



A Children's Book and a Simple App: Stress Relief for Teachers & Students

Deb L. Marciano¹

Valdosta State University, United States of America¹

Abstract

Teaching is one of the most stressful professions. This is not a phenomenon unique to one country or grade level, as demonstrated by recent research specific to teacher stress and its impact on students conducted in public universities and/or with teachers in Pakistan, Greece, Canada, Romania, Italy, and the United States. Stress, unfortunately, comes from a myriad of sources; preparation, quality of student work, meetings and additional responsibilities outside of the classroom, tenure/promotion, colleagues, and so on. Since the future of education is in our hands, we have a moral obligation to be excellent teachers. That also means protecting ourselves and our students from the harmful effects of excessive and continuous stress. Studies present suggestions to increase mindfulness and stress reduction techniques. This presentation shared an American children's picture book, "Quiet", to entice readers into a peaceful awareness. After the read aloud, participants were guided through a hands-on creation of a simple animation, using the app, ChatterPix. This technology is a tool that can be customized for teachers and students at any age level on any device.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Technology, Effective Teaching, Stress, Coping Strategies

1. Introduction

Teaching is a very stressful profession for a myriad of reasons [1]. The daily challenges of presenting appropriately challenging materials, creating interactive and engaging activities to an audience that may be not so willing to learn, record keeping, grading student work, and keeping classroom management and behavior in line can overwhelm even the best educators. Pressures associated with expectations for tenure and promotion, perfection, standardized testing, dealing with parents, meetings (and more meetings), budget cuts, societal perception of education, and so on contribute to manifestations of stress many teachers feel.

This article presents strategies identified by recent international research as to how we, as teachers, can assist our students and ourselves in applying healthier ways of dealing with academic stress [3] [5] [8]. Readers will be guided through several activities as samples for helping to relieve stress.

1.1 International studies regarding teacher and student stress

This is not a phenomenon unique to one country or grade level, as demonstrated by recent research specific to teacher stress. Over time, a decline in teacher well-being can materialize into physical and emotional circumstances which affect others. Surveys and interviews with teachers in Pakistan [2] [3] [4], Greece [1], Canada [4], Romania [5], Italy [6], and the United States [7] explored the impact of teacher stress on students in grade school and public universities and/or with teachers themselves [6].

1.2 The future of education includes taking care of ourselves

We are all aware of the problems stress can cause mentally, socially, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Since the future of education is in our hands, we have a moral obligation to be excellent teachers. That also means protecting ourselves and our students from the harmful effects of excessive and continuous stress.

It is well known that unresolved stress can lead to overthinking, memory issues, headaches, high blood pressure and headaches, trouble concentrating, worry, decrease in patience and socialization, sleep disorders, and stomach pain. How can we be at our best for our students, with all these materializations of stress overload? The answer is, we cannot.

This applies to our students, their families, our colleague, as well as ourselves. Students have family issues and are often dealing with situations outside of the school day that some of us can never even imagine. When they arrive at the schoolhouse door, they may not be ready to learn, as a result. In addition, this impacts their ability to fully participate in the school day. The sense that we are not quite ourselves may further contribute to their overall anxiousness.



Since the effects of unrelenting stress does not dissipate when the day is done, teachers need to become better equipped with a variety of ways to reduce and avoid (when possible) stressful situations, engage in coping strategies, and to apply selfcare continually, not merely as a one-time activity. Students will also benefit from stress-reduction strategies, both for immediate pressures, and as a life-long skill to dealing with social circumstances that can be stress-inducing.

2. Stress relief

Studies present suggestions to increase mindfulness [6] [8] and stress reduction techniques. There are thousands of web sites offering stress-reducing breathing techniques, using music and low-level lighting for our classrooms, discussion topic ideas, ways to become more aware of immediate surroundings and how to deal with physical and emotional symptoms of stress. Web sites provide resources, activities, techniques to create rhythmic breathing, and visualization to start readers on a path to self-awareness and wellness. Mindfulness (an organic, practical, life used to calm the mind and body [11]) has been suggested as an effective way to deal with stress [7], particularly for teachers and students. Furthermore, studies indicate that mindfulness intervention may contribute to teacher resilience and the impact stress has on teacher efficacy [8].

2.1 A picturebook that addresses mindfulness

The activity presented in this article is designed to begin the process toward giving teachers and students one example to begin their path to stress reduction. In this activity, teachers are guided through the use of two readily available tools: A children's picture book and a simple app available for mobile devices. Sharing this book aloud with students (of any age) may gently guides readers to a softer, slower pace.

Quiet was written by popular American children's author/illustrator, Tomie dePaola [9]. This picture book, done in soft transparent acrylics and colored pencils, lends itself to creating a relaxed setting for reading aloud. The main character, a grandfather, comments on the rushed pace of nature to his grandchildren as they walk through a park. They all begin to notice how the animals and plants around them are "...busy as busy can be." The three characters decide to take a rest and "...not be so busy" (no page numbers). Again, they notice how their surroundings have also become more still, setting a more peaceful setting.

Ask students (or yourself when you first read the book):

- How do you feel?
- What did you notice about yourself, (your surroundings, your breathing, your heartrate)?
- What were you imagining?
- Where were you in your mind?
- How do you think your students might react?
- What time of day might be best for you to present this?
- Under what circumstances can you include this in your own curriculum?

