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STRESS AND COPING STYLES AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

In order to meet the expectations of the job and students, special education teachers are often stressed due to various factors like workload, public criticism, pressures on student performance, student behavior and worrying about the stability of position. However, they constantly try different coping strategies to overcome stress to manage workload and show better performance. Three styles of coping are commonly used to tackle stressful situations that are problem focused coping, emotion focused coping and avoidant coping. The primary goal of the study was to determine the stress level and what coping strategies are used to decrease stress among special education teachers. To investigate the study's hypothesis, 150 special education teachers who deal with mentally challenged students of 07 to 18 years participated in the study. Through purposive sampling, the data was gathered from 07 special education centers of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The participants were asked to complete Perceived Stress Scale 10 (Cohen et al., 1983) and Brief – Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory (Carver, 1997). The results showed that all the study's variables had satisfactory reliability ($=.57$ to $.79$) in the study. The result further showed negative significant correlation between stress and coping styles as Avoidant coping positively predicted stress while problem focused coping negatively predicted stress and emotion focused coping also negatively predicted stress. Moreover, t test showed that females tend to have higher level of stress as compared to males and females use more avoidant coping while males use more problem focused and emotion focused coping. The present study

serves to pave a pathway for special education professionals and aware educational institutions to work on needs of special educators and help them improve their abilities. These results, in particular, emphasize the need for additional research to solve this issue.

Keywords: Stress, Coping Styles, Special Education Teachers, Special Need Student

This article explores the relationship between stress and coping styles among special education teachers. Also it aims to unravel the impact of demographic variables like age, gender, marital status, work experience and education on stress and use of different coping styles among special education teachers. It also highlights the impact of coping strategies on stress.

Stress

Stress is an inevitable reality in the current world as it affects individuals regardless of their status. Stress is an important part of our lives, and both have beneficial and adverse effects. The World Health Organization found psychological stress to be a significant health problem in the modern times and it is rapidly increasing (Dimsdale, 2018). In the working population, symptoms of stress are quite frequent, and the number of vacation days taken due to disturbances as a result of stress is growing in many nations with high incomes (Hassard et al., 2018). The current scenario being faced by the workforce has been referred to as a stress pandemic due to the high prevalence of stress linked to work and the rapid growth in the prevalence of stress connected to work. Failure to address stress triggers has been linked to persistent stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as major physical health issues such cardiovascular diseases and other psychological issues (Rose et al., 2017).

Stress is a global public health problem and it affects the health and well-being of employees and the productivity of work. Stress experienced by teachers is more severe compared to other job-related stressors (Clipa, 2017). The special needs education system in Pakistan has been chastised for its lack of progressive development. Critical concerns include: (a) failure to recognize various disabilities and develop suitable educational policies for each, (b) a lack of inclusive education possibilities that would aid inclusion, and (c) inadequate supervision of

special needs institutes (Ahmed et al., 2016). Another considerable and vital problem that special educators face in Pakistan is inadequate training, no policy for practice and dealing and no policy for the professional growth and development of special educators (Jafree & Burhan, 2020).

Coping Strategies

In spite of the fact that teaching itself has been reported as stressful, it appears that teaching in

special schools may be much more stressful compared to normal students (Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). To cope up with this stress people use different coping strategies that can be emotion focused or problem focused. It's critical for special education teachers to have the resources necessary to control the intensity of stressful situations (Ansley et al., 2016). A special education teacher's profession will always include stressors; therefore it's critical that they acquire coping mechanisms to lessen the strain they face on a regular basis (Waltz, 2016). Stress reduction treatments vary depending on individual preferences and needs. Stress management strategies (Chong et al., 2011) including ancient traditions like Tai Chi and yoga, as well as other physical exercises, are frequently cited as effective stress relievers. Similarly, conventional meditation, mindfulness, and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) also have proven advantages (Arch et al., 2013). Coping techniques can mitigate the effects of stress by altering how one feels during a difficult event or removing or lowering the source of stress. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping is the process of managing specific external and/or internal demands that exceed a person's capabilities and resources involving constant adjustment of cognitive and behavioral efforts. Teachers and special educators who have access to coping strategies are less likely to experience burnout than those who lack such strategies (Bjorndal et al., 2021). Therefore, this study is conducted with an aim to investigate the stress and coping styles among the special education teachers working with children having special needs.

