WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN GREECE: TEACHERS' STRESSORS AND COPING STRATEGIES

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Few studies explore the specific sources of stress, and the coping strategies applied by teachers of children with special educational needs, particularly in small countries such as Greece. The present study investigated the specific work-related stressors affecting special educational needs teachers in Greece and the coping strategies applied by them. 158 One hundred fifty eight special education teachers participated in the study, recruited from Athens (n = 113), and other urbanised areas of Greece (n = 45). Pilot interviews were conducted in order to generate a scale for measuring specific sources of stress in Greek special education teachers. The resulting scale(s), together with the Coping sub-scale of the Occupational Stress Indicator were administered to the sample, and a number of sociodemographic factors were also obtained by the use of a detailed biographical questionnaire. The results identified five key stressors, loading mainly onto the domains of working conditions, workload, and organisational problems, which appear to have an impact on teachers of Special Educational Needs students in Greece. Furthermore, a number of key coping strategies were identified by the teachers, as a means of dealing with work-related stress. The implications of the study are discussed, with a view to forming suggestions for stress intervention programmes.

Review of literature

Research evidence on occupational stress suggests that teaching is among one of the most stressful occupations (Boyle et al., 1995; Doune, 1999; Hui and Chan, 1996; Schonfeld, 2001). As far as the social welfare occupations are concerned, it has been claimed that in fact, teachers experience the highest levels of stress (Travers and Cooper, 1993). In a study carried out in 1996, 80% of the head teachers in special schools in the UK reported that they considered teaching to be a very stressful profession and more than 50% reported having actively contemplated leaving (Male and May, 1997).

Evidence suggests that prolonged occupational stress can lead to physical, mental and emotional ill-health (Borg, 2003; Kelso, French and Fernandez , 2005; Male and May, 1997; Pithers, 1995; Travers and Cooper, 1996), as well as an impairment of the quality of teaching itself (Jaoul, Kovess and FSP-MGEN, 2004). Furthermore, high levels of occupational stress are also associated with job dissatisfaction, absenteeism and work turnover (Billingsley and Cross, 1993).

Forlin (2001) has classified teacher stressors into three general clusters: *administrative*, (i.e. heavy workload, role overload and role conflict, role ambiguity, time/resource difficulties), *classroom-based,* (i.e., classroom climate, high ratio between teacher-pupils, limited progress of pupils with an emphasis on pupils' disruptive behaviors) (Brouwers and Tomic, 2000; Friedman, 1995; Hock, 1988) and *personal*, (i.e., poor collaboration with colleagues, poor working environment, external locus of control, insufficient salary and low social status) (Borg, Riding and Falzon, 1991; Byrne, 1994; Guglielmi and Tatrow, 1998; Kyriacou, 2001; Male and May, 1997).

Although a great deal of research on teachers' stress has been carried out since the late 1970s, studies on the stress experienced by teachers of children with special educational needs remain rather scarce despite the specific factors acting as stressors for teachers in special education schools or classes (Fore, Martin, and Bender, 2002; Galloway, 1985; Upton & Varma, 1996). Williams and Gersch (2004) provided evidence that there are no significant differences in the total level of stress between mainstream and special school teachers, but differences have been identified with regard to the sources

of stress in SEN and non SEN teachers. As such, SEN teachers tend to experience high levels of stress by disruptive pupils, pupils' poor attitudes to schoolwork, lack of available time to spend with individual pupils and OFSTED inspections with the mainstream teachers being stressed by lack of resources (Willliams & Gersch, 2004).

Stress appears to be especially evident for teachers working in inclusive settings and special classes within mainstream schools (Forlin, 2001; Vlachou and Barton, 1994). The additional sources of stress that special educational needs teachers experience may relate to the individual learning and emotional needs of the children who are mentally, physically and/or sensory impaired (Chapman and Stone, 1996; Fraser, 1996; Lecavalier, Leone and Wiltz, 2006; Nelson, 2001; Upton, 1996; Ware, 1996).

