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Directors´ Stress in Day Care Centers: Related Factors and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore what causes stress to day care center directors and what their coping strategies are. In addition, the study examined the extent to which directors experience work-related stress and burnout, and the factors associated with their work-related stress, engagement and recovery from work. Eighteen day care center directors completed questionnaires including both open-ended and structured questions. A mixed method approach was used. The results showed that the main sources of directors' stress were connected to leading oneself, leading others, managing change and lack of social support. Moreover, the main coping strategies with stress were leading oneself, social support and leading others. In addition, both pre- and in-service leadership training played a significant role in the experience of stress. The nature of factors causing stress and coping strategies with stress may imply that directors need further support in self-management and developing their internal competences. Because directors´ stress impact on childrens´ development and wellbeing through teachers´ wellbeing, it is crucial to pay attention on directors´ wellbeing and provide more support for them. The current study is among the few ones focusing on the stress of directors at ECE settings. Findings provide important information about the causes of directors´ work related stress as well as their coping strategies and about factors that might be related to those.

Keywords: Day care center director, educational leadership, occupational stress, coping strategies, early childhood education

Introduction

Several studies have shown that teaching is one of the most stressful occupations (e.g., Clement, 2017) and directors have an important role in supporting teachers in their job (Zinsser and Curby, 2014). Considering the importance of the role directors have in supporting teachers in their job it is important to investigate what causes stress to them and what kind of coping strategies they use. Moreover, while teacher stress has been studied extensively at different school levels (e.g., Chaplain, 2017), less studies have been conducted in day care settings (Zinsser and Curby, 2014). Consequently, the current study tries to understand how day care center directors perceive their work and how to best support them in their job. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to explore what causes stress to day care center directors and what are their coping strategies, as well as to examine the extent to which they experience work-related stress, and the factors associated with their work-related stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery from work.

Directors´ work related stress

Stress has been defined as a response syndrome of negative affects which develops due to prolonged and increased pressures that cannot be controlled by an individual´s coping strategies (Kyriacou, 1987). Curbow et al. (2000), for example, describe work stress as a situation in which an individual feels that s/he does not have enough resources to respond to pressure, challenges, and requirements of work. The literature provides several theoretical models of work-related stress (e.g., Lazarus and Folkman; Siegrist et al., 2004). As an example, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) see psychological stress as a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being. The judgement that particular person-environment relationship is stressful hinges on cognitive appraisal.

Work-related stressors may increase an individual's emotional exhaustion and a need for recovery from work. When confronted with stressors, person have to invest extra effort in order to meet the job demands (Zohar et al., 2003). High levels of work-related stress, when experienced over a prolonged period, can also lead to a state of burnout (Jepson and Forrest 2006; Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout is a typical stress syndrome which develops gradually in response to prolonged stress and physical, mental and emotional strain (Sharma and Cooper, 2017). According to Maslach and Jackson (1981), burnout comprises of three separate but related factors: (a) 'emotional exhaustion', which is described as feelings of being emotionally over-extended and exhausted; (b) 'reduced personal accomplishment' (cf. inadequacy), which is experienced by teachers as decreased feelings of competence and achievement and a tendency to evaluate oneself negatively with respect to work; and (c) 'depersonalization' (cf. cynicism), which is the development of negative feelings and attitudes about the profession.

Although day care center directors play an important role through their pedagogical leadership and their responsibility for managing, developing and evaluating teachers (Zinsser et al., 2016) there are no studies in our knowledge concerning directors stress in ECE settings. The decisions directors make related to hiring, supervision, professional development, and performance appraisal influence the quality and excellence of the center (Jorde Bloom and Abel, 2015). Directors may experience, to some extent, similar pressure as teachers but in addition they also have to balance the demands placed on them by various stakeholder groups, such as teachers, children, parents and governors. Moreover, directors` impact on teacher's wellbeing which then further has an influence on children's development and wellbeing (Jorde Bloom and Abel, 2015). In school settings Beausaert and colleagues (2016) categorises antecedents of directors stress and burnout into individual (e.g., age, gender, personality, coping strategies or perceived self-efficacy) and contextual (e.g., role

stressors, working conditions, student behaviour, the need for professional recognition, level of specialization, lack of resources, relation with colleagues and lack of social support) factors. For example, Chaplain (2001) reported the main stressors for primary headteachers` to be managing self, managing others, financial management, curriculum management, the management of change, and social support. There is also an increasing amount of research on how educational leaders should support staff with stress management (e.g., Clement, 2017). However, less research has been conducted on how to support directors, and in addition to that, existing literature has been mostly focused on school and not ECE settings.

