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# "How Can We Stop Learners from Exploding and Educators Imploding?"



For example, learners who “misbehave” and are malnourished, find it difficult to stay in school and perform optimally. They are often painted with the same brush as “problematic” and “delinquent” learners. The writer argues that such learners are within their “normal” reaction to want to escape the drudge of education under conditions of hunger. Such children often act within reason when they cannot complete educational tasks, concentrate poorly, act aggressively and find school life challenging. Yet, “reputable” reports often paint them as learners with “criminal” intent and urge government to implement better policing, punishment, surveillance etc. Clearly, in this example, the relationship between nutrition (or lack thereof) and learning is poorly understood by such reports. Yet, without undermining the severity of potential or real problems within education in South Africa, the writer acknowledges the numerous challenges facing parents, learners, officials and educators. School-based violence and poor scholastic and educator performance have been noted in many instances in the writer's anecdotal experience. In some places more endemically than in others. It is the challenge of scholastic and educator performance that has attracted the attention of many a scientist and educationist. This paper attempts to examine certain factors that have an impact on learner and educator performance. More specifically, it examines the reasons why educators and learners display negative behaviour patterns and what it takes to alter such behaviour. The discussion is also approached along more scientific lines.

## Background to Paper

The media has been rife with stories of violence in our schools over the last couple of years. Here and there situations are often described and meant to imply that South African education has made great strides, since the advent of our democracy in 1994. However, one gets the overwhelming feeling, based on media reports, that our system and quality of education is crumbling. Statistics are often bandied about as to the high levels of child and sexual abuse in our schools, for example. Criticism is leveled at abusive and underperforming educators and learners. As you may note, the writer has refrained from using any statistical reference that would describe the state of our education system for a few reasons. As an expert in research, development and training he often finds the various research “reports” problematic in their methodologies, depth and lack of scientific analysis. Incidences and statistics are often quoted in an a-historical context. Children and educators alike are often criminalized, and societal phenomena are often described as unique to South African schools only. Furthermore, the often vague and “academic” solutions are devoid of practical ideas and understanding of human pedagogical behaviour.

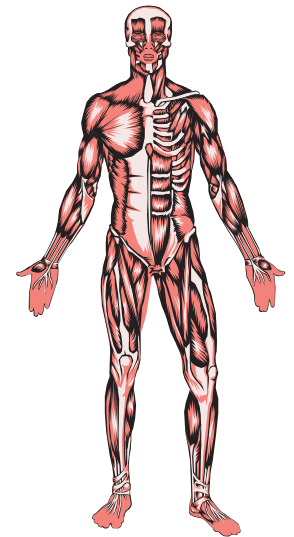
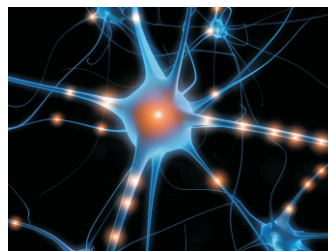
## About the Writer

Gerald Williamson is a clinical psychologist and educationist, who has been very active in the field of psychology and education. He is also the co-director of Shaping the Learner, a research, training and development agency that works extensively in schools and government departments across South Africa. See [www.shapingthelerner.com](http://www.shapingthelerner.com) for school based programmes.

## Perception, Experience and Stress

Often, when educators are quizzed about their craft, it is often with great amusement that one listens to their answers. Many will tell you that they are principally involved with the act of “educating” in order to result in “learning” taking place. In other words, (they say), we “transmit” knowledge (lecturing methods) to the learner while others will tell you that they “facilitate” knowledge (group facilitation and outcomes based learning techniques). It is quite interesting however, to note that in both these instances, when educators are asked: “Which part of the body are you “transmitting” and “facilitating” to? The answer without fail is, “to the brain, of course!” Neuro-scientists on the other hand, have studied the mind-body-nerve network connection for a long time and have come to the conclusion that the act of learning is really not all in your head but is rather an outcome of a complex interplay between the ears (auditory), eyes (visual), muscle control (proprioception), skin (touch), smell and taste (olfactory). The eyes and ears, in interplay with the muscles and make up the area called the “vestibular system” while smell, taste and touch make up part of the sensory experience. The vestibular system plays an important role in balancing acts involving handwriting, copying from the board, seating, sensory processing and so forth. The sensory system on the other hand impacts on hunger, memory, concentration, heat management, bodily adjustment (to cold, heat, oxygen etc) during the act of living (and learning). Neuro-scientists therefore agree that these constructs make up the complex act of learning that results in good memory, concentration, attention, emotion, meaning and comprehension etc.

