



The development of an instrument to measure English Language Learner (ELL) teacher work stress



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Development of an ELL teacher stress measure capturing multiple work ecologies.
- ELL teachers from across the U.S. participated in the study.
- The development of the final 40-item ELL Teacher Stress Measure is described.
- Four ecological domains of ELL work stress are represented in the final measure.
- The new measure provides a tool that is useful in a variety of school settings.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Article history:

Received 2 June 2015

Received in revised form

24 October 2015

Accepted 7 December 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

English language learners

Teacher stress

Measure development

Immigrant and refugee students

A B S T R A C T

The purpose of the current study was to develop a measure of English Language Learner (ELL) teacher stress that highlights multiple aspects of teachers' work settings that impact their work stress. Ninety-eight ELL teachers from 29 U.S. states completed an online questionnaire, including the current measure in development, a demographic survey, the Teacher Stress Inventory, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory. The development of the final 40-item ELL Teacher Stress Measure (ETSM) is described. The new ELL Teacher Stress Measure addresses a significant gap in the field and provides a tool that is useful in a variety of school settings.

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"It's almost like tutoring. I can't teach the class as a class. Like when you have all 60 eyes looking at me on the blackboard and taking notes. I can't even do it as a group, or a table. I have to go around and explain it to every single one of them. As long as I can—unfortunately, I only have 50 minutes. The first 20–25 minutes, you almost lose it. Everybody gets started with their work in the last 10 minutes. Of course, that's when you have everybody getting to work and then the warning bell rings, and it's like 'AAAGH.'" (Katz, 1999, p. 832).

English Language Learner (ELL) teachers have perhaps the most important role in school for immigrant and refugee students. These

are the staff that immigrant and refugee students first encounter in their school experiences and are often the school adults with whom they spend the majority of their day. Their distinctive significance in the lives of immigrant and refugee students makes the work experiences of ELL teachers of particular interest to understand, and little research attention has been paid to the ELL setting. Further, with nearly 50% of all teachers leaving their position within their first 5 years (NCES, 2011), approximately 45% of ELL teachers not receiving specialized ELL certification or training (Esch et al., 2005), and estimates of dropout for ELL students reaching as high as 40% (NCES, 2011), the current examination of sources of stress in the work lives of ELL teachers is imperative.

The purpose of the current study was to develop a measure of ELL teacher stress that highlights the impact of various ecologies within ELL teachers' work settings. Understanding sources of ELL teacher stress allows us to be better informed about the school experiences of teachers who work with immigrant and refugee students and, as a result, can help to minimize its negative impacts.

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The limited understanding of ELL teacher stress presents a significant gap in the field and provides a potential roadmap for how the school setting affects ELL teachers and the immigrant and refugee students they work with.

1. The ecology of teacher stress

Stress has been defined broadly as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). While past research on schools and stress has attempted to capture specific aspects of the school environment that may impact teacher stress, it does not present an ecological picture of the school, including the experiences of teachers with multiple roles within the school and stressors that evolve from various ecologies in their school environment. Further, how stressful work experiences are appraised to be by the teacher depends upon all of the components that are present in their environment and how these components interact with each other. For ELL teachers more specifically, stress may evolve from various sources, such as the work roles (formal and informal) that ELL teachers must assume to get their jobs done, their ability to address constantly changing student issues, and the ever-changing task of responding to diverse student learning needs.

The current examination of teacher stress benefits from the use of an ecological framework to look at a broad group of factors that impact stress, including the influences of other teachers, school staff, school administrators, parents, and students. The notion of capturing the processes that influence teachers' environment that result in work stress is essential to the current examination. Use of the Trickett, Kelly, and Vincent (1985) ecological framework in this study addresses how the ecology of teachers' lives are reflected in the issues that are brought both to the school and to the classroom by administrators, other teachers and school staff, parents and students. Therefore, the various components that are present within the school environment contain rich information about what influences teacher experiences of stress, including potential stressors that come from multiple sources. Guided by this ecological framework, the current stress measure is designed to address these shortcomings by capturing stress events experienced by ELL teachers that evolve from multiple ecological domains, such as: federal and systemic influences; overall school climate; the presence or absence of social support; interactions with other school staff, students, and parents; and the nature of the job for teachers.

