

**AN INVESTIGATION OF STRESS EXPERIENCED BY THE NOVICE TEACHER**

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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May 2015

Major Subject: Curriculum and Instruction

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## **ABSTRACT**

The research conducted during this study consisted of examining the stressors experienced by the novice-teacher. The purpose for conducting this study was to examine the steadily increasing teacher attrition rate among beginning teachers, which has reached the highest it has ever been. It is believed that stressors experienced by novice teachers are major contributors to the high teacher attrition rates in today's teacher workforce. Extant data was gathered by analyzing a survey of perceptions and the and the first-hand experiences of a first year teacher through an autoethnographical methodology was used to determine the major stressors for first-year teachers. The aim was to discover possible solutions for those major stressors. The results of the study showed that lack of support, time-management skills, and working in a high-stakes testing environment created high levels of stress for the novice teacher. Effective solutions to aid in the reduction of stress levels included engaging in physical exercise, being assigned a mentor teacher, being well prepared, and leading a balanced lifestyle.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my loving mom, Linda Gallegos. She has always guided me and believed in me, even when I did not believe in myself. Without her support, this thesis would be a dream; without her inspiration my dream would be nonexistent.

I also dedicate my work to Ava Perez, the most brilliant five year old I know, and whose smile has been incredible motivation throughout this journey. Dream BIG, dear.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of many people. First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Mary Margaret Capraro who read numerous revisions and helped me every step of the way. She helped make sense amidst all of the confusion, and always guided me in the right direction. The completion of this journey would not have been possible without her love, support, and encouragement.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Robert Capraro and Dr. Fuhui Tong, for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research. Since the day I met Dr. Robert Capraro, he has pushed me to achieve things I did not ever think possible. His encouragement and tough love motivated me to never give up, especially during the most difficult times when all I wanted to do was quit.

Thanks also go out to my friend Ali Bicer who helped me in the final stages of my writing.

Finally, many thanks to my family and friends who endured this long process with me, always offering love and support. Y'all kept me sane and were a constant reminder to hurry up and finish, so I could have fun when it was all over.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Each year, the number of people entering the realm of teaching exceeds the amount of educators retiring from the profession. The United States is faced with a huge, and steadily increasing, teacher deficit (Carroll & Foster, 2009; Ingersoll, 2003).

According to the Texas Education Agency, teacher attrition reached its highest peak in Texas within the past few years. This is the first time within the past decade that the loss of teachers has surpassed the gain (TEA, 2013). Hong (2012) suggested that there were many teachers stepping down from the podium due to non-retirement reasons. Research performed by Achinstein (2006), Fleener (2001), Roulston, Legette, and Womack (2005), and Darling-Hammond (1999) reported that teacher attrition rates were steadily increasing amongst the population of novice teachers.

According to the National Commission of Teaching and America's Future, more than 50% of people entering the teaching profession will choose to relinquish their role as an educator within the first 3-5 years (Plunkett & Dyson, 2011) costing nationally more than \$30 billion within the past five years (Carroll, 2007). Not only are we facing a colossal teacher deficit in the United States, other countries such as China, England, and Australia have reported similar findings (Changying, 2007; Department for Education and Skills, 2005; Hong, 2012). Teacher attrition rates have the potential to expand outside of school campuses and create immense problems for school districts, especially financially. The cost to hire new teachers and replace old ones can be detrimental to

school districts when one takes into account the cost of the hiring process. Interviews, trainings, professional development, school materials, and background checks are all contributing factors to the price of hiring a new teacher, which costs Texas approximately half a billion dollars a year (Amos, 2005).

High novice teacher attrition rates cause many problems within schools, which can eventually extend to the school districts. If we can determine what underlying factors cause the most stress, target those stressors, and apply effective coping mechanisms we may be able to decrease teacher attrition rates. Which stressors are the most detrimental to first-year teachers? What stress management techniques are the most effective? The research conducted during this study aimed to gain more insight by investigating these questions and providing solutions to better equip the novice teacher with effective coping strategies, and aid in reducing teacher attrition. If we can resolve and reduce the issue of teacher attrition rates, we can take steps towards improving student learning by providing and maintaining a sound, consistent, and foundational learning environment within our schools.

### **Problem**

Teacher stress is defined as “a response syndrome of negative effects resulting from the teacher’s job” (Hopkins, Hoffman, & Moss, 1997, as cited in Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007, p. 212). There is a clear indication that first-year teachers are experiencing sufficiently high levels of stress causing them to want to leave the profession early into their career.



Studies report that high-stakes testing mandates and the pressures associated with those tests have become the primary reason for such high teacher attrition rates in recent years (Johnson, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu, & Donaldson, 2004; Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002; Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Pérez, 2012; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Specifically in Texas, teacher frustration continues to skyrocket as the passing requirements for standardized tests continue to become more rigorous each year.

Rieg, Paquette, and Chen (2007) reported that the development of engaging lesson plans that are aligned with the required curriculum, classroom management, and differentiation of assessment and instruction were also major stressors for novice teachers. Other studies have linked the following stressors as contributing factors for high teacher attrition rates as well: inadequate amount of available resources, lack of administrative support, failure to receive proper mentorship, poor working conditions, and lack of stress coping strategies (Abebe & Shaughnessy, 1997; Beach & Pearson, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fisher, 2011; Hong, 2012; Ingersoll, 2001, 2003; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Kaunitz, Spokane, Lissitz, & Strein, 1986; McIntyre, 2003; Reig et al., 2007; Sass et al., 2012; Tait, 2008; Weiss, 1999).