The whole act of learning, according to scientists, like Carla Hannaford, a neuro-physiological-psychological specialist, who studies human beings and how they learn and behave, is made up of “experience”. Hannaford (1995) asserts that the more we “experience” the more we grow educationally (IQ) and emotionally (EQ). Central to the act of “experiencing”, according to Hannaford (1995) is a physical (movement and sensory) and psychological dimension (perception). Hannaford, in her studies has found that the more human beings physically move about and explore the senses, the more they learn and that in turn has a profound effect on insight, comprehension, memory, problem-solving, self-esteem, confidence etc. In her studies and literature searches from various eminent fields such as psychology, neurology, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, medicine, psychiatry, education and other fields, Hannaford (1995) found that the amount of neurons in the brain and nerve networks, usually associated with intelligence and emotions, grow with physical movement.



This paper will focus on the psychological dimension (perception part) of “experience” and how that influences our neuro-physiological-psychological reactions to the world. The argument laid out in this paper will construct insight into the interplay of factors that influence “perception” and how it lends to “implosion” and “explosion” in learners and educators. Among the issues to be discussed will be factors influencing “perception” positively and negatively. The interesting bit of course, is to see how “negative perception” can lead to a heightening of intra and interpersonal distress, to the point where it threatens the mental health (imploding or exploding) of affected individuals. This paper will therefore explore **how we can stop learners from exploding and educators imploding.**

## ***Implosion or Explosion? The Difference Defined***

*In this paper, it is argued that children, by virtue of their limited understanding of factors influencing behaviour, are more likely to turn their stress symptoms outwards (explosion). We see “acting out” behaviour in the form of aggression, bullying, anger, hyperactivity etc. In adults the opposite holds true. Adults often tend to withdraw (implosion) into a world of intra-personal distress in the form of depression, anxiety and other mental disorders. In the end though, both parties express the stress reactions in a manner that also causes inter-personal distress.*

**TABLE 1**

Effects of schools and classroom factors (stress) on educators and learners ...

<b>... On your body</b>	<b>... On your thoughts and feelings</b>	<b>... On your behavior</b>
Headache	Anxiety	Overeating
Chest pain	Restlessness	Undereating
Pounding heart	Worrying	Angry outbursts
High blood pressure	Irritability	Drug abuse
Shortness of breath	Depression	Excessive drinking
Muscle aches	Sadness	Increased smoking
Back pain	Anger	Social withdrawal
Clenched jaws	Mood swings	Crying spells
Tooth grinding	Job dissatisfaction	Relationship conflicts
Stomach upset	Feeling insecure	Decreased productivity
Constipation	Confusion	Blaming others
Diarrhea	Burnout	
Increased sweating	Forgetfulness	
Tiredness	Resentment	
Sleep problems	Guilt	
Weight gain or loss	Inability to concentrate	
Sex problems	Seeing only the negatives	
Skin breakouts		

### **So, how do Educators “Implode” and Learners “Explode”?**

How many times have we heard that being an educator is a “stressful” job? In fact, educators will draw your attention to the fact that the sheer volume of time and energy that goes into dealing with lively energetic children is soul destroying work. For the record, according to the writer’s observation, this is true. Complaints of physical and mental exhaustion are common place in the education fraternity. It is of course interesting to note that learners also experience such mental and physical exhaustion in response to the stressful demands of modern day education and living. This paper, however, is not a contest to examine who has the most or least stress between learners and educators, but rather it will examine stress as a causative factor towards implosion or explosion. Specifically, the focus will be on the concept of “perception” and its relationship with the subjective experience of stress. “Stress”, is often explained as a cluster of neuro-physiological-psychological symptoms. These are physical and psychological symptoms such as back pain, headaches, nerve pain all over the body, disease, immunity problems, decreased concentration, memory problems, anxiety, tension, depression, anger, aggression, defensiveness, criminal behaviour, lack of insight, irrationality, pressure of speech, restless behaviour of mind and body and many other related symptomologies.