Coping, engagement and recovery

The transactional model of stress by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identifies the importance of coping strategies for dealing with stress and reducing it. They see coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. Major categories of coping resources are health and energy, positive beliefs, problem solving skills, social skills and material resources. Wong and Cheuk (2005) found emotional support from supervisor to be an effective buffer to the impacts of work-related stress for day care center directors. Garcia-Herrero et al. (2013) indicated that positive experience of social support, especially support from leaders, has a significant association to better resources to work and higher quality of work. They found that it is important to feel appreciated and respected by both colleagues and leaders, particularly when encountering challenges.

Job engagement and recovery from work are seen as fundamental factors in stress management (e.g., Rich et al., 2010; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007). Job engagement, defined as the investment of individuals´ emotional, cognitive, and physical energies into task performance (Rich et al., 2010), is a motivational state driven by perceptions of psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability at work. It predicts important outcomes, such as

performance, citizenship behaviour, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Hernandez and Guarana, 2018). Job engagement is seen as the positive antithesis of burnout (Maslach, et al., 2001), and is influenced by a number of individual- and organizational-level attentional sources (Hernandez and Guarana, 2018). Moreover, Rich et al. (2010) found job engagement having an impact to job performance.

Recovery from work is seen as one of the most important components in coping with occupational stress (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007). Recovery refers to activities that repair the negative effects of stress and restore lost resources and create new personal resources that improve resistance to stress (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007). Overall, recovery by gaining resources is considered to be important because it can stop, counteract, or even prevent the detrimental effects of resources loss (Gluschkoff, 2017). There are several ways to cope with stress and recover from work. For example, Richards (2012) has proposed the following ways for recovering from work and for successful coping with stress: making time for oneself, exercise, and for family and friends, getting enough sleep and eating a healthy diet, practicing meditation and solitude, indulging a sense of humour, determining some `fun` in one's everyday working life, determining to display a positive attitude, and letting things go that are out of one's control. Furthermore, Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) found psychological detachment (i.e., mentally ''switching off'') from work, relaxation, mastery and control over leisure time to be important aspects of recovery.

Directors in Finnish ECEC settings

In Finland ECEC is provided by local authorities or private service providers as centre-based and family-based activities for 0-6-year olds. A director of day care center has a qualification as ECE teacher, in addition, also at least masters´ degree in educational sciences. They can be

the directors up to five day care center units. Most often, day care center directors' tasks are to direct and lead staff, oversee daily activities, prepare plans and budgets, and to be responsible for administration. Directors may need to divide their time between duties as a part time teacher and part time director depending of the arrangements done at the municipality.

The Aim of the study

The aim of the present study is to explore what causes stress to day care center directors and what are their coping strategies with stress as well as to examine the extent to which they experience work-related stress, and the factors associated with their work-related stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery from work. The more specific research questions are:

1. To what extent do directors report experiencing work-related stress, and what is its association with burnout, work engagement and recovery from work?

2. What are day care center directors´ self-reported sources of work-related stress and coping strategies?

3. What is the role of professional training in directors´ work related stress, work engagement and recovery from work?

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study is part of a larger project investigating teacher stress in Central Finland (authors omitted for reviewing purposes, 2016-2017). Eighteen (66.67%) out of 27 directors (all female) agreed to participate in the study and signed consent form. The age of directors varied from 26 to 65 years (M = 48 years; SD = 10.75 years). Directors' work experience in the educational field ranged between 3 and 38 years (M = 17.59 years; SD = 10.74 years) and

their work experience as director varied between 0.5 to 35 years (M = 11.22 years; SD = 10.5 years). Six directors were leading one center, nine were leading two centers and three were currently leading three different centers. With regard to directors' leadership and management related education, five did not have any such education, three had in-service training focused on the leadership of ECE, and ten had been going through basic studies oriented to leadership. Ten directors had not followed any other in-service training in past two years and eight directors had followed at least some in-service training.