### **Methodology**

My thesis consists of four chapters. The first chapter is an introduction and provided an overview of my research. The second chapter focused on the stressors experienced by first-year teachers at a local elementary school. The elementary school that was the focus of this study is one of the lowest performing schools in the district, is on a campus improvement plan for failure to meet certain TEA requirements, and also

has one of the highest teacher attrition rates in the district. In an effort to increase the teacher retention rate, the school administered a survey to its teachers. The survey was administered to three female first-year teachers, and included questions about the stressors experienced by the teachers during their first year. The survey also asked teachers to provide solutions and suggestions that they found effective in reducing their stress levels.

I investigated the literature and reviewed what other researchers have discovered concerning the stress experienced by first-year teachers and any possible solutions that they have discovered. Additionally, I analyzed the textual data from the survey and narrative data obtained through public observation in a qualitative approach to supplement this research project in an effort to determine effective solutions in reducing stress levels of the novice teacher.

For the third chapter of my thesis, I created an autoethnography based on my personal reflections as a first year teacher and the stress that I experienced. Autoethnography is a qualitative approach that recognizes the author's self-reflection and personal experiences as credible data (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008). I used myself as the main subject of the study, and I referred to my journal of personal reflections that I kept during my first year of teaching. I reflected on the how my cultural ideals affected the research and also how the research affected my own personal ideas and practices after my first year. Unfortunately, there is not a strong connection between this type of research approach and the stress of first-year teachers. As a result of this void in the literature pertaining to this topic, I have chosen to complete my inquiry on 'the stress

experienced by the novice teacher and how to effectively cope with that stress', while executing an autoethnographic approach.

For my "auto", I kept a journal of reflections during my first year of teaching that includes diary entries of my daily experiences, notes on improving lesson plans for the following year, and suggestions to myself and other new teachers on classroom management. For my "ethno", I found journaling to be a very effective way to document myself during my first year of teaching. By reflecting back on my first year and entering my second year as a public educator, I can already see major changes in myself, and my teaching style. I will reflect on the stress I experienced while teaching during my first year, coping methods that I found to be most effective in dealing with my stress, and solutions that I believe should be provided to every first-year teacher. I also included the school context and how factors such as being a Title I school affected me as a first-year teacher. My "graphy" will consist of organizing all of the research I have obtained on the stress behind the novice teacher and effective solutions.

My fourth and final chapter consists of possible solutions that I believe could help reduce teacher attrition rates. These solutions were research based and also based on my first-hand experience. I connected these solutions to ways that I believe will benefit our educational system overall, and hopefully will be provided to future first-year teachers in order to reduce their stress levels. My goal is to help reduce overall stress levels for beginning teachers by providing healthy and effective solutions to potential situations they may encounter in their first year of teaching.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **STRESSORS**

Within the past 2-3 years, teacher attrition has reached the pinnacle in Texas. Research performed by Achinstein (2006), Fleener (2001), Roulston, Legette, and Womack (2005), and Darling-Hammond (1999) reported that teacher attrition rates were steadily increasing amongst the population of novice teachers. Novice teachers can be defined as teachers who have little or no classroom experience, generally two years of experience or less (Gatbonton, 2008). According to Hong (2012), many teachers are stepping down from the podium due to non-retirement reasons, explaining the major deficit the United States is currently facing.

Plunkett and Dyson (2011) report that within five years or less, greater than half of the potential teachers beginning their careers will abandon the profession. Fisher (2011) argued that the first five years of a teacher's career is a very impressionable period, and if they quit during this time, it would be a lost opportunity for necessary growth and establishment to flourish in the profession. Teacher stress is defined as "a response syndrome of negative effects resulting from the teacher's job" (Hopkins, Hoffman, & Moss, 1997, as cited in Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007, p. 212). There is a clear indication that first-year teachers are experiencing sufficiently high levels of stress causing them to want to leave the profession early in their career.

According to Sass, Flores, Claeys, and Pérez (2012), data revealed that teacher attrition from the TAKS era (1999-2010) has increased by 24% since the TAAS era

(1990-1998). As the rigor of the standards steadily increases, so does the accountability that is placed on teachers to prepare students for high-stakes exams (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). "Teachers spend more time coaching students on test-taking skills...rather than on content they deem relevant" (Sass et al., 2012, p. 5). Data also revealed that the decisions of teachers to remain in the field of education and teacher candidates to enter are being affected by the increasing high-stakes testing and accountability (Sass et al., 2012).

Studies reported that classroom management was also a major stressor for novice teachers. Even though a university had provided pre-service teachers with classroom management strategies, the novice teachers still felt unprepared for the task of managing student behavior (Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007). Success with classroom management was related to the teacher's self-efficacy. Teachers who had left the field after two years of teaching claimed to have experienced challenges and low levels of confidence in their classroom management abilities (Hong, 2012). Both of these studies noted that their participants had realized that classroom management was not a 'one size fits all' approach; what works for one group of students may not work for a different group of students, which can add to existing stress levels (Hong, 2012; Rieg et al., 2007).

Lack of mentoring has been proven to be another factor that causes lack of teacher retention. According to Blair-Larsen (1998), lack of a necessary mentor can lead to increased teacher attrition. Teachers felt mentorship programs were a significant factor in their decision to stay or leave their profession. An increasing number of teachers are leaving the profession, because they feel unsupported due to the lack of a

mentoring program (Bennett, Brown, Kirby-Smith, & Severson, 2013). In order for the novice teacher to gain a stronger sense of task-management such as paperwork and tasks outside the classroom, proper support and mentorship is required (Brown, 2005). Lack of modeling for the novice teacher of what appeared to be simple tasks can actually result in increased stress levels. “These tasks can include parent conferences, bus monitoring, hallway duty, staff meetings, bathroom duty, cafeteria supervision, and a plethora of other tasks assigned to teachers” (Fisher, 2011, p. 7). Interpersonal relationships help new teachers develop better stress coping strategies. Therefore if a novice teacher does not receive the opportunity for working with a mentor teacher, it is likely that their stress levels may increase due to the lack of development of proper stress coping strategies (Tait , 2008).