The afore-mentioned clusters of stress symptoms (see Table 1 for a more detailed list of stress symptoms) are reflective and descriptive of the explanations given by educators to describe the symptomology associated with the act of “educating”. It is however noteworthy to add that the cluster of “stress” symptoms in **Table 1** is also associated with childhood illnesses, behaviour and learning problems. Some of these problems can be described as memory challenges, poor concentration, anger, aggression, lack of insight, criminality, comprehension difficulties, hyperactivity and so forth. These symptoms are of course, more evident when learners start to under-perform at school. Educators, exhibiting “similar” problematic behaviour, such as physically abusing learners, violence, swearing, disrespectfulness, insulting etc, sometimes euphemistically called “over-stressed”, “over-worked” and “depressed”. There are also other reasons given for the resultant “problematic” behaviour often displayed by educators. Among the “softer” reasons would be that the educator is not a team worker, resistant to change and is finding it hard to adapt to the context. Whichever way, the symptomology in both learners and educators, in the writer’s experience, often looks more like a cluster of stress reactions that have escalated in severity and measured along a continuum. The fact that the writer argues that problematic behaviour under certain conditions can be described as “stress reactions”, should of course, not be construed, as a pardonable offence. The “stress” label is also not a reason for engaging in negative behaviour, especially behaviour that impacts on the lives of those surrounding the individual.

The writer is of the view though, that child and teen behaviour, by the very nature of its limited “experience” or “growth” should be examined and understood in context and in relation to harmful stress factors. Adult (educator) behaviour, due to the advantage of a larger slice of life “experience” and “insight” should also be viewed in the context of factors that interplay to create the stress “experience”. Educator transgressions, some may argue, must therefore be viewed with compassion, yet less leniently so.

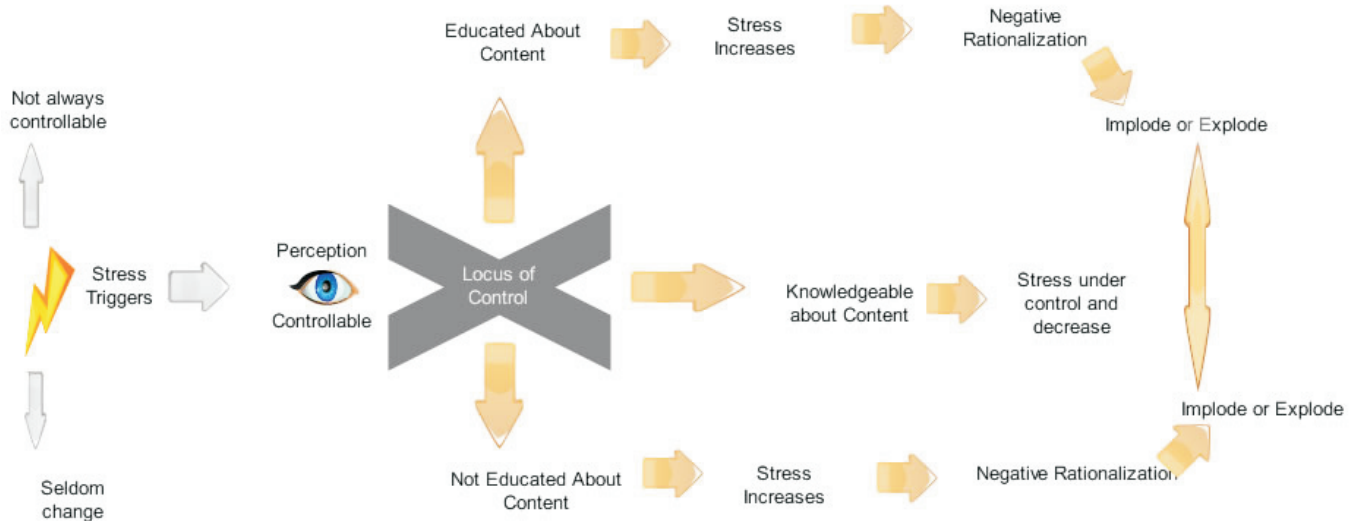
***Beware Educator – “I was stressed” is not a defense in court, but is an acceptable argument for a child reacting to stress***

