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Managing stress in schools: teachers coping with special education children

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Abstract: Teaching is one of the most stressful professions worldwide. This study aimed to explore how teachers cope with teaching – in regular classes – special education children who get some assistance through special integration programs in their schools but no additional assistance in their regular classes. More specifically, I examined coping strategies in two cultural groups of teachers – Jews and Arabs. Furthermore, I investigated how the different coping strategies explain stress reactions of state anxiety and state anger in the two cultures in the background of this special situation. Six hundred and thirty-four Jewish and Arab teachers (80% Jews) completed self-report questionnaires, including Cope, state anxiety and state anger in their free time during the period of November 2010 to January 2011. Significant differences were revealed among Jewish and Arab teachers in usage of coping strategies. Although both Jews and Arabs used mostly “problem solving” strategies, Jewish teachers used these strategies more compared to their Jewish counter-parts, while Arab teachers used more “emotional coping” and “disengagement” strategies. The relationships between the different coping strategies and stress reactions were mostly in the same direction for both groups. However, the strengths of the relationships were significantly different. The obtained variance of anxiety and anger by coping strategies was greater among Jewish teachers than among their Arabs counterparts. The results are discussed in relationship to the Stress and Coping Theory of Lazarus and Folkman. Emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of each culture and how each culture translates interaction with stressful situations into coping strategies.

Keywords: coping; cultural groups; special education children; teachers.

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Introduction

Teaching is one of the most stressful professions worldwide [1]. Research on teacher stress has shown that the teachers who suffer the most stress tend to be those who are less tolerant of their students [2] and who have poorer relationships with students who they perceive as challenging [3, 4]. As result, the students who have conflicted relationships with their teachers are those who have problems adjusting to, and achieving within, the school context [5]. A recent review has shown that teachers suffering from high stress levels harbor more negative emotions toward their students than their colleagues with less stress, and those emotions invariably impair their ability to extend to their students the support they need [6]. Therefore, it is important to explore the stressful situation of enrolling special education students in general education with no teacher assistance and the coping strategies that may enable the teachers to successfully contend with this challenging situation.

Thus, the aim of this study was to explore the ways teachers cope with this potentially stressful situation of teaching – in general education – special education children who get some assistance through special integration programs in their schools but no additional assistance in their home room classes. We compared usage of coping strategies in two cultural groups of teachers – Jews and Arabs – and investigated how the different coping strategies explain stress reactions of state anxiety and state anger in the two cultures in the context of this special situation.

Coping strategies across cultures

Research of cultural influences on coping behavior is sparse and not conclusive. Relatively few studies have compared coping across cultures [7, 8]. Much of the research has been done in two or more countries and has assumed cross-cultural universality of coping behavior. However, in neglecting cultural influences one might miss a full understanding of behaviors, emotions and cognitions [8]. In Israel, most studies that addressed

the issue of coping across cultures dealt with political violence [9, 10].

A recent review [11], aimed to understand differences in coping among Christians and Muslims and emphasized the collectivist vs. individualistic paradigm. To this end, the authors suggested differences between more Westernized cultures and traditional collectivist cultures where Muslims as the “collectivists” use more intrapersonal coping and turn more to strategies such as prayer and improving relationships as opposed to the “individualistics” who will use more interpersonal and cognitive coping [7, 11, 12]. Findings from a study on Jewish (westernized-individualistic) and Arab (traditional-collectivist) societies [13] are inconclusive. One study supported this suggestion and showed that coping strategies might also have different meanings in different cultures, for example, sharing feelings was found to be related to higher distress only for Jews but not for Arabs [14]; another study showed similar usage of coping as well as a similar explanation of stress reactions by coping [15].

More investigation is needed in different contexts to find out how coping strategies affect stress reactions among Jews and Arabs in various settings.