Few studies exist which investigate stress among teachers working in small countries such as Greece, particularly within the field of SEN. Recently however, attention has been drawn to teachers' stress in Greece, with the main focus being the sources and levels of stress and job satisfaction of mainstream school teachers at the primary and secondary level. Low wages and limited opportunities for promotion, teachers' goals (occupational and financial) have been identified as a source of stress for Greek primary and secondary teachers (Koustelios and Kousteliou, 1997; Papastylianou, 1997). However, there is some evidence that the levels of stress of mainstream teachers are lower compared to those in other countries with teachers reporting less working hours, less physical exertion and higher levels of social support than their European counterparts (Alexopoulos, 1992; Leondari, Kiridis and Gialamas, 2000; Pomaki and Anagnostopoulou, 2003). With regard to children with special needs, feelings of inadequacy have been reported by Greek mainstream school teachers, mainly deriving from the inadequate training that they have received (Padeliadu, 1995; Antoniou, Polychroni and Vlachakis, 2006).

The Greek special education system comprises special kindergartens, special primary schools, inclusion classes in mainstream kindergartens and mainstream primary schools, special lower secondary schools and special upper secondary schools. The aim in recent years is towards inclusion. Primary special education is for children 4-14 years, lower gymnasium is for 14-18 years and upper secondary is for 18-22 years old. In terms of the demographics of the different categories of special needs, the majority of pupils (68,35%) attending special schools or units are pupils with specific learning difficulties (i.e. dyslexia), 15.38% of pupils have mental retardation, 4.5% have severe learning difficulties and fewer have severe neurological conditions, autism, hearing and visual impairments (The Information Network in Europe, 2005).

Despite the recent attention that stress and teaching has received, there are still virtually no studies investigating the specific sources of stress and the coping strategies of the teachers of children with special needs in Greece. Teaching stress may be moderated by the use of a number of coping strategies rather than being a mere exposure to difficult situations. Approaches to reducing stress may be either direct (e.g. changing the source of stress) or indirect (e.g. changing the way one thinks about or physically responds to the stress to reduce impact) and either active (e.g. taking some action to change oneself or the situation) or inactive (e.g. avoiding or denying the source of stress by engaging in sport activities, relaxation techniques, alcohol consumption) (Folkman, 1984; Kelso, French and Fernandez, 2005; Williams and Gersch, 2004). In a study carried out by Gersch (1996) a number of strategies were indicated, suggested as effective by teachers. These included listing and prioritising work, having a sympathetic adult or mentor to share problems with, engaging in leisure activities and pursuing hobbies outside school hours.

Considerably less attention has been given to the coping strategies used by special education teachers. However, Green and Ross (1996) identified a number of coping strategies used by SEN teachers, also proposed in an earlier study by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as general approaches for coping with demanding circumstances. These fell into three major categories: problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance coping strategies. Special education teachers are more likely to use different directed coping strategies than regular education teachers, but also employ self-directed coping strategies which are similar to those used by mainstream teachers. These may include a step by step plan of action to remedy problems or taking direct action and putting aside other activities to solve problems, and avoidant coping strategies, including trying not to think about problems (Green and Ross, 1996; Markham, Green and Ross, 1996).

The present study explores the specific sources of stress experienced by Greek teachers in Special Education, and investigates the coping strategies used by these teachers in an effort to overcome stress. In addition, the study seeks to identify possible predicting factors for both the sources of stress experienced, and the coping strategies employed by Greek SEN teachers.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 158 teachers working in special needs classrooms in special schools and/or inclusive classrooms situated in Athens (71.5%) and three other main cities in Greece (28.5%), Thessaloniki, Irakleio and Volos. Records from the Greek Ministry of Education showed that these cities had a large number of special needs schools and schools with inclusive classes. As a result, they were considered more suitable for participation in the study. Questionnaires were mailed to 200 schools addressed to all special needs teachers working on site. Finally, 158 teachers (106 males and 52 females) from 120 schools (45 special schools and 75 mainstream schools) responded. The breakdown of the sample can be found in Table 1.