Measures

Burnout. Burnout was measured with a shortened Finnish version of the Bergen Burnout Inventory (BBI9; Salmela-Aro et al., 2011), which consisted of 9 items measuring three dimensions: Exhaustion (3 items, α = .65), Cynicism (3 items, α = .69) and Inadequacy (3 items, α = .84). All the items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*).

Stress. Experience of stress was measured with a question "Stress means a situation in which a person feels excited, restless, nervous, or anxious or has difficulties in sleeping when something is bothering her/him. Do you feel this kind of stress at the moment?" The participants were asked to answer on scale 1 (*"not at all"*) to 6 (*"to a great extent"*) (Elo et al., 2003; Länsikallio et al., 2018).

Sources of work-related stress. Sources of work-related stress were measured by asking them to write down their answers to an open-ended question: "What causes you the most stress and exhaustion at work?"

Recovery from work. Recovery from work was measured with the Recovery Experience Questionnaire (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007) which consists of 16 items with respect to their free evenings on a 5-point scale (1 = *I do not agree at all* to 5 =*I fully agree*).

The questions produced scales for Psychological detachment (4 items, α = .81), Relaxation (4 items, α = .74), Mastery (4 items, α = .87), and Control (4 items, α = .79).

Work Engagement. Work engagement was measured with 9 items from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). The scale produced subscales for Vigor (3 items, α = .86), Dedication (3 items, α = .78) and Absorption (3 items, α = .87). All items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 =*never* to 6 =*daily*).

Coping strategies with stress. Coping strategies were measured by asking them to write down their answers to an open-ended question: "What are your ways of coping with work-related stress and exhaustion?"

Analysis

The present study was conducted using mixed method approach. The qualitative and quantitative data was analysed separately and independently from each other.

Quantitative data was analysed by using IBM SPSS statistical package. To investigate associations between the variables correlation analysis was used (Spearman correlations). To compare directors' stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery from work in terms of their level of leadership training and participation in in-service training, nonparametric Kruskall-Wallis test and Mann-Whitney U test were used. The groups were created based on directors' in-service training on leadership.

Qualitative data were analysed by using problem-driven content analyses with abductive reasoning (Krippendorff, 2013; Patton, 2015). First, qualitative data was read several times to find individual meaning units, that is words or sentences containing aspects related to each other through their content. For example from an answer about causes of stress*"... Lack of time ... when I try to work as a class teacher and director at the same time.*

One of these always getting less time and effort, which causes feeling of quilt and tasks to accumulate. Often, I do overtime to finish incomplete tasks and workdays stretch too long." we identified two meaning units: lack of time and the amount of work. As can be seen from this example more than one meaning units could be reported by one participant, therefore the amount of meaning units is bigger compared to the number of participants. The total amount of meaning units under sources of stress were 40 and in case of coping strategies 57. Second, meanings were combined into main themes and subthemes (if needed) depending of their content. Finally, main themes were examined for illumination of predetermined sensitizing concepts and theoretical relationships.

Results

Day care center directors' experienced stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery

Descriptive statistics for directors' stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery, and correlations between these factors can be seen from Table 1. Firstly, results showed that 56% of participants reported experiencing stress at least to *"some extent"*. Secondly, Spearman's correlations between directors´ work-related stress experiences, burnout (exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy), work engagement (vigor, dedication, and absorption) and recovery from work (psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control) indicate a strong positive relationship between directors´ work-related stress experiences and exhaustion, and between their stress experiences and feelings of inadequacy. In addition, there was a moderate negative relationship between directors´ work-related stress experiences and work engagement vigor, their stress and dedication to work as well as between dedication and feelings of inadequacy.