Stress reactions: anxiety and anger

Teaching is a stressful occupation typified by numerous and often conflicting demands from administrators, colleagues, students and parents. Additionally, teachers must contend with chronic work overload, policies that are constantly shifting and the realization that recognition for their accomplishments is not guaranteed [16]. The negative emotions evoked by their work experiences is defined as teachers’ stress [17], which may ultimately result in burnout, depression, poor performance, absenteeism, low levels of job satisfaction and, eventually, the decision to leave the profession [18, 19].

Studies that compared individuals who are part of a majority with minority members, suggest that minority members are more vulnerable to distress [20, 21]. However, when examining teachers in the context of schools and special education children, Jewish and Arab teachers have shown no differences in their related stress – anxiety and anger [22]. Thus it seems that as opposed to checking for the level of stress, it is important to investigate which coping strategies are assets in each culture, meaning to check which coping strategies assist Jewish and/or Arab teachers in reducing stress in the background of teaching special education children in their general education.

Research background

Special needs children who are integrated in general education are a common phenomena and part of the general education system in Israel [23]. The goal of the integration/inclusion programs is to fit these children into general education while emphasizing a “normal” curriculum. Within the integration/inclusion setting, the student receives some aid outside the regular class, but most of his/her studying takes place in the general education where he/she receives no extra help. The modification of curriculum for each student is by identifying the needs of each student according to their disability and accommodating the learning in accordance with the individual’s educational needs [24]. Usually, these are students with a variety of learning disabilities. These special needs children are entitled for financial support from the government. More specifically, 7.2% of the entire Israeli population is entitled for this kind of support. In the present study we compare teachers from Jewish and Arab systems, and it is important to note that among the Arab population, the entitlement percentages are even higher than the national average [25, 26].

Jews and Arabs in Israel

Israel is a culturally diverse society whose majority group comprises Jews while minority groups constitute about 25% of the state’s population. Among the minority groups, 84% are Muslim Arabs. The division between the state’s Jewish citizens and its minority groups is reflected in religion, culture, national identity and socioeconomic status, to name but a few [27].

Jews: Diversity in Israel is expressed not only through the variety of ethnicities that constitute the country’s overall population, but also within the Jewish majority, in which a large proportion of whose members came from outside Israel. For example, more than 30% immigrated to Israel from other places around the world, and a third of the population defines itself as “traditional” (i.e. religious “lite”), whereas another third is religious or very religious [28]. Overall, Jewish society is considered a “Western”, individualistic society [13].

Arab Muslims: Arab Muslims in Israel are an ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural and national minority. Although today they are, in general, more exposed to the “outside world” and becoming more modernized, they are still a collectivist, traditional society [13]. They share language, culture, identity, history, collective memory,

narratives and loyalty with Palestinian nationalism and pan-Arabism. In the eyes of the Jewish majority and the Jewish state, therefore, this minority group is potentially hostile because they are part of the Arab world, which includes the Palestinian people, and as such, they constitute an inassimilable minority [29].

In accordance with the research goals the following research questions were formulated:

1. Do Jewish and Arab teachers use different coping strategies when dealing with special education children in their general education?
2. Are there relationships between the different coping strategies and stress reactions of anxiety and anger?
3. Which strategies will explain state anxiety and state anger in the different groups?

Methods

Participants

Six hundred and thirty-four teachers participated in this study, of whom 71.5% teach in elementary schools and 28.5% teach in middle/high schools. The sample consisted of teachers with ages in the range of 21–62 years ($M=37.39$; $SD=9.58$); 80.7% were female, and 80% were Jewish. A majority (77.7%) of them reported having graduated from a college of education and overall, 82% of the teachers hold an academic degree. Teachers reported that the number of special education children in their total general education ranged from 1 to 43 ($M=7.93$; $SD=6.42$).

Procedure

All ethical procedures applicable to this study were followed. As required by the Israeli Ministry of Education, the research proposal and questionnaires were sent to the Office of the Central Scientist, and the questionnaires were approved before the study began. After fulfilling the requirements set by the Ministry of Education and receiving its approval to proceed with the study, we received permission from the principals to enter the schools. Teachers completed the self-report questionnaires in their free time during November 2010 to January 2011. The participants were informed that the researcher was interested in their experience of teaching special education children who get some help in school through a special integration program but who receive no additional assistance in the regular class. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire: Teachers were asked to report their ethnicity, gender, age, number of years teaching, number of classes taught and number of special education children in their classes.