Table 1.
Breakdown of sample and demographics (N=158)

Variable	Demographic Categories	N	%
Gender	Males	106	67.1%
	Females	52	32.9%
Location	Athens	113	71.5%
	Other areas in Greece	45	28.5%
Type of School	Mainstream	75	62.5%
	Special	45	37.5%
Age	up to 40	53	33.5%
(years)	41 - 50	66	41.8%
	over 51	39	24.7%
Marital Status	Married	143	90.5%
	Single	15	9.5%
Teaching Experience	1 -15	43	27.2%
(years)	16 - 24	74	46.8%
	over 25	41	25.9%
Position in school	Teacher	73	46.7%
	Head teacher	31	19.6%
	Other	54	33.7%
Years in current position	1-4	56	35,4%
	5-9	40	25.3%
	over 10	62	39.2%
Teaching hours per week	1-20	38	24%
	21-30	120	75.9%
Preparation time per week	1 - 5	73	46.2%
(hours)	6-10	57	36.1%
	11-20	13	8.2%
Assessment time per week	1-2	46	29.1%
(hours)	3-5	60	38.0%
	over 6	52	32.9%
Number of pupils in class	1-5	51	32.3%
	6-15	101	66.4%

Measures

The study has a cross-sectional self-report design. Pilot interviews were conducted with a small group of Greek SEN teachers (N=10) in order to generate items for a scale assessing the specific sources of stress of SEN teachers in Greece. The final scale constructed consisted of 45 items describing sources of stress relating to working conditions, students' achievement and behaviour, resources and equipment, job demands and occupation status. Sample items included: *lack of progress for a number of student*s; *unrealistic expectations and pressure by parents*; *lack of support staff in the classroom* and *limited recognition of my contribution by the state*. Responses were obtained through a six-point Likert-type self-report rating scale ranging from *no stress at all* (1) to *very high level of stress* (6). Reliability of the scale was high, with Cronbach's alpha calculated at 0.943.

The questionnaire utilized to assess coping strategies was the coping subscale from the Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI) developed by Cooper, Sloan and Williams (1988). The 28-item scale is designed to measure the positive and negative coping strategies which an individual uses to overcome various stressful situations. Individuals are asked to rate the statements on a six-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (*never used by me*) to 6 (*extensively used by me*) (e.g. *Try to deal with the situation objectively and in an unemotional way*). The coping strategies are broken down into the following six subscales: social support (assistance which an individual can obtain from a social support system), task strategies (individual's efforts to cope with occupational stress by rearranging their current and future tasks), logic (individual's unemotional and rational approach to stressful situations), home-work relationships (ways in which the individual can obtain support from the home environment as well as from other interests), time (benefits for an individual when using an effective time management as coping strategy) and involvement (how an individual becomes appointed to the tasks leading them to increased stress) (Cronbach's alpha: 0.862). Similar procedures have been previously adopted by other researchers when investigating sources of stress (Antoniou, 1999; Travers and Cooper, 1996).

Demographic information and work characteristics were employed as predictor variables. Teachers were asked to fill in a detailed biographical questionnaire which included information with regard to gender, age, teaching experience, hours spent on preparation and marking, and thoughts of quitting the job.

Results
A principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was applied to the responses to the 45 potential sources of stress. Six factors were derived from the analysis that contributed for 55.08% of the total variance of the scores: 1) Work conditions (29.82% variance), 2) Workload (6.85%), 3) Lack of recognition and support (5.32%), 4) Organisational problems (4,78%), 5) Students' motivation (4.62%), 6) Difficult student behaviour (3.69%). The factors eliciting greater levels of stress were work conditions, workload, and organisational problems factors. In particular, five specific items loading onto these factors were identified as the most important and re-curring sources of stress (see table 2) as follows: lack of resources and equipment in schools; responsibility for pupils; support from the government; pressure of time at school; and favouritism at work, whereby promotion is perceived to be based on social contacts rather than on professional performance.