Society and especially the legal system contradicts itself in cases where crime has been committed by either a learner or educator. This contradiction happens when the court accepts mitigating factors such as drugs and alcohol when involved in the crime. The court in this case will undisputedly agree that psycho-active substances do have an effect on neuro-chemicals in the brain. However, the same court system, often finds it difficult to accept that stress can also cause neuro-chemical imbalances. Yet, neuro-scientists, like Carla Hannaford (1995), Paul MacLean (1990) and Paul Dennison (1985) together with thousands of reputable journal articles have demonstrated that the brain is affected by stress and will result in certain forms of negative behaviour. What is of course interesting is that scientifically and undisputed, is the fact that stress **does** have a profound affect on the brain and learning behaviour, especially children's behaviour. Please note the contradiction: According to the legal system – “stress” is not an acceptable explanation for criminal actions. The new Child Justice Bill launched in 2008 in South Africa however, does recognise that children are not totally culpable, especially where stress symptoms are forwarded as a reason. On this latest front, it seems that stress symptoms, such as anxiety, aggression, anger, school failure etc, are now being recognised as mitigating factors. The writer gets a sense though, that one should rather not mention the term “stress”. Maybe the court reasons that it probably sounds too “common a reason” to be a special factor. Could the courts be fearful that many will abuse the term “stress’ as a legal defense? On the other hand, it is going to be very difficult to convince the same court, that an educator who has corporally punished a learner, for example, was simply stressed out! Try winning that one! The legality and admissibility of stress reactions are not however the focus of this discussion paper.

## Perception, Stress and the School/Classroom Experience

The writer is profoundly more interested in how “perception” leads to certain neuro-physiological-psychological responses in educators and learners. “Perception” should not be confused with “vision”. Far from it, “perception” happens deep within the different ambits of the brain and body. For example, even a blind person, can sense that a person is unfriendly or hostile, based on tone of voice, the harshness of a handshake, the unpleasantness of a harsh smell and so forth. One does not need to be sighted to form an impression and react. It is therefore in the realm of “perception” that we form an opinion of a stimulus and whether it is a danger to us or not. The individual will decide and make a choice, based on the perception of the stimulus, whether it will cause a positive or negative stress reaction. This decision (choice) is of course both conscious and unconscious and is often the key to how we respond to stimuli. Outlined below is a diagram that attempts to explain how “perception” works in order to create stress for the individual:

**Graphic 1** below, offers an explanation towards understanding how stress symptoms and perception interact to determine a specific outcome:

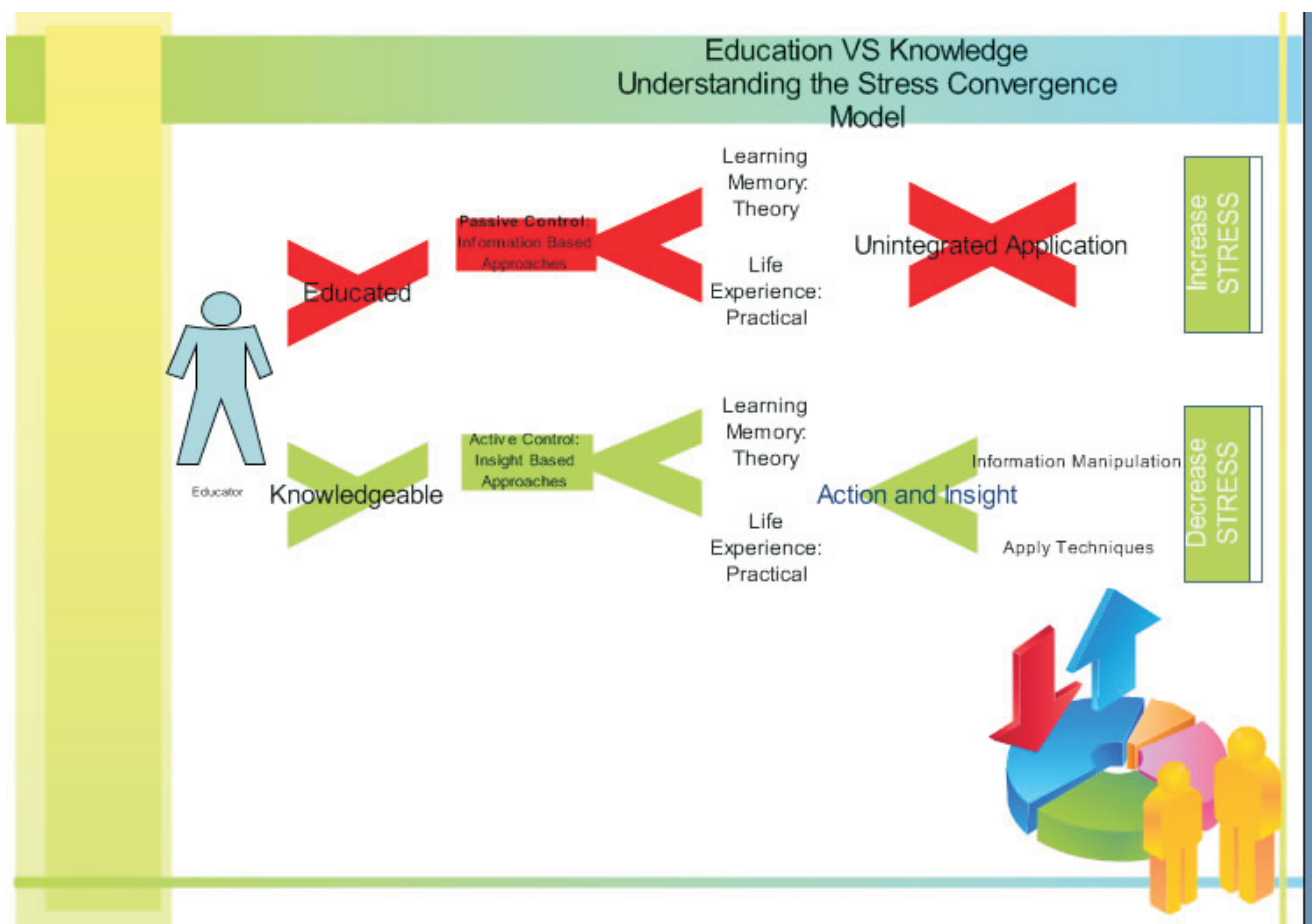


According to **Graphic 1**, stressors and their concomitant triggers seldom change and are one of the constants in life. Educators and learners are not always in a position to change stressors such as death, crime, money problems, violence etc. What is in the control of an educator or learner though, is the manner in which they perceive (perception) the event. The attached (perceived) meaning and importance of the stressor will indicate how much of an impact (locus of control) the stressor has. It can thus be said that the locus of control is influenced by the constructs of “meaning” and “importance”. The locus of control is in turn also influenced by how much education we have about the stressor. It is therefore assumed that the more we know about the who, what and why of the stress trigger, better control ensues. It is interesting to note that the goal of therapy with a psychologist is to provide meaning to the stressor, investigate with the client the dynamics involved and how the stressor impacts. It is out of this that the client's perception is altered through a shift in meaning and importance. The result is a reduction in intra and interpersonal distress away from implosion or explosion.

## Knowledge and Education will Decrease the Negative Potential of Stressors

**Education** is often argued to be a sum total of ones experience with a specific subject over a period of time. Thus, we learn formulae for mathematics, absorb historical facts etc. It is however, true **knowledge** (the interpretation, analysis, meaning and creative application of the content) that results in real survival. It is from a position of knowledge that we navigate the pitfalls of the world. The sum of these are said to be both your intelligence quotient (IQ) and emotional quotient (EQ). It is accepted that your EQ is largely responsible for your life responses to stressors.