Special education teachers and Special Students

South Asia has a tradition of overlooking its special needs population and being slow to implement educational assistance and teaching methods for special needs students. Pakistan is predicted to have 35 million persons with special needs, however just 5% of the country's special

needs students are enrolled in school (Hafeez, 2020). According to World Bank Report on disability places the disability ratio in Pakistan at 3.56 percent, whereas the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) indicates that 22.1 percent of the government schools have children with disabilities. Special need students can be categorized into different categories i.e.; physical, mental/psychological, developmental, communication, behavioral and learning. We focused on mentally/psychologically challenged students from the age of 05 to 18 years. Students with special needs need specially -trained teachers who offer extra help and care for kids to achieve their maximum presentation and diminish their shortcomings. These teachers will be more effective by making tasks manageable for their students, using visual support and doing regular tests and supplementary activities for students to increase their progress and enhance their whole productivity (Hastings & Oakford, 2010).

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the relationship between stress and coping styles among teachers dealing with special need students.
2. To explore the Stress level among teacher dealing with special need students.
3. To investigate which style of coping strategies are common in teachers dealing with special need students.
4. To determine how socio-demographic factors impact stress and coping styles among special education teachers.

Hypothesis of Study

H1: Avoidant coping styles will positively predict stress among special education teachers.

H2: Problem focused coping and emotional focused coping will negatively predict stress among special education teachers.

H3: Males will score high in Emotion focused and Problem focused coping than females.

H4: There will be low stress level in teachers with higher teaching experience.

H5: Married teachers will have higher level of stress rather than unmarried teachers.

H6: There will be negative relationship between stress and use of coping strategies in teachers dealing with special need students.

Methods

The present research was cross-sectional survey research that comprised of 150 participants from 07 special education centers of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The participants were aged between 20-60 years who deal with mentally challenged students of age 05 to 18 years. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data was collected with help of standardized measures of Stress and coping styles. The instrument used to access the level of Stress was Perceived Stress Scale 10 (Cohen et al., 1983) and to explore coping strategies was Brief – Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory (Carver, 1997). In addition to these questionnaires, informed consent and self-reported demographic performa were also administered. Descriptive statistics, Alpha reliability, Independent Sample T-test, Anova, and Correlation were carried out for analysis.

Results

Alpha reliability, Independent Sample T-test, Anova and Correlation were run on data of present study through statistical package for social sciences (SPSS, 25). Table 1 shows frequency distribution for demographic variables.

Table 1

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Special Education Teachers

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
20 – 30 years	61	40.7
31- 40 years	75	50.0
41-50 years	10	6.7
51-60 years	04	2.7
Gender		
Men	62	41.3
Women	87	58.0
Education		

Bachelors	46	30.7
Post Graduate	69	46.0
Doctorate	35	23.3
Teaching Experience		
1-5 years	71	47.3
6-10 years	61	40.7
11-15 years	14	9.3
16-above	04	2.7
Marital Status		
Single	90	60
Married	60	40

Note. *f* = frequency, % = percentage

Psychometric Properties of Study Variables

Table 2

Psychometric Properties for Scales

Scale	M	SD	Actual Range	Potential range	Cronbach's α	Skewness	Kurtosis
Problem focused coping	15.75	2.79	09-24	8-32	.734	.347	-.057
Emotion focused coping	21.49	4.04	12-35	12-48	.571	.205	.239
Avoidant coping	25.59	3.32	17-32	8-32	.621	-.186	-.597
Perceived Stress Scale	32.53	4.58	24-40	0-40	.792	-.053	-1.469

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation

Table 2 shows psychometric properties for the scales used in present study. The Cronbach's alpha value for problem focused was .734 (>.70) that shows good internal consistency. The α reliability of emotion focused coping was .571 (<.70) that shows low internal consistency. The α reliability of avoidant coping was .621 (<.70) that shows satisfactory internal consistency. The α

reliability of Perceived stress scale was .792 (>.70) that shows good internal consistency. Overall, it is shown that these scales are suitable for use in future studies.

Table 3

Table 3 represents correlation across Perceived Stress Scale 10 and Brief Copc subscales to see relationship between variables(N=150) .