Table 2.
Rank order of mean scores and standard deviations of the most important sources of stress (N=158)

Rank Order	Sources of Stress	Mean	SD	Percent % scoring 5 or 6
1	Resources and equipment	4.39	1.24	50.6
2	Responsibility for pupils	4.24	1.38	44.9
3	Support from the government	4.18	1.33	52.0
4	Pressure of time at school	4.09	1.36	38.7
5	Favoritism	4.04	1.51	44.9

Range of scale: 1=Not stressful at all, 2=Not stressful, 3=Generally not stressful, 4=Generally stressful, 5=Quite stressful, 6=Very stressful.

Factor analysis was also performed on the coping strategies sub-scale, in order to confirm the structure. Analysis yielded six factors that contributed to 57.93% of the total variance, depicting a slightly different structure compared to the original structure of the OSI as follows: 1) Social support (12.89%), 2) Time (10.36%), 3) Involvement (9.80%), 4) Logic (8.87%), 5) Task strategies (8.05%), 6) Separating Home-work relationships (7.96%).

Mean scores for the individual items of the coping strategies scale were investigated, in order to ascertain those most frequently applied. Coping strategies employed by the teachers in order to minimize their occupational stress levels are depicted in Table 3, ranked by frequency. It was found that teachers used mainly strategies loading onto the involvement factor, (i.e. looking for ways to make their job more interesting) and the task strategies factor, (i.e. setting priorities in their duties and reorganizing their work). In addition, strategies loading onto the social support factor were also applied (i.e. maintaining stable relationships).

Table 3.
Rank order of mean scores and standard deviations of coping strategies (N=158)

Rank Order	Coping Strategies	Mean	SD	Percent% scoring 5 or 6
1	Look for ways to make the work more interesting	5.0	1.19	77.8
2	Have stable relationships	4.89	1.09	69.0
2	Reorganize my work	4.89	1.09	69.6
3	Set priorities	4.84	1.09	72.1
4	Deal with problems immediately	4.82	1.27	63.3
5	Expand interest and activities outside work	4.78	1.21	68.9

Range of scale: 1=Not stressful at all, 2=Not stressful, 3=Generally not stressful, 4=Generally stressful, 5=Quite stressful, 6=Very stressful.

Independent samples t-test was applied to identify differences in scores between male and female teachers with regard to the most frequently reported sources of stress items and the 6 stress factors, together with the most frequently applied coping strategy items and the 6 coping strategy factors (see Table 4).

Table 4.
Independent samples t-test identifying significant differences between male and female teachers for specific stress and coping strategy items and factors.

	Mean (SD)		t	p
	Men	Women		
Specific stress Items:				
Responsibility for pupils	4.04 (1.44)	4.64 (1.16)	2.63	.009
Pressure of time at school	3.92 (1.39)	4.43 (1.23)	2.25	.025
Specific stress factors:				
Student motivation	25.50	28.00	2.51	.013
Student difficult behaviour	17.28	15.10	2.64	.004
Coping Item				
Having stable relationships	4.76 (1.14)	5.15 (0.92)	2.15	.033

Significant differences in mean scores were identified for stress items in relation to *responsibility for pupils*, and *pressure of time at school*, with women reporting more stress in these areas, Females also reported significantly more stress for the *student motivation* factor, whilst men reported more stress in relation to *difficult student behaviour*. A significant difference was also identified for the *having stable relationships* item of the coping scale, with women reporting more extensive use of this strategy than men. No significant differences were identified for the coping strategy factors.

Differences in scores on the most frequently reported sources of stress items and 6 stress factors, were also investigated across the three age ranges, as were the frequently recurring coping strategy items and 6 coping strategy factors (see Table 5). Significant differences were evident for the *support from the government* stress item, with the 41-50 age group reporting greater stress, but there were no significant differences for the specific stress factors. The 41 – 50 age group reported greater usage of three of the coping strategy items: *reorganize my work*; *set priorities*; and *deal with problems immediately*, whilst the <40 age group indicated significantly more use of the *expand interest and activities outside work* strategy. Investigation of the 6 coping factors revealed that SEN teachers aged from 41 to 50 used social support and involvement in the situation more often compared to their younger and older colleagues.