Task-management can also be linked to time-management. One group of experienced teachers indicated the following reasons were indicative as to why time-management was a major contributor to teacher attrition: teachers are not told about the amounts of paperwork required, meeting requirements, obligations that pulled them away from instructional time, and insufficient amounts of time to dedicate to the children (Bennett et al., 2013). Data has also shown that lesson plans and meetings have also become major stressors for novice teachers. Due to the amount of time lesson plans demand in order to be aligned with district requirements, including differentiation for all students, and also keeping students engaged has proven to be very stressful for beginning teachers. Studies also indicate that teachers are unaware of how much time they will actually dedicate during their day to faculty meetings, parent-teacher

conferences, phone calls, email, and other routine tasks (Rieg et al., 2007). Clearly, teachers stress levels can increase due to being unaware of how to properly allocate their time during the day, which coincides with the stressor of not having a mentor teacher.

### **Methodology**

The focus of this chapter will be on the stress experienced by 3 first-year teachers at a local elementary school. This elementary school is one of the lowest performing schools in the district, is on a campus improvement plan for failure to meet the Texas Education Agency's Index IV requirement, and also has one of the highest teacher attrition rates in the district. For the academic school year of 2013-2014, seven new teachers were hired in an effort to fulfill the positions of teachers who had resigned from the previous year. In hopes of increasing the teacher retention rate for the following year, the school principal administered a survey to its first-year teachers at the end of the academic school year.

The survey was comprised of both closed and open-ended items that were identified both by prior research and the school administrators as the stressors had the most significant impact on beginning teachers. Administrators of the school in the past had conducted informal exit interviews but were interested in collecting more formal data to analyze teacher attrition. The survey included a questionnaire section where the teachers ranked 17 different categories of stressors based on a four-level Likert scale: 1 – Never stressed me (0% - 25% of the time), 2 – Stressed me some of the time (25% - 50% of the time), 3 – Stressed me most of the time (50% - 75% of the time), and 4 – Stressed me all of the time (75% - 100% of the time). The survey also contained three open-ended

questions in order for the participants to better express themselves in a way that the questionnaire may not have allowed them to. The survey was provided to all seven first-year teachers, however only three teachers chose to participate. This represents a response rate of 43%. All three participants were female, between the ages of 21 and 23, and had just completed their first year of teaching.

### **Analysis of the Data**

The quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed by distributing the response percentage of each area in a chart. In order to develop a more thorough understanding of the quantitative data, each of the three open-ended questions was analyzed using a qualitative method of text analysis to determine which stressors had the greatest impact on the group of first-year teachers. Responses were coded as 13 distinct stressors. Due to the similarity of the coded responses, the codes were then grouped together to create six themes. The themes were further classified into three main categories of stressors for first-year teachers: Pressure from a high-stakes testing environment, Time management, and Lack of support. The three open-ended survey questions analyzed were:

1. As a first-year teacher, what do you feel causes you the most stress during your workday?
2. What coping strategies have you found to be effective in dealing with your stress?
3. What could others do to assist you in effectively reducing your stress levels?



## **Results**

### *Quantitative Results*

On a quantitative survey scale, the data results revealed that high expectations of teaching performance, overall teaching workload, and working in a high-stakes testing environment were the three areas that created the most stress for this group of first-year teachers. Sixty seven percent of the participants experienced stress all of the time from high expectations of teaching performance and working in a high stakes testing environment. One hundred percent of the participants experienced stress all of the time from their overall teaching workload. At least 67% of the participants experienced stress most or all of the time from assessing students' written work, differentiating instruction, developing engaging and aligned lesson plans, and being observed by administrators/coaches, and communicating concepts to students.

One hundred percent of the participants experienced stress some of the time from the strategy of providing appropriate feedback to students. Sixty seven percent said they felt stress some of the time from the delivery of the lessons, managing group or individual work, and helping students with learning difficulties. Thirty three percent experienced stress some of the time from preparing resources for lessons. However, 33% of the participants never felt stressors while performing tasks in the following categories: classroom management, establishing a good relationship with students, helping students with emotional/behavioral problems, or communicating to administrators/coaches.

### *Qualitative Results*

According to the textual data obtained from the first open-ended question, one hundred percent of the respondents felt negatively about the first category, pressure from working in a high-stakes testing environment. This category appeared to be very stressful for the participants because the passing requirements for this elementary school were raised even higher as a result of not meeting all four indexes mandated by the Texas Education Agency the previous year. Many of their students entered into their classrooms with academic levels one to three grades below where they should have been at the commencement of the school year. One teacher shared that due to her students' results on a mathematics unit test, an instructional coach was in her room teaching her mathematics lessons for 10 working days. She felt it was unfair that her teaching capability was questioned when her students did not enter her classroom with the mathematical background they should have gained from previous years. Another teacher wrote that she was so stressed about her students' unit test that her entire face, neck, and body broke out in stress-induced hives her second week of teaching.

One hundred percent of the participants expressed negative feelings surrounding the second category, time management. Trying to balance the writing of extensive lesson plans, attending meetings multiple times a week, and completing paperwork required for the school and/or students was included in this category. One teacher wrote, "There aren't enough hours in the day to be the best educator and give the kids 100%, write lessons, grade papers, reflect, do paperwork, relax, attend meetings, etc."

