Positive stress: Using Positive Psychology to explain the relationship between Teacher Burnout, Self-Renewal and Positive Affect

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1 Introduction

This paper will highlight instances where teacher stress and teacher burnout have contributed to self-renewal and positive affect in teachers. The ideas for this paper developed from an initial quantitative analysis of 1187 survey responses of teachers (presented at BERA 2008) exploring the positive side of teacher stress. This paper is based on the in depth narrative and semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers conducted between June 2009 and June 2010 with the initial interview instruments having been developed from the findings of the quantitative analysis. The research has gone on to try and create a theoretical model which helps to explain the different types of stress and the role these play in the everyday working lives of teachers. The topic is of importance as there is much focus on fixing what is going wrong with teachers’ working lives, with little focus on the parts of stress that work in a positive light, and my research begins to draw the two together. My research is in line with the positive psychology movement which advocates that more attention ought to be given to positive growth and wellbeing rather than simply focusing on human pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Within the literature on teacher stress burnout is generally characterized as a negative life event. Stress has been defined as an "adaptive response, mediated by individual characteristics and/or psychological processes, that is the consequence of any external action, situation or event that places special physical and/psychological demands upon a person" (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980, pp. 8-9). This definition would fit in with how stress can be utilized in order to benefit teachers. The interesting point here is that neither research on teacher stress nor teachers’ opinions of stress focus on how reactions to stress can be adaptive.

Teacher stress & Positive psychology

Positive psychology is the global term used for the study of positive emotions, human characteristics and the positive ethic of institutions that facilitate the development of individuals (Seligman & Steen, 2005). Positive psychology is an emerging tradition that is shifting from the conventional concerns of the psychological tradition in repairing issues that are wrong in the lives of people to that of having a focus on constructing positive qualities to help provide a buffer against illnesses caused by distress. This movement shifts from viewing human issues from a negative perspective to that of a positive stance. At the individual level positive psychology focuses upon building on positive human experiences such as well-being, optimism, hope and satisfaction. At the group level positive psychology focuses on civic virtues with a responsibility placed on institutions in helping individuals become better citizens through nurturing values such as altruism, tolerance, work ethic and responsibility. The key set of personality traits that underpin positive psychology are subjective well-being (Diener, 2000), optimism, happiness and self determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Nonetheless it is recognized that
such complex psychological characteristics can only be understood when examined in conjunction with the cultural and social contexts in which individuals are embedded. Myers (2000) suggests that religious faith, close interpersonal relationships, economic growth and income are key elements that contribute to the positive quality of life in addition to positive personality traits. Those within the positive psychology tradition also indicate that it is not necessarily the case that positive emotions are the opposite to negative ones and that longitudinal studies indicate that negative and positive emotions are stable independent factors using separate neural substrates (Bradburn, 1969; Chang et al., 1994; Frederickson, 2003; Davidson et al., 2000). Positive psychologists suggest that there are three distinct aspects to happiness which have all been successfully researched: first, positive emotions about the past, present and future (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005); secondly, the engaged life which requires the use of positive characteristics, traits and strengths (Seligman, 2002); finally, a sense of belonging and purpose to institutions that nurture (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Subjective well being is all about the affective and cognitive conclusions that individuals reach about their life experiences; by and large it is mainly about how they mediate between external events, how they judge the quality of such experiences and how they relate such experiences to their own lives. Optimism is a key dispositional trait that mediates between individuals’ interpretations and external events (Peterson, 2000). Peterson’s work suggests that optimism involves motivational, emotional and cognitive components. His work suggests those who have high levels of optimism are more persevering and successful with better physical and emotional health. It is also recognized that to be psychologically healthy, individuals need to be objective about their situations as over optimism could be a sign of a mental health problem (Peterson, 2000; Schwartz, 2000; Vaillant, 2000). Though, in converse to this, positive psychologists also report that over optimism is a barrier to mental and physical ill health (Salovey, 2000).

The work on self determination investigates the relationships between the need for competence, belonging and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Their work suggests that when individuals are able to satisfy all three needs, they have high levels of intrinsic motivation which will help them to achieve their goals and thus such individuals continue to then seek out progressively greater challenges. Their work highlights that positive growth in individuals can still be achieved even when placed in social contexts that do not support autonomy, relatedness (belonging) and competence. On the other hand, other researchers within the field of self-determination suggest that cultural constraints are antecedents for anxiety, unhappiness and depression because an under reliance on social norms puts individuals in a state of flux when they are left to make their own autonomous choices (Schwartz, 2000).
The use of positive emotions in dissipating negative ones has been established (Fredrickson, 1998). In fact there is evidence to suggest that the impact of negative emotions on the cardiovascular system can be reversed with the use of positive emotions (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). In the same study it was reported that individuals were able to find positive meaning in stressful situations. Other research goes on to suggest that there is an upward spiralling effect of positive emotions in that those who experience positive emotions have a tendency to find meaning in negative events which then feeds into experiencing progressively more positive emotions in future professional or personal events (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Even without looking further into the long term benefits of positive emotions, research has documented the relationship between resilient personalities, positive emotions and the way in which this serves to buffer stress (Klohnien, 1996; Fredrickson et al., 2003; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). In fact positive psychologists have also established that the use of positive intervention techniques in order to increase pleasure, engagement and meaning have managed to successfully decrease anxiety symptoms (Parks & Seligman, 2004). Furthermore, studies on those clinically depressed have indicated that the use of therapies based on positive psychological approaches, have effectively treated depression by not only reducing the symptoms but by also building upon positive emotions, individual character strengths and providing a meaning for life (Seligman et al, 2006). Though research needs to explore this area further, the presumption is that building upon positive resources counteracts negative symptoms and experiences whilst also providing a buffer against the impact of future negative experiences.

