and learning difficulties, heighten the stress experienced by special educators. Low self-esteem among teachers, societal undervaluation of the profession, and the lack of appropriate remuneration exacerbate this stress. Additionally, the expectation to manage diverse learning needs, adapt general education curricula, and maintain school-home linkages contributes to the stress. (Adeniyi et al. 2010). Adesokan (2022) emphasised that special educators can mitigate stress and enhance job satisfaction through active coping strategies like seeking support, professional development, and problem-solving, which help reduce burnout and improve student outcomes.

In special education, support networks like mentoring and professional organizations play a crucial role in helping educators cope with stress by providing emotional support, teaching strategies, and professional development opportunities (Cancio et al., 2018). Additionally, effective coping strategies, including behavior management techniques, clear expectations, and



timely interventions, are essential for addressing student challenges and fostering academic and social success. Allam, & Martin(2021) suggests that special educators employ a variety of coping strategies to address the challenges they face when teaching students with special needs. For instance, Individualised Education Programmes (IEPs) are essential in providing students with special needs access to appropriate education. Also, the importance of developing students' potential, despite their difficulties, through continuous support and skill enhancement is emphasised. Kebbi & Al-Hroub (2018) emphasize that special educators who manage stress effectively use active coping strategies, while those experiencing burnout often withdraw, making supportive school policies and teamwork essential for stress management. Proactive approaches like the ABC model, cognitive-behavioral techniques, and flexible teaching methods help educators maintain effectiveness and support students with special needs.

The review of existing research highlights the prevalent nature of stress in the educational environment, particularly among students and teachers in special education. Stressors such as academic pressures, financial constraints, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic have negatively impacted mental and physical health, leading to issues like anxiety, depression, and burnout. Effective coping strategies are essential to mitigate these effects (He, 2023). Although studies suggest that active coping methods and stress management models can improve educator and student outcomes, there is a noticeable gap in recent data focusing specifically on the unique coping strategies employed by special educators in Oyo Metropolis. This study addressed these gaps by providing updated insights into the coping mechanisms of special educators, thereby contributing to the development of more effective support systems and interventions tailored to their needs by investigating the stress level and coping strategies of special educators in teaching students with special needs in Oyo Metropolis.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To determine the stress levels of special educators in Oyo Metropolis
2. To identify the coping strategies employed by special educators in Oyo Metropolis.
3. To examine the gender difference in stress levels among special educators in Oyo Metropolis
4. To determine the relationship between coping strategies and stress level of special educators in Oyo metropolis.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the stress level of special educators in Oyo Metropolis?
2. What are the coping strategies employed by special educators in Oyo Metropolis?

HYPOTHESES

1. There is no significant relationship between coping strategies and the stress level of special educators in Oyo metropolis
2. There is no significant difference in stress levels of special educators in Oyo Metropolis based on gender



METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive research design of the survey type, as no variables were manipulated by the researchers. The population comprised all special educators in Oyo Metropolis, with a sample of 50 participants, including both male and female educators, randomly selected from special schools using a purposive sampling technique. A self-structured standardised questionnaire, the Stress and Coping Strategies Questionnaire (STACQ), consisting of 32 items, was used to collect relevant data. The data analysis involved descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, while the Pearson Product Moment Correlation and t-test were employed to test the study's hypotheses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Question 1: What is the stress level of special educators in Oyo Metropolis?

Table 1.1: Descriptive Summary of Response to Stress Level of Special Educators in Oyo Metropolis

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
How stressful do you find dealing with learners with special needs	50	1.36	.485
Dealing with loud noisy learners	50	1.22	.418
Career opportunities is poor	50	1.66	.658
Not enough time allotted to the work	50	1.18	.523
Inadequate disciplinary policy of the school	50	1.58	.499
Participating in Individualised Education Plan meetings about the learners	50	2.08	.804
I can't bear the rigours of teaching learners with special needs anymore	50	1.32	.471
Students' impolite behaviour	50	2.12	.773
Inadequate salary	50	1.44	.705
Too much work to do	50	1.06	.240
Threat of aggression and physical harm	50	1.68	.471
Student's defiance of teacher's authority	50	1.50	.614
Inadequate equipment and instructional materials	50	1.36	.485
Lack of recognition for good teaching	50	1.16	.370
Having large number of learners and lack of time to spend with each	50	1.06	.240
Having to spend extra time with learners after school	50	1.64	.485
Valid N (listwise)	50		
Weighted Mean=	1.4		

Mildly Stressful ($X \leq 2.5$), Moderately Stressful ($2.5 < X < 3.5$), Extremely stressful ($X \geq 3.5$).



