

Is Special Education Teaching in Ireland Stressful? Coping with Work-related Stress

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Natalie is a recent graduate from MIE where she completed a Master of Education Studies (Leadership in Christian Education). Since completing an undergraduate degree in Art, Craft and Design Education in 1995, Natalie has continued her academic studies with a Higher Diploma in ICT for Education, a Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs and a Graduate Certificate in the Education of Pupils on the Autism Spectrum. Currently a practicing post-primary Special Education Teacher, Natalie is also a part-time associate working with the Level 1/Level 2 Learning Program Team with JCT. Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) is a continuing professional development (CPD) support service of the Department of Education and Skills. Natalie founded the Facebook group 'Special Education Teachers Ireland Supporting Each Other' in 2017 in response to an emerging need for an accessible peer support network helping Irish SET share their extensive knowledge, skills and values as and when needed.

KEYWORDS: SET, stress, Special Education, work-related, coping

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a larger piece of research conducted for a Masters Dissertation titled "An exploration of the association of religious faith in coping with work-related stress among special education teachers in Ireland." The original piece researched three main elements; work-related stress (WRS) among Irish Special Education Teachers (SET), how they coped with WRS and how those with faith used it as a method to cope with WRS. This article focuses solely on the first aspect and explores the concept of work-related stress, discussing whether Irish SETs relate to the concept and identify possible causes of WRS.

Recent surveys of the teaching population have identified work-related stress as an increasing aspect of teacher professional life in Ireland (ASTI, 2018; Bolton, 2015; Buckley et al., 2017; Darmody & Smyth, 2011; National Principals' Forum, 2019). One participant in this research describes how work-related stress has affected her: 'I had a mini-breakdown - lots of tears - with my principal about this before Christmas. Although he doesn't fully understand, he was sympathetic and took it on board. He told me afterwards he was almost frightened by how stressed I was' (Participant 1, February 15, 2020).

SETs in Ireland provide individualised teaching to students- addressing specific needs, teaching small groups or working as team-teachers with a class teacher (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017a). They often have extra training and are responsible for the planning and coordination of resources. A significant amount of their time can be spent collaborating with other professionals to create individualised learning plans specifying priority areas and interventions needed.

Stress can occur if perceptions of these duties result in the SET feeling unable to cope. Stress impacts physical and mental health, family life, relationships and workplaces through reduced morale, absenteeism and high job turnover (Russell et al., 2018, p. xii). Conversely, teachers who do not feel stressed are more likely to have effective classroom practices, improve their teaching, positively impact student achievement and are less likely to leave teaching (Cancio et al., 2018, p. 476).

Research concerning stress has been carried out on certain groups within the teacher population, such as principals and post-primary teachers (Buckley et al., 2017; Darmody & Smyth, 2011; Kerr et al., 1998). The population of SETs is rapidly expanding (Donohue, 2020), and it is possible that SETs may be experiencing more work-related stress than the typical mainstream teachers due to the rapid change in special education in Ireland. To date, no study has looked explicitly at identifying work-related stressors among SETs in Ireland's schools.

The aim of this research was to identify if work-related stress exists among SETs, and if it does exist, capture baseline data describing the issue. Using an exploratory mixed-methods approach, qualitative data was collected utilising a guided journaling group who explored personal accounts of WRS from Irish SETs in a range of settings. The resulting data informed an online survey where quantitative data was collected to explore the emerging themes with a larger sample.

CONTEXT

Fitzgerald and Radford refer to Irish special education as a “rapidly transforming educational landscape” under “constant re-construction” (2017, p. 453). There has been a dramatic increase in the number of students with special educational needs attending mainstream schools, resulting in an expansion of resources such as special needs assistants (SNAs), special classes and SETs (Banks & McCoy, 2017). Having additional teachers does not necessarily mean extra specialised teachers. Currently, teachers employed as SETs do not need specific training - they simply need to be a registered teacher.