Additionally, they were asked to report whether they graduated from a college of education or from a university, their level of education (three levels – no academic degree, BA or Bed, MA/MED or PhD) and in which type of school they were teaching, elementary or middle/high school, at the time of the survey.

State anxiety: State anxiety was assessed using the Hebrew version of Spielberger et al.'s [30] State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). The questionnaire is designed to fit different situations. The opening statement of this questionnaire: “When you think about special education children who study in your classes in regular education....”. The Hebrew version is a translation of the English STAI. It has proved to be a reliable and valid equivalent to the English inventory [31]. State anxiety scores were evaluated using the mean score of the relevant 11 items from the 20-item inventory of the STAI (on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 4). Examples for items include: I feel peaceful, I am afraid of disasters, I am worried. Cronbach's alpha was 0.89 for Jews and 0.82 for Arabs.

State anger [30]: The Hebrew translation [31] was used to assess anger. The questionnaire is designed to fit different situations. The opening statement of this questionnaire: “When you think about special education children who study in your classes in regular education....”. The Hebrew translation has proved to be a reliable and valid equivalent of the English language State Anger Inventory [31]. This scale comprises six items on a four-point Likert scale. Examples of inventory items include: I am angry, I want to scream at someone, I feel frustrated, etc. The mean score was used, and Cronbach's alpha reliability was 0.86 for Jews and 0.81 for Arabs.

COPE [32]: COPE comprises 60 items on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1, usually don't do it at all, to 4, usually do it a lot. The questionnaire is designed to fit different situations. The opening statement of this questionnaire: “When you think about special education children who study in your classes in regular education....”. The COPE items are divided into 13 subscales, with 4 items each. The sum of each four items is used to create the subscales. The authors differentiated between three general dimensions: (1) problem-focused coping: active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping and instrumental social support; (2) emotion-focused coping: positive reinterpretation, acceptance, denial, turning to religion, emotional social support; and (3) disengagement-focused coping: behavioral disengagement, emotional disengagement, focus on and venting of emotions, drug and alcohol use. Due to restrictions made by the Central Scientist Committee in the Ministry of Education, we did not use the scale of “drug and alcohol use”. We used the mean of each four (or three) scales to create the three general coping dimensions (scales). The reliabilities of the three general scales are as follows: problem solving, Jews $\alpha=0.85$, Arabs $\alpha=0.81$; emotional coping, Jews $\alpha=0.76$, Arabs $\alpha=0.67$; disengagement coping, Jews $\alpha=0.81$, Arabs $\alpha=0.72$.

Results

The first question was examined by t-test. Results are presented in Table 1 and show that both groups used mostly

Table 1: Differences in coping strategies among Jewish and Arab teachers.

	Jews		Arabs		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
Problem solving	11.17	1.89	10.42	1.83	3.89 ^a
Emotional coping	9.50	1.55	10.11	1.56	-3.88 ^a
Disengagement coping	7.40	2.05	8.66	2.13	-5.93 ^a

^ap<0.001.

problem solving strategies. However, while Jewish teachers used more problem solving coping compared to their Arab counter-parts, Arab teachers used more emotional and disengagement coping.

The second question was examined by Pearson correlations and results show significant correlations among all variables (Table 2). Although correlations are low, results show negative links between problem solving or emotional coping and state anxiety or state anger. Disengagement coping show positive and strong correlation with state anxiety or anger.