Core questions

1. What are the differences between how positive and negative stress manifests itself within teachers?
2. Why is it that some teachers can turn a distressing experience into one with positive outcomes more readily than others?

2 Methods

The collection of interview data spanned one calendar year, though spread out over two school years. The interviews were conducted in six schools. In some schools I interviewed only one teacher whereas in others I interviewed two or more. The type of interview I conducted was firstly to do with data collection stage and/or how open the teacher was to having a more in depth interview. The interview data were collected over three rounds of interviews. The first set of interviews, n=3, were structured interviews
which were analysed using a grounded theory approach. The themes extracted from the first wave of interviews were used to determine some of the questions in further interviews with new teachers and/or a second set of follow up interviews with teachers who formed a part of the first wave of interviews. The second and third wave of interviews (n=7) used a semi-structured or narrative-type approach. The preference was to use a narrative approach to talk through the life histories of teachers but in instances where teachers were uncomfortable or did not have the time, I reverted to asking questions about stress using semi-structured methods. The emerging data confirmed that conducting narrative-type interviews were the most effective way to uncover issues related to ‘relational stress’ so that I could tap into teachers’ individual fluctuations in the development of stress. I use relational stress to discern changes within an individual across their own life course, rather than just looking across teachers. Research indicates that teachers’ personality determines how they perceive and react to stressors and thus what is distressful for one teacher may not be for another. Therefore, looking into fluctuations within a teacher over their own life course history helps to shed light on how stressors are perceived by teachers and in which circumstances they can be positive or negative.

The data collection was complemented by several pieces of ethnographic work. Firstly, observation of teachers in their classes. Secondly, I attended formal and informal school meetings and took detailed notes down on school practice, relationships between colleagues, perceptions of ethos, perceptions of objectives, engagement with target setting and how teachers spent their lunch hour. Data gathered was based on my perceptions and/or recordings of teachers perceptions of particular issues.

Perceptions of stress

The way in which stress was discussed by the interviewees was in one of three ways:

i. Current stress: Some of the teachers decided to use the interview as a sounding board in order to help alleviate their concerns about current ongoing stressful situations.

ii. Historical stress: Other teachers used the interview as a platform to voice what had happened in the past and how it had impacted their current professional lives.

iii. General stress: Some teachers tried to talk about others and I sensed were not so comfortable about talking about themselves in detail, though such interviews were still useful as it helped me triangulate data findings across teachers particularly when two teachers were interviewed in the same school.

Precursors to the development of stress

Coding of the interviews (whether focused on current, historical or general stress) uncovered key themes that are relevant to how stress arises and whether it leads to the
development of positive or negative stress. Within the interviews it was quite apparent
that either across individuals or for the same individual each theme split into a
dichotomy, one end of which provides evidence for inciting distress and the other for
arousing positive stress (though I will discuss towards the end of the paper why I feel
stress is on a spectrum as well as being dichotymous). The themes either fall into
individual personality-based factors (within the control of teachers) or school context
(not in the control of teachers). For some themes there is a cross over which is
impacted both by individual teacher characteristics and by school context. Each
interview uncovered themes that fell into at least three of the below categories as it was
not the case that every interview covered each of the themes (which isn’t contrary to
what I expected). The last three interviews indicated that I had reached saturation of
ideas around themes that are precursors to positive stress.

The major themes pulled out from my interviews are:

- Trust / mistrust (influenced by individual teacher perceptions)
- Benefit / detriment (influenced by school context and related to dual level social
  exchange theory)
- Self worth / low self worth (influenced by individual teacher perceptions)
- Motivation / lack of motivation
- Social support / isolation (influenced by individual teacher perceptions and school
  context)
- Proving skills / affirmation of skills (influenced by individual teacher perceptions
  and school context)
- Reflection / lack of reflection (influenced by individual teacher perceptions)
- Autonomy / lack of autonomy (influenced by individual teacher perceptions and
  school context)
- Good Leadership / bad leadership (influenced by school context)
- School resources / the lack of them (influenced by school context)
- Good school intake / bad school intake (influenced by school context)

3 Results

My paper focuses on mainly one of my interviewees, Gregory², to elucidate some of my
points about positive stress (though I also use James in places). I will only discuss in
detail a few of the themes, as to how they relate to Gregory’s experience and positive
stress.