Sources of day care center directors´ stress

Second, directors were asked to indicate what causes them the most stress and exhaustion at work. We identified six main themes concerning directors' self-reported stress (see Figure 1): (1) leading oneself; (2) leading others; (3) managing change; (4) lack of social support; (5) implementing new issues, and (6) financial planning.

One of the main sources of stress identified in the data was leading oneself, it was mentioned most often (46% from totally 40 meaning units). Not having enough time and having too much work seemed to be the main cause of stress under this theme. Directors also struggled with the great responsibility and, with problems and situations, which they were not capable to influence.

Another frequently mentioned theme "leading others" containing human resources management, unclear issues and student affairs, covered 22% of meaning units under stressors at work. One cause of stress reported under leading others was student affairs, containing the process of choosing children, because in some occasions there can be more applications from parents than there are places for children in day care.

Third mostly mentioned theme was "managing change," including meaning units: being new on a current position, the transferring process from old center to a new one, learning new programs and implementing new core curriculum which was launched in Finland in 2017. Furthermore, the lack of social support from ECE directors from municipality level was also seen as one cause of stress. Theme "lack of social support" included unfair treatment, poor management on higher level, poor information mobility and lack of emotional support from colleagues and in adopting new programs and projects. In addition directors´ reported receiving stress also from implementing the new curriculum and from getting and securing resources.

Day care centers directors´ self-reported coping strategies with stress

Next, directors reported what kind coping strategies they use to handle work-related stress. After qualitative content analysis, meaning units were organized into three main themes: (1) leading oneself; (2) leading others and, (3) social support among which leading oneself and social support were divided into two subthemes: (1) professional and (2) personal (See Figure 1).

Directors reported leading oneself to be the most important way to handle their work-related stress, forming 72% of all meaning units (totally 57 statements). This theme includes in professional level prioritizing and organizing own work and keeping workdays at a reasonable length, and on personal level being physically active, having a hobby, getting enough rest and separating work from leisure time.

Physical exercise was the most often mentioned on personal level to deal with work-related stress. By physical exercise respondents mentioned also, in addition to doing sports, doing other physical activities outside the house, for example, going for a walk and gardening. In addition to being physically active, keeping private and work life separated, having a hobby and getting enough rest were seen as an effective ways to handle stress. When it comes to managing oneself at professional level, prioritizing and organizing ones work and keeping workdays at a reasonable length were reported as effective coping strategies.

Social support was seen important way to deal with stress on both professional and personal level. On professional level involving support from colleagues and from municipality level and on personal level support from friends and family and social relationships.

In addition, leading others through shared leadership and commonly agreed practices was reported as an effective way to deal with stress.

The role of professional training

Finally, the role of professional training was investigated. Participants were divided into three groups according to their level of training in leadership (Group 1: no training (n = 5); Group 2: some in-service training focused on the leadership (n = 3); Group 3: at least basic studies oriented to leadership (n = 10). There was a statistically significant difference in recovery from work mastery scores for the three groups: χ^2(2, n = 18) = 8.77, p = .012. The post-hoc comparisons indicated that experienced mastery in Group 1 (Md = 3.25) was significantly lower than in Group 3 (Md = 4.13). Groups 2 and 3, and Groups 1 and 2, however, did not differ significantly from each other in terms of directors' mastery experiences.