You might want to have some of the above questions ready or prepare ones tailored to what you know about your students and their needs.

2.2 A free app

The next part of the activity presented in this article takes a simple technology tool and uses it as a diversion from a stressful situation. I suggest you consider creating a funny message or utilize an inspirational message that you can view whenever you need it and/or share it with others who might need a quick stress break.

ChatterPix and *ChatterPixKids* [10] is a *free* downloadable app for mobile devices, that gives any photo a voice. Snap a photo or use one already on your device. Think (or write out a script as needed for some students), practice what you want your photos to "say" and follow the simple directions. It is as easy as using your finger to draw a line for the mouth, and then take up to 30-seconds to record your message.

There are sticker-type props one can add to the photo or use as is. Be sure to demonstrate how to use the app and provide support, as needed.

The *ChatterPix* can be funny or inspirational. Once you have created your *ChatterPix*, be sure to share with others who might need a dose of inspiration of laughter.



3. Sharing with others

Share your *ChatterPix* with friends and family as a silly greeting, playful message, inspiration, or a creative card. These can be saved as an mp4 file in the photo file on the mobile device and sent as an email. Consider:

- How did it feel to view your *ChatterPix*?
- What did you notice about the creations of those around you?
- What did you find easy/difficult about using the App?
- How do you think this will work in your teaching?

In my college courses, I have had students come into class telling me it is a “*ChatterPix Break*” kind of day. They then take two minutes to use their phones to create something that makes their peers laugh, and we are ready to begin our lesson. This has surprised and inspired me, as my university students are teacher candidates who will hopefully bring these stress-relieving strategies and experiences into their future classrooms. The time is well spent, as everyone feels more relaxed and more ready to participate in the class session.

4. Conclusions

Suggestions abound for ways to relieve and reduce the effects of stress. However, it is often impractical to consider taking a shower, exercising, getting some sunshine, eating a healthy diet and so on when you are based in a classroom. Often, we need immediate relief, especially when we witness a child in stress-overload. The activities offered here are quick and beneficial, in that they break the stressful moment. Also, *Quiet* can be reread and the possibilities for *ChatterPix* creations are endless.

This book may help to create an attitude of mindfulness, which can grow into awareness of ones' surroundings, feelings, and how to take a moment to rest, relax, and breathe. A sense of harmony may result in a discussion to enhance a less frenetic pace and foster solitude and peacefulness. Let your own classroom situation determine subsequent activities, time allotment, and next steps along this mindfulness journey.

Although these activities may not take a great deal of time, a quick break from constant stress can be just enough to help you and your students rethink, regroup, and perhaps deal with situations a little better afterwards.

Creating a sense of presence and mindfulness is a lifelong journey, used to move toward more balanced and peaceful ways to deal with stress. It is important to remember that coping with and managing stress cannot happen with a single activity that one attends only once. These activities are part of the journey intended to foster calmness in the face of adversity, working toward emotional wellness. You will be giving students and yourself tools to meet multi-faceted challenges they will encounter in life. And be sure to share!

I have chosen to be happy because it is good for my health. ~ Voltaire ~

References

- [1] Kourmoussi, N., Darviri, C., Varvogli, L., & Alexopoulos, E. C. “Teacher stress inventory: Validation of the Greek version and perceived stress levels among 3,447 educators”. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*. (2015). 8, 81-88
- [2] Haseeb, M. A., & Sattar, S. A. “Exploring the causes of job stress and coping strategies among the faculty of public universities”. *Journal of Education and Human Development*. (2018). 7(4), 27-33.
- [3] Quaraishi, U., Aziz, F., & Siddiquah, A. “Stress and coping strategies of university teachers in Pakistan”. *Pakistan Journal of Education*. (2018). 35(2), 193-206.
- [4] Ferguson, K., Mang, C., Frost, L. “Teacher stress and social support usage”. *Brock Education Journal: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, (2017). 26(2), 62-86.
- [5] Clipa, O. “Teacher Stress and Coping Strategies”. In Clipa, O. (Ed.). *Studies and current trends in science education*. (pp.120-128). Suceava, Romania: LUMEN Proceedings. (2017).
- [6] Zurlo, M. C., Pes, D, and Capasso, R. “Teacher stress questionnaire: Validity and reliability study in Italy”. *Psychological Reports*, (2013). 113(2), 490-517.



- [7] Schussler, D. L., Deweese, A., Rasheed, D., SeMauro, A., Brown, J., Greenberg, M., & Jennings, P. A. "Stress and release: Case studies of teacher resilience following mindfulness-based intervention". *American Journal of Education* (2018). 125(1), 1-28.
- [8] Flock, L. Goldberg, S. B., Pinger, L., Bonus, K. & Davidson, R. J. "Mindfulness for teachers: A pilot study to assess effects on stress, burnout and teaching efficacy". *Mind Brain Education*. (2013). 7(3): DOI: 10/11111/mbe.12026.
- [9] DePaola. T. *Quiet*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers. New York. (2018).
- [10] Duck Duck Moose, Inc. *ChatterPix* and *ChatterPix Kids*. duckduckmoose.com
- [11] Mason, C., Murphy, M. R., and Jackson, Y. *Mindfulness practices: Cultivating heart-centered communities, where students focus and flourish*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree. (2019).