Pen portraits
Gregory is a teacher in his mid ‘50s working in a semi-rural location in a Norfolk school
which serves a quite disadvantaged intake of students but in terms of value added
results (KS4) the school is doing very well. The school has an ambitious deputy head

² More details on Gregory and James are in appendix 1
(according to my perceptions) who values his staff and students above government targets. I had classified this school as having a people-focused ethos (as opposed to a target-focused one which was apparent in other schools). Noting this is quite important to Gregory’s story. He suffered from clinical depression 15 years earlier after a breakdown caused by the stress of a bad marriage combined with working in a former failing school, with little support either in his personal or professional life. He took six months off from work and then did a phased return back, working some part time hours. He recognizes he had a strong professional identity and being able to maintain links with the school during his time away helped him get through his illness. He was fortunate enough to have colleagues and senior leaders who kept in touch with him and gave him the opportunity to get back his mental health whilst still maintain a professional identity (though working part-time at the school). Prior to his breakdown he had no work-life balance and found it difficult to separate work from home commitments. His breakdown led Gregory to re-evaluate his life and he explicitly says his breakdown was a positive thing, the distress he went through had a positive contribution to his life, in that had he not experienced that, he would not have managed to appreciate life for what it is. Gregory is unique in that no other interviewee explicitly said that distress led to self renewal and growth. All of the other interviewees either do not recognize how positive stress functions in their professional life or recognize it but refer to it as challenge stress, that is of immediate benefit rather than benefitting from distress (post the event). What Gregory believes is that he needed to go through the unpleasantness to be able to appreciate life and understand himself better (post the breakdown). Gregory is now in a second marriage and speaks of his personal and professional life as being in balance. On the whole his interview suggests that when teachers build on positive human experiences such as optimism and hope in Gregory’s case, combined with institutions taking responsibility (via senior management) in taking appropriate steps to help their staff by nurturing their skills and providing a supportive role when progressively difficult tasks or threatening situations arise, stressors need not create distressing situations ones but ones that incite positive stress, encouraging teachers to grow and rise to further challenges.

In the areas of my research where the use of data from Gregory is not enough to substantiate a point I will also refer to James. James has recently qualified in the UK though has had ten years of teaching experience in Japan. James is married with one young son and it appears that his home life is in balance, as is his emotional state. His professional life steadily increased in stress whilst he engaged in some teacher research for another project I was working on. Unlike Gregory, James utilised support mechanisms both within and outside of the school to help protect himself against progressively difficult issues at school which, in his view, constituted passive bullying. Unlike Gregory, James tackled the problems he faced by directly tackling them and also by actively trying to avoid distress by finding alternatives he could do (applied for other jobs, looked at doing a doctorate, etc). James managed to resolve his situation satisfactorily. He recognised that he was able to turn his negative situation around by focusing on the positive and using stress for his benefit. He explicitly recognised and believed in positive stress though did not feel (at the time of the final interview) that his
stress was positive as the stress created unpleasant emotions. His interview suggests that teachers who have high levels of optimism and who persevere can use stress to be successful with better physical and emotional health. Furthermore, his story indicates that positive growth in teachers is possible even when faced with professional contexts that do not support autonomy, belonging and growth.

**Trust / mistrust (influenced by individual teacher perceptions)**

An important finding for the precursor of the existence of distress or eustress was trust, with trust going hand in hand with eustress and mistrust being a precursor for distress. Within the schools that exhibited greater trust amongst teaching staff, the atmosphere of teachers within the school appeared to be more relaxed. The essence of the role of trust in igniting positive or negative affective states is supported by Hargreaves (1998) who emphasized the importance of emotions within teaching and that the school environment is an emotional practice. Related to trusting relationships is that of having close collegial relationships. The schools where the ethos was to create a harmonious atmosphere for staff that genuinely aimed for collaborative working environments enabled teachers to build on positive stress whilst controlling the negative repercussions of negative stress. This was not the culture of all the schools and tense relationships between staff, particularly between management and class teachers, were observable in a number of schools. Though I did not directly ask about the nature of their relationships with other staff, all the teachers voluntarily offered examples of the importance of retaining working relationships based on trust and support. It appeared that the relationship held with those in leadership roles was the one that held the most importance in harnessing distress or eustress likely because those in leadership have the power to find a solution or exacerbate issues. The kinds of values that teachers referred to as being most important from leadership were that of support, understanding and fairness. In the instances where this was not forthcoming teachers were more likely to experience distress within their everyday roles with the converse being true for eustress. Trust or the lack of it was a precursor for the type of stress teachers exhibited. Trust also surfaced within these interviews in the guise of teachers ‘wearing their heart on their sleeve’ and letting senior management know about why there were unable to take on additional responsibilities. There is always a risk involved when teachers indicate to senior staff their own personal vulnerabilities. In some school settings seeking the help of those in management was fully supported, which helped to alleviate distress or eustress.

In one particular case James a teacher of mathematics said he felt he was ‘shafted’ by the headteacher in particular, though he referred to senior management as one body. At the time of the interview James had undergone a series of incidents which could have been construed as bullying by the Head Teacher. He which he felt had undermined his professionalism. His perception of the Headteacher and her motives was animated with a series of labels that signaled mistrust ‘its part of the heads technique to bring in external people to keep you on your toes 15:04’ The interesting point was that his perception of mistrust of the headteacher was further cemented when he was alerted by
the Head of Maths about another underhand tactic the headteacher had employed. James decided to leave the school even though his vocalization to the head of maths;

‘im looking for a more pleasant work environment to work in’ was met with reassurance that ‘it was only one person who thinks that (his lack of competency…and its not everyone else and certainly not anyone in the maths department’.

The lack of trust in the headteachers motives were arousing distressing emotions in James

‘Head was trying to stitch me up 10.43’ ‘quite sick of all these observations 14:50).

Though it was also apparent that James had utilized positive social relationships with other members of staff and he was able to trust them with his intentions of how he intended to resolve the situation which would possibly go against the needs of the HeadTeacher. James, unlike Gregory managed to turn the situation around.