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

Variables	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1.Perceived stress scale	150	32.53	4.59	-			
2.Avoidant coping	150	25.59	3.32	.59**	-		
3.Problem focused coping	150	15.75	2.79	-.41**	-.52**	-	
4.Emotional focused coping	150	21.49	4.04	-.12	-.28**	.59**	-

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

Mean Comparison of Gender and Marital Status on Perceived Stress Scale and Coping Scale

Table 4

Mean Comparison of Gender on Perceived Stress Scale and Coping Scale

Variables	Male		Female		t(147)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Perceived stress scale	28.54	2.61	35.37	3.46	-13.09	.000	2.23
Avoidant coping	23.79	3.16	26.88	2.83	-6.25	.000	1.03
Problem focused	16.61	2.55	15.17	2.82	3.19	.002	0.54
Emotional focused	22.00	3.49	21.14	4.40	1.26	.208	-

Note: M=Mean, SD= Standard deviation, p=Significant value

Table 4 revealed significant mean differences on perceived stress scale with $t(147) = -13.09$, $p<.05$. Findings showed that female exhibited higher level of perceived stress as compared to males and also female exhibited higher scores of avoidant coping as compared to males.

Findings showed that male exhibited higher scores of problem focused and emotion focused coping as compared to females.

Table 5

Mean Comparison of Marital Status on Perceived Stress Scale and Coping Scale

Variables	Single		Married		<i>t</i> (148)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Perceived stress scale	29.80	3.58	36.63	2.29	-13.07	.000	2.27
Avoidant coping	24.56	3.26	27.13	2.80	-4.98	.000	0.85
Problem focused	16.17	2.65	15.11	2.89	2.30	.022	0.38
Emotional focused	21.52	3.88	21.45	4.31	0.11	.915	-

M= mean, *SD*=Standard deviation, *p*= significant value

Table 5 revealed significant mean differences on perceived stress with $t(148) = -13.07$, $p < .05$. Findings showed that married exhibited higher level of perceived stress as compared to singles and married exhibited higher scores of avoidant coping as compared to single. Results showed that single exhibited higher scores of problem focused coping as compared to married and singles exhibited higher score of emotional focused coping as compared to married.

One-Way Anova of Age on Perceived Stress and Coping Styles

Table 6

Mean, Standard Deviation and One-Way Analysis of Age on Perceived Stress and coping styles

Variables	20-30 years		31-40 years		41-50 years		51-60 years		<i>F</i> (2,147)	<i>p</i>	η^2
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			

Perceived stress scale	32.59	4.32	32.82	4.78	30.60	4.69	31.00	5.59	.843	.47	-
Avoidant coping	25.55	3.15	25.94	3.49	23.60	3.09	24.50	1.73	1.65	.18	-
Problem focused	15.59	2.59	15.65	3.03	17.50	2.06	15.75	1.70	1.41	.24	-
Emotional focused	21.60	4.03	21.26	4.27	23.00	2.78	20.25	1.50	0.68	.56	-

Table 6 shows Mean, Standard Deviation and F-values of Perceived Stress Scale and Coping Styles across age of special education teachers. It is revealed from the results that participants of age 31-40 years show higher level of stress as compared to participants of other ages. Results also showed that participants of age 31-40 years use more avoidant coping while participants of age 41-50 years use more problem focused coping and emotion focused coping as compared to participants of other ages.

DISCUSSION

The current study was conducted to investigate the relationship between stress and different coping styles among the special educators. All teachers of Rawalpindi and Islamabad who deal with mentally challenged students of 05 to 18 years were the study’s target population. Purposive convenient sampling technique was used to select desired sample from twin cities. Sample size of the study was 150 special education teachers with 62 males and 87 females.

Table 3 showed that the avoidant coping style positively predicts the stress. These findings correspond to the findings of previous studies where a study conducted to investigate the impact of coping styles upon stress revealed that the use of avoidant coping styles had a strong positive association and were also a strong predictor of stress (Allen, 2021). It is also revealed that the problem focused coping style negatively predicts the stress and the emotional focused coping style negatively predicts the stress but it was non-significant. This partially supports our second hypothesis of the study. Literature has shown that the coping styles have

emerged as protective factors against the stress and other psychological outcomes among the special educators (Cancio et al., 2018).

