



PRAYER and Its Role in Mitigating Stress

By Robin LaBarbera and June Hetzel

The “Spiritual Lives of Teachers” study (Hetzel and Costillo 2013/2014), conducted in May 2013 with a sample of 1,509 Christian educators in 38 countries, hypothesized that the spiritual discipline of prayer would have an association with job satisfaction and longevity among Christian educators. A subsample of 916 international ACSI educators reported significant sources of stress in their work, yet they also reported high levels of job satisfaction. To explain this, the researchers hypothesized that practicing the discipline of prayer helped participants mitigate their perceived stress. Statistical analysis revealed a significant relationship between frequency of prayer and job satisfaction, providing support for the hypothesis.

Literature Review

Stress

Perceived sources of stress in the teaching field, and associated negative outcomes, have been investigated extensively in educational psychology literature (Akpochafo 2012; Chan and Hui 1995; Chaplain 2008; Forlin 2001; Klassen and Chiu 2010; Kyriacou 2001). Stress, “essentially viewed as a negative emotional experience being triggered by the teacher’s perception that [his or her] work situation constitute[s] a threat to [his or her] self-esteem or well-being” (Kyriacou 2001, 28), can contribute to physical illness, burnout, anxiety, frustration,

anger, depression, and reduced job satisfaction, and it can ultimately result in teachers’ intentions to leave the field entirely (Chaplain 2008; Kyriacou 2001; McCarthy et al. 2010; Richards 2012). Clearly, stress can have adverse health consequences.

Researchers have identified three significant sources of stress among education professionals: administrative stress, classroom-based stress, and relational challenges. Administrative stressors, such as high workload, insufficient planning time, and lack of general support from school administrators have been reported (Akpochafo 2012; Chaplain 2008; Forlin 2001; Klassen and Chiu 2010; Kyriacou 2001; McCarthy et al. 2010). A second source of stress is classroom-based, related to direct contact with students, such as dealing with large class size (Akpochafo 2012) or having students who seem to lack motivation or demonstrate disciplinary challenges (Forlin 2001; Kyriacou 2001; Pang 2012; Richards 2012; Van der Wolf and Everaert 2003). Jan Richards found that teaching students with significant academic, social, emotional, psychological, or behavioral needs, without sufficient support, contributed to teacher stress (2012). Relationship difficulties are the third source of stress reported in the literature. Issues such as parent-teacher tension, excessive parent meetings, and meeting parent expectations were reported in Chris Forlin’s research, in which 82 percent

of participants indicated that they were challenged with meeting parents' expectations for their children (2001).

Prayer and Mental Health

The literature clearly demonstrates an association between the role of prayer and participants' perceived well-being in a number of studies involving a variety of occupations. James Kleffman, for example, provides a report of how an Army chaplain found *peace* amidst the stress of active duty through *centering prayer* (1987). Edward Gray, a physician, found prayer to be an effective *coping strategy* for the stress of working with cancer patients (2004). Paul Lawson, an Episcopal priest, asserts that the spiritual practice of daily *meditative prayer* can help clergy and congregations deal with stress (2001). Prayers have also been linked to *lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms* in research reports (Pérez et al. 2011; Pössel et al. 2014; Wachholtz and Sambamthoori 2013).

Results of ACSI Study

Despite reports citing teachers as among the most highly stressed professionals, many teachers still thrive in teaching. It is probable that the practice of prayer plays a significant role in mitigating the stress that educators might experience. Our initial analysis of stress in the lives of ACSI teachers indicated significant levels of stress, categorized into four themes: administrative work, classroom-based stressors, parent relationships, and coworker relationships (Hetzl and Costillo 2013/2014). Participants also reported high levels of job satisfaction, which the researchers hypothesized could be attributed to the role of prayer in participants' lives.