If an educator or learner develops the necessary “insight” into a stressor, the locus of control is strengthened. It is therefore noted that the weaker the knowledge and education about the stressor, the higher the probability of negative impact. In such a case, the idea that implosion and explosion will occur is higher. If one only has education (factual content) then the probability of negative rationalization (giving negative meaning) exists and could lead to implosion or explosion. In other words, **you need both education and knowledge** to prevent the individual from imploding or exploding. Think about having education only as having all the theory, while knowledge is having the practical application thereof. Combine these two and one has better insight and understanding (meaning/perception) and therefore control of the stressor. Outlined in **Graphics 3 & 4** is an illustration of how stress impacts on educators (also applicable to learners):

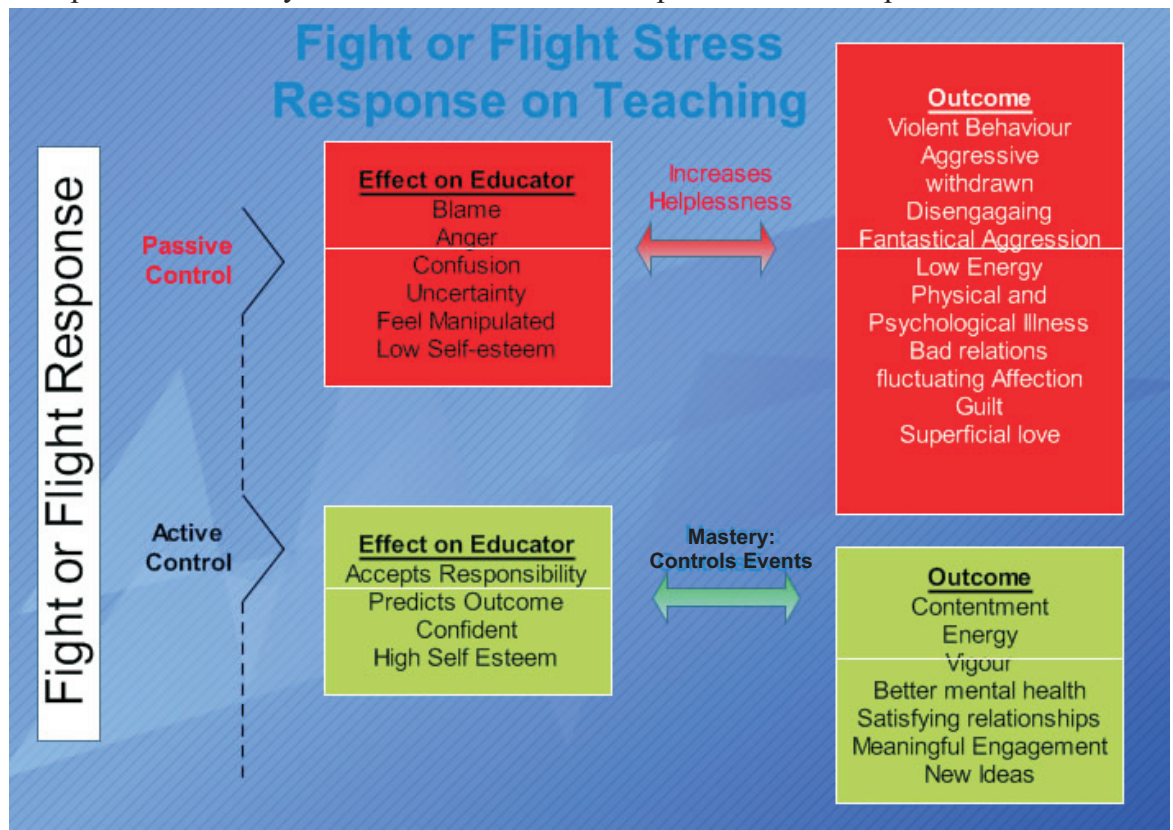


**Graphic 3**

## Factors that Contribute to Educator and Learner Stress

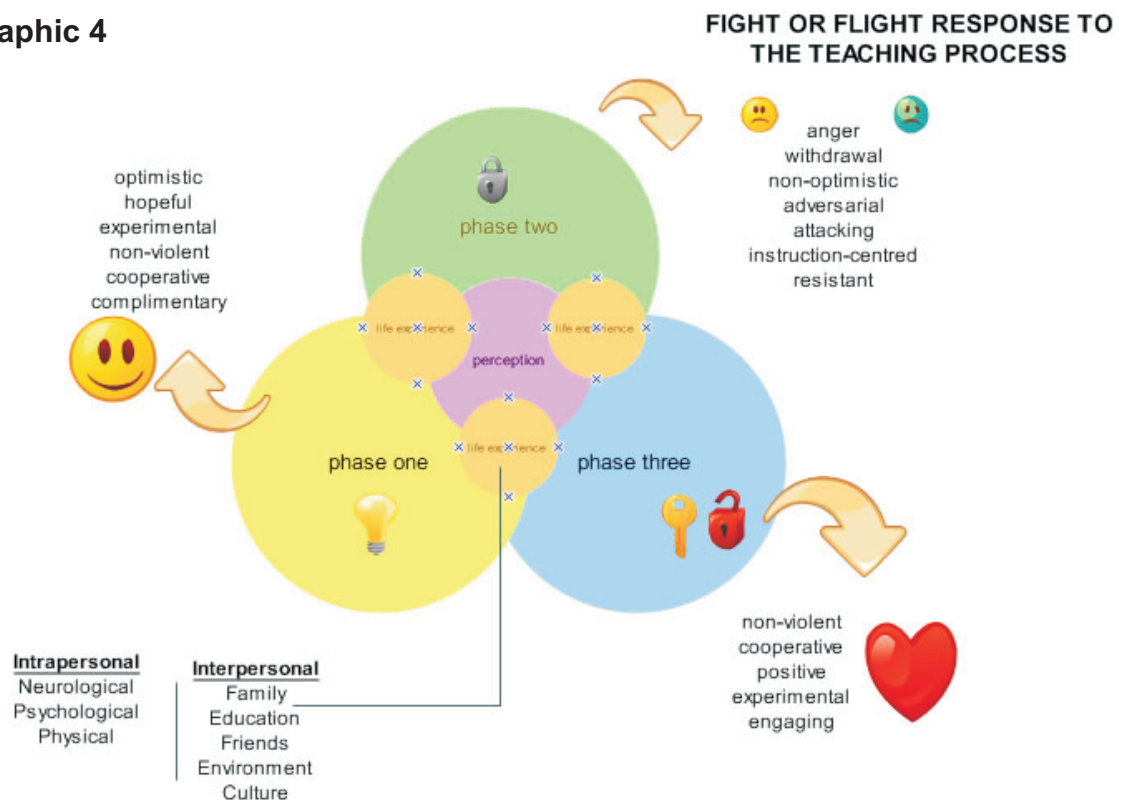
Educators and learners are often faced with a myriad of factors that contribute to their high levels of stress. Among these are:

- Poor education and knowledge about the way children learn results in classroom methods that can only be described as “trying to push a camel through a needle's eye”;
- Uncreative and unexciting classrooms that lead to bored learners. Boredom is by itself stressful;
- Poor methods of discipline and group control strategies that result in high noise and low concentration levels when tasks are being done in classrooms;
- Poor life and coping skills (EQ) in dealing with general stressors encountered outside of the school that impact on work and productivity levels;
- Educators find themselves in a conflicting motivational cycle, characterized by fluctuating guilt (due to stressors) and love (affection for the children) for the profession;