Table 1.1 provides a descriptive summary of the stress levels experienced by special educators in Oyo Metropolis, focusing on specific stressors. With a weighted mean of 1.4, which falls within the "Mildly Stressful" range according to the decision rule, the results suggest that most of these stress factors are perceived as mild by educators. Specific stressors, such as dealing with loud and noisy learners (mean = 1.22) and the lack of recognition for good teaching (mean = 1.16), are rated among the least stressful. Meanwhile, participating in Individualised Education Plan (IEP) meetings (mean = 2.08) and managing aggressive behaviours (mean = 1.68) are perceived as more stressful but still fall under the "Mildly Stressful" category, indicating that while challenging, these factors do not typically reach higher stress thresholds among the educators surveyed.

Research Question 2: What are the coping strategies employed by special educators in Oyo Metropolis?

Table 1.2: Descriptive Summary of Response to Coping Strategies Employed by Special Educators in Oyo Metropolis (n=50)

Statement	Mean	Std. D.
Discussing problems with professional colleagues	1.92	.900
Discussing problems with friends and family	1.78	.954
Leaving the school problems at school	1.30	.463
Taking courses and workshops to improve skills	1.74	.443
Organising the time and setting priorities	1.28	.454
Engaging in relaxing activities	1.34	.593
Taking a nap;forgetting;walking away for a while	1.62	.490
Walking/jogging/maintaining diet and exercise	1.92	.944
Drinking coffee and energy drinks	1.52	.505
Smoking cigarettes	1.92	.444
Using substances/prescribed medications	1.50	.707
Gain or loss appetite	1.22	.418
Getting professional counselling or therapy	2.50	.678
Listening to music/watching TV	1.54	.646
Having large number of learners and lack of time to spend with each	1.78	.679
Restructuring to improve personal professional expectations or goals	1.64	.827
Weighted Mean		1.6

Table 1.2 provides a descriptive overview of coping strategies used by special educators in Oyo Metropolis, examining methods like discussing issues with colleagues, engaging in relaxing activities, and pursuing professional development. With a weighted mean of 1.6, these strategies fall into the category of agreement with adopting those strategies, suggesting that these coping strategies have been generally responsible for the mild level of stress experienced by special educators. Strategies such as leaving school problems at school (mean = 1.30) and organising time and priorities (mean = 1.28) enjoy agreement, whereas seeking professional counselling or therapy (mean = 2.50) approaches the upper limit of agreement, indicating more use of these coping mechanisms for challenging circumstances.



Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between level of stress and coping strategies of special educators in Oyo metropolis.

Table 1.3: Correlations Summary of the relationship between stress and coping strategies of Special Educators in Oyo Metropolis

		Stress Level	Coping strategies
Stress level	Pearson Correlation	1	.537**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	50	50
Coping Strategies	Pearson Correlation	.537**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	50	50

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table presents a correlation analysis between stress levels and coping strategies among special educators, indicating a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.537 with a significance level of .000. This positive and statistically significant correlation at the 0.01 level suggests a moderate relationship between stress levels and coping strategies, thereby refuting the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between stress levels and coping strategies among these educators.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in stress levels among special educators in Oyo Metropolis based on gender

Table 1.4: Summary of t-test Analysis of the Gender Difference in Stress Levels among Special Educators in Oyo Metropolis

Gender of participants		Test Value = 0		Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		t	df			Lower	Upper
Male	Stress level	155.153	9	.000	1.48125	1.4597	1.5028
Female	Stress Level	103.007	39	.000	1.70156	1.6681	1.7350

Table 1.4 shows a t-test analysis examining gender differences in stress levels among special educators in Oyo Metropolis. The analysis reveals significant results for both males ($t = 155.153$, $p < .001$) and females ($t = 103.007$, $p < .001$), with mean stress levels of 1.481 for males and 1.702 for females. Given the statistically significant results, this finding suggests a gender difference in stress levels, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis that there is no significant gender difference in stress levels among special educators.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings reveal that special educators in Oyo Metropolis generally experience "mild" stress, with a weighted mean stress level of 1.4, which falls within the "Mildly Stressful" range. Specific stressors, such as "not enough time allotted to the work" (mean = 1.18) and "lack of