The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) defines WRS as “stress caused or made worse by work” and more specifically “when a person perceives the work environment in such a way that his or her reaction involves feelings of an inability to cope. It may be caused by perceived / real pressures / deadlines / threats / anxieties within the working environment” (2016, p. 6). It is important to note the perception of the individual experiencing stress is central to the definition of stress. “It is a state characterised by high levels of arousal and distress and often by feelings of not coping” (Levi, 1999, p. v). Employers in Ireland have a legal duty to ensure the demands placed on their employees at work are reasonable (Health and Safety Authority, 2016, p. 11). Determining what is ‘reasonable’ can be complex as the source of stress on particular teachers will vary depending on their personality, values, skills and circumstances (Kyriacou, 2001). School management teams who wish to keep competent SETs need to encourage and support them in minimising and alleviating stress factors (Cancio et al., 2018).

Stressors are based on “the precise characteristics of national educational systems, the precise circumstances of teachers and schools in those countries and the prevailing attitudes and values regarding teachers and schools held in society as a whole” (Kyriacou, 2001). Kyriacou notes the need for research on teacher stress will constantly be there, as schools undergo periods of change in curriculum content, assessment and teaching methodologies (2001). Kyriacou maintains that research can inform governments and policymakers on the impact educational reforms have on teacher stress (Kyriacou, 2001). This research aims to identify common stressors experienced by Irish SETs with the aim of informing policy makers on current trends.

Used as a noun, ‘stress’ can refer to the physiological response to a stimulus or the stimulus itself. Used as a verb, ‘stress’ can describe the experience of going through a stressful event. Stress is “an emergent process that involves interactions between individual and environmental factors, historical and current events, allostatic states, and psychological and

physiological reactivity” (Epel et al., 2018, p. 146). A ‘stressor’ refers to the cause, trigger, event, or stimulus resulting in a stressful experience (Epel et al., 2018).

Lazarus and Folkman presented a theory of coping and stress in their 1984 seminal text, *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*. Much current research refers back to the staged process, illustrated in Figure 1.

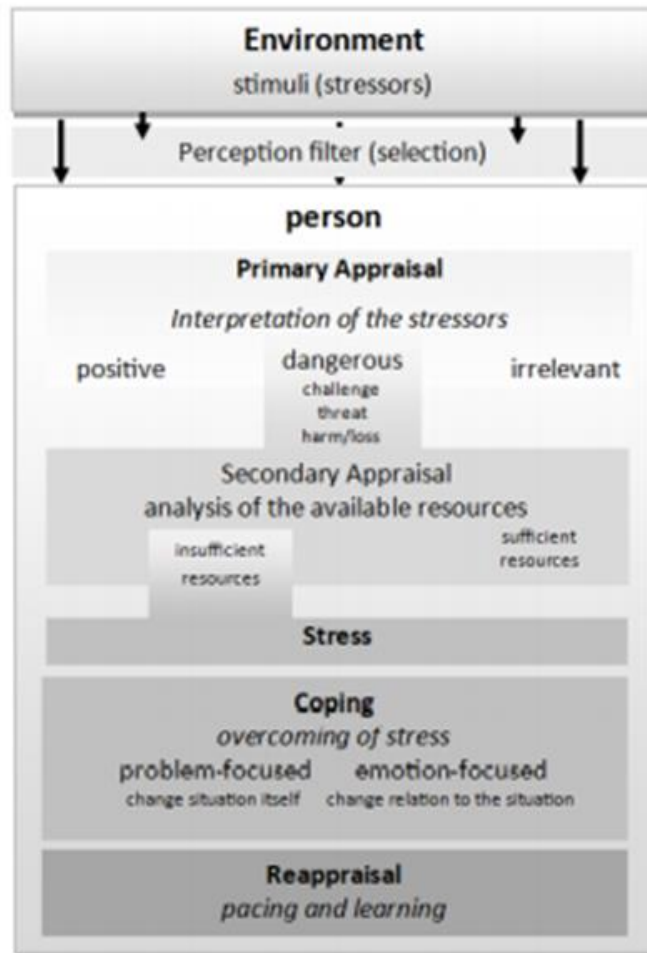


Figure 1 Transactional model of stress and coping, redrawn from *Stress, appraisal and coping*, by Lazarus and Folkman, 1984

The model shows stress as a process; the environment (in the form of stressors) affects a person who experiences the event through their perception filter. The ‘transaction’ happens between the environment and the person, each affecting the other “in a dynamic, mutually reciprocal, bidirectional relationship” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 293). The person interprets the stressor as positive, irrelevant or dangerous. If dangerous, a second appraisal is experienced, where they examine their capacity to deal with the stressor. If they conclude they have insufficient resources to deal with the stressors, stress results.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach (described in Figure 2) using a guided reflective journaling group to gather qualitative data, followed by an online survey (using Microsoft Forms) collecting primarily quantitative data. This mixed-method research allowed for the collection of numbers and stories, the combination of which are often required by policymakers (Creswell, 2012).