Sources of Stress

The most reported source of stress for ACSI educators was related to *administrative work*, mentioned by 52 percent in this survey. Comments like the following reveal difficulties with completing teaching-related tasks: "Deadlines, paperwork, grading—that causes me the most stress" (male teacher, grades 9–12, Cambodia). Similarly, another teacher commented, "There is never enough time to get everything done. It's always the busyness and the meetings that bring the stress" (female, grades 4–6, United States).

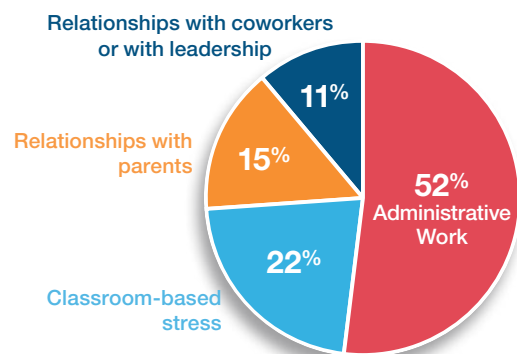
The second highest source of stress for ACSI participants was *classroom-based stress*, mentioned by 22 percent of the educators. Participants made statements about contributors to stress, such as, "When I explain something

several times and the students make little or no effort in trying to understand the concepts" (male, grades 9–12, United States). A participant from Ukraine (female, grades 7–8) said, "I don't like it when kids don't pay attention to my words, and even though I'm a teacher they sometimes treat me as their peer." Several teachers mentioned their greatest stress comes from "dealing with students who do not do well academically, do not care or try, and consistently are disrespectful in class" (female, grades 9–12, Canada).

Challenging *relationships with parents* emerged as the third highest response, reported by 15 percent of ACSI participants. One respondent described "unfounded and/or unjust parent complaints" as a source of stress (male, grades 9–12, United States). Another participant phrased it this way: "Parents are making greater demands on educators to 'fix' their children's problems" (female, grades 4–6, Ecuador).

Among the participants, 11 percent reported difficult *relationships with coworkers or with leadership* as the fourth most reported source of stress. One teacher commented, "School leadership [is] being unsupportive and not empathetic" (male, grades 7–12, Indonesia).

Most Reported Source of Stress for ACSI Educators



"Deadlines, paperwork, grading—that causes me the most stress." —male, grades 9–12, Cambodia

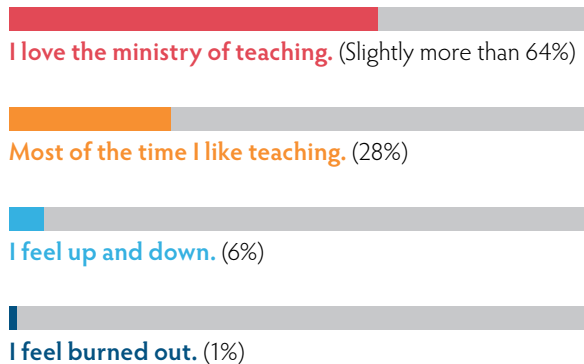
"There is never enough time to get everything done. It's always the busyness and the meetings that bring the stress." —female, grades 4–6, United States

Job Satisfaction

In this ACSI investigation, teachers were asked the dependent variable, “Which of the following statements most accurately describes how you feel right now as a teacher?” Participants responded by indicating either (1) “I love the ministry of teaching. I know this is my calling. I plan on being in teaching, as God leads, for my full career”; (2) “Most of the time I like teaching. Even though some days are challenging, overall, I like the students and the teaching process”; (3) “I feel up and down. Some days are happy teaching; some days are very frustrating. I often think about a change of job”; or (4) “I feel burned out, frustrated, and ready to quit my job.” Nine hundred thirty-six participants responded to this question. (However, overall data analysis in the current study was based on the 916 participants who responded to *all* of the key questions in the current investigation). Results of the 936 responses to the question of job satisfaction are reported below.

Which of the following statements most accurately describes how you feel right now as a teacher?