Sixty seven percent of the participants felt that the third category, lack of support, also contributed to increased stress levels. Factors such as not having a mentor teacher, unfamiliarity with school routines, and lack of resources were also included in this category. One participant wrote about how she spent 20 minutes trying to figure out how to work the copying machine, and felt that situation could have been easily avoided had she been given a mentor teacher.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to understand the stressors behind the novice teacher in an effort to aid in reducing teacher attrition rates. Results from previous research have already discovered that the teacher attrition rate is at its highest level ever, and that stressors within the novice teacher are playing a key role in this trend. According to Plunkett and Dyson (2011), more than 50% of people entering the teaching profession choose to relinquish their role as an educator within the first 3-5 years of their professional career. For the first time within the past decade, teacher attrition has surpassed teacher retention, due to non-retirement reasons (Hong, 2012). If this trend continues, it can lead to a shortage of highly qualified teachers that can result in a lesser quality of educational performance (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This analysis of stress behind the novice teacher expanded upon the research of what major stressors novice teachers experience, and how to help alleviate those stressors in hopes of reducing teacher attrition. The results from this study show that high-stakes testing environments, time management, and lack of support were three major stressors experienced by the first-year teachers.

One of the findings from this study is that high-stakes testing environments create a lot of stress within the novice teacher. These findings parallel with previous research that has shown that teachers are experiencing high levels of stress due to the pressure associated with high-stakes testing environments (Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Pérez, 2012; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). One of contributing factors to the high levels of stress could be that teachers and schools receive a professional rating from the Texas Education Administration based on the success and growth of the students. Every school is required to meet a specific standard for four different indexes based on the student results on the high-stakes, STAAR test. Failure to meet every standard results in a derogatory mark for the school. If the school does not meet the standard for two consecutive years, the school is placed on an improvement-required plan, and every teacher faces the possibility of losing their job if growth is not shown for their students. Another contributing factor could be the pressure to teach old concepts with newer, engaging methods. When these teachers were in school themselves, pedagogies were very different and technology was a foreign language. In most of today's teaching strategies, technology is constantly being integrated to teach the same material teachers learned, but in a completely different way. Standard algorithms were a common approach years ago, and now teachers are being pushed further and further away from the standard algorithm and more towards the world of technology and visual learning. Technology can be intimidating for many people, and teaching concepts in a different way than how one learned them can also add to the stress of new teachers as well.

Another major finding from this study was that time-management created a lot of stress for beginning teachers as well. This finding was consistent with what previous researchers have discovered about how lack of modeling of effective time-management can result in increased stress levels (Fisher, 2011). Things that appear to be simple tasks such as bathroom duty, faculty meetings, bus monitoring, cafeteria supervision, and other miniscule seeming tasks can actually be extremely overwhelming. There are multiple factors playing a role in this such as lack of training. Teachers may enter into their career completely empty-handed when it comes to classroom management methods needed to control a noisy cafeteria crowd or keep straight, organized lines to ensure that every child gets on the correct bus. In discovering what methods work best for each of those tasks, novice teacher may need help with long-term memory in handling similar situations in the future, but the amount of stress that one experiences until they arrive at that point, may not be worth it. Novice teachers also need to be informed of how much time to dedicate to certain tasks such as grading and staff paperwork. Lack of time frames and being informed of how long one has to complete certain task items may also contribute to negative feelings towards their career and result in high levels of stress.

The third major finding of this study was that lack of support additionally created high levels of stress for first-year teachers. Previous research performed by Blair-Larsen (1998) supports this study finding that lack of receiving and effectively working with a proper mentor can lead to higher attrition rates amongst the novice teacher population. This finding was also supported by Bennett et al. (2013) and his colleagues whose study demonstrated that larger numbers of teachers are quitting their careers as educators,

because they feel unsupported by a proper mentoring program. A contributing factor to this finding could be that veteran teachers may assume that new teachers will simply enter into the school and profession knowing how to complete certain tasks. This can result in teachers with more experience not offering to help new teachers, because certain tasks seem so obvious. They may not want to offend new teachers by explaining something that seems so obvious and simple. On the other hand, novice teachers also may not ask for help out of fear of appearing incompetent. Novice teachers could possibly have a very similar mind set, and think that something such as using a copy machine or scheduling parent-teacher conferences should come naturally, so they shy away from asking for help to avoid embarrassment amongst their own colleagues. This factor resulted in high-levels of stress for the novice teacher, which may also have created negative feelings towards the profession. Being fully informed about what an ideal parent-teacher conference should entail, and how bathroom duty should run may seem like small things, but to first-year teachers it has resulted in higher levels of stress, which could possibly have resulted in higher teacher attrition rates.

### CHAPTER III

#### AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The easiest way to define autoethnography is by breaking it down into the three root words: *auto*, *ethno*, and *graphy*. *Auto*: An autoethnography uses a qualitative approach that recognizes the author's self-reflection and personal experiences as credible data (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008). *Ethno*: The driving force behind this type of research is to evaluate one's cultural experiences in order to determine the effects that culture had on the researcher, and in turn how the researcher helped shaped his or her own culture itself (Canagaraja, 2012). *Graphy*: Indicative of a form or process used to systematically analyze and represent information through writing (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Blair (2014) wrote that this type of research approach is a combination of two research methods: autobiography (a self reflexive account of one's life) and ethnography (the scientific description of the customs of individual peoples and cultures).

Cahnmann-Taylor (2008) defined autoethnography as the connecting link between autobiography and ethnography. According to Reed-Danahay (1997), autoethnography is a form of self-reflection that places the researcher directly within the social environment being observed. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) proposed that autoethnography, as a method, is both progression and result since the author is applying the rules of both autobiography and ethnography. Hayler referred to autoethnography as a "toolbox within the qualitative research workshop...that focuses on the analysis of emotions and feelings in order to...illuminate and facilitate understanding" (Hayler,

2011, p. 19). With other types of qualitative research, the researcher is obligated to refrain from involving any personal bias during the inquiry. However, autoethnography is written from personal experiences, and the main source of data were the researcher themselves.