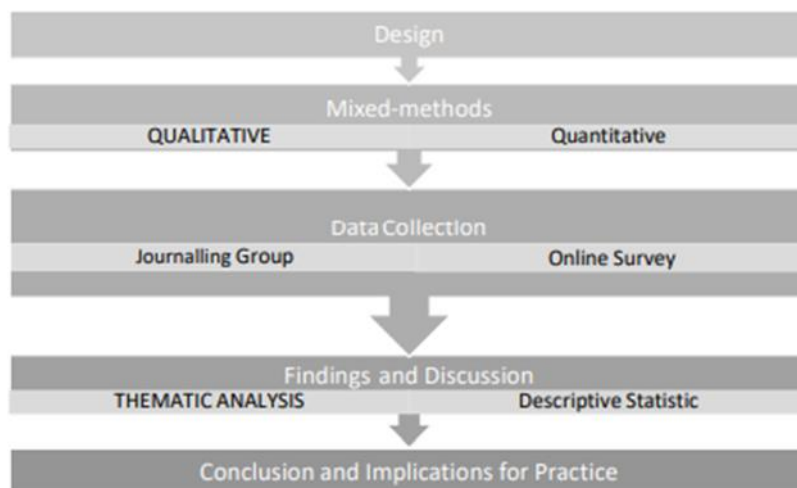


Figure 2 Research design: Exploratory sequential mixed methods.

Participants in the research were invited from the 'Special Education Teachers Ireland Supporting Each Other' Facebook group. Members of this group are all members of the sample population and were easily accessible. Eleven (nine female and two male) SETs took part in the reflective journaling group. Two work in special schools, four in Post-primary, five in Primary-one of which works in a special class for students with a diagnosis of ASD. Four hundred and six qualified SETs, registered in Ireland, completed the online survey. In line with STER policy, participants have been numbered to protect their anonymity.

The first phase of data collection occurred over two weeks commencing on February 5, 2020. As the Covid-19 global pandemic has impacted on much research carried out in early 2020, it is worth noting that the first report of an Irish case happened on 28 February 2020 and Irish school buildings closed on 12 March 2020 due to the pandemic (RTÉ, 2020). Online survey data collection for this research started 29 February and was complete by 6 March 2020. No mention of the pandemic was made by participants.

Over the two weeks, links to six forms were emailed to each participant containing journal prompts in the form of questions. The answers were inputted automatically to a spreadsheet, analysis of which informed the prompts in subsequent forms. Data processing

started on submission of the final journal entry in response to each form. A visual examination was conducted of the data, and the data was imported into NVivo 12 regularly where it was auto-coded to quickly elicit themes that needed to be responded to in the creation of subsequent journal prompts.

On completion the online survey data was imported into NVivo also, as it included some qualitative data. The analysis of the combined data sets involved thematic analysis of the responses. The combined files from the journaling group and the open-ended responses from the broader online survey were then coded manually. The final coding framework focused on themes, rather than on individuals; it reflected the group rather than the individual perspectives.

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics, a software package used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the data in order to identify more general trends and to aid comparison of how one score related to another. The main limitation of a mixed-methods approach is that it is typically more time consuming to conduct. This can be a drawback; however, it can also be an opportunity for a novice researcher to experience and learn from both qualitative and quantitative paradigms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

IRISH SET EXPERIENCES WORK RELATED STRESS

Across different school settings SETs reported experiencing work-related stress (see Table 1). 48% of the 267 primary SETs who responded to this study reported feeling a moderate or a great deal of stress in this study. 59.4% of 106 post-primary SETs reported a moderate amount or a great deal of stress. 57.6% of 33 special schoolteachers reported feeling a moderate amount or a great deal of stress. Comparing the level of stress with previous studies of similar populations is difficult as there is no standard way of reporting levels of stress from study to study, which makes comparisons of the phenomenon more difficult.