To examine the third question, interactions between group (Jews/Arabs) and each of the coping scales were created. Then, the three coping scales and the three interactions were entered in a stepwise regression for each of the dependent variables, state anxiety and state anger. Problem solving was insignificant in explaining state anxiety or state anger. Disengagement coping was significant in explaining anxiety with 17.5% ($\beta=0.42$, $p=0$), and emotional coping was significant in explaining anxiety with 1.6% ($\beta=-0.15$, $p=0$). Additionally, the interaction of group X emotional coping ($\beta=-0.25$, $p=0$) was significant in explaining anxiety. Thus moderation effect for the dependent variable, anxiety, was established. A different regression analysis for each group (Jews and Arabs) was run with emotional coping as an independent variable. For Jews, emotional coping explained anxiety with 1.1% ($\beta=-0.10$, $p=0.02$), whereas for Arabs emotional coping was not significant in explaining anxiety ($\beta=-0.07$, $p=0.42$).

Table 2: Pearson correlation among the study's variable.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. State anxiety	-	0.72 ^a	-0.11 ^b	-0.11 ^b	0.42 ^a
2. State anger		-	-0.13 ^b	-0.10 ^c	0.47 ^a
3. Problem solving			-	0.52 ^a	-0.08 ^c
4. Emotional coping				-	0.27 ^b
5. Disengagement coping					-

^ap<0.001, ^bp<0.01, ^cp<0.05.

A similar procedure took place for state anger. Of all the variables entered, disengagement coping ($\beta=0.93$, $p=0$) and emotional coping ($\beta=-0.37$, $p=0$) were significant in explaining anger with 23% and 1.6%, respectively. Additionally interactions of group X emotional coping ($\beta=-0.37$, $p=0.02$) and group X disengagement coping ($\beta=-0.65$, $p=0$) were significant in explaining anger as well. Thus, different regressions were run for each group with emotional and disengagement coping as independent variables. For Jews, emotional coping explained 1.9% ($\beta=-0.29$, $p=0$), and disengagement coping explained 31.4% ($\beta=0.58$, $p=0$); For Arabs, emotional coping explained 3.7%, but was not significant ($\beta=0.10$, $p=0.20$), and disengagement coping explained 25% ($\beta=0.51$, $p=0$) of the variance.

Discussion

This study investigated how regular teachers cope with the adversity of teaching special education children in their general education classes. These teachers are regular teachers in regular schools who integrate special education children to their classes with no aid in the classroom. The research had several central aims. First, we wanted to compare two groups of teachers, Jewish and Arab, in their ways of coping with this adversity. The second aim was to find out if the different coping strategies are linked to stress reactions of anxiety and anger. The last aim was to examine if the different coping strategies explain anxiety and anger (stress reactions) in the same way for both cultural groups (Jews and Arabs).

The findings show that Jewish teachers used mostly problem solving strategies, whereas Arab teachers used mostly both problem solving and emotional coping strategies. Moreover, the two groups differed significantly from each other. Jews used more problem solving strategies, Arabs used more emotional coping and disengagement coping compared to their Jewish counterparts. These findings could be explained on the cultural background of each group. The Arab culture is a more traditional and collectivist oriented. Part of being a collectivist society is the strong affiliation of a person with its society [11]. Moreover this is a more religious culture compared to the Jewish-Israeli secular western culture. All these characteristics are expressed by different types of coping such as turning to religion, emotional support and acceptance, which are part of the emotional coping dimension in this study. The Jewish Israeli teachers, in turn, belong to a more western culture where cognitive restructuring and

cognitive reframing [11], which make up the “problem solving” dimension in this study, are used more.

The second question related to the relationships between the different coping dimensions and the stress reactions of anxiety and anger. We found that disengagement coping is strongly linked to more anxiety and anger, thus having an adverse effect, but the protective effect of problem solving and emotional coping is weak. These types of relationships between problem solving or disengagement coping and stress reactions replicate previous studies that found similar links [15, 33]. However, the negative link between emotional coping and anxiety or anger for both groups is more puzzling. Previous studies such as [14] found such results only in Arab society. It could be that different measures that are used across studies could result in such findings. Whereas other measures of coping include in their emotional dimensions items such as: worry, wish for a miracle, let off steam, etc. [34] which are linked to negative consequences in this study, the measure of emotional coping include items of positive reinterpretation that could contribute to the negative link of negative consequences such as anxiety and anger. Additionally, the emotional dimension included items of acceptance and emotional support in which in this specific situation of teaching special education children could be of asset.