The way teachers appraise a situation lends itself to the kind of coping strategy that they adopt. In some teachers there were a mix of different type of coping strategies which helped them to regulate distress and produce positive affect. The use of such strategies was also influenced by whether perceived inequity was coming from interpersonal relationships and/or the organization. James had appraised his stressful situation as a challenge and thus had undertaken various strategies in order to overcome the issue of the passive bullying style of his HeadTeacher. The Headteacher and the SMT was the ‘organisation’ as far as James was concerned as he would use ‘they, she or SMT’. His references to colleagues he worked with did not indicate that he had any working issues with them. The re-appraisal of a series of distressing situations as becoming possibly successful but challenging ‘im a maths teacher in demand I can go elsewhere’ meant that James was able to signal to himself the possibility of mastery or gain over his situation. In my observations of his attitude towards his long-term and immediate short term goals during this stressful time at school indicated that he was also using positively toned emotions such as confidence, ambition and eagerness. The problems with his HeadTeacher (or the organization) spurred him on to apply for other positions outside of the school and having landed a position with more responsibilities. He was then able to see the benefit of having gone through a distressing time at school;

I’m 25% financially better off….and it’s a positive outcome career wise, I do want to get into the lecturing side of things and my CV at Southbank showed me that I don’t have enough experience and having an extra 2-3 years at the same school wouldn’t really make me that much more attractive, whereas changing schools, taking on more responsibility…that will make me more attractive, so it’s a good career move 21:54’
James had seen an immediate financial positive outcome of a stressful event at school. This James had not undergone any burnout because of the way in which he appraised his situation combined with the fact that he perceived the management of the school as being the main problem, rather than colleagues and was able to continue having some stable relationships and rewarding interactions with colleagues whilst undergoing a period of distress.

Gregory spoke of his three different kinds of experiences in two very different school settings, where trust in leadership played a vital role in his management or mismanagement of workload issues and consequently to the development of distress or eustress. In his first failing special measures urban school Gregory did not trust the management with the fact that he was not coping. It is evident from the interview that one of the reasons he remained silent was because the school itself was facing problems of its own and given he was aiming for deputy headship he chose not to portray such a vulnerability. In converse to this situation in the new rural school that he moved to, he was able to fully vocalize his concerns about his anxieties about taking on more responsibilities in two further situations. An interview with his current Deputy Head (Michael) supported the claim that Gregory made that the school fostered a supportive environment for both staff and pupils. Michael stated that supporting teachers was a key concern of his: ‘building teachers’ confidence, supporting them and motivating them, if teachers are incompetent they should be given support’ ... and in terms of his attitude in terms of letting all the problems of teachers competency fall on to one person namely the head teacher he was of the view that the ‘management team work together … this helps ease the pressure off one individual’.

Evidently within this school a trusting collegial environment is fostered throughout which is perhaps a reason why Gregory has been able to trust his Deputy Head with what he could not manage when particular demands were place on him. Rather than shy away from speaking the truth, Gregory was able to turn down promotion and responsibilities that went with it, as he had learnt from his breakdown that being realistic and honest is important. Using this strategy has helped prevent a re-occurrence of clinical depression. Gregory admits that he has ‘run away’ from certain responsibilities but that having a supportive environment has enabled him to aim for challenges that he knows are not ‘too far out of my comfort zone’. What Gregory displays are signals of positive affect as he remains ambitious, is diligent in his job, motivated to seek more challenges and uses the word ‘enjoy’ in reference to his job. He knows his limits and uses positive stress to aim for challenges that he knows he can meet, thus feeding into his self-efficacy as a teacher and protecting his own positive view of his professional identity. In one particular classroom observation of year 10 students I noted that one of the students had continually tried to create a disruptive environment whilst Gregory taught (abusive to other students, to Gregory). Post the observation I had asked Gregory if situations like the one I had observed make him feel low and drained during his role as a teacher. His response was:

No – I like the challenge of turning a student around, without having such challenges in life, I would not be motivated or as engaged in my job ... I am here
to make a difference … you say you don’t believe in bad stress, well neither do I, how can I if I want to be a good teacher … besides I sent him to Michael to deal with!

Taking this statement in conjunction with his interview data, it is quite clear that Gregory’s former experiences of distress certainly play a role in his well balanced professional life which was only possible because of a reflective state in a school context that valued human relationships.

Social support / isolation (influenced by individual teacher perceptions and school context)

Not all teachers were able to recognize that they required social support during times of distress and in such instances the situation for teachers just became worse. Gregory did not actively seek social support prior to his first breakdown but rather had hoped that it would be forthcoming and at the time he felt resentful for not being supported both personally and professionally, though retrospectively he can see now that why those things were not forthcoming and he can also see professionally other colleagues who were going through breakdowns and early retirements.

Up until the point of breakdown Gregory continued within the distressing work situation which was made worse by the failure of the OFSTED inspection (as judged by Ofsted). It led to an increase in workload where Gregory, like his other colleagues, had to prepare every lesson and show the paperwork to the immediate line manager both before and after the OFSTED inspection (result of the expectations by senior management team because of OFSTED:

if anything causes stress in schools that does, it damaged a lot of people … the stresses that were put on teachers.