Table 5.
One-Way Analysis of Variance identifying significant differences by age range for specific stress and coping strategy items and factors

	Mean Score (SD)			*F*	*p*
	< 40	41 - 50	>50		
Specific stress items:					
Support from the government	4.06	4.48	3.85	3.30	0.39
Specific Coping items:					
Reorganise my work	5.02 (.97)	5.06 (.95)	4.44 (1.31)	4.82	.009
Set priorities	4.94 (.88)	4.98 (.86)	4.96 (1.51)	3.29	.040
Deal with problems immediately	4.79 (1.18)	5.11 (.97)	4.36 (1.66)	4.43	.013
Expand interest and activities outside work	4.85 (1.21)	4.00 (.91)	4.33 (1.52)	3.96	.021
Specific Coping Factors:					
Social support					
Involvement	31.45	32.13	28.94	3.71	.026
	19.24	19.43	17.48	3.67	.028

Table 6 presents the rank order of individual coping strategy items, used by male and female teachers separately. For male teachers the most frequently used coping strategy is looking for ways to make work more interesting (classified as involvement strategy in the OSI), whilst for female teachers this coping strategy is ranked in the sixth position. Additional coping strategies used was attempting to set priorities (a task coping strategy), taking up interests and activities outside work (home and work strategies). Other coping strategies, frequently used by male SEN Greek teachers were found to be stable relationships, effective time management, trying to stand aside and think through the situation, dealing objectively with the situation and planning ahead. Females used predominantly social support strategies such as trying to maintain stable relationships with others. Re-organizing work and dealing immediately with problems (time strategy) were ranked as second and third strategy. Female SEN Greek teachers also resorted to interests and activities outside work, talking to understanding friends, standing aside and thinking through the situation as well as using effective time management.

Table 6.
Rank order of mean scores and standard deviations of the most important coping strategies by gender (N=158)

Coping Strategies	Rank	
	Males (N=105)	Females (N=53)
Look for ways to make the work more interesting	1	6
Set priorities	2	5
Expand interests and activities outside work	3	7
Reorganise my work	4	2
Deal with problems immediately	5	3
Have stable relationships	6	1
Effective time management	7	10
Try to stand aside and think through the situation	8	9
Try to deal with the situation objectively	9	-
Plan ahead	10	4
Talk to understanding friends	-	8

Stepwise multiple regression analysis was applied, to identify the impact of the frequently used sources of stress items on the most widely used coping strategy items, with the most common predicting stress items being *lack of resources* and *lack of support from the government* (see table 7). There was no effect of the source of stress items on the *setting priorities* coping strategy. The same analysis was used to investigate the predicting effects of a number of demographic variables (e.g. teaching hours, number of students in class, time spent assessing, marital status, years of experience), with dependent variables being the frequently reported stress items and coping strategy items. Table 8 demonstrates

the results of this analysis. No predicting demographic variables were identified for the *favoritism* stress item.

Table 7.
Stepwise regression for the key stress items significantly predicting the use of specific Coping Strategies

Dependent Variable (coping strategies)	Predicting Variables (source of stress)	R	R^2	p	Beta
Find ways to make work more interesting	Lack of resources	0.31	0.10	0.001	0.26
Having stable relationships	Lack of resources Lack of support from government	0.24	0.6	0.012	-0.23
Re-organise work	Lack of support from government	0.38	0.14	0.000	-0.35
Deal with problems immediately	Lack of resources	0.44	0.20	0.000	0.39
Expand activities outside work	Pressure of time at school	0.35	0.12	0.000	0.36

Table 8.
Stepwise regression for the key demographic variables significantly predicting sources of stress and the use of specific Coping Strategies