Our last question related to the explanation of anxiety and anger by the different coping dimensions in the different groups. Despite the statistically significant differences that were found across groups, the similarities seem to be greater. First, problem solving strategies of being active, planning, acting with restraint or instrumental social support do not seem to be an asset in reducing emotional distress in the context of teaching special education children in general education. This is in contrast to other contexts such as political violence where problem solving strategies were found to have protective effects [15, 34]. These findings call for further examination. Thus, these strategies should be explored as explanatory factors of other variables such as job satisfaction or life quality, which might be affected by them.

The second dimension of strategies, disengagement coping was the strongest factor in explaining anxiety and anger for both groups (it was stronger among Jews). For both Jews and Arabs, this set of strategies explained anger with more variance. These results could be interpreted by the strategies that constitute this dimension. Those teachers who disengage, behaviorally and/or emotionally, and those who are occupied with venting emotions are those who also become angry and anxious in a complex and potentially conflicted situation. It seems that dealing directly with the situation and not giving

up or finding ways that deconstruct one from the issue/problem are ways to handle the situation more effectively. The other ways, although intended to decrease stress have the opposite results.

The last set of strategies, emotional coping, had the most surprising affect on stress reactions. Overall, previous studies have found emotional coping to have a negative affect [34], however in this study we found this set of strategies to be negatively linked to anxiety, thus having a protective effect for both cultures – Jews and Arabs. Once again, the context and measure seem to make the difference. In the present study, emotional coping consists of strategies such as positive reinterpretation, acceptance and emotional support, which can be an asset when teaching special education children in general education with no aid. By accepting the situation as is and looking at the bright side of it by positive interpretation one could gain strength and thus react with less anxiety.

Study limitations

A proper assessment of the research and practical implications of this study requires acknowledging certain limitations and drawing conclusions that can be translated into future avenues for research. First, as all data are self-reports, the extent to which teachers’ experiences of stress and difficulties converge with external observations remains to be investigated. Although self-reports are generally reliable, an assessment may benefit from multiple-informant evaluations. As a rule, the multi-informant paradigm facilitates a better evaluation of the psychological difficulties across different environments [35, 36].

Second, in the absence of a base rate for participant mental health indicators prior to the study period, we cannot state with certainty whether the observed outcomes are due solely to the impact of teaching special education children in a regular classroom with no additional teaching assistance. This finding suggests that longitudinal designs better suited to evaluating cause-effect relations must be developed. Furthermore, a qualitative section that will include interviewing a number of teachers from both groups may contribute to additional insights into teachers’ stress.

Conclusion

To summarize, this study was an attempt to explore the ways of coping of regular teachers who teach special

education children in general education and schools. These teachers get no extra help in their classes so that they have to cope independently with this complex and conflictual situation every hour they teach. We compared two cultural groups, Jews and Arabs, and found that although both groups used mostly problem solving strategies, when comparing the groups, Jews used more problem solving, whereas Arabs used more emotional and disengagement coping. Furthermore, despite differences across cultures in usage of coping strategies and strength of relationships between coping and stress reactions, the overall direction of links is similar. Disengagement coping was found to have an adverse effect, and emotional coping was found to have a protective effect. These results show the need for further research in other cultures to find out if usage of these coping strategies among teachers from diverse cultures in the context of “teaching special education children in general education with no aid” have similar effects. Furthermore, other socio-demographic descriptors, such as religious observance, location in Israel and type of school (elementary, middle, high) not investigated here should be investigated in future research. Indeed, the increased numbers of special education children arriving in regular classrooms with no additional teaching assistance call for future prevention efforts and intervention programs. These results could help intervene with all teachers to facilitate appropriate coping strategies to deal with this situation and handle it optimally.

Conflict of interest statement: There is no conflict of interest.

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