

Running with the Hare and Hunting with the Hounds: Stress Implications on the Working-Class Student

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Abstract

The thrust of this study was to investigate stress implications of working and studying concurrently and strategies for coping with the stress among students in the University of Education, Winneba, located in the Efutu Municipality of the Central Region (Ghana). Utilizing the interpretive paradigm, this study employed a case study approach. Semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data from MPhil students. Twenty (20) participants comprising 10 first year MPhil students and 10 second year MPhil Students were sampled. The study identified financial difficulties as the major reason why students combined their academic activity with work activity. The study indicated that the stress implications of working and studying concurrently were; high blood pressure, restlessness, headaches, back pains and loss of appetite. The study further indicated that the students coped with their stress by exercising regularly, checking their diets, absenting themselves from work and school to rest, and being assertive. Based on the findings relating to the stress implications of working and studying concurrently, it was recommended among other things, that students' work situation should be factored into time-tabling, counselling programs should be organized for the students and scholarships, bursaries, grants and loans should be made easily available to the students.

Keywords: Stress, Working, Students, Interpretive Paradigm, Constraints

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/13-23-04

Publication date: August 31st 2022

1. Introduction

The popular saying; 'running with the hare and hunting with the hounds', means that engaging in two or more irreconcilable roles concurrently is highly impossible. This saying implies that an attempt to fulfil the demands of one role will make it difficult to fulfil the other. One would have to sacrifice his or her responsibilities in one role to be able to effectively fulfil the other.

In modern times, formal education seems to be the way out of maintaining one's status or staying on top of one's career competition. It is therefore not surprising to see many people trying to gain admission into tertiary institutions to undertake a variety of programs that will either secure them in job positions or help them obtain or maintain their career statuses. Work is a necessity in humans' lives and since humans are engaged in a variety of duties in their social settings, role conflict is likely to take place. As it is in this study, people work and study to obtain some form of balance in their lives. It seems the major reason why people study and work concurrently is because of financial constraints. This research sought to identify why people decide to combine study and work and also determine the implication of the stress they go through on individuals. According to Osei (2013), students who take advantage of the school and work approach end up gaining some work experience by the end of their study, and some students are also able to use their small earnings from working to support their education, especially for those who come from poor families.

Curtis and Williams (2002) explain that working long hours can be particularly damaging to students' academic activities. Vickers, Lamb and Hinkley (2003) have asserted that research in Australia suggests that the majority of university students combine their study with participation in work, resulting in inter-role conflict and stress. Lingard (2007) and Rolfe (2002) reported that excessive and unsocial hours of part-time work sometimes lead to tiredness and depression among students. The above assertions indicate that the possibility of excessive stress presented by the combination of work and study also raises concerns about students' mental health.

The most commonly noted role conflict is that of work and family (Lenaghan & Sengupta, 2007); however, from a cursory observation, it seems in recent times, role conflict between study and work has become rampant as students in universities today seem to spend less time studying and more time working.

According to Dixon and Kurpius (2008), two major concerns related to the academic success and graduation rates of college students are stress and depression. Research has shown that the vast majority of college students experience moderate (77.6%) or serious (10.4%) stress and are mostly affected by stressors related to their studies (i.e., examination results and workload) (Abouserie, 1994; Dixon & Kurpius, 2008).

One of the major problems that students in the Ghanaian tertiary educational institutions encounter today is role conflict. Some students who gain admission into universities to undertake graduate programs are combining

the responsibilities of professional work activities with study activities. At the Department of Psychology and Education, University of Education (UEW), for example, from a cursory observation, it seems twenty-four (24) out of twenty-eight (28) students who were admitted into the Master of Philosophy (Guidance and Counselling) programme in the 2011/2012 academic year; fourteen (14) out of eighteen (18) of those admitted in the same programme in the 2012/2013 and all those admitted in the 2013/2014 academic year were in full-time jobs.

Curtis and Williams (2002) point out that working long hours can be particularly damaging to students' academic activities. Whereas attempts have been made to explore the experiences of students who work and study concurrently in some of the advanced countries, little is known about the phenomenon in the Ghanaian higher educational context, particularly at UEW. This study therefore explored the experiences of students who kept their active work life and still pursued the Master of Philosophy degree in Guidance and Counselling at the Department of Psychology and Education, UEW. Specifically, the study looked at what factors cause a student to combine their academic work with their professional work activities and how the two concurrent roles have stress implications on the student.