David Hayano was credited for the creation of the term ‘autoethnography’ in 1979 (Hayler, 2011), and studies have shown that the term was inspired by postmodernism in the 1980s (Ellis et al., 2011). During this time period, research transitioned away from the restraint of suppressing one’s personal reflection during scientific inquiry, and autoethnography was a part of the movement towards embracing it (Canagaraja, 2012). Thus, opening the channel to many other qualitative research designs such as: ‘narratives of the self’, ‘reflective ethnographies’, and ‘collaborative autobiography’ to name a few (Hayler, 2011).

Despite the fact that there are very credible articles, which use an autoethnographic approach, the methodology does have its constraints and discrepancies. It is recognized that autoethnographic research is highly influenced by personal opinion, emotions, and reflections (Ellis et al., 2011). Regardless, some researchers still believe that the research can be performed from a neutral standpoint (Atkinson, 1997), whereas other researchers feel that such a position is not obtainable (Bochner, 2002). The controversy as to whether or not this type of research is tenable, and if so to what extent, will continue to be an ongoing issue in the world of educational research. It ultimately boils down to the integrity of the author, and how objective or biased they choose to be while declaring the discoveries and conclusions of their own work. Over the past three



and a half decades, autoethnography has quickly grown to become the popular choice of methodology for qualitative researchers, and according to Hayler (2011), the number of educators who choose to use this research approach is rapidly increasing.

As a first-year, mathematics/science 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher of 26 bilingual students, I reflected on my personal experiences, challenges, and growth to perform and complete my inquiry. This study discusses which stressors seemed most disconcerting and which methods were taken to effectively address them in a healthy manner as a first-year teacher. I kept a record of my data through personal journal entries and reflections over a course of ten months. I organized my data into chapters that were major stressors for me during my first year of teaching.

This study includes conversation with myself, and focuses on effectively addressing my research questions: “What are the major stressors I am experiencing as a first-year teacher?” and “How can I effectively deal with those stressors in a way that I can share with other future teachers?” My goal will be to answer these questions in order to provide validity and credibility to my research (Feldman, 2003). My journey consists of real, living experiences inside my classroom therefore pseudonyms will be applied when referring to my students or coworkers.

### **The Big News**

Imagine...23 years old, no teaching experience, and one year of graduate school left. I was visiting with my professor, preparing to register for the upcoming fall semester when she informed me that I needed to begin my teaching career to obtain meaningful research and data to complete my final semesters of graduate school. It felt

like I had been hit by a bus of emotions both scared and excited for a new change in my life. However, I was not prepared to begin this semester in a classroom! That was supposed to happen next year when I had mentally and physically prepared for it. The next two weeks were a blur of me scrambling to find interviews, what to wear for those interviews, how to prepare for them, I even considered commuting to a different town if it was my only chance at getting a job, and then it happened. I received a job offer for a 4<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics and science ESL position at a local elementary school, and I was to start working full time the second week into the school year. I remember thinking about that two-week job-hunting process and how it was such a stressful time for me; little did I know about the extremes of stress that I was about to face during the next ten months.

### **Preparation**

“This will be easy”, I thought. Mathematics and science have always been strengths for me, I have standard algorithms in my back pocket, and these children will be just like I was when I was in school. I remember walking into a classroom full of little faces staring at me, waiting for me to teach them, and then all sorts of emotions came over me. I was so nervous, and I wasn’t sure why. “I’m the teacher, I’m in charge. Don’t be scared, they can sense it.” So I did what any other first-year teacher would do. I apologized for being one week late, introduced myself, wrote my name on the board, and dove head first into teaching place value.

During this first lesson I encountered my first major challenge and stressor, lack of preparation. Most of my students knew very little English, and I did not have the

Spanish background to translate right then and there. “How in the world do you say the ones and tens place in Spanish? Unos? Diezes? Should I ask someone? No! What if they think I’m not suitable for the job? No one warned me about this. I can speak Spanish conversationally, but I had no idea what I was walking into.” I figured there had to be translations in the curriculum, so I butchered my way through my first lesson and during my conference period got online to look it up. That was when I encountered my second challenge, zero guidance. I had no idea how to access the online curriculum! Even worse, if I did access it, I did not have a single clue how to read it. No one prepared me for this. Thankfully my co-teacher was able to clarify this for me and taught me how to request access and read the online curriculum.

After one week, I really reconsidered my career choice. I was not prepared for this position, and after doing some research on my students I discovered that about four out of twenty-six of them were academically prepared for fourth grade. Some spoke no English at all, how was I supposed to teach them in a language they couldn’t understand? Others could barely read, how were they supposed to tackle those awfully long word problems? Some could barely add or subtract and still used their fingers, how did they not learn their math facts in previous grades? Not to mention, our school campus was administered a warning given by TEA, called “I.R.”, whatever that meant. I learned very quickly that it meant ‘improvement required’, and my students and I were about to eat, sleep, and breath standardized testing for the next ten months.