Answered: 936 Skipped: 620



Slightly more than 64 percent of Christian educators in this study love the ministry of teaching and plan on being in teaching for their full career, even with the significant sources of stress they experience. Twenty-eight percent of educators in this sample like their jobs most of the time, 6 percent feel “up and down,” and only 1 percent feel burned out and ready to quit.

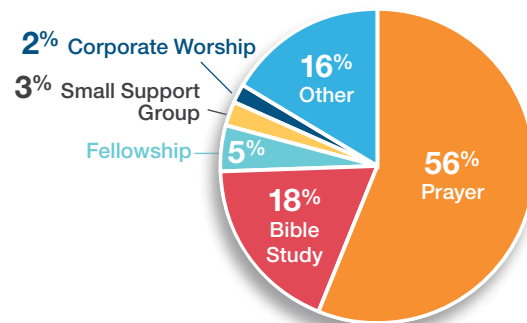
There were no statistical differences in job satisfaction data according to gender, number of years in an educational position, or total number of years employed as an educator.

Spiritual Disciplines

Participants were asked to identify the first most important spiritual discipline that supports their ministry as a Christian educator. Out of a list of 22 disciplines, such as prayer, fellowship, individual worship, corporate worship, rest, solitude, and so on, the majority of respondents (56 percent) indicated that prayer was their most important spiritual discipline.

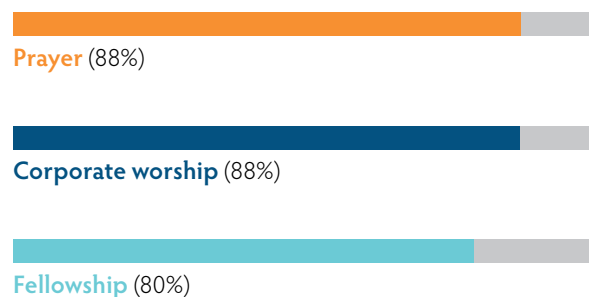
Identify the first most important spiritual discipline that supports your ministry as a Christian educator.

From a list of 22 disciplines, the top-ranking disciplines were as follows:



Participants were also asked, “With what frequency do you practice the following disciplines?” Participants reported that the most regularly practiced discipline was prayer (88 percent of participants reported that they regularly practice this discipline), followed by corporate worship (88 percent of participants reported that they regularly practice this discipline), and fellowship (80 percent of participants reported that they regularly practice this discipline).

With what frequency do you practice the following disciplines?



Given the high percentage of participants who regularly practice prayer, this data was used in subsequent statistical analysis.

Table 1: Most Important Spiritual Discipline

Discipline	%	Frequency
Prayer	56%	Regularly: 88% Sometimes: 12% Never: 0%
Bible Study (Individual or Group)	18%	Individual Bible Study Regularly: 57% Sometimes: 41% Never: 2% Group Bible Study Regularly: 48% Sometimes: 43% Never: 9%
Fellowship	5%	Regularly: 80% Sometimes: 19% Never: 1%
Small Support Group	3%	Regularly: 39% Sometimes: 42% Never: 19%
Corporate Worship	2%	Regularly: 88% Sometimes: 10% Never: 2%
Other	16%	

n=916



The Role of Prayer

To answer the question of whether prayer helped to mitigate perceived levels of stress and increase participants' sense of job satisfaction, a one-way ANOVA was calculated. The results revealed a statistically significant relationship between frequency of prayer and loving the ministry of teaching ($F(3,912) = 5.433, p = .001$). A Turkey post-hoc test revealed that participants were statistically more likely to love the ministry of teaching when they prayed more frequently, compared with the group who reported liking their jobs most of the time ($1.18, p = .000$). In other words, the frequency with which participants practiced prayer seemed to have a significant role in helping participants deal with the stress experienced in their job.