- Poor parenting i.e. violence, crime, divorce, alcohol abuse etc, impacts on learners and their stress potential;
- Responding to the aggression by adults (including educator threats);
- Responding to the threat of failure in an educationally demanding atmosphere - everyday existence is perceived as “fighting to survive”;
- Increased anxiety by parents and society about the performance of children – these young people absorb the concern and in turn stress themselves out;
- Poorly organised school environments that do not encourage physical movement i.e. sitting in cramped classrooms (more than 25 learners per classroom is toxic!), poor sport curriculums, limited expression through poor or none existent arts and culture initiatives etc;
- A total misunderstanding by education authorities on how the human brain absorbs and responds to education and knowledge has lead to uncreative content that often has an over emphasis on memory based skills and an under emphasis on creative production.



The afore-mentioned factors are some of the elements that create the type of stressors that lead educators and learners alike to reactive negatively (implode and explode). The subjective stress responses can be along a continuum and often at the extreme end, the individual becomes totally overwhelmed. Outlined in **Graphic 4** is an example of how stress has an effect on educator motivation and mental health over time. The graphic highlights the journey that an educator undertakes throughout the teaching cycle. It illustrates the time an educator enters the profession (phase 1) to the time that they rejuvenate (phase 3). Anecdotal evidence suggests most educators agree that phase 1 is where they started out at. It is argued that phase 2 is where many educators find themselves in the profession today. Furthermore, it is argued by the writer that educators can only get to phase 3 by engaging in a greater exercise of education and knowledge (combining the two). The second phase is of course characterized by the symptomology described in **Graphic 1**.