Curtis and Williams (2002) explain that the cost of financing education has increased to such an extent that combining work and study is a necessity for many students. Could this be the reason for which many graduate level students continue to maintain their work as they pursue their academic work?

The study sought to:

- i. Explore factors influencing students' decision to work
- ii. Examine the stress implications on working students because of the two imposing and incompatible demands or pressures of combining academic work and professional work activities
- iii. Determine the coping strategies implemented by the working students

2. Theoretical Framework

This study operates on a theory that examines the stressful nature of combining academic work and professional work activities. Role-conflict theory views the combination of academic work and the demands of professional work activities as incompatible and stressful (Lenaghan & Sengupta, 2007). Role conflict, most often than not, begins because of a person's desire to achieve success and the demands of two or more irreconcilable roles compete against each other. People experience role conflict when they find themselves pulled in various directions as they try to respond to the many statuses they hold.

Role conflict theory posits that 'individuals have limited time and energy and adding extra roles and responsibilities necessarily creates tension between competing demands and a sense of overload and inter-role conflicts (Marshall & Barnett, 1993; González, Lapuerta, Martín-García & Seiz, 2018). The theory explains that commitment to multiple roles can lead to incompatible and/or excessive role expectations, which in turn can lead to physical and mental disequilibria (Fowlkes, 1987; Ward, 2004).

Conflict among roles begins because of the human's desire to reach success, and because of the pressure put on an individual by two imposing and incompatible demands competing against each other. The effects of role conflict, as found through case-studies and nationwide surveys, are related to individual personality characteristics and interpersonal relations. Individual personality characteristic conflicts can arise within personality role conflict where aspects of an individual's personality are in conflict with other aspects of that same individual's personality (Iverson, 2011).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To fulfil this purpose, the study employed a case study design. A case study allows for an investigation into real-life events; such as individual life cycles, organisational and managerial processes, neighbourhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries (Ofori & Dampson, 2011). This design enabled the researchers to gather the views, feelings and challenges of the students to aid in better understanding of the situation under study.

3.2 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 Master of Philosophy students from the Department of Psychology and Education, UEW who worked and studied concurrently. A semi-structured interview was used to gather data from the participants.

3.3 Data Analysis

All data collected through the interview schedules were analyzed qualitatively. Thematic data analysis approach was used for the analysis. The researchers organized the data across all the interviewees and their responses to identify consistencies and differences.

After organizing the data, the data was transcribed. The researchers ensured that codes were appropriate

through the consensual coding technique. This allowed the researchers to assign codes to each of the transcripts independently in order to compare them. For example, a participant's comment such as "I hardly see my colleagues on campus; they are pre-occupied with their work schedules" was coded 'absenteeism'. To attribute comments to the interviewee, the researcher assigned serial numbers to each of the transcripts. First, the participants were categorized into two- 1MPhil and 2MPhil students. The 1MPhil students were assigned serial numbers 1MWS1 - 1MWS10, while the MPhil 2 students were assigned 2MWS1 – 2MWS10.

4. Results

4.1 *Factors Influencing Students Decision to Combine Study with Work Activities*

- Economic Factors

It emerged from the data collected that certain economic factors were accounting for the students' combination of the activities of study and work. The majority of the interviewees expressed concern that they had very little or no financial or material assistance from their family.

I do not receive any financial support from my family and that is the reason why I am combining my academic work with my professional work activities. (1MWS-10)

My family does not give me financial or material support. As a matter of fact, because they know that I am working, they are rather dependent on me. I only depend on the money I receive from working and so I don't see any other way other than combining the two roles of studying and working. (2MWS-4)

Others indicated that they were studying and working concurrently because they had to cater to immediate family members and at the same time, they had to rent accommodation and pay for transportation, type and print assignments, buy textbooks, hand-outs and do photocopies. Some of them also explained that they would not be able to survive in the university if they did not work to earn a living.