Dependent Variable (Sources of stress)	Predicting Variables (demographic)	R	R^2	p	Beta
Lack of resources	Teaching hours	0.35	0.12	0.003	0.35
Responsibility for pupils	Number of students in class	0.33	0.11	0.004	-0.33
	Time spent assessing	0.46	0.21	0.004	-0.20
	Gender	0.20	0.03	0.009	
Support from government	Position	0.36	0.12	0.000	-0.47
	Time spent assessing	0.54	0.27	0.000	0.42
	Marital status	0.60	0.33	0.014	-0.25
Pressure of time at school	Gender	0.17	0.02	0.025	-0.17
Dependent Variable (Coping strategies)					
Look for ways to make work more interesting	Teaching hours	0.34	0.10	0.001	0.38
	Location	0.41	0.15	0.040	-0.23
Have stable relationships	Teaching hours	0.31	0.08	0.002	0.36
	Location	0.41	0.14	0.024	-0.26
Re-organise work	Position	0.40	0.14	0.000	-0.47
	Teaching hours	0.50	0.23	0.000	0.36
	Years in position	0.55	0.27	0.000	-0.38
	Number of students in class	0.62	0.35	0.003	-0.29
	Years of experience	0.66	0.39	0.019	-0.24
	Teachers age	0.18	0.03	0.017	-0.18
Set priorities	Teaching hours	0.31	0.08	0.043	0.23
	Type of school	0.39	0.12	0.027	0.25
	Position	0.45	0.16	0.039	-0.23
Deal with problems immediately	Position	0.29	0.07	0.012	-0.29
Expand activities outside of work	Hours spent preparing lessons	0.37	0.12	0.004	-0.33
	Years of experience	0.45	0.18	0.018	-0.26

Discussion

The present study explored the key sources of stress, and the coping strategies used by Greek teachers of children with special educational needs to overcome stress. In addition, the study sought to identify possible predicting factors for both the sources of stress experienced, and the coping strategies employed by Greek SEN teachers. It was shown that the five most important stressors referred to the difficulties of teaching students with SEN due to lack of resources and equipment, their feelings of increased responsibility for their pupils' well being and education, general lack of support from the government regarding their occupational status, pressure of time at school, and discrimination. When the factor structure of the stress items was examined, these five most frequently recurring stress items were found to load mainly onto the *work conditions*; *work load* and *organisational problems* factors. In line with the classifications proposed by Forlin (2001), with regard to teacher stress, these 5 items may be seen to relate predominantly to the *administrative* and *personal* categories.

Lack of equipment and human resources appears to be an issue which is frequently raised by special educational needs teachers in Greece. Teachers may attribute this to lack of support from the government, including lack of official educational guidelines from the state and insufficient opportunities for professional development for SEN teachers. Favoritism, which is often observed within the context of Greek schools and which was also illustrated during the pilot interviews in the study, appears to be related to this, in the sense that teachers who have close personal relationships with head teachers are often favored against others. Lack of resources and equipment was also identified in the studies by Williams and Gersch (2004) and Male and May (1996) with British SEN teachers. Teachers may feel inadequate when they need to balance their responsibilities with shortage of resources and equipment (e.g. libraries, supportive technologies, resource banks) in order to meet the different needs of each pupil, which may lead to high levels of stress and low self-esteem.

When differences between male and female teachers were explored with respect to the five key stressors identified, it was revealed that women scored significantly higher than men with regards to their perceptions of the extent to which *responsibility for pupils*, and *pressure of time at school* were considered important sources of stress.   Likewise, when differences were explored with regard to the specific stress factors, women reported higher levels of stress with regard to *student motivation*. However, men were significantly more stressed than women with regards to the *difficult student behaviour* factor. These findings may imply that the social role and personality differences between men and women, as defined by their gender, may have an impact on their perceptions of stressful factors. However, due to the smaller number of female teachers in the study, any differences related to gender should be treated with caution. Nonetheless, this indication may prove useful in designing teachers' stress management programmes.

When the frequently reported stress items were compared across different age ranges, the 41 – 50 age groups reported more stress than teachers in the younger and older age groups with regard to perceptions of support from the government. This may reflect that this age group, possibly at a key stage in their career, feel particularly strongly with regards to the lack support provided by governmental authorities. No significant differences in scores for the specific stress factors were identified between the three age groups.