## **Balance**

Fortunately, I was not willing to throw in the towel quite yet. If my students had a unit assessment coming up at the end of the week, then I was going to prepare them the in the best way I possibly could. I stayed late every night, which usually led to 12-hour working days and Google translate became my best friend. I created anchor charts for the lifeless walls in my classroom and included translations of everything. I was so envious of everyone else's classrooms that were so pretty, organized, and had some type of decorative theme throughout that brought their classrooms to life. "If only there were more hours in the day" I thought to myself, then I could still prepare for my lessons AND have a beautiful classroom that my sweet children deserved. There just weren't enough hours in the day. Going to work was easy, because I fell in love with my students. It was getting them to grow to the appropriate academic level that was challenging, and on top of that choosing whether to teach them in English or Spanish. I had no balance what-so-ever to my lifestyle, and soon my life revolved around my classroom and my students who felt like my own children. My students needed me more than my dog needed to go on a daily walk. My students needed me more than I needed a boyfriend, so I parted ways with him and explained that I wanted to focus on my career. I began turning in my graduate school assignments at the last minute, and requested multiple extensions on deadlines. My social life was nonexistent, and I began to lose touch with all of my friends. I stopped going home to visit my family, because weekends were too valuable to pass up on the quality time I could spend on improving my classroom and preparing the lessons for the upcoming week. Eventually I did not even

have a weekend because I was going to the work almost every day of the week, but I did not care. It was what was best for my career.

### **Guidance**

Besides, if I didn't go in on the weekends, how else would I have been able to learn how to use the copy machine and discover where they keep all of the extra school supplies my classroom desperately needed. I wasn't going to ask for help, it would just make me look incompetent. I taught myself how to make copies and how to work the printers. I learned that there were more microwaves throughout the school, no more wasting my duty-free lunch waiting in line. I figured out how to work the phone in our classroom, luckily I used a similar type of phone at my previous job. I figured out that the Rizzo machine is for mass amounts of copies, instead of using all of your allotted number of copies on the other machines. I discovered that the door to bathroom A doesn't lock completely and you have to flush the toilet in bathroom B twice. I learned that bus duty did not require me to walk the kids all the way down the sidewalk for every bus, teachers are allowed to stand in one place and monitor the lines. I taught myself to create my own lesson-planning template, since there was not a standard one and everyone just does what he or she wanted. I found out the hard way that even if it is an English week for the dual language program, your students are still allowed to take their exam in Spanish. I did not know what to expect at our faculty meetings, so I showed up empty handed while everyone else was taking notes. I remember feeling so lost, and everything seemed like a blur around me. Where was my mentor teacher that takes me under their wing, and shows me all of this? Nowhere in sight, that's where. I did not

receive a mentor teacher to show me all of the ins and outs of the school, so I had to learn everything on my own. If I had the courage to ask someone, it would have saved a lot of time and tears, but I was too afraid of appearing incompetent. I did not understand why the other teachers were not more helpful. If I were in their position I would have offered a helping hand to a new teacher that appeared lost. Above everything else, I just wanted someone to talk to about everything I was experiencing as a first-year teacher. I needed someone who understood what teaching was like, and that I was comfortable enough with to fully share everything I was feeling. Unfortunately my mentor teacher never arrived.

### **Physical Effects**

My first year of teaching taught me that stress is not always a mental thing. I was young, strong and figured I could handle losing a little bit of sleep if it meant I could be a more efficient teacher, so I pushed my mind and body to limits I had never experienced before. Within the first couple of weeks of teaching my back started aching in places it had not before. Initially I assumed that I had slept wrong the night before, I was halfway correct. When I arrived to morning meeting with my colleagues they informed me that stress is capable of doing that to someone's body. I listened to them, but I did not think that was my case; it had to be something else to cause such a sharp pain. I quickly learned that I was wrong. One night I was having a difficult time falling asleep, because I could not stop thinking about work. I eventually fell asleep, and when I woke up I realized that my body was knotted up, because I was so stressed out that I could not even relax during my sleep. Sleeping so tensely was causing me to knot up in my sleep and

caused the random back pain. I had never felt this type of pain because before my first year of teaching I had never experienced stress during my sleep. That was just the beginning. My second experience with the physical results of stress was when my students had their first unit assessment approaching; it felt like I had college finals all over again. “What if my students didn’t pass? What kind of reflection will that make on my teaching?” I was so worried that I stayed late at work every night. When I arrived home I would eat dinner and then continue working. Two days before my students’ exam, I woke up to red, irritated spots all over my neck. I just assumed an insect had bitten me, and that it would eventually calm down later on during the day. When I arrived at school, my back began itching and it seemed to be spreading to my arms as well. I applied anti-itching lotion and finished out the workday. By that evening, my entire body had broken out and I was red and itchy all over. The cause: Stress-induced hives. It wasn’t much longer afterwards that I noticed I was beginning to lose more hair than usual in the shower as well. I could not believe what was happening to my body. This was not supposed to happen, I’m young and strong – I should be able to handle this without enduring negative effects like these. My first year also taught me that it doesn’t matter how young or strong you think you are, stress will always win if you set it up to do so.

### **High-Stakes Testing Environment**

When I was in elementary school, I do not recall taking standardized tests except in the middle of the year as a benchmark, and at the end of the year, formerly known as the TAAS test. Things have drastically changed, and the movement of standardized

testing has taken over. My students were required to take a unit assessment at the end of every unit. Each test was at least 10 questions long, a scantron was required, and most of the time the unit assessments were not aligned with the actual STAAR test that my students would face in April. Not only were most of my students academically below grade level, they were required to take a test almost once a week that they were not ready for. I always felt like there was no time to go back and reteach concepts to the students who didn't grasp the concept initially. The district was stuffing the curriculum down my throat, requiring me to teach a new concept almost every day, and I turned around and tried stuffing it down my students' throats, praying that they would stay on board with me. I had to figure out a way to pull my students up to an academic level that would prepare them for the STAAR test, and at the same time determine in which language they would achieve greater academic success. The day that I completed the paperwork on each student finalizing the language they would test in was the day that I felt like I had sold my soul. I asked myself, "What if they don't pass their STAAR because they weren't ready for an English test? Even if they know the content, they might fail because of my decision. Can I change my mind later?" I never expected that decision would be so difficult, and even though I knew the time was approaching to make the decision I still felt rushed, just like I did with everything else my first year of teaching. I always felt weighed down with the stress of my students taking their STAAR test. Since our school was already labeled as an 'improvement required' campus, there was even more pressure for our students to perform well on this test. "Did my students care as much as I did if they passed? Were they going to remember all of the testing