I work and study at the same time because I have a wife and children to take care of. Besides, I would not be able to buy books, pay my rent, do photocopies and pay for transport, if I do not work as a student. (2MWS-7)

I will not be able to survive in the university if I do not work as a student. This is because I need to buy handouts, pay my hostel fees, type and print assignments and settle other costs and expenses. I also have responsibility towards my family all of which require money. (1MWS-2)

Some participating working-class students revealed that they received some financial assistance from their families. When probed to find out why they still had the desire to work when they received assistance from their family, the students had the following to say;

I receive some financial assistance from my family and I am grateful for that but truth be told, the assistance is not always enough, hence the need to provide for myself. (2MWS-1)

I receive financial support from my family but then I still combine both because what I receive from my family will not last through to the end of the programme. (1MWS-8)

I receive financial and material support from my family. I just received my appointment and I haven't been paid since so my parents provide for my financial and material needs but I still have the desire to combine my academic work with my professional work because I want to ease the burden on my parents. (1MWS-9)

The comments above seem to suggest that some working-class students either receive little or no financial or material support from their families, forcing them to engage in work activities to earn additional money. Lenaghan and Sengupta (2007) elucidate that in order to meet the increasing tuition costs, many students have to be employed in a full-time or part-time job to meet the financial needs. According to Lipke (2000) and Curtis and Williams (2002), in recent years, the cost of financing education has increased to such an extent that combining work and study is a necessity for many students. This is further prompted, according to them, by the fact that many parents can no longer support or bear the full financial costs of a college education. The responses from the participating working participants agree with the assertions of Lenaghan and Sengupta (2007), Lipke (2000), and Curtis and Williams (2002) since they revealed that they had to work to be able to pay their tuition fees and to meet their financial needs.

4.2 *Combining Study Activity with Work Activity; Stress Implications on Students*

- Physical and Mental Health Challenges

All the working-class students who were interviewed explained that in one way or the other, their health was affected because of their concurrent activities of studying and working. The majority of the participants complained of stress and its related symptoms as the following comments show.

I experience a lot of stress because I am sometimes frustrated especially when there is a clash in the two roles; I find myself in limbo. Also, I don't have enough time to rest because I always need to accomplish certain tasks under the programme as well as the work. (1MWS-3)

Combining the two roles is very stressful. I am always very exhausted. This is because I am always running up and down every day without getting any rest and at night time I get restless. I have developed high blood pressure since I started combining the two roles (1MWS-6)

Working and studying at the same time affects me a lot. I feel tired all the time because my life revolves around the cycle of home-to-work-to-campus-to-work-to-home. It is very stressful. I sometimes get headaches, back pains, sleepless nights, loss of appetite and many others. (2MWS-4)

All the participating working-class students complained that they experienced health challenges, both mental and physical. Though quite different in symptoms, the responses above indicate that the pressure from the two roles (either) caused restlessness, feelings of anxiety/frustration, tiredness/exhaustion, back pains, headaches, sleepless nights, loss of appetite and/or high blood pressure.

Ackumme (2003) explains that prolonged exposure to stress can result in physical and psychological symptoms. She identified the following as some of the symptoms of stress; headaches, back pain, waist pain, muscle tension, high blood pressure, neck pains, irregular heartbeat, constant fatigue, inability to sleep, feelings of anxiety. Feldman (2005) also added that usually, the immediate stress response is a biological one. He further explained that exposure to stressors generates a rise in certain hormones secreted by the adrenal glands, an increase in heart rate and blood pressure changing how well the skin conducts electrical impulses.

Other participating working-class students also revealed that their double concurrent roles sometimes caused them to experience despair, forgetfulness and decreased sexual activities as the following comments depict.

Working and studying at the same time affects me. Apart from the sleepless nights and exhaustion that I experience, I sometimes become psychologically unstable. I remember quite recently just before rushing for lectures, I had my pants on my shoulders. I planned to hang it on my dry lines before heading towards campus but before I realised it, I was in the middle of the road with my pants still on my shoulder. (1MWS-3)

Because of my busy schedules, I hardly have time for anything anymore these days. I am unable to satisfy my wife sexually because whenever I get home, I am either very tired or I still have to fulfil my work demands. (2MWS-9)

Actually, it affects me in many ways. The stress in coming all the way from the North to the southern sector of the country, that is, here in Winneba alone is very stressful. I have to go to work in the Northern region of the country, then to the house before coming to Winneba all in a week. I get so tired sometimes, I can't sleep at night and I feel very sad; I sometimes feel like giving it all up. (2MWS-4)

The comments above seem to indicate that some of the students lose hope sometimes and want to give up; some experience forgetfulness, and others experience decreased sexual activities due to the stress they experience. Ackumme (2003) identified depression, forgetfulness and decreased sexual activities as signs of prolonged stress. This implies that most of the working students are going through severe stress. The responses above also indicate that some of the working students seemed to show some signs of depression. According to Quinn (1997), making the transition from home to college is a common source of stress that can also result in feelings of sadness and hopelessness, both of which are symptoms of depression.