Thirdly, Mann-Whitney U-test was conducted to compare stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery from work between Groups 1 and 2. There was a marginally significant difference in stress between Group 2 (Md = 3.00, n = 8) and Group 1 (Md = 3.00, n = 10): U = 19.00, z = -2.063, p = .068. There was also a significant difference in exhaustion between Group 2 (Md = 2.50, n = 8) and Group 1 (Md = 3.67, n = 10): U = 15.00, z = -2.245, p = .027. Director in Group 2 reported lower stress and exhaustion than directors in Group 1.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine day care center directors' sources of stress and coping strategies as well as the extent of which day care center directors experience work-related stress and burnout, and the factors associated with their work-related stress, work engagement and recovery from work, and the role of training for leadership in stress. First, the results were in line with the recent working life barometer of the Trade Union of Education in 2017 (Länsikallio et al, 2018) in which more than half of directors reported experiencing stress at least to some extent. In addition, stressed directors were more

exhausted and felt inadequate and less engaged to work. The workload of educational leaders is increasing and at the same time they feel that the time to complete all the tasks in satisfactory way is decreasing (Jorde Bloom and Abel, 2015). That leads to a situation where demands are outweighing their personal resources. If a director is not capable to balance the situation by coping strategies it may lead to increased stress level and can eventually end up with burnout (Kyriacou, 1987). It is crucial to pay attention to their well-being and provide more support for educational leaders since their wellbeing have an influence on staff members´ wellbeing in center (see Jorde Bloom and Abel, 2015).

Second, we explored day care center directors´ sources of stress and their coping strategies. The results were only partially in line with previous research (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Chaplain, 2001). The directors´ reports showed that the main sources of stress were connected to leading oneself or others, managing change, and lack of social support. It seems that directors struggle with time management, for example dividing their time between their work tasks and demands from different stakeholder groups such as teachers, children, parents and governors. Directors experiences of stress seem to be related to multiple responsibilities associated with their role as the person responsible for the centers´ daily practice and as the advocate of the staff. In addition, leading others seems to be one major cause of stress for directors, whose work includes leading a large number of employees, to be more precise, they find the recruiting processes and finding substitute teachers as causes of stress. Not having enough time and too much work leads to accumulation of unfinished tasks and feeling of inadequacy, which by Maslach and Jackson (1981) can be experienced as decreased feeling of competence and achievement and tendency to evaluate oneself negatively with respect to work. It has been suggested that time management strategies might function as compensatory coping strategy to adjust to stressors.

The results of the present study suggest that offering time-management training might decrease day care center directors' experiences of stress (see Häfner, et al. 2014).

The directors reported managing change as an additional major source of stress. The landscape of ECE is in constant change (Haslip and Gullo, 2018), which makes directors' work challenging. It seems that keeping up with the development and learning new practices, for example, related to digitalization, may cause difficulties. Implementing the new curriculum to the center at the semester when data was collected may have caused stress to directors. In addition, in some cases, stress is caused by a lack of time and support from both ECE directors from municipality level and colleagues.

Directors' coping strategies were connected to leading oneself and others, and social support. It is possible to draw parallels with Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who found health and energy, positive beliefs, problem solving skills, social skills and material resources to be major categories of coping resources. Leading oneself was seen as the most common stress-related coping strategy. It should be noted that leading oneself was also seen as the most common stressor by directors. Directors seem to highly value their own responsibility in looking for ways to deal with stress. It seems that directors would benefit from support in self-management and developing/using their personal competencies. In line with previous research (e.g., Richards, 2012; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007), being physically active (not only doing sports but also just spending time outside and in nature) was one of the most beneficial strategies in coping with work-related stress. In addition, keeping private and working life separated and having a hobby were seen as effective coping strategies. Successful recovery from work creates new personal resources, which can counteract and prevent the effects of resources' loss (Gluschkoff, 2017; Sonnentag, and Fritz, 2007). In line with that directors reported social support from not only employees, co-workers and ECE directors from municipality level but also from family and friends to be one coping strategy with stress.

Social support has been shown to buffer stress, depression and burnout (Beausaert et al., 2016).

An additional source of stress found in the present study was the lack of social support, in earlier research lack of social support has been found as a cause of stress also for school principals (Beausaert et al., 2016). The main problems are lack of support, unfair treatment and lack of information mobility from the higher level. Thus, support and training should be offered to directors for adapting and implementing new practices. Directors need emotional, informational, and /or tangible support from both their colleagues and ECE directors from municipality level. It seems to be that re-evaluating day care center directors´ tasks in terms of time needed and content would be beneficial to reducing directors' stress. In addition, time-management training might be beneficial in planning their work better. Another possible buffer for directors' work-related stress could be sharing leadership tasks, which might ease directors' workload and through that reduce their stress level.

