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Cover photo: Valley View Secondary School students Naomi Smith and Mel Luksa get involved in National Simultaneous Storytime in September. Full story page 29.

Losing the plot: Workplace stress in school libraries

By Amanda Credaro

Abstract

Workplace stress has been identified as the most prevalent occupational health and safety (OHS) hazard in numerous sources (Widmer 2002; Woods & Carlyle 2002; Minter 2003; Baker 2004; International Labor Organisation 2004). This paper examines the extent to which this issue warrants further investigation for the health and safety of school library staff in Australia.

Introduction

From all continents and all employment sectors, the global trends are obvious. Work is making many people psychologically 'sick'. And among the most stressful workplaces are schools (Smith et al. 2000; Health and Safety Executive 2003).

In recent months, Australian newspapers have featured headlines referring to widespread stress among the teaching profession (McDougall & Bissett 2004). While this is not new information for those working in the education industry, it did raise awareness of the issue in the wider community.

However, the type of work and the working conditions for school library staff differ from that of their classroom colleagues. They address dissimilar obstacles within a profession that has rapidly changed to meet a new set of educational and societal considerations.

A brief history

The cover story for *Time* magazine on 6 June 1983 called stress the 'epidemic of the eighties' (DeCarlo 2001). In discussing that article, the American Institute of Stress (2003a) noted from surveys that the incidence of workplace-related stress problems has increased from 55 percent in 1983 to 75 percent in 1996.

Beyond surveys of self-reported impressions of feeling 'stressed', the international medical fraternity has



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been collecting empirical data for decades. Depression has doubled with every generation since the 1920s; disabling stress has doubled during the past six years; unmanaged stress is potentially more dangerous than smoking (Burrows 1996).

In January this year, Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* reported a 40 percent increase in 'teacher stress claims'. In Britain, one in every 15 teachers called the Teachers' Help Line during one week in March (Baker 2004).

However, a senior spokesperson for the NSW Department of Education and Training was quoted by McDougall and Bissett (2004) as stating his belief that the apparent increase in the stress claims made by teachers was the result of changes to legislation that enabled 'more favourable treatment of the claimants'.

Statistical analysis difficulties

Although psychological injury is a compensatable event (Lawson 2004), there is a complicated process, with rigid guidelines, for its acceptance by insurance companies. As Workcover does not specify 'stress' as either cause or effect of psychological injury, collecting accurate statistics for analysis becomes problematic.

Further, those statistics that are available concerning acknowledged psychological injuries with the typical

symptoms of stress (such as anxiety or depression) do not differentiate between teachers and teacher librarians. Similarly, there is no mechanism for distinguishing 'general' clerical staff from library support staff. Available statistics are listed by occupation as only 'teacher' or 'clerical worker'.

Although the Australian Bureau of Statistics does record statistics for work-related psychological injury, the agency does not consider the work-type or profession.

The NSW Teachers Federation, when contacted by this author, said that its statistics were confidential.

Khan (2003) conducted a qualitative assessment on teacher stress in the USA, building on the earlier work of Farber (1991), in which it was found that 'between five percent and 20 percent of all American teachers are burned out, depending on the type of school and the method of assessment'.

In Australia, the last intensive research into teacher stress at K-12 level appears to be that conducted by Rosemarie Otto between 1982 and 1985 (ACT/NSW Independent Teachers Union 2002). In 1996, the Victorian and ACT/NSW branches of the Independent Teachers Union released their own reports on teacher stress. None of these reports considered the unique situation of teacher librarians. It is obvious that

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while a number of factors may have changed in the eight years since 1996, the professional lives of teacher librarians have radically altered since the early 1980s.

Governance of OHS

In Australia, Workcover is the government agency 'working primarily to eliminate death, disease and injury in the workplace' (ACT Workcover n.d.). This work is supported by three main Acts: the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 1989*, the *Workers Compensation Act 1951*, and the *Dangerous Goods Act 1975*.

Interestingly, Workcover Australia does not recognise 'stress' as either injury or illness. In comparison, the USA views the issue as warranting the existence of two separate agencies. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is the federal agency responsible for conducting research and making recommendations for the prevention of work-related illness and injury (NIOSH n.d.). NIOSH is part of the US Department of Health and Human Services; it is distinct from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which is a regulatory agency located in the US Department of Labor. Both agencies have specific divisions that are concerned with workplace stress.

Britain's Health and Safety Commission (HSC) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) are responsible for the regulation of almost all the risks to health and safety arising from work activity in Britain. Despite the academic argument as to whether or not 'stress' is a valid term, Britain has elected to retain the nomenclature as being most appropriate for the issue.

