

MY RESEARCH: FIGHTING STRESS

In a new series, *ASTIR* talks to teachers who are doing, or have completed, postgraduate studies. In this issue, Pat Glover was determined to find out the causes behind teacher stress, so based his master's around researching the issue.



Pat Glover was the recipient of this year's ASTI Centenary Scholarship, an annual scholarship to assist ASTI members in undertaking further third-level studies. He is pictured with his students at Marian College in Dublin.

Where were you studying and what was the title of your research?

I started my master's in 2014 in DCU, which was an MSc in Education and Training Management. There are two streams in the programme – an e-learning stream and a leadership stream – and I was in the leadership stream, which is mostly teachers. It's preparation for anyone who wants to go into management roles in schools. It's the ideal preparation. It was a part-time course over two years and there were also a lot of online lectures, so it's kind of a hybrid system. You go to lectures and then other things are posted online. It was very user friendly, particularly when you're a busy teacher.

Could you tell me about your research?

The topic I chose was 'Occupational stress and job satisfaction among teachers in a Dublin-based secondary school'. The objective was to look at the teachers on my staff. There are 33 and I invited them all to participate in an online questionnaire examining stress and job satisfaction. Out of the 33 that were invited, 29 took part. What I found in the questionnaire directed my main themes and I used that then to formulate a focus group. Five of the 29 teachers were selected for the group using purposive selection. This is where you look at age cohorts and you get a gender balance that is representative of your staff. In the focus group, we sat in a room and thrashed out the different causes of stress and the manifestations of stress, how people feel when they're stressed. Basically, the things in their day-to-day work that bother them or cause them anxiety.

What were the main findings?

Occupational stress was a significant problem affecting the study population; most teachers measured in the medium range. Some teachers reported very high levels of stress in certain categories. For example, time management was a major cause of stress. Lack of pupil motivation caused higher stress than pupil indiscipline or behaviour issues.

One of the interesting findings was that levels of stress vary throughout your career and they reduce the longer that you're in the profession. Young teachers have the highest levels of stress. The causes of stress for them range from getting used to the curriculum, to teaching in general and to classroom management.

Experienced teachers are well used to managing their classrooms and are familiar with the curriculum. Teachers in mid career, so those who have taught for 15 to 25 years, one of their big stressors is the lack of promotional opportunities. For many teachers, there's no real avenue for promotion or advancement so you could be a classroom teacher for 40 years. Occasionally, a deputy principal or principal's job comes up but traditionally there's only ever been one deputy principal and principal post in schools. The moratorium imposed on A-posts and the disappearance of many B-posts during the recession has greatly curtailed opportunities for career progression for many teachers.

There were very high stress levels in certain subject areas like maths, science, Spanish, history, music and art. In many of these subjects, there was either a new curriculum introduced recently or there have been practical components brought in in the last couple of years. The introduction of new curricula elicits anxiety, as do research studies, field studies, project work or classroom-based work that goes towards final grades. For many of the teachers, trying to get this work done, chasing students for the work, was particularly stress inducing.

The other interesting finding was that although stress levels were medium to high, job satisfaction was really high. You might expect because stress is high that job satisfaction would be low but in fact, and this mirrors other studies done by the ASTI, job satisfaction among teachers in Ireland is really high. The main cause of job satisfaction for teachers is when they feel or they see that they're helping their students to progress and develop.

How do you hope this work will help teachers/the ASTI?

The hope of the study was first of all for our own staff to reflect and to get a discussion about occupational stress and job satisfaction started. But also, if I could discover the main causes of stress perhaps I could help teachers become more aware of the most prevalent stressors affecting them. A greater awareness might aid the early detection of the onset of these stressors and, therefore, help teachers to deal with them before they become a major issue. Teaching and learning in the class would be enhanced because of that.

What is the potential of this research to improve learning in schools?

One of the things that I recommend is that there should be mentorship schemes in all schools for newly qualified teachers to help them find their feet and get used to classroom management. In many cases, they're thrown in at the deep end. I believe that in a school like mine where you have a number of experienced teachers, you could form a group to mentor these younger teachers in their first couple of years.

Currently, there is a huge emphasis on the quantity of work teachers do. One of the recommendations was that the focus should be on quality of instruction, rather than quantity. Reducing teacher workload would be one way to reduce stress but also to enhance quality of instruction.

What inspired/motivated you to undertake postgraduate research?

The reason I undertook the study was that I was in the 35-40 age group at the time. I was looking at people around me and I noticed that my generation seemed to be becoming more stressed. There are more demands on teachers

and I was trying to figure out what those were and were teachers becoming or feeling more stressed than previously, and that seemed to be the case.

I wanted to raise awareness with the management in school as well to say: "Look, people are finding things difficult at times". I believe that school managements should have a keen awareness of this issue and should be conscious to assist in the reduction of teacher stress levels, wherever possible.

What was it like returning to education as a student?

It was strange going back. I had 15 years having not studied myself and for the first month or two it was tricky, but the course was very user friendly for people who are working professionals and people who have families. The hybrid between online and physically going to lectures was well balanced. It was a demanding course but it was well worth doing in the end. I received great assistance during the master's from my research supervisor Dr Brendan Walsh, and the course director Dr Margaret Farren.

Hoop dreams

Pat is Deputy Principal at Marian College* in Dublin and also teaches history and ICT. He is married with two children. He played Irish Super League basketball for 16 years for UCD Marian and DCU Saints, and also played for the Irish senior team. Although he doesn't play anymore he is still involved in Irish basketball, coaching the Super League team Éanna from Rathfarnham.

**Pat greatly appreciated the willingness and honesty with which his colleagues at Marian College participated in the study.*

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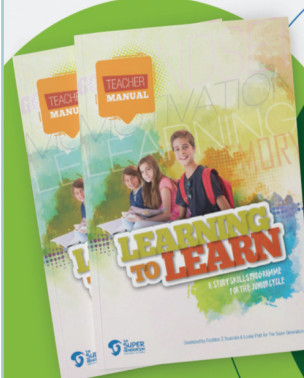
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