Though Gregory should have sought support, perhaps the confused state he was in, which is often a result of distress, led him to isolate himself both professionally and personally, avoiding tackling the issues that were making him ill and throwing himself further into a work situation that showed little signs of improvement. Gregory’s case history is rather different from the other teachers I interviewed in that he was able to vocalize and identify that the way he dealt with distressing events were very different both before and after the breakdown. There were two further instances where he found himself in professionally distressing situations but having learnt from the impact of isolating himself, Gregory sought support from senior management which led to positive outcomes. It appeared from the analysis of a range of interviews that there is a relationship between positive affective states during times of stress, social support and pro-active resolution to and/or conflict resolution as opposed to negative affective states, social isolation and avoidance of stressors and/or conflict resolution. This is the case as stated earlier, with Gregory and the situation I observed within the classroom.
Proving skills and affirmation of skills (influenced by individual teacher perceptions and school context)

The issue of proving one’s worth as a teacher either to others or to oneself seemed to be a running theme across teachers, how stressed they felt and whether that stress indicated the presence of distress or eustress. In some instances it appeared that the professionalism of the teachers was not taken on faith; in others it was and in some situations proving one’s self worth was related to teachers’ own need for self accountability.

Gregory, as noted within the section on ‘social support and isolation’, faced issues with accountability to OFSTED and then was subject to continued accountability to his line manager and, unlike another interviewee of mine, this did take a toll on Gregory primarily because of the way he dealt with the situation, the support surrounding him and his perceptions of whether or not he could resolve it. When it comes to this theme it is quite apparent that personality traits play a role in perceptions, what coping strategies are used and whether the stressor develops into positive or negative stress. So for instance an interviewee (James) describes himself as ‘passive-aggressive’ in response to dealing with colleagues at work who cause him work-related stress and ‘if you are told to hand something in as soon as possible you do it as soon as you possibly can even if it’s a month later’. In contrast Gregory reiterated several times that he was ‘eager to please’, a ‘perfectionist’. Gregory was very aware that:

I was always eager to please, I’ve always wanted approval, looking back to my time as a child I wanted my father’s approval and I’ve taken it to my professional life, I’ve wanted my head of department’s approvals, my headteacher’s approval, parents’ approval, governors’ approval … the breakdown has helped with this as I’m more at peace with myself, know myself a lot better now, or not feel the urge to prove myself or seek approval.

Gregory says he no longer feels guilty about saying no and is able to say no without feeling guilt. It appears that again Gregory is internalizing the blame of having to prove his skills and did not go into detail like James had done about why there was a culture of proving one’s skills. In contrast to the school where Gregory had his breakdown, in the current school he is at there does not appear to be quite the need to prove his value and within a year of being in that school he was given more responsibilities. Although he turned them down and vocalised he could not cope and went off ill for a few weeks, the leadership still approached him a few years later with the chance to take on more responsibility. It appears that in his new school there was an acceptance that Gregory was skilled at his job, capable of doing more despite his previous illness but a culture of ‘people-focused ethos’ meant that Gregory would not feel he was letting anyone down if he refused responsibility.

It was not the case for all teachers that accountability was only an external source. For some teachers accountability came from within. Gregory is an example of this.
Reflection / lack of reflection (influenced by individual teacher perceptions)

There is a recognition that critical reflection upon professional practice serves a valuable role in helping teachers to improve their professional practice as well as improvements on a personal level giving teachers a sense of control. Within the growing body of research in this area it is also recognized that engagement in critical reflection can be difficult for teachers to engage with in a meaningful way (Attard & Armour, 2006; Luttenberg & Bergen, 2008). I found that within my interviews the presence or absence of reflection was related to the type of stress that developed within teachers. Reflection or reflexivity by teachers was a sign of positive stress via the emergence of positive affective states. In some teachers I observed instances where positive outcomes arose after a period of time had elapsed even if the event that caused the distress did not entail positive affect during those periods.

For Gregory reflection played a key role in positive affect and the prevention of further chronic illness once he applied reflection to his working life. The lack of reflection in Gregory’s professional life led him to an inevitable breakdown. In Gregory’s situation the reflective state came about after his first breakdown and within this interview I can clearly see how reflection served a role in preventing further breakdowns and enhancing his work-life balance. Gregory feels he is more effective now as a teacher post his breakdown period and that his work in the classroom was not prioritised before his breakdown.

‘things were more enjoyable … and I rediscovered my job of teaching’. The breakdown helped him realize that all he wanted to do was to work in the classroom and not go on to senior management or the status that went with it. He realized that ‘he didn’t want it and didn’t need It (senior roles) … and since that time things have been an awful lot better for me’.

All of his work now has a time limit and he now draws a line under a task once time is up, without reverting back to the role of perfectionism and never putting anything down. ‘My type of personality is the type of one that is eager to please’. He wishes he had learnt that very early on in his career.

Gregory feels that his teaching was not as effective prior to the breakdown as it now is because he was involved in other jobs and was often entering the classroom tired and stressed. Before the breakdown he did not have time to reflect about where his life both professionally and personally was heading and why it was that he needed to take on more and more responsibilities in order to secure a leadership role. His breakdown gave him the time (as he was off school for six months) and the motivation to think about why he had got to where he had and he re-discovered his love of teaching as a classroom teacher rather than a leader at that point. Gregory made a link between being able to reflect and his burnout:

Sometimes in teaching I think people feel they do not have time to do that (reflect) … I don’t think we have enough time to be able to reflect. … so when I say it was a good and a bad thing this breakdown I can be very positive looking
back and thinking in a sense it needed to happen to enable me to think through what I needed to do with my life to make the positive changes in my life to make it manageable and enjoyable … It has helped me get a better work-life balance … looking back I feel in many ways I was married to the job … when it all went pear-shaped I wasn’t able to do anything, now I have a very good balance … it took the breakdown and turmoil of all that to reassess where my life was going. It took the breakdown and turmoil of all that to really sit down think things through and re-assess where my life was going.