**Graphic 4**



Please Note: The Fight or Flight response is the survival response that human beings and animals utilize to survive stressors. The nature and size of the stressor/s does not matter. What is important is the perception (education and knowledge) that the individual has about the stressor that would determine the impact and outcome thereof. Typical Fight or Flight responses include defensive behaviour such as making excuses, avoiding responsibility, anger, aggression, belittling and degrading others etc.

## Where to from here?

This paper avoids giving simplistic solutions to often complex stressors. The paper will endeavour to give general advice and is by no means exhaustive. This advice is meant to assist in reducing the stress burden on learners and educators alike:

In order to gain mastery of their own “perception” of learner behaviour, educators need to learn more about how children learn. They have to capacitate themselves with education and knowledge regarding issues such as brain behaviour, learning styles and techniques, classroom management techniques, the role of movement in learning, nutrition and behaviour; stress and brain behaviour etc.

Curriculums and classrooms need to be more exciting and imaginative in order to counter educator and learner boredom that leads to high levels of stress.

We need to equip both our educators and parents with parenting skills in order to reduce the pressures of stress on learners.

Society, the media, parents and educators, as hard as it may be at times, need to remember that children cannot behave like adults, reason like adults or foresee implications, nor do they have mature solutions. Their education and knowledge base is far from mature and they therefore do not possess the necessary insight and skills to adjust their behaviour accordingly.

Children must not be perceived to be deliberate (sometimes educators interpret their behaviour as “deliberately disrespectful”, for example). This “perception” angers adults and increases stress reactions. More than often, children have to be patiently assisted in seeing the errors of an action. We sometimes have to reason, repeat numerous times and exercise exhaustive patience.

There are no “bad” children. Modern and especially Euro-Western society has created immense stressors for our young. Children and their stress reactions (behaviour) are therefore normal, universal and in line with human nature.

Educators, schools and districts need to educate themselves and become knowledgeable in order to play a more active role in helping parents to understand the impact of stressors on the child. This will assist in mitigating stressors that emanate in the home and broader community. Children will then be less likely to act out.

Educators need assistance from school districts and the parents with building support networks, education and knowledge on dealing with their own stressors;

Our national education system should work towards reducing numbers per class and as such, make control manageable.

Learners need practical life skill exercises and lots of reflective work in order to develop skills that assist with insight (knowledge and education) in order to develop coping skills.

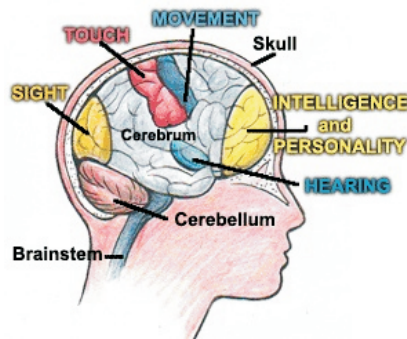
Human nature is complex. There are no simplistic answers or solutions to various behavioural phenomena. If we are to survive as a nation, we need to cultivate good coping skills. For example, we need to address stress reactions due to poverty and unemployment and deal with crime and violence pro-actively. We also need to stimulate the creativity of our learners, parents and educators in dealing with stress (*think China and the Tai Chi culture in schools*) and provide better support systems in education. Finally, we need to promote a culture of healthy living. Among the healthy living approaches are good nutrition (where possible), develop sport and exercise programmes and promote anti-substance abuse strategies etc). It is the writer’s belief that one can make small changes in order to prevent educators from imploding and learners from exploding. The quickest and best way towards making a difference in our schools is to become knowledgeable about how stress harms us. In this way, one will gain insight and understand the impact that stress has on the lives of us all. Mastery and control comes from insight and action. Let us pledge to never give up trying to make a positive change in our lives - a fresh pledge, one more time again... just for today, just like yesterday, today and tomorrow!

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