strategies that I had taught throughout the year? Why didn't I spend more time on academic vocabulary? Did I cover that concept well enough during the lesson?" These questions constantly raced through my head as I was drowning in stress from work and stress from completely avoiding my graduate schoolwork. By the time I would arrive home, I felt so exhausted that I would just want to eat dinner and go straight to sleep just to dream about work. It was incredibly stressful that I could not completely escape the stress and actually leave my work at work. I eventually arrived at a very difficult crossroad during this time of preparing my students for their high-stakes standardized test that was just a couple of months away. Due to the serious procrastination I had placed on my graduate program, I fell very far behind with my coursework. I was faced with the decision to either stop everything I was doing with my job and completely focus on graduate school if I wanted to graduate on time, or put my education on hold in order to provide the best education I could to my students. I chose my students and accepted the fact that I was not going to receive my second degree within my scheduled time frame of two years. I accepted my own decision and moved forward completely focusing on preparing my students for the STAAR. About one month before the STAAR test, the entire third, fourth, and fifth grade levels complete a program called "Boot camp". This month was completely dedicated to small group instruction, finding out what gaps each student had, and using that month to fill those gaps in. It was a strict schedule, fifteen minutes were dedicated to a whole group, mini-lesson and the rest of the duration was dedicated to small groups and centers. I would set a timer for twenty minutes at each station, and as soon as it would go off my students cleaned up their centers and rotated to

the next center in less than a minute. I remember observing them and thinking that they were so trained, just like little robots. Their self-efficiency was amazing, however the fact that learning did not seem fun anymore just added to my stress levels. I wanted school to be enjoyable for them, like it was for me. Unfortunately boot camp was a necessary process, and we had to ride it out until the end. The very last day of boot camp was on a Friday and their STAAR test was on the following Tuesday. I was analyzing my students' data, trying to determine if there was anything else I could hit one more time before Tuesday, and then I realized that they knew what they knew, and one more day was not going to change that. If I did not have the energy to teach them a concept on Monday, they surely did not have the energy to learn it. I let it go and left work feeling alive for the first time in a month.

### **The Big Day**

When the big day had finally arrived for my students, I think I was more nervous than they were. There were so many rules for both the teachers and students! Teachers were to arrive extra early that day in order to check out their tubs of materials that included their students' STAAR tests, tissues, pencils, Band-Aids, and fruit snacks. You were not to leave your tub unattended or the school could be written up with a serious testing discrepancy. Entering the classroom that morning almost felt like entering a prison. Classroom walls were completely covered up, backpacks were left at the front of the classroom as an extra precaution, and all electronic materials had to be completely shut off. This included teacher materials as well, cell phones, laptops, projectors, and everything else electronic. Once the instructions were read students were to begin

testing, the next four hours were to be completely silent. I took a deep breath, pulled out my teacher instruction manual, and froze up. I was so nervous that I could not read the instructions to my students. They sat there staring at me, and me back at them in silence. “Oh no, this could not be happening. Of all the days to freak out, please God, not today!” I thought to myself. As calmly as I could, I walked over to my door and popped my head out to see who was monitoring the hallway. Of course, it was my principal. I had to face one of my biggest fears of appearing incompetent, and ask for help. Of all the people to face that fear with, it had to be my administrator. I did not have to explain much, I suppose my face said everything. She smiled at me, entered into the classroom, read the directions to my students, and then the four hours of complete silence began. As silent as it was in the classroom, my mind was racing with so many different thoughts. “She is going to fire me, I’m done for. Who can’t read a simple set of instructions?! I bet all of the other first-year teachers did just fine. Did you freak your students out? Probably. Great, they are not going to pass because their teacher could not read instructions. OK, do not sit down for too long. Keep monitoring the room. What did that online article suggest to do during these four hours? Oh yeah, make a mental bucket list for next year. Do I get a bathroom break soon? How much time has passed...only twenty minutes?” If I was this nervous and stressed out, my students had to be too. They were not. I stood there and observed, they were so focused on their test. Wow! Even Billy, who always seemed to be in another world during my lectures, was so focused. They were so calm. It was so relieving, and I could finally breathe.

## **The Great Discovery**

It was in that moment, that I calmed down and began reflecting over my entire first year as a teacher. What were my biggest struggles? How did I overcome them? What did I learn? Will my students walk away with as much knowledge as I received from them? What did not work this year, and how can I improve for next year? That was when I realized that I wanted to create something helpful, not just for myself, but for all first-year teachers. Some kind of survival guide so that future novice teachers could avoid some of the stressors that I experienced during my first year. That way they could dedicate more of their focus on work, rather than trying to figure out how to deal with certain stressors that come with the job. I personally believe that every teacher grows to eventually find his or her niche within their pedagogy, but if I could assist in eliminating out certain stressors, maybe they could find their niche with a little more ease. That discovery was the inspiration for completing this study, and ultimately providing the final chapter.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **SOLUTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this ‘Survival Guide’ is to assist the novice teacher in dealing with a variety of stressors that one may encounter during their first year of teaching. This guide is based on first-hand experiences and reflections of a former, first-year teacher who hopes to provide as much ease as possible for others during their first year of teaching. It is understood that not all possible stressors may be included in this guide, however the ones that were included were shown to be major stressors experienced by the novice teacher through research findings that have been included throughout this study. The expectation of this survival guide is to assist beginning teachers in dealing with stress in a healthy manner, resulting in a positive outlook on their teaching career and hopefully aid in the reduction of the current teacher attrition rate amongst beginning teachers.