Such situations were later seen as positive because Gregory re-appraised the situation in a positive way, which not only changed the way in which historical events were remembered but also paved the way for future distressing episodes to be immediately re-appraised using more positive angles. Gregory said of his work-related mental breakdown:

I now have an Interest in mental illness and depression and would like to break down the stigma, by being open about it with children in assemblies … if I have a crusade it’s about breaking down those barriers … when it is appropriate during PSE or RE I will talk about my own experiences of depression … As educators if we can say to children this is like any other illness, it’s like falling off your bike and breaking a leg or something, yes let’s get rid of the stigma.

Gregory appeared to be quite passionate about assuring pupils and colleagues that mental illness was not anything to be ashamed about. His experiences with work-related depression have spurred him on to having informal discussions with colleagues who are suffering with stress-related conditions and he believes that people feel reassured by him saying that it happens to people in life and that it is normal. The positive benefits from having gone through a mental breakdown also extend to his personal life and his re-appraisal of that part of history indicates that he sees the breakdown in a positive light..

It appears, from the accounts of both Gregory and James, that the use of re-appraisal of a situation as possibly positive gives rise to the use of coping strategies that in turn give rise to positive affect. These appear to be precursors to acquisition of personal self growth, professional growth, new coping skills by teachers in stressful situations, giving rise to both short term and long term positive gains.

Scenarios that lead to positive or negative stress

The next and pre-ceding sections will use the data gathered on all of the interviewees. What is also important to note is that teachers’ manifestation of stress is ‘relational’ in that in the same school contexts and/or within the life course of an individual, teachers’ manifestations of stress or perceptions of it will vary from person to person. This would highlight how other factors such as personality traits and personal circumstances are important in the type and manifestation of stress. Furthermore, within the same teacher,
manifestation of stress will itself vary over the life course and events that may have induced distress in one set of circumstances may lead to positive affect and positive stress in another set of circumstances. Just as people’s emotions vary within an individual over their life course, so do perceptions of what they can cope with and what is distressing or manageable. All of this is important as it does closely ties in with school context.

Scenarios that relate to positive and negative stress

The analysis of interview text and ethnography identified within my sample lead to three scenarios that influence individual teachers’ stress levels. Appendix 1 shows how each of my teachers fitted within these different scenarios and whether being in such a model led to the development of positive or negative stress.

- Scenario 1: Individual personality characteristics, professional school context and personal life are all in balance. Though there may be the occasional small fluctuations in one of these three domains, they all work together well and produce positive healthy stress.
- Scenario 2: One or two aspects of these domains are unbalanced or under moderately to high challenging circumstances and at times impacting other domains. This may be manageable in the short term if the right coping strategies are used and again leading to positive affect and can possibly thrive under positive healthy stress.
- Scenario 3: There are extreme fluctuations in all three domains (individual, professional and personal). All three domains appear to impact the responses and functioning in the other domains. In such circumstances the use of the right coping strategies and appraisal of the situation is vital in ensuring the manifestation of positive stress and reducing the possibility of distress developing.

Positive stress: coping styles and stress

An analysis of all of my interviewees raised some important points about coping styles and the development of negative and/or positive stress. The type of coping style adopted in order to overcome distress was influenced by personality traits. The coping style adopted was also influenced by social support and social resources and so it was not always the case that the same individual would adopt the same type of coping style. Coping styles were used to help alleviate distressful circumstances or ones that had the potential to become distressful. Some of the interviews highlight instances where coping styles played a key role in not only managing the issues creating the distress but also in producing positive outcomes. Reflection on distressful events can lead to the adoption of coping styles for future distressful events that can produce positive affect and avoid the effects of mental and physical ill health. Not all coping styles were effective methods to combat stressful situations.
Positive stress: cognitions and mastery

There was a conscious recognition by some teachers that positive stress existed when teachers saw the situations as challenging and overcomable as opposed to challenging and non-overcomable. In the former situations teachers were able to use stress in a positive way as it enabled them or signalled to them that the possible mastery of a situation would enhance their skills or professional standing. Such situations were characterized by emotions such as eagerness, confidence and pride. Situations that were seen as challenging and non-overcomable were situations where stress served in the negative way, in terms of distress.

Positive stress and active avoidance

Not continuing within a distressful situation was a copying style adopted in situations where there appeared to be no satisfactory resolution within a situation. The adoption of avoidance in some instances led to positive affect and in some instances negative affect. Avoidance of a distressful situation manifested itself in two ways:

i. Active avoidance – by actively seeking an alternative path or method to bring about a satisfactory outcome

ii. Passive avoidance – by taking a passive role in tackling the distressing situations, not seeking alternative ways of overcoming the problem.

The determinant of the kind of affect that arose was related to the kind of active or passive avoidance strategy adopted.