4.3 Coping Strategies admitted by Participants

- Purposive Absenteeism

It evolved from the data collected that the students had developed some strategies to help them cope with the stress they encounter as a result of their double concurrent roles. Some of the participants revealed that they sometimes found an excuse to absent themselves from their professional work and academic activities to rest.

I usually call in sick when I feel so stressed up. I do that for both roles so that I can take the day off and rest. (1MWS-2)

To be honest, sometimes when the pressure is too much, I just switch off my phone and find a quiet place to sit and relax. (2MWS-5)

The responses above seem to indicate that the students have adopted some strategies to help them deal with the stress they encounter at work. 1MWS-2 and 2MWS-5 for instance seem to have employed the use of avoidance coping. Halohan, Moss and Brenna (2005) state that avoidance coping can be described as cognitive and behavioural efforts, where the individual is directed towards minimizing, denying or ignoring dealing with a stressful situation.

- Regular Body Exercise

Some students also explained that they coped with the stress that they experienced by exercising regularly as the comments below indicate.

Stress is part of our lives; it's in everything we do so we must learn to cope with it. I cope with it

by exercising regularly. I jog at least thrice a week. (2MWS-1)

I exercise regularly so that even when I am stressed up, it doesn't totally consume me. I also check my diet and go for regular check-ups at the hospital. (1MWS 8)

The comments by 2MWS-1 and 1MWS-8 indicate that some of the working students cope with stress by exercising regularly and following a strict diet. Ford and Manson (2002) noted that exercise is one method of coping with stress. Thus, people who exercise regularly are less likely to have heart attacks than inactive people. More directly, research has suggested that people who exercise regularly feel less tensed and stressed, are more self-confident and show greater optimism. Thompson et al. (1994) also suggest that maintaining a strict diet is one way people cope with stress.

- Rejecting Additional Responsibilities at Workplace

A few of the students however revealed that they had learned to be assertive and that helped them to deal with the stress they experienced due to their conflicting roles of work and study.

I sometimes say 'no' to additional responsibilities at the workplace and this helps to reduce the workload on me. (2MWS-4)

I mostly refuse to take on assignments at the workplace and sometimes I try to get my colleagues to request a reduction of assignments and quizzes in class. (1MWS-10)

The comments above seem to indicate that some of the working students cope with stress by being assertive. Duffy (1999) mentions that "assertiveness" is another way to manage stress. He further explains that individuals may learn to say 'no' to additional commitments when they are already pressed for time in coping with stress. Besides, if they may get along well with co-workers or students and lecturers, then they should regularly have deep seven to eight hours sleep per night. These assertions imply that by being assertive as a way of coping with stress, students may have to express their rights, thoughts and feelings directly and honestly without violating the rights of others.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Most of the working students are most often than not forced to study and work concurrently because they receive little or no financial support from their families. Coupled with this, they need money to be able to fulfil their nuclear family responsibilities and at the same time fund their education by buying course handouts, paying for printouts and photocopies, accommodation, tuition and other expenses on campus. It is recommended that governments, donor organisations and corporate bodies make efforts to increase access to bursaries, loans, grants and scholarships to make it easier for students to deal with their financial burdens.

The participants in the study were of the view that working students at the university experienced some difficulties in fulfilling demands of their double concurrent roles and in an attempt to accomplish tasks in these roles, they experienced some symptoms of stress such as headache, back pains, forgetfulness, and low sexual drive. It is therefore recommended to the university's counselling centre to educate working students on how to properly manage the stress they experience on daily basis. This could be included in the orientation programmes organised for students when they are newly admitted to the university. Group counselling sessions could be also organised for students who are studying and working concurrently so that individual members within the group can learn to acquire knowledge relevant to their situation, develop skills to manage their challenges, and cope effectively with the problems they encounter.

Finally, the University's academic board and administration should consider the situation of working students when designing the academic calendar since it appears that working to earn a living is indispensable in the lives of most students.

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