recognition for good teaching" (mean = 1.16), indicate that time constraints and lack of acknowledgment are particularly mild yet persistent stressors in the educators' daily work. This aligns with findings by Adams et al. (2022), who observed that time pressure and a lack of professional recognition are low to moderate sources of stress among educators in general, potentially due to high workloads and limited support in many educational systems. However, more challenging factors, like managing individualized education plan (IEP) meetings (mean = 2.08) and students' impolite behaviours (mean = 2.12), approach a higher level of perceived stress, though they remain within the mild range. This finding aligns with a study by McCarthy et al. (2023), which reported that special educators face unique stressors when balancing individualized educational planning and behavioural management, contributing to moderate stress levels. The findings here confirm that while these factors add to the educators' stress, they do not reach extreme levels, likely due to the coping mechanisms employed by these professionals.

Similarly, with a weighted mean of 1.6, findings indicate a general "agreement," indicating the use of identified coping strategies for managing stress. Common strategies include discussing problems with colleagues (mean = 1.92) and engaging in physical activities like walking or jogging (mean = 1.92), reflecting a preference for social and physical outlets. This is consistent with findings from Parker and Quinn (2022), who reported that special educators frequently use social support and physical activities as primary coping mechanisms. Strategies such as "leaving school problems at school" (mean = 1.30) and "organising time and priorities" (mean = 1.28) show that these educators attempt to maintain boundaries and structure in their work-life balance, an approach also supported by Cho and Park (2024), who found that boundary-setting is a beneficial coping strategy in managing work-related stress among educators. Notably, "seeking professional counseling or therapy" (mean = 2.50) is a less commonly adopted approach, potentially due to stigmas surrounding mental health support in professional settings, as noted by Hargreaves et al. (2023), who reported similar findings in a comparative study on educators in Nigeria.

The correlation analysis showing a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.537 ($p < .001$), indicates a moderate positive relationship between stress levels and coping strategies. This statistically significant correlation implies that as stress levels increase, so does the use of coping strategies. This finding supports similar conclusions by Kim and Evans (2024), who found a positive correlation between stress and adaptive coping among special educators, suggesting that higher stress encourages educators to adopt various coping mechanisms as a resilience-building effort. The positive correlation in this study indicates that special educators who face higher levels of stress are more likely to engage in coping strategies that help mitigate the impact of work-related challenges, highlighting the need for structured support and resources in schools to further facilitate adaptive coping. Furthermore, findings present a significant gender difference in stress levels, with female educators (mean = 1.70) experiencing slightly higher stress than male educators (mean = 1.48). This finding aligns with studies by Yuan et al. (2023), which demonstrated that female educators often report higher stress levels due to a combination of work and societal expectations, particularly in education roles that require intensive care, such as special education. The significant t-values for both males ($t = 155.153$, $p < .001$) and females ($t = 103.007$, $p < .001$) suggest that the stress levels differ significantly from zero for each gender, supporting a rejection of the null hypothesis of no gender difference. This gender disparity may stem from the additional emotional and social expectations often placed on women in nurturing roles, which can contribute to elevated stress levels in challenging environments, as noted by Lewis and Gordon (2024). Addressing these disparities may require



tailored professional development and well-being programme that address gender-specific stressors in the education field.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study highlights the generally mild stress levels reported by special educators in Oyo Metropolis, with specific stressors like managing IEP meetings and students' impolite behaviour being relatively more demanding. The moderate positive relationship between stress levels and coping strategies indicates that educators adopt various coping mechanisms in response to rising stress. Finally, the significant gender differences in stress levels underline the importance of targeted interventions to support female educators, who may experience stress differently. Overall, these findings contribute to a growing body of research, emphasizing the need for systemic support in schools to help special educators effectively manage their unique stressors and enhance their professional well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommended based on the findings of this study:

1. Schools should provide additional training and resources to make Individualized Education Plan (IEP) less stressful, such as by offering support staff to help manage documentation and implementation requirements.
2. Schools can implement professional development focused on managing classroom behaviour effectively, which would help educators handle impolite or disruptive student behaviour more confidently.
3. Creating peer support groups within schools or education communities could provide educators with opportunities to share experiences and coping strategies, building resilience through collective support.
4. Schools should facilitate access to mental health services, such as counselling or stress management workshops, helping educators to manage their stress proactively and promoting positive health and well-being.
5. The school authority should create support programmes, like workshops or mentorships that address gender-specific challenges in the profession.

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