Indicators of positive stress

- Not all teachers were able to accept a recognition of positive stress. In situations where my understanding of positive stress was seen to be functioning, some teachers referred this to as pressure and in situations where stress took on the role of being distressful, this was recognized as ‘stress’.
- Some teachers were able to recognize that positive stress functioned in their roles as a teacher.
- An indicator of positive stress was positive affect.
- Positive affect was a significant indicator of eustress and teachers used meaningfulness and hope as psychological ‘belief’ coping mechanisms that they had the will and the way to succeed. Positive affect reflects a condition of pleasurable engagement, energy and enthusiasm. Eustress was also associated with task engagement or absorption.
- Reappraisal of distressing situations using positive reframing enabled teachers to overcome distressing situations with gains instead of losses.
- Reflection on distressful events lead to positive outcomes and thus the reframing of distressing situations took place in a reflective manner after the event but which led to positive gains in future situations.
• Some distressing events are related to teachers' self esteem and self worth. Awareness of the value of knowing oneself, of one's own values as a teacher enabled teachers to reappraise situations which could have had an impact on their self-efficacy and thus avoided distress induced by personal values.
• Acceptance of distressful events as a learning experience helped teachers grow both as people and teachers. A recognition that without the experience of distress such growth would not have been possible.

4 Future work

Positive, negative & mixed stress: Types of stress akin to Bi-polar disorder

The aim of my work was to establish whether positive stress existed and the model I originally had in mind was that stress simply served in either a positive way or in a negative one. Such a model did not account for nor explain how in situations where teachers encounter stress that works in a positive way, negative emotions are felt. It appears that positive stress and the emotions it gives rise to can occur at the same time and about the same situation as negative stress and negative emotions. It appears that in some situations stress is bi-polar. I have found with my qualitative work whilst some teachers display positive stress (eustress), others indicate negative stress (distress) whilst a third group of teachers did not fit into any definition I had of either eustress or distress as they exhibited both negative and positive affect when faced with stressors. I can see that stress is not purely a dichotomous phenomenon but one where the positive and negative sides of stress can exhibit themselves in the same person at the same time. The divide between distress and eustress is not always quite clear within the themes and in instances where teachers might have exhibited only distress they sometimes also showed patterns of eustress.

The most useful way in which I can illustrate my theory on stress is by making comparisons with depression. One form of depressive illness, bi-polar disorder, is where an individual fluctuates from one extreme ‘manic’ (an abnormally elevated state) to another extreme ‘depressive’ state (where the individual's mood drops and they display traits similar to those of uni-polar depression). However, some people with bi-polar disorder suffer from 'mixed episodes' where the behaviour, feelings and/or mood displayed reflect that of a manic state as well as a depressive state. This perhaps explains why in such scenarios teachers tend to not equate feelings of stress with positivity, as it is also arousing negative emotions.
5 Discussion: The implications of positive psychology on teacher stress research

The data suggest that stress is a multi-faceted and unstable construct which manifests itself in different ways for each individual. The ethnographic and interview work indicate that all teachers appeared to be experiencing/have experienced some form of stress with there to be a tendency for negative states to be more prevalent in particular school contexts. It was also apparent was that the perception of events as stressful, the way teachers reacted towards stressors and the impact on individuals varied for each teacher. It is the way a stressor is perceived and subsequently dealt with which is the key behind whether stress is positive or negative for any given teacher. Not all teachers gave the same weight to the types of stress they perceived. A variety of different issues were reported as being stressful such as personal values, self worth, pupil behaviour, parents, teachers, workload and expectations (both from oneself and others) and passive bullying styles from management/colleagues. The type and manifestation of stress is determined by the interaction between the school context (external work-related environment), individual resilience and/or personality traits, use of coping styles and the influence of challenging personal lives. The data suggest that the manifestation of the type of stress experienced varies between teachers and fluctuates over time (relational stress).

I had previously theorized and understood stress to be a dichotomous construct, one which served a role in a negative way or a positive way, which is the conclusion that was supported by the findings of the quantitative analysis of the survey work previously presented at BERA (Mujtaba, 2008) and by further quantitative and qualitative work (Mujtaba, 2010).

My interviews suggest that the use of positive psychology in the workplace (as demonstrated by my main case study teacher in this paper) can be used as a prevention therapy against depression and anxiety. Building upon the positive traits of teachers, reinforcing positive subjective work experiences and building optimism in the workplace may help buffer teachers against experiencing distress and perceiving situations as being negative. Much of the research on teacher stress to date focuses on distress and factors (both individual and contextual) that contribute to this. Very little is known about the experience of eustress in the teaching profession and whether positive growth in individuals can be achieved even when faced with school contexts that do not support autonomy, relatedness and competence as I found with my second case study teacher, James. Positive psychology suggests that the experience of unpleasant situations can indeed help individuals flourish with the use of positive emotions as indicated by Gregory’s experience.

If techniques in line with the growing ideas of positive psychology were fostered within the teaching profession, tapping in and helping to create an upward spiralling effect of
positive emotions in teachers might possibly help teachers to avoid becoming distressed and find a meaning in negative educational contexts which would then contribute to experiencing progressively more positive emotions in their professional lives or life in general. In line with the work of Ryan and Deci (2000) it perhaps could be the case that if teachers were able to satisfy all three needs of optimism, happiness and self determination, teachers who have high levels of intrinsic motivation will find they are more readily able to achieve their goals and persist in seeking out progressively superior challenges.