		Setting		
		Primary	Post-primary	Special school
Never	N	1	1	0
	% within Level of Stress	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%
	% within Setting	0.4%	0.9%	0.0%
Rarely	N	23	4	1
	% within Level of Stress	82.1%	14.3%	3.6%
	% within Setting	8.6%	3.8%	3.0%
Occasionally	N	115	38	13
	% within Level of Stress	69.3%	22.9%	7.8%
	% within Setting	43.1%	35.8%	39.4%
A moderate amount	N	80	39	10
	% within Level of Stress	62.0%	30.2%	7.8%
	% within Setting	30.0%	36.8%	30.3%
A great deal	N	48	24	9
	% within Level of Stress	59.3%	29.6%	11.1%
	% within Setting	18.0%	22.6%	27.3%
Total	N	267	106	33
	% within Level of Stress	65.8%	26.1%	8.1%
	% within Setting	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 1 Level of Stress * Setting Crosstabulation

Table 2 shows the stress levels considering the SET population as a whole. Over 50% of SETs report experiencing WRS 'a moderate amount' or 'a great deal', whereas 0.5% 'never' experience WRS. The data shown above suggest Irish SETs do experience work-related stress.

Level of Stress	N	%
Never	2	0.5%
Rarely	28	6.9%
Occasionally	166	40.9%
A moderate amount	129	31.8%
A great deal	81	20.0%
Total	406	100.0%

Table 2 Summary of Level of Stress

CAUSES OF WORK RELATED STRESS AMONG IRISH SET

To alleviate WRS, the causes or stressors must be identified. Causes are generally situation dependent, varying from country to country setting to setting and school to school. SET duties, qualifications, supports, paperwork, testing, and curricula vary; for example, in some areas SETs require additional qualifications in the Foundation of Reading whereas in Ireland no additional qualifications are needed. However, some commonalities are to be expected.

Ten potential stressors were ranked by respondents to the online survey: in order from top stressor to bottom stressor and are illustrated in Figure 3. 'Workload' was placed in the top three by 88.2% of respondents. Closely linked to workload, the stressor 'Lack of time' was ranked within the top three by 76.9%. Survey respondents had the opportunity to add additional stressors allowing for new and emerging themes.

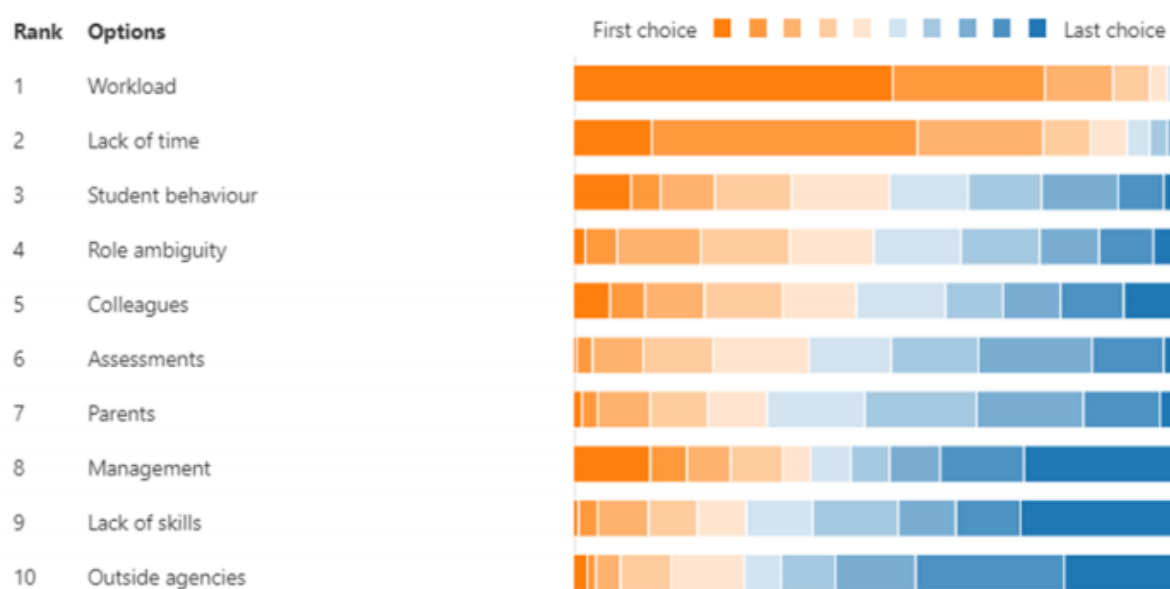


Figure 3 Ranking of 10 potential stressors by online survey group

'Colleagues', 'management', 'resources', 'admin and paperwork' took the top 4 positions for the most coded references within the qualitative data (see Table 3).