Table 4 revealed that the males scored higher upon emotion focused and problem focused coping than females, but only differences upon problem focused coping was significant whilst differences upon emotion focused coping were non-significant. This partially supports our third hypothesis. Literature evidence showed that the coping strategies are used by both males and female educators but there are differences in using strategies and a study showed that the males used more problem focused coping than females (Sinha & Latha, 2018). Literature shows that the females score higher on emotion focused coping as compared to males (Olsen et al., 2019) but our study shows opposite results. The non-significant differences can be explained by the role of extraneous factors such as personality traits, stress levels, support systems, and specific job demands involved which can affect coping mechanisms (Mathews & Campbell, 2009). Table 5 showed that the married teachers scored higher upon stress as compared to unmarried teachers. This supports our fifth hypothesis. Literature evidence suggests that married workers have higher stress than unmarried where a study conducted to investigate the differences on stress in married and non-married workers revealed that married workers had higher stress (Batoool et al., 2020).

Table 6 revealed that the younger teachers showed higher stress than older workers which was non-significant. This rejects our hypothesis. The findings can be related to the experience related findings explained above where the higher experienced and older educators show better adaptation to the work, handle the children, demands of the work whilst the new educators are in-experienced, learning to work, understand the demands, handling the children and also trying to cope with the environment which results in increased stress among the new and younger educators (Stark & Koslouski, 2020).

The results of the study showed that there was a significant negative relationship between problem focused coping and stress. These findings correspond to the findings of the previous studies where it was evident that the coping strategies serve as a protective factor against stress among the special education teachers and that there is a range of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies among the special educators. The educators relying on emotion and problem focused coping strategies showed a decrease in stress levels whilst relying on avoidant coping

was found to be positively correlated to stress (Cancio et al., 2018; Kebbi, 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021)

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the significant impact of coping styles on stress levels among special educators, revealing intricate relationships between coping mechanisms and stress. The use of avoidant coping styles was found to significantly predict higher stress levels, confirming the hypothesis that maladaptive coping mechanisms exacerbate stress rather than alleviate it. Conversely, problem-focused coping strategies were shown to significantly reduce stress, highlighting their efficacy in helping educators manage the demanding nature of their work. While emotional-focused coping also predicted lower stress levels, this relationship was not significant, suggesting variability in its effectiveness based on individual differences and contextual factors. Furthermore, Male educators were found to use problemfocused coping more significantly than their female counterparts, while emotionfocused coping did not show significant gender differences expectations and gender roles that influence coping mechanisms. Interestingly, married educators reported higher stress levels, supporting the notion that dual roles and responsibilities amplify stress, particularly for female educators. This finding suggests that the additional responsibilities of managing both professional and personal life contribute significantly to their overall stress. The study also found that younger educators experienced higher stress than their older colleagues, pointing towards the challenges faced by less experienced educators. Moreover, these findings indicate the importance of targeted support and professional development programs for younger and newly hired educators to help them better cope with their stressors. Overall, the results of this study highlight the critical need for effective coping strategies and support systems to mitigate stress among special educators. Implementing training programs that promote problem-focused and adaptive coping strategies could be beneficial. Additionally, creating a supportive work environment that acknowledges the dual roles of married educators and offers specific support for younger and less experienced teachers can further help in reducing stress levels. By addressing these factors, educational institutions can enhance the well-being and professional efficacy of special educators, ultimately leading to better outcomes for the students they serve.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study sample is small and from twin cities which can be an explanation of non-significant findings, and which limits the generalizability of the findings. The data collection was challenging as certain institutions did not allow for data collection although permission was there. The participants wasted survey forms with non-serious and fake responses. Purposive sampling technique is used in the research. Purposive sampling is highly prone to researcher bias

no matter what type of method is being used to collect data. The idea that a sample is created in the first place relies on the judgment of the researcher, as well as their personal interpretation of the data. The study was quantitative in nature which may have limit the findings and further qualitative and longitudinal studies are required for in-depth findings. The extraneous variables are not explored which is also a limitation of quantitative design which may have led to non-significant results.

Educational institutions and policymakers should consider the implications of these findings when allocating resources. Training programs emphasizing effective coping strategies should be developed and implemented. Special educators could benefit from workshops and continuous professional development sessions that teach adaptive coping mechanisms, stress management techniques, and problem-solving skills. Schools and special education programs should prioritize creating a supportive work environment where educators feel valued and supported. Since married educators and younger educators report higher stress levels, tailored support interventions should be designed to address the specific needs of these groups. For married educators, providing flexible work schedules or offering resources for work-life balance could be beneficial. For younger and less experienced educators, mentorship programs pairing them with seasoned educators could provide guidance and reduce their stress.

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