#### **The Mentor Teacher**

Every beginning teacher should be assigned a mentor teacher; if you are not assigned one simply ask your principal for one. Do not be afraid to ask questions; that is what your mentor teacher is there for. You should not be judged by your questions, because there is never a stupid question. Your mentor teacher is there to show you the ins and outs of the entire school including: lesson-planning, how to use the copy machines, how to schedule parent-teacher conferences and what to expect, explain what tasks have strict deadlines and how to prioritize your tasks, classroom management

techniques, how bathroom and bus duty should be facilitated, what or whom to avoid on campus, and offer a variety of classroom management techniques. If you are ever feeling lost, your first step should be to go directly to your mentor teacher. Do not feel like you are inconveniencing anyone; it is their job to guide you and it is your job to ask questions. If you are afraid of appearing incompetent, do not. Every teacher has been in your shoes before, and has felt exactly how you are feeling.

### **Preparation and Consistency**

Preparation can either make you or break you during your first year of teaching. The act of always being prepared is not always realistic, but as a first-year teacher you need to do your best to be as prepared as possible. Do not wait until Sunday night to look at lesson plans for the upcoming week, you will psych yourself out and be overwhelmed with stress the entire week. One strategy that is effective is having a set of storage drawers labeled with each day of the week. Organize your materials for each designated day, so when the week arrives you are already prepared for each day. This is also very effective for when the situation of needing a last-minute substitute arrives. Be prepared to lay down the law on the first day of school, enforce the rules, and more importantly your expectations. This requires preparation on your end as their teacher. Be proactive in designing a seating arrangement, rewards system, consequences, hallway and bathroom expectations, voice levels, etc. You must be consistent when enforcing classroom rules, even though it may be difficult at times. A child will strive to meet your expectations, as long as the expectation is always clear.

## **Balance**

Balance is crucial during your first year of teaching, and is also one of the most stressful and difficult goals to obtain. Begin small, create a classroom schedule and stick to it. If science should end at 9:00 am, make sure you are finishing up your lesson by 8:55. Allow time for students to transition and clean up when creating your classroom schedule, and ask a mentor teacher for a copy to be used as a template. No need to reinvent the wheel if someone else's is already effective. Sticking to your classroom schedule creates consistency within your classroom, and also ensures that you are respectful of others' time as well. Arriving to specials on time is just as important as your students walking into your door on time in the morning. Ensure that you have a balanced lifestyle outside of your work environment as well. As novice teachers, we tend to dedicate most of our time to our job and do not realize the consequences of an unbalanced lifestyle working 12 hour days, but there are. Your stress levels can dramatically increase resulting in not only emotional but physical effects on your body as well. Make sure you include time for yourself during your day. This can include physical exercise, walking your dog, talking to someone about your day, relaxing with a glass of wine watching your favorite show, anything you find enjoyable.

## **A Message**

Assistance from administration and teachers with experience is crucial to the success of first-year teachers. It is important to create a safe, welcoming environment for these novice teachers and always offer a helping hand. At times we shy away from offering help, because we fear that we will insult beginning teachers. However, it is

better to be proactive and ask if they need help, because it is much more likely that they are too afraid to ask for it in fear of appearing incompetent. We were all there at one point, and understand what it feels like to be lost and too scared to ask for help. While veteran teachers are a very reliable source and have a lot to offer as a mentor teacher, newer teachers are ideal candidates for this position. Newer teachers with experience are usually more familiar with the latest technology and up to speed with current trends in the world of education. These newer teachers can also more easily remember the issues that faced them as beginning teachers. Thus both types of teachers are very important candidates to have as a mentor teacher.

As mentors, model a good example for our beginning teachers and make sure to constantly check-in with them. Provide a safe, judge-free environment and maintain an open-door policy with your mentee. Maintain open communication and suggest meeting regularly with other first-year teachers on campus. Ask them questions if they do not ask you; it is very common for first-year teachers to not even be aware of what they can and cannot ask for in their new position. Overall be prepared to take them under your wing and offer a variety of solutions that you have found to be effective for the different situations they will encounter during their first year of teaching.

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned earlier, the novice teacher population has a steadily increasing teacher attrition rate, which I find very troubling. People do not become teachers because of the lucrative career path, they become teachers because they have a passion for education. I can proudly say that I do what I love and I love what I do when it comes to



my career choice of being a public educator. As mentioned earlier, the most crucial period for growth is within the first five years of beginning a teaching career. If novice teachers are quitting before completing those five years, they are missing out a very significant opportunity for growth (Fisher, 2011). I want to help contribute research-based suggestions to the problem in our educational system and aid in reducing the teacher attrition rate. I want to reach out to beginning teachers and provide them with solutions to the potential problems they may experience during their first year.

Just because they hit a few bumps in the road, does not mean that they should quit or that they are not suitable for the profession, maybe they just need a little extra help and are not sure how to find it. All beginning teachers should feel just as excited to maintain their career as they were the day they chose it, and I believe the research conducted during the writing of this thesis is a step towards achieving that.

One limitation within this research study was the sample size, which created some difficulty in verifying significant relationships to previous data. Another limitation for this study was using extant data, leaving the researcher with no control over the methodology used to obtain the data.

A suggestion for future research would be to research the stressors of first-year teachers within different areas of the state or country. Stressors can be dependent upon many things such as culture, socioeconomic levels, and physical surroundings. With that in mind, it would be informative to compare the stressors of a first-year teacher in southern Texas as to a first-year teacher in northern Texas.

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