Finally, we examined the role of professional training in directors´ work related stress, work engagement and recovery from work. Directors with no leadership training seem to have lower experience of recovery from work compared to those who had been going through in-service training and/or basic studies oriented to leadership. Similarly to Rich et al. (2010), the results of present study show that directors with higher level of stress are less engaged to their job which can lead to degrease performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. The importance of in-service training in keeping people's education updated for fulfilling the changing requirements and competences has been recognized (e.g., Norberg, 2018). The results showed that directors who had followed some in-service training in the last two years, reported experiencing less stress and exhaustion. Based on the results of current study it can be suggested that in-service training provide forums for communication, sharing information, and concrete tools for handling the work

load and therefore it might be beneficial for municipalities to develop and implement in-service training or stress-reduction programs for directors in ECE.

Limitations

The present study has limitations that need to be considered when making generalizations. First, a small sample size limits the generalization of the findings. Second, the study relied solely on one source of information, i.e., directors' self-reports. Third, data was collected only at one time point at the end of the year when stress levels might have accumulated. Finally, the study has been done in the Finnish educational context where day care center directors' job description varies depending on municipality.

Conclusions

The current study is among the few ones focusing on the stress of directors at ECE settings. In planning support for day care center directors, asking their opinion about what is needed is crucial for success. Directors´ impact on teacher´s wellbeing which then further has an influence on children´s development and wellbeing. Findings provide important information about the causes of directors´ work related stress as well as their coping strategies and about factors that might be related to those.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Directors´ stress experiences											
2. Burnout: Exhaustion	.73**										
3. Burnout: Cynicism	.36	.36									
4. Burnout: Inadequacy	.79**	.74**	.74**								
5. Work engagement: Vigor	-.55*	-.52*	-.14	-.46							
6. Work engagement: Dedication	-.54*	-.49*	-.23	-.54*	.74**						
7. Work engagement: Absorption	-.19	-.32	-.38	-.23	.50*	-.56*					
8. Recovery from work: Psych. detachment	.03	-.31	.05	-.08	.24	.35	.15				
9. Recovery from work: Relaxation	.42	-.16	-.14	.08	.19	-.06	.23	.79**			
10. Recovery from work: Mastery	.03	-.22	.08	.06	.27	.14	.35	.41	.45		
11. Recovery from work: Control	-.30	-.29	-.07	-.32	.77**	.80**	.55*	.50*	.27	.15	
Mean	3.17	3.19	1.33	1.69	6.46	6.57	6.67	2.94	3.92	3.69	4.21
Median	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	4	4	4	3	3	3	3
SD	1.04	1.01	.49	.93	.65	.67	.64	.79	.64	.82	.70
Cronbach´s alpha		.65	.69	.84	.86	.78	.87	.81	.74	.87	.79

Note. $* p < 0.05$. $** p < 0.01$. Two-tailed testing of significance.

Figure 1. Day care center directors´ sources of stress and coping strategies.

SOURCES OF STRESS		COPING STRATEGIES		
Meaning units	*Themes*	*Subthemes*	*Meaning units*	

Sources of Stress – Meaning units	Themes	Subthemes	Coping – Meaning units
Great responsibility Unfinished tasks Lack of time Amount of work Works seasonal congestion	Leading oneself	Professional	Prioritizing tasks Organizing own work Keep work days at a reasonable length
		Personal	Physical activity Separation of work and leisure time Hobbies, Rest
Human resources management Unclear issues Student affairs	Leading others		Shared leadership Commonly agreed practices
New position New computer programs Planning a new school New core curriculum	Managing change		
Unfair treatment Poor management on higher level Lack of information Lack of support in adopting new programs	Social support	Professional	Support from colleagues Support from municipality level
		Personal	Support from friends and family Social relationships
Getting and securing resources	Financial planning		
Implementing new curriculum	Implementing new issues		