Positive psychologists have indeed begun work in the direction of positive health which focuses on the mental and physical health of individuals in the absence of any ill health. Clinical work indicates that positive states of mental health are not necessarily established when mental illness came to an end. The correlation between depression and happiness was found to be -.35 and one would expect a perfect negative relationship (-1.0) between depression and happiness if they were on the same continuum. Research indicates that though mental disorders hinder positive states, they do not prevent the development of positive accomplishment, positive relationships, purpose, meaning to life, positive emotions and engagement (Haidt, 2006; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 2002; Seligman, 2008). In line with what I am researching within the field of teacher stress, perhaps it is the case that positive stress and negative stress can co-exist at the same time and having positive stress, positive rewards and good challenges in the work environment, does not necessarily negate the impact and severity of negative stress on teachers.

If positive teacher stress and its influence was simply due to the absence of negative stress, then indeed there would not be a need to explore the positive impact of stress as research would be able to deduce the impact of positive stress simply by presuming it to be the opposite of all the negative effects of teacher stress. The assumptions of my research questions are that if positive stress exists amongst teachers its impact is not necessarily on the same continuum as negative stress. Given that the fundamental concept of eustress in the teaching profession is accepted by very few, this makes it even more crucial to establish.
This table helps to indicate where each of my teachers fitted on this model spectrum.

**Appendix 1: Charting teachers on model spectrum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality traits</th>
<th>Views of stress</th>
<th>School context</th>
<th>Personal life</th>
<th>Coping strategies</th>
<th>Specific issues</th>
<th>Prevalent Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janey</td>
<td>At times unstable, lacks self efficacy.</td>
<td>Stable current school.</td>
<td>Appears to be in balance.</td>
<td>Passive avoidant resulted in not dealing with specific issues. No mention of harnessing social support. At a time when she did get support from management she was able to deal with a specific situation much better.</td>
<td>Lost headship with change of school due to becoming a mother. She has applied a few times for roles, never quite got there again and rather than seeing it as a challenge she has internalized the ‘rejections’.</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Stable, strong sense of self efficacy.</td>
<td>Believes in ‘positive healthy stress’. Sees that stress can be challenging and supports the view that personality traits dictate whether it turns to distress.</td>
<td>Stable current school.</td>
<td>Appears to be in balance.</td>
<td>Feels that his staff should have him or someone on SMT to talk to about problems ‘often teachers just need to get it off their chest’. Recognises that teachers can be isolated if they don’t talk about their specific problems. Believes in team supporting one another.</td>
<td>Managing ‘volatile’ staff and parents. Feels he is ‘logical not emotional’. Equates logical with mental strength and stability. Note that in the two interviews steers away from talking about himself in detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Stable, strong sense of self efficacy.</td>
<td>Believes in ‘good stress’.</td>
<td>Unstable school environment. Perceptions of passive bullying. Disharmony in the maths department.</td>
<td>Appears to be in balance though raises that has to ensure that good work-life balance is maintained because of baby but difficult at times.</td>
<td>Active avoidant and reflection. Used the stress to challenge him to make positive changes in his life. Harnessed social support</td>
<td>Dealing with the SMT. Being aware of the games they play and was under distress as he felt they were trying to deliberately make life uncomfortable for him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Stable, strong sense of self efficacy.</td>
<td>Does not recognize good stress.</td>
<td>Stable current school.</td>
<td>Appears to be in balance. Good work-life</td>
<td>Uses a range of coping strategies to combat stressful situations. Creates social support</td>
<td>As a leader creates a supportive environment. I witnessed first hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>New Gregory</strong></td>
<td><strong>Old Gregory</strong></td>
<td><strong>Anonymous female</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently stable, strong sense of self efficacy.</td>
<td>Unstable, low self efficacy.</td>
<td>Appear distant and non committal to interview.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Believes in good stress. Feels distress helps people to grow if channelled in the right way. He admits his life is better because of having gone through distress and learnt from it.</td>
<td>Unstable school environment. Failing school, special measures. Lack of social support.</td>
<td>No recognition of positive stress.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stable marriage. Good work-life balance.</td>
<td>Threw himself into work in order to fill the void in his personal life. Problems at work meant no outlet for work problems. He could not see the wood for the trees and so a pressurized environment did not enable him to think and reflect.</td>
<td>No recognition of positive stress.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaks to his Deputy Head immediately concerning any specific problems. Utilises social support and is keen on giving social support as he recognizes that colleagues need someone to talk to.</td>
<td>Ended up with clinical depression as a result of dual distress at work and at home. Two episodes of this.</td>
<td>Felt she was being overly monitored.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td><strong>Tim</strong></td>
<td><strong>Science teacher at specialist maths academy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Used the appropriate coping strategies to handle a distressing situation and then to change schools.</td>
<td>Unstable environment.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>how she handled a situation in the staffroom quite well that could have erupted into an explosive argument.</td>
<td></td>
<td>No mention.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Science teacher at specialist maths academy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bribed children with sweets. Distanced himself from the disengagement.</td>
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<td>Appeared distant and non committal to interview.</td>
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<td>Felt he was not supported. Has decided to leave the profession.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Recognises good stress.</td>
<td>Stable environment</td>
<td>Utilises social support.</td>
<td>Feels supported.</td>
<td>Model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Stable environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vera</td>
<td>Recognises good stress.</td>
<td>Stable environment</td>
<td>Stable marriage. Good work-life balance. Though was not always the case.</td>
<td>Creates social support for colleagues. Head of maths department</td>
<td>Feels supported (now) but was not always the case.</td>
<td>Model 1 (though was model 3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Acknowledgements

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