	Code	Data sets	References
1	Colleagues	2	97
2	Management	2	77
3	Resources	2	67
4	Admin and paperwork	2	62
5	Outside Agencies	2	61
6	Workload	2	57
7	Time	2	48
8	Student Behaviour	2	46
9	Parents and home	2	45
10	Skills and knowledge	2	44

Table 3 Frequency of stressor themes coded from qualitative data collected

COLLEAGUES AND MANAGEMENT

Close examination of the data shows that although colleagues and management (teachers who are managed and teachers who manage others, e.g., special education teaching principals or SETs working with SNAs) were most referenced, the references included both positive and negative sentiment (See Table 4 and 5). Although they were often the cause of WRS, colleagues and management were also supportive factors in coping with it.

Codes	No. of coding references
Nodes\\Stressor\\Colleagues	97
Nodes\\Stressor\\Colleagues - Mixed	16
Nodes\\Stressor\\Colleagues - Negative	26
Nodes\\Stressor\\Colleagues - Neutral	39
Nodes\\Stressor\\Colleagues - Positive	16

Table 4 Sentiment towards colleagues

Codes	Number of coding references
Nodes\\Stressor\\Management	77
Nodes\\Stressor\\Management - Mixed	12
Nodes\\Stressor\\Management - Negative	19
Nodes\\Stressor\\Management - Neutral	35
Nodes\\Stressor\\Management - Positive	11

Table 5 Sentiment coded towards management

Positive sentiment towards colleagues used words like support, family, and team. Participant 2 used all those terms when she wrote, *“I’m happy to report that in my setting, my colleagues are a huge support network: we are a team and a family.”* SETs on occasion find collaboration with colleagues and management difficult due to a mismatch between what the SET considered best practice and relaying this knowledge to colleagues and management. Participant 3 believes class teachers think *“that special needs are not part of their remit; that we, SETs, are the only ones that deal with special needs.”* Participant 4 reasons, *“Many teachers feel they don’t have the necessary training to teach the myriad of disabilities in front of them. They try to remove students from their classes to go to learning support when they should be differentiating for the students.”*

Part of the SET role is to work and support class teachers bringing an extra workload. *“If they are having difficulties, they all land looking for advice- that can be nice sometimes as you can share ideas, but sometimes you feel that you just wish they would go away and get on with it,”* says participant 6. Finding time to collaborate can be difficult; *“Corridor nabbing, constant negativity at every door you knock on to collect a child /group /team teaching. Discussing the behaviour of a child you support during lunch break etc. (I sometimes don’t even go into the staff room)”* says one primary school teacher.

Respondents sometimes feel more knowledgeable about special educational needs than management. Participant 1 says she finds management more of a stressor than other colleagues; for example, *“Management hold a monopoly over contact with NEPS, so it’s like a triangle, sometimes the information is incorrectly transferred from management to NEPS and vice versa, as management don’t have SEN experience and have limited understanding”.* Participant 5, working in a primary setting, tries hard *“to ensure that all staff follow best practice as opposed to their own opinion!”* She sometimes feels *“practice was being decided on a whim or an opinion”* and was not evidence-based, resulting in *“the stress of seeing the upset of the*

kids.” Participant 5 reflects, I knew “the best practice to use but maybe didn’t have the skills to ensure it was followed.”

RESOURCES

Special education teachers report being pulled from their assigned work to cover for absent colleagues as substitute teachers are not available. “Not being able to find substitute staff or the lack of sub cover provided for leave such as uncertified sick leave or force majeure can cause a lot of stress and extra workload for some teachers if they have to cover colleague’s absence,” says participant 6. One female primary teacher describes the guilt she feels towards missing the students on her caseload; it is “very difficult to promise ‘I’ll do x with you the next day’ as you don’t know if you’ll be able to!”