In addition to the identification of specific stressors amongst Greek SEN teachers, this study also investigated the key coping strategies applied by them. Most teachers reported frequent usage of items contributing to mainly *active* (involvement and task) strategies, for example, taking steps to try to remove or circumvent the stressors or to ameliorate its effects. Examples of active strategies include looking for ways to make the work more interesting, re-organizing the work, and setting priorities. These are termed as task strategies, involvement and time strategies by Cooper (1988) and are very similar to what Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989) termed active coping or planning, i.e. initiating action strategies, thinking about what steps to take and how best to handle the problem. Social support strategies, such as having stable relationships were also indicated as main coping strategies.   In accordance with the three major categories for SEN coping proposed by Green and Ross (1996), the current study suggests that Greek SEN teachers seem to apply mainly problem focussed and emotion focussed strategies.

There is a growing body of evidence that social support plays a considerable role in reducing the effects of stress on an individual's health and well-being (Sutherland and Davidson, 1993). Social support provides the individual with opportunities for moral support, sympathy, and understanding

(emotion focused), and is also a useful means for seeking advice, assistance or information (problem focused). In the present study, when teachers were asked to indicate their preferred choice of support for sharing work problems, it was revealed that they asked for advice and support principally from colleagues (problem-focused approach) and spouses (emotion-focused approach). Active behaviour, such as problem focused coping is associated with reduced stress and burnout while withdrawal coping strategies such as avoidance appear to be related with higher levels of burnout although it is difficult to ascertain the causal direction of this relationship (Koeske, Kirk and Koeske, 1993; Thornton, 1992).

In the current study, women teachers reported significantly more extensive use of the *stable relationship* coping strategy than men. This difference may possibly be interpreted by the stereotyped belief that women are more likely to take more emotion-focused actions in general, a suggestion which is reinforced by Admiraal, Korthagen and Wubbens (2000) in that emotion-focused form of coping are often influenced by personality factors.

The literature has documented that individual differences might influence coping, and our findings suggest that female SEN teachers in Greece give priority to building stable relationships, an emotion-focused coping strategy as described above. The literature further demonstrates that women tend to be much more involved in their social networks and are more likely to seek out and use social support (Glynn, Christenfeld and Gerin, 1999; Taylor et al., 2000). No other significant gender differences were identified in the present study with regards to usage of specific coping strategies. However, males reported higher usage of problem-focused strategies, involved in actions that have the goal of changing or eliminating the stressor, for example, by looking for ways to make the work more interesting.

Significant differences across age ranges were identified for a number of the frequently applied coping items. Participants in the 41-50 age group reported greater use of the coping items in relation to *re-organizing their work*, and *dealing with problems immediately*, whilst those in the >50 age group scored higher on the item *setting priorities*. For the frequently reported item in relation to *expanding interests outside of work* as a coping strategy, teachers in the <40 age group scored significantly higher, perhaps indicating greater opportunities for outside activities in the younger age group. An investigation with regards to age differences in the total facet scores of the coping strategies scale, revealed that teachers in the >50 age range adopted social support and involvement coping strategies less than their younger colleagues, implying that older teachers may feel more equipped to deal with daily hassles at work, and in line with the literature, may experience lower levels of stress (Trendall, 1989).

To identify predictors of the use of the individual coping strategy items, frequently reported stress items were investigated for the whole sample. The results revealed that *lack of resources* and *support from the government* were key predictors for the use of a number of coping strategies. Thus, it would appear that these particular stressors are of special importance to SEN teachers in Greece. As previously mentioned, lack of resources tend to be a problem in Greece, and as such, it was somewhat expected that Greek SEN teachers would identify this as particularly stressful, as well as issues with regard to governmental support.

Demographic variables were investigated with a view to identifying their ability to predict sources of stress, and utilisation of specific coping strategies, which revealed a number of findings. Stress with regard to *lack of resources* was predominantly predictable by the number of teaching hours, whilst *support from the government* could be predicted by the teacher's position, time spent assessing, and marital status. Number of students in the class, time spent assessing, and genders were all predictors of stress with regard to responsibility for pupils, whilst gender was also a predictor of *pressure of time at school* as a stressor. In terms of the use of specific coping strategies, various predicting factors were identified. The number of teaching hours and the location of the school were the key predictors for *looking for ways to make the work more interesting*, and *having stable relationships*. Use of the *re-organising work* strategy was predicted by a number of variables including position, years in position, and number of teaching hours, whilst teaching hours, type of school and position influenced the use of the *setting priorities* strategy. Finally, *dealing with problems immediately* was predictable by the teachers position in the school, and the use of the *expanding activities outside of work* strategy could be predicted by hours spent preparing lessons and years of experience.