Throughout the western world, similar agencies exist. Canada, New Zealand, and Europe all differentiate 'stress' as an identifiable workplace hazard.

Of great significance in Australia is that every work site is required to have an OHS committee. Among the responsibilities of these committees is the preparation of workplace risk management plan, with a clearly articulated legislative requirement to identify and remove—or at least reduce or minimise—causes of stress (NSW Teachers' Federation 2003).

Extent of workplace stress

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work reported 'that over half

of the 550 million working days lost annually in the US from absenteeism are stress related and that one in five of all last-minute no-shows are due to job stress' (American Institute for Stress 2003b).

It is estimated that workplace-stress-related absenteeism costs US employers more than US\$300 billion annually (*Medical World News* 1999). Extrapolating from the relative populations of the US and Australia, it could be expected that Australian employers are paying in the order of AUD\$20 to 30 billion. This amount does not consider the amount that insurance companies are spending on medical and other peripheral costs associated with the post-event treatment of workplace stress.

In Australia, it is hard to obtain data relating to pre-tertiary educational institutions as primary worksites. However, an Australian Bureau of Statistics' 1995 survey (ABS 1998) showed that of nearly three million Australians reporting an injury, nearly 1.1 million had been injured at their place of work. The same survey reported that of the 'accidents, poisonings and violence' that resulted in 7554 deaths for the reporting period, the leading cause of death was suicide.

Despite the difficulty in obtaining accurate statistics, anecdotal evidence suggests that in New South Wales, between 10 and 15 teachers commit suicide each year. In reporting the State Coroner's findings in the suicide of teacher Andrew McDermott, Curtin (1997) notes the official condemnation of the administration of the psychological well-being of the teaching profession. As a result of the Coroner's findings, the NSW Department of Education introduced the Employees' Assistance Programs (EAPs), which provided free access to professional counselling.

Incidentally, EAPs were introduced in the 1930s (Toran 2003) in the USA, where they originally addressed alcoholism in the workforce. However, as affective domain aspects were found to affect productivity in the 1970s, the focus of EAPs changed to psychological counselling.

Causes of stress

Since 1984, it has been known that insufficient incidental daily exposure to natural light affects melatonin levels, and can result in lethargy and reduced productivity—often accompanied by

Possible sources of workplace stress

1—Work organisation and conditions

- Continual changes in work, organisation and structures
- Lack of participation in decision making
- Complexity and demands of new systems
- Lack of control over work
- Inadequate staffing
- Low pay or low status
- Job insecurity
- Lack of recognition or promotion prospects
- Lack of facilities for rest breaks
- Unclear reporting lines
- Over promotion
- Lone working
- Excessive working hours
- Shift working
- Excessive workload

2—Work relationships

- Poor management communication
- Uncertainty about responsibilities
- Tasks inappropriate to ability
- Inconsistent management
- Social isolation
- Responsibility for others
- Boring, repetitive work
- Conflicting demands
- The threat of violence
- Lack of support or assistance
- Lack of appropriate training
- Customer/client complaints
- Bullying
- Harassment
- Surveillance
- Time pressures
- Under use of skills

3—Physical conditions

- Excessive noise
- Poor ventilation
- Poor lighting
- Poor temperature control
- Poor equipment
- Poor workstation
- Exposure to the elements
- Exposure to fumes, chemicals, or other unpleasant substances
- Uncomfortable seating

Based on a document originally published by Sheffield Hallam University (2001). Used with permission.

Figure 1: Possible sources of workplace stress

clinical depression (Bower 2001; Barbor 2002). Anecdotal evidence suggests that less than 30 percent of teacher librarians leave the library building during the course of the working day, thereby existing in an artificially lit environment for most of their working

lives. One teacher librarian recently reported confidentially to this author that their principal *insists* that they do not leave the library building through the school's core hours. Others have similarly reported that the same instruction applies to them, although not as explicitly expressed.

Referring to figure 1 (page 18), school library staff may use the parameters delineated as a checklist of their personal vulnerability to workplace stress.

It is self-evident that the teaching profession in the last few decades has had numerous additional 'complexities' (Credaro 2002) foisted on it. As well as the demands created by changing curriculums, the legislative changes concerning duty of care, the introduction of information and communication technologies, and the ongoing development of pedagogical research have affected all members of school communities.

Many school *library* staff have had the added burden of reduced financial support, adding to their workload as they raise funds to enable their collection development programs to continue. As well, in New South Wales government schools, the trend in the reduction of library support staff in secondary schools has added to the physical, as well as psychological, load.