Participant 2 talks about having to research and create resources from scratch; “It isn’t a case of open your books on page ... Our books, resources etc. are mainly all researched and handmade - so it’s very time-consuming! It requires a lot of pre-planning, and yes, there is an element of stress associated with that”.

ADMINISTRATION AND PAPERWORK

Difficulties relating to paperwork refer to the amount of it, ambiguity around what is needed and its impact. Respondents became very descriptive over the amount of paperwork which they described as excessive, pointless, mountainous, endless, and ridiculous. “Endless paperwork which I never seem to be able to get nearly completed; it’s like shovelling snow when it’s snowing.” says one primary teacher. There is “ambiguity around paperwork,” writes one primary school SET and “uncertainty about how much paperwork is needed,” writes another. Participant 3, in post-primary also talks about the uncertainty of what is required; “Endless amount of paperwork without appropriate training to do the same. A lot of guesswork at times.” An efficient structure is not always there to support the completion of paperwork. “Assessments and paperwork have to be kept piling up on the desk until you can get access to the principal’s office. All paperwork relating to students is locked into the principal’s office, which is not always easy to access” writes one post-primary teacher who is a Special Education Needs Coordinator. Despite requiring considerable time to complete the completed paperwork does not necessarily follow the student. “I’ve almost 17 years teaching in special education, and I’ve never been so frustrated,” writes Participant 2, “this pupil, let’s call her Mary, has had many school placements but yet has very little paper trail.”

CONCLUSION

Over 50% of special education teachers in this study are suffering from moderate to significant work-related stress. The data provide convincing evidence that work-related stress is a significant challenge for SETs in Ireland. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection resulted in different and complementary evidence. For example, the qualitative data identified ‘colleagues’ and ‘management’ as top contributors to work-related stress. The quantitative data identified ‘workload’ and ‘lack of time’ were ranked as top contributors to work-related stress. The use of a qualitative approach was useful in discovering emerging themes within the population which would not be possible using a more prescriptive quantitative approach.

Identifying ‘colleagues’ and ‘management’ as stressors can be productive because they can also serve as coping strategies. SETs should consider ways to transform these negative stressors into positive coping strategies. SETs can individually attempt to use their time more effectively to deal with the workload and lack of time, however, the fact that the vast majority of SETs experience the same stressor to a considerable extent would appear to be more telling about the system than the individuals.

Evidence SETs are likely to experience work-related stress has implications for policymakers and school management. Under current Irish health and safety legislation, all “employers should consider any workplace hazard where there is a reasonable probability that it could cause work-related stress” (Health and Safety Authority, 2016, p. 4). Employers are also tasked with having a safety statement which details the risks and the “control measures put in place to eliminate or reduce them” (Health and Safety Authority, 2016, p. 4). With SET ranking workload and time as the top stressors contributing to WRS, employers need to recognise that there is a reasonable probability that SETs may be affected by them. Supports need to be put in place to alleviate these stressors. Time and workload need to be addressed on a system-wide basis.

Paperwork and administration were found to form a large part of the substantial workload. State agencies, such as the National Educational Psychological Service, and the National Council for Special Education, could work together to reduce the level of paperwork needed. A national portal could be developed to hold records of students with additional learning needs, diagnostic assessments, interventions, and other vital information. This would prevent replication of work and provide a more consistent standard of reporting as well as a greater coherence at policy level. Information could be available in real-time to those authorised

to access it. This could also assist in the timely deployment of resources to where they are needed.

Comparison of levels of work-related stress across sub-groups of the teaching population is difficult because no common standard of measurement is used to measure the phenomenon. Future research would benefit from identifying or developing a standard instrument that can be used to measure and compare levels of work-related stress within sub-groups.

It is important to recognise that this article focuses on WRS and therefore reveals negative aspects of the SET role. This is not intended to be a complete picture, rather it explores some issues that SETs may experience.

From this research, it was useful to learn how influential my perception of situations can be in alleviating potential WRS. Furthermore, recognising that certain situations are outside of my control is equally important. These situations can be used as learning opportunities for personal growth or an opportunity to advocate for systemic change where needed e.g. advocating for sufficient resources. As an educational leader, understanding a framework of stress and coping can help me provide practical support to others.

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