2. Review of literature on teacher stress

Teacher stress represents a relatively ignored area of research in the larger context of education, although burnout (an outcome of stress) has been a common topic of investigation, with newer literature highlighting ecological contributors (e.g., Fernet, Guay, Senécal, & Austin, 2012). Much of the research on teacher stress has focused on individual-level factors, such as personal affect and self-efficacy (Yoon, 2002), coping (Lambert, McCarthy, O'Donnell, & Wang, 2009), and mental health (Wang & Guo, 2007). Some broader areas identified as causing stress for teachers include: lack of training, preparation, and professional development; role ambiguity, conflict, and overload; and negative work environment or lack of ongoing support (Billingsley, 2004; Freedy & Hobfoll, 1994; Kyriacou, 2001). There is a more limited body of research that focuses specifically on teachers outside of the mainstream setting, mostly in the Special Education setting. This research shows that non-mainstream teachers experience higher teacher attrition (Billingsley, 2004; Edgar & Pair, 2005), suggesting that stress may

be more inherent to these positions. Yet this link has not been formally investigated. Furthermore, for ELL teachers specifically, research finds that the ELL teaching position includes increased isolation from the mainstream, more diversity in student backgrounds and abilities than in mainstream settings, and challenges to adapt curriculum based on a large range of student learning needs (Katz, 1999). Increased paperwork demands attached to this position are frequently cited as stressful, as is an increased need for parental contact/involvement, especially when compared to teachers who work in the mainstream setting. In addition, the role diffusion that ELL teachers are likely to experience, based on the multiple roles within the classroom that these teachers assume (teacher, mentor, counselor, etc.), has been noted as an increased source of frustration, stress, and burnout for these teachers across K-12 grade levels (Markham, 1999).

2.1. Distinctive aspects of the ELL classroom

When examining the ELL context more closely, it is important to note that ELL programs are quite diverse and vary greatly by school, with no federal system in place to dictate guidelines for ELL education (in contrast to the Special Education system, for example). Yet, across these programs, the cultural, linguistic, and educational diversity of students in the same classroom has been viewed as a particular pedagogical challenge for teachers of ELL students (Haneda, 2009; Lucas, 1997; Olsen, 1997). ELL classrooms often include students from multiple cultural and linguistic backgrounds whose prior education may range from those with little or no prior schooling or literacy to those with adequate or occasionally exceptional educational backgrounds.

This student diversity is complicated by a relative lack of well-developed curricular materials for ELL instruction (Haneda, 2009; Lucas, 1997), necessitating what Glisson (2002) calls a reliance on “soft” rather than “hard” technology. Soft technology is involved when lack of existing standardized procedures or materials forces the practitioner to modify existing resources or develop new ones to accommodate the work task. The softer the technology and existing resources, the less teachers can rely on prior knowledge and the more they must rely on improvisation and creative use of existing materials. This suggests that ELL teachers spend considerable time improvising class-related materials and using trial-and-error pedagogical processes.

Further, ELL teachers at both the elementary- and secondary-levels have reported an increased sense of responsibility for their students, even at times during the school day when their students are not assigned to them (Markham, 1999). Teachers who report specialized training in working with ELL students do not feel equipped to deal with all of the diverse roles they must fulfill in their daily work lives (Loh, 1995; Markham, Green, & Ross, 1996), let alone new teachers or teachers with little preparation or training. Markham et al. (1996) reported a series of out-of-class stressors for ELL teachers, including time spent preparing students to perform well in non-ELL classes and helping them adjust to the larger school culture. Moreover, these teachers reported that out-of-class related stressors were more stressful than in-class ones, a different pattern than that found among a sample of mainstream teachers in this particular study.

In addition, by their nature, programs outside of the mainstream setting are likely to be structurally isolating for teachers with regard to their regular interaction with coworkers in the mainstream setting, acting as an additional potential stressor for ELL teachers. Many ELL teachers across grade levels report other school staff treating them as “different” in some way, feeling that other staff deem them to be less important than mainstream teachers, and having weaker relationships between ELL teachers and content-

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