As outlined above, a number of factors were found to contribute to specific stressors and coping mechanisms. In particular, factors in relation to time (e.g. teaching hours, time spent assessing, and

time spent preparing lessons) feature quite highly in terms of predictors of stress and use of coping strategies. It has been previously reported that working hours of mainstream Greek teachers may be less than in other countries, but in the current study, working hours do appear to be a specific issue. It is possible, that the numbers of working hours are exacerbated in SEN teachers, and that this is further affected by lack of adequate resources

The results of this study highlight a number of significant findings applicable to SEN teachers in Greece. Such findings may be of value to Greek SEN teachers themselves, by helping them to gain insights about their own feelings of stress and the coping procedures which they follow. Moreover, these identifications could help to form suggestions and propositions for the most effective stress intervention programs addressed to SEN teachers, and for training teachers in classroom stress management. It follows that training must help people to become effective in their own work settings. In addition, the curriculum content of postgraduate training programmes for SEN teachers may require reappraisal. There needs to be discussion and decision making on the knowledge and skills which are considered essential or desirable in teachers working with students of all ages with special needs. The findings of the current study could also offer significant information on the measures and adjustments with which the government should be advised to proceed, in order to ameliorate the special education framework in Greece and in this way to reduce the relevant sources of stress. Likewise, the results of this study could prove useful to countries of a similar size and cultural structure to Greece, wherein similar issues in relation to lack of resources, and support from the government might apply.

The present study has a number of limitations. The sample was relatively small, female participants were significantly less than male and there are certain difficulties in generalizing the present findings at a global level, based on a specific sample of teachers in a Greek cultural context. In addition, it is realised that the number of teachers involved in the generation of items for the stress scale was relatively small. It was beyond the scope of this study to consider the existing differences between inclusive and special settings in terms of the work environment and the school structure. The study indicated a significant difference between teachers in mainstream schools, and those employed in special schools, with regard to use of the *separate work and home* coping strategy. A research study, further examining the differences between SEN teachers working in special schools and those working in inclusive settings regarding their attitudes towards stress and the related coping strategies, might help to fill a gap in the literature. Unfortunately, no previous research in Greek SEN teachers' stress and coping strategies was available, that could be referred to for the purpose of this study. Likewise, there are few recent studies in the international literature on SEN teachers, as the majority of studies mostly focus on teachers of regular school. Clearly, it is desirable to investigate the issues of teachers' perceived stress and coping strategies in special education in future international studies. Another issue that should perhaps be examined is if and how different special educational needs influence the levels of SEN teachers' stress and their coping strategies. Further research is also required to discover whether and how much the coping strategies applied by SEN teachers have a positive or negative effect in the long term.

In conclusion, this study highlights key factors influencing sources of stress, and applied coping strategies in SEN teachers in Greece. It is important to recognise that increased stress levels in teachers could have major ramifications for the teachers themselves, and also for pupils and the school/education provision as a whole. Within the cultural context of Greece, this study provides evidence that lack of resources and support from the government are key issues for Greek SEN teachers, but that the coping strategies applied by them are generally positive. In particular, social support is expected to play a essential role in helping Greek teachers to cope with stress, given the traditional structure of Greece, and the importance of the family.

It is uncertain the extent to which stress and coping in Greek SEN teachers might compare to that of mainstream Greek teachers, but it is possible that stressful issues might be exacerbated in SEN teachers. Further research comparing teachers in SEN settings with mainstream teachers might prove fruitful in furthering our understanding.

Finally, although no hypotheses were generated with regard to age and gender, specific differences were identified which should be taken into consideration when designing stress intervention programmes for SEN teachers. In order to deliver effective education provision, healthy school environments should be created, where members at all levels can work and learn at their maximum

potential, and with minimum pressure.   Creating *healthy schools* may be particularly relevant for special education provision, as this study has indicated.

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