Cryer (1996) quotes the work of Dr Elias Iliya, an endocrinologist and researcher who has seen increasing workplace stress impacting on the hormonal and immune system balance in increasingly serious ways, even affecting how quickly we age. According to his research, an especially stressful aspect of the information age is the demand to frequently shift concepts in our work. The 'average businessperson must now shift concepts at least seven to eight times per hour'. One supposes that this 'average business person' is not dealing with classes of 30 children simultaneously, let alone their class teacher, possibly a parent, the school principal, phone calls, a bookseller and multiple technology challenges. In a one-hour period, the average school library worker may well 'shift concepts' every few minutes.

Of the items in figure 1, of particular concern is increasing incidence of workplace bullying. One survey (Robinson 2003) found that 'more than 85 percent of those surveyed reported

they had suffered or witnessed intimidation, humiliation or being left out of social events by workmates'. The survey report noted: 'The problem was increasingly emanating from senior management because of the pressure to perform better.'

Just as teachers have found an increasingly wide range of demands impacting on their professional lives, principals and other members of the school executive are similarly experiencing workplace overload. In fairness, it must be noted that those operating at the educational corporate level are being placed under greater strain by accountability requirements (McClounie 2004) and wider community expectations. This is within a construct characterised by budgetary support that is shrinking in terms of real-dollar value.

The National Safety Council of Australia (2003) cites a Griffith University study which estimated that workplace bullying 'costs Australia between six and thirteen billion dollars annually'.

Sharan Burrows (2004), president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, states that workplace bullying is the second highest priority for the national union, after workplace deaths (which, notably, result in more fatalities than automobile accidents). Burrows suggests that nationally, workplace bullying results in about one suicide a week.

Identifying workplace bullying behaviour may be difficult (Harper 1999) as it is 'often subtle and context dependent'. Quoting research on occupational stress, Harper also notes that a new diagnosis, Prolonged Duress Stress Disorder, is being proposed by members of the medical profession to recognise that many small adverse events can cause the same, or worse, symptoms than a single traumatic event.

It is evident that many of the examples in figure 2 are built into the daily working lives of teacher librarians. The social isolation for secondary teacher librarians, who rarely have the opportunity to have morning tea and lunch on a daily basis with their classroom colleagues, is well known.

With regard to 'withholding resources... vital for effective work performance', the lack (or more often the absence) of clerical support staff in primary school libraries has meant less time being

available for professional-level activities (Riley 2004). The recent trend in many secondary schools to reduce library clerical support hours—seemingly based on the primary school model—will similarly impact on the work of secondary teacher librarians.

Nevertheless, every work site and every school library has a different set of parameters in operation. Many teacher librarians function in a psychologically healthy environment. However, for many others, the school culture and administration is not supportive of their work or themselves as professionals.

Warning signs

Many of the early indicators of stress are

Examples of workplace bullying behaviour

- Verbal abuse
- Restrictive and petty work rules
- Excluding or isolating employees
- Giving a person an unpleasant or meaningless task
- Humiliation through sarcasm or belittling someone's opinions
- Constant criticism or insults
- Being required to perform tasks without adequate training
- Spreading misinformation or malicious rumors
- Deliberately changing work rosters to inconvenience certain employees
- Deliberately withholding information or resources that are vital for effective work performance
- Constant, intrusive surveillance or monitoring
- Denial of opportunity to input into work practices
- Compulsory overtime, unfair rostering or allocation of work
- Manipulating the impression of others to split the work group into taking sides
- Unreasonable demands and impossible targets
- Open or implied threat of the sack or demotion
- Oppressive, unhappy work environment
- Displaying written or pictorial material which may degrade or offend certain employees
- Intimidation
- Pressure to suppress complaints concerning conditions, behaviour, or health and safety

Sources: ACTU 2002; ACT Workcover 2004.

Figure 2: Examples of workplace bullying behaviour

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well known. Nail-biting, teeth grinding, sudden weight loss (or gain), high (or low) blood pressure, and, of course, absenteeism are all clear indicators of stress.

However, for those who state they have not missed a day for years; that they are back at work for hours after classroom teachers have left; or attend to an overflow of problems or undertake a 'special project' at weekends or school holidays, the Mental Health Foundation (2002) warns that *excessive attendance* is also an indicator of stress.

Other indicators of stress include persistent irritability, procrastination, fatigue, digestive upsets, and the increased use of coffee, tobacco, and alcohol (Psychotherapy San Francisco n.d.).

Addressing stress

Wiley (2000) suggests a number of methods to address the issue of teacher stress (see figure 3). The most cursory glance reveals, however, that the financial costs involved in adopting any of these schemes indicates the unlikely nature that any of them will be implemented in the current economic climate.