Conclusion and Summary

This investigation of teacher stress and its relationship to spiritual disciplines, a subcomponent of the "Spiritual Lives of Teachers" study (Hetzl and Costillo 2013/2014), identified four categories of stress for Christian educators. The first is that of a teacher's administrative work. Results of the current study are consistent with the findings reported in previous investigations that attributed a high workload to increased stress (Akpochofo 2012; Chaplain 2008; Forlin 2001; Klassen and Chiu 2010; Kyriacou 2001; McCarthy et al. 2010). Results of the current study revealed the second most stressful category to be related to student needs or behaviors. Participant reports of feeling overwhelmed with meeting diverse student needs were consistent with data from other studies (Forlin 2001; McCarthy et al. 2010; Richards 2012). Findings related to challenging student behaviors in the current analysis are similar to those of Kyriacou (2001) and Richards (2012), who cited challenges with maintaining student discipline as sources of stress, and with those of Brown, Davis, and Johnson (2002); Pang (2012); and Van der Wolf and Everaert (2003). Challenging relationships with parents, coworkers, and even headmasters emerged as the third and fourth most stress-inducing work-related issues in this study, similar to Forlin's (2001) and Akpochofo's (2012) research.

Sixty-four percent of participants in the current study, despite reports of stress, remain fully committed to their teaching role and plan to stay in the profession throughout the remainder of their career. Similar to findings of other studies (Ferguson, Willemsen, and Castañeto 2010; Lawson 2001; Oman and Driskill 2003), levels of stress

seem to be ameliorated by the practice of prayer in the current study. As one participant explained, “Always ask God to direct you to the support for your particular need. He will!” (female preschool administrator, United States).

Consistent with our hypothesis, prayer served to ameliorate stress among participants in our sample. Data analysis revealed a significant relationship between the frequency with which participants prayed and their perceived job satisfaction, as demonstrated in a one-way ANOVA analysis (LaBarbera and Hetzel, in review). This study indicates that those who prayed more frequently were more likely to see teaching as a calling and to remain in the profession for their full career. Findings are compatible

with those of several other investigations (Eaken 2003; Ferguson, Willemsen, and Castañeto 2010; Kleffman 1987; Lawson 2001; Oman and Driskill 2003; Wong 2005). As one elementary teacher in the United States reflected on 1 Thessalonians 5:17, she wisely acknowledged the constancy of prayer in the life of a Christian teacher, “I never thought I could pray without ceasing. I didn’t really know what that was until I became ... a teacher.” And her colleague across the world in Indonesia wisely concurred, recognizing the centrality of prayer in the teaching ministry: “Prayer is everything in this ministry. By the grace of God, I am growing in my prayer life. Prayer [makes] me depend on God more than myself, thus [the] less stress[ed] I become” (male, grades 9–12).



Think It Over

1. Which of the following statements most accurately describes how you feel right now as a teacher?
 - a. I love the ministry of teaching. I know this is my calling. I plan on being in teaching, as God leads, for my full career.
 - b. Most of the time I like teaching. Even though some days are challenging, overall, I like the students and the teaching process.
 - c. I feel up and down. Some days are happy teaching; some days are very frustrating. I often think about a change of job.
 - d. I feel burned out, frustrated, and ready to quit my job.
2. How is stress affecting your educational ministry, family life, or sense of internal well-being?
3. What is your first impulse when experiencing stress in the classroom? Is it to try to take care of the problem yourself? Or is it frustration, anger, or despair?
4. How might you reorder the habits of your heart to make your first response to stress be that of prayer?
5. How do you practice “prayer without ceasing” in the context of your educational ministry?
6. Who might you pray with regularly at school to help keep you accountable to a life of prayer as one way to mitigate stress and keep you on track spiritually?

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*For further detail and expanded statistical analyses, see LaBarbera and Hetzel's article, "Perceived Sources of Stress and Coping Strategies Among Educators," currently under review with the *Journal of Religion and Health*.

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