The use of humour in stressful situations has a long and well-documented history (Credaro 2002). Not only has it been used in a medical environment for therapeutic applications, but also for the diversion of the terminally ill.

Yet such is the seriousness of stress and its multiple consequences that it should not be a case of 'librarian, heal thyself'. The current general workplace legislation is acknowledged as 'inadequate' (Harper 1999) but is under review.

The Scottish Centre for Educational Research (SCER) (2002) states that 'there are no reliable statistics' on stress in the teaching profession, and therefore it is impossible to compare occupational stress factors between and among professions using the available proxy evidence. A number of sources disagree with SCER. Antoniou et al. (2000), Brenninkmeijer (2002), *Personnel Today* (2003), Rose (2003), and Marshall and Marshall (2003) are but a few who cite the high-stress nature of teaching.

Numerous studies appear to have been carried out on stress among academic staff in tertiary teaching institutions (National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education 2002,

Stress reduction strategies for teachers		
Stress factors	Work-related effects	Reduction strategies
Extra-organisational professional status	Deterioration in work performance	Administrative support
Professional development	Increased access to relief staff and funding	Administrative and collegial support
Salaries	Increased absenteeism	Better facilities
Class size	Lower productivity	Pay incentives
Inadequate facilities/equipment	High staff turnover	Job redesign
Role conflict	Stress transmitted to students	Participative decision-making
Disruptive students	Less learning in the classroom	Welfare programs
Source: Wiley 2000.		

Figure 3: Stress reduction strategies for teachers

Silcock 2003, Winefield et al. 2003). However, it appears that primary and secondary educational institutions are sadly neglected in this area.

In regard to school library staff, who face different challenges to their classroom colleagues, formal research into stress in school libraries is long overdue. As Haycock (2003) notes in his landmark study *The Crisis in Canada's School Libraries*, little can be done without the collection of accurate data.

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Significant progress in past year

Below is a copy of the annual report for 2003–04 that ASLA President Mary-Ann Salisbury presented to the annual general meeting in August.

ASLA has had a very successful 12 months with significant advances being achieved in the areas of advocacy, research, and strategic planning. The current executive members have completed their two-year terms of office and I thank them for their hard work for the association during this time.

Strategic direction

ASLA's new constitution was accepted in February 2004. One of the major changes for the association is that all meetings are now national council meetings with all councillors participating, rather than a combination of standing committee meetings and one national council meeting. A new position of president-elect has been created on the executive as a measure of succession planning for the association.

A strategic plan has been developed and planning groups of councillors have been identified to implement and further develop this plan. Key areas that have been identified for the coming year include research, advocacy, publications, and projects.

Advocacy

The publication *Impact of school libraries on student achievement: A review of the research* was distributed to peak national and state/territory bodies and personnel during 2004.

ASLA was represented on a number of national bodies and forums including the Peak Library Bodies Forum, the Forum on Library Services for People with Disabilities, and the ANZIIL forum on information literacy.

ASLA responded to reviews and inquiries at the national level including the Digital Agenda Review and the Inquiry into the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership.

Publications

The new *Access* Editor, Peter Nibbs, was appointed from the start of 2004. The national council has approved a

proposal for *Access* to become a refereed journal, beginning with the inclusion of one refereed article in the first issue for 2005.

New publication

The *Learning for the future: Professional development kit* is due for completion by June Wall (past president) by the end of August 2004, ready for sales to start in early September.

Research

Michele Lonsdale's review of the research on the impact of school libraries on student achievement identified a number of gaps in the research that has been carried out since 1990. ASLA facilitated a meeting of various stakeholders in October 2003 to develop a strategy for ASLA to continue research on behalf of the profession. The result is that ASLA has signed a partnership agreement with Charles Sturt University to investigate *Smart information use in schools*.

ALIA-ASLA liaisons

ASLA endorsed the continuation of liaison with ALIA in the amalgamation of the two previous committees to the ALIA-ASLA Joint Policy Advisory Group. This group finalised the Alliances/Advocacy Directory and the *Standards of Professional Excellence for Teacher Librarians* for endorsement by both associations.

Conferences

ASLA hosted its first, very successful online conference. One hundred and eighty people registered for *ASLA Online I: Constructing communities of learning and literacy*. The proceedings of the conference are on sale through the ASLA office. The next ASLA conference, *ASLA XIX: Meeting the challenge*, will be hosted by ASLA ACT from 10–13 April 2005 in Canberra.

Awards

The ASLA Citation 2003 was awarded to Ruth Jones, ASLA NT, in recognition of her contribution to the association. The inaugural Australian Teacher Librarian of the Year award was presented to Bev Endersbee, SLASA, in recognition of her work as an exceptional teacher librarian in a school setting.