

Exploring Occupational Stressors of Elementary Teachers

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Abstract

Occupational stress has become increasingly common in teaching profession. Elementary school teachers possess the most crucial position in the entire system of education. It is deemed important to identify stressors of teachers to help them assess and manage their occupational stress in the workplace. The study aimed to explore the occupational stressors of elementary school teachers. Common occupational stressors of teachers identified using in-depth interview were work overload, student misbehavior, poor supervisory style, lack of parental support, minimal compensation, unconducive physical environment, poor working relationship with colleagues, lack of available resources and poor organizational system. Experiencing stress at work can have a negative impact on their performance. It is deemed important to identify and qualify the occupational stress of teachers to understand and address issues on managing stress among teachers.

keywords: Occupational Stress, work overload, student misbehavior, poor supervisory style, lack of parental support, minimal compensation, unconducive physical environment, poor working relationship with colleagues, lack of available resources and poor organizational system

1.1 Introduction

Work is one of the most important components for human survival. Due to the competitive nature of working environment, most of the people are spending their time on work which causes a great deal of stress. A little bit of stress can keep the worker energetic, focused and motivated to overcome challenges in the workplace. However, in today's hectic world- long hours, tight deadlines, and increasing demands can leave the workers worried, drained and overwhelmed. According to International Labor Organization (ILO), stress related with a job or occupation is called occupational stress. It has been considered as leading stressor among adults and affects all countries, all professions and all categories of workers. World Health Organization defines occupational stress as, "a pattern of reactions that occurs when workers are presented with work

demands not matched to their knowledge, skills or abilities and which challenge their ability to cope”.

International Labour organization (ILO) considers occupational groups like policemen, prison officers, miners, doctors, nurses, teachers and journalists among the most stressful professions. Recently, teachers’ stress has received widespread recognition reflecting difficulties encountered by them. In the last two decades, there have been a lot of studies on occupational stress among school teachers (World Health Organization, 2007). According to Kumar (2017), Occupational stress has become increasingly common in teaching profession largely because of increased occupational complexities and increased economic pressure on individuals. A major source of stress among teachers is result of failure of school to meet the social needs and jobs demands of the teachers.

Moreover, Child (2007) observes that the changes in education system causes stress which affects teachers’ motivation, and emphasizes “the introduction of so many innovations into school life, more detailed and time-consuming methods of assessment, more administration and committee meetings within the school have all conspired to increase tension in teaching”. He added, teachers portray many roles such as the creators of leaders, scientists, philosophers, advocates, politicians and administrators. Teacher is the principle means for implementing all educational programs of the organizations of educations.

In the 21st century education, teachers have to face different demands from school management, parents and society. They are required to acquire many new skills to cope effectively in a very fast changing society. They have to equip themselves in terms of creativity, innovations and critical thinking and that is why stress among teachers is becoming pervasive and serious (Paray et al, 2016).

Internationally, work stress among teachers is apparent. In South Eastern Europe, Shkembi, Melonashi, and Fanaj (2015) conducted a research concerned with teacher or work stress among Kosovo teachers and found out that the most frequently reported work stressors are inadequate wages (36.8%), physical working environment (30.1%), and undisciplined students (26.2%). Another research from Ireland proves that the existence of work stress among teachers is morphing the said profession. Bolton (2015) found out that teachers in urban schools experienced stress more frequently than their counterparts in rural schools. Thus, regardless of the school itself, stress is still occurring.

In addition, according to Sprenger (2011) in a study on stress and coping behaviors among primary school teachers in North Carolina, one hundred percent of teachers interviewed for this study reported that the teaching profession is stressful, with 72% describing the profession as extremely or very stressful. Moreover, Beckley (2011) in his study on the wellbeing of New Zealand teachers, the relationship between health, stress, job demands and teacher efficacy, over 39% of teachers considered teaching to be either very stressful or extremely stressful.

In the Philippines, Under RA 1800, the Civil Service Commission requires government employees, to include the public school teachers, to render eight hours of service per day which entails performing school-related tasks, such as, preparing instructional materials, writing lesson plans everyday, conducting and preparing evaluation, attending meetings, seminars and trainings. However, due to heavy demands made by the society and the administration on the teachers to perform various roles and the heavy workloads, teaching is indeed stressful and demanding (Roxas, 2009).

Pagayanan (2016) conducted a study on the Stress Profile of Public Elementary Teachers in Tacloban City it was found out that most common work stress of the public elementary teachers are the following: lack of teaching guides and learning materials (83.2%), working under deadline pressures (79%), pressure to produce better exam results (77%), having to perform tasks not trained for (76%), and extreme temperature in classrooms (72%). It cannot be denied that work stress among educators is becoming a problem nowadays.

Hence, it can be said that occupational stress among teachers has the potential to impact their own performance; achievement levels of the students’ and even the whole education system. Roxas (2009) describes the demands that go with the job of elementary school teachers. She explains that elementary school teachers play a vital role in the development of children. They introduce children to the basic of numbers,

language, science and social sciences. They use games, music, artwork, films, slides, computers, and other teaching available technology to teach the basic skills. Elementary school teachers take the time to model and instill the good habits and a curiosity for learning. This study aimed to explore the occupational stressors of elementary school teachers.

1.2 Methodology

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative design using phenomenological approach was used in order to broadly explore and understand the stress experienced by elementary public teachers at work. According to Creswell (2007), using qualitative design allows researchers to capture responses that are not measurable using concrete answers. Additionally, using this kind of design is very appropriate especially if the researcher is seeking to understand more than the event but also how the individuals made sense of the event (Maxwell, 1998). Moreover, this methodology also offers insight into how the individual's behavior is influenced by making sense of an event (Maxwell, 1998).

Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were public elementary school teachers in Region VIII. Participants who were part of the in-depth interview were purposively chosen based on the result of the screening test. The Occupational Stress Inventory-Revised was used as the screening test and was administered to public elementary school teachers. Those teachers who have high scores and considered stressed were chosen as the participants of the study.

Research Instruments

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to gather data on work-related stress experiences of the elementary public teachers who were selected to participate in an in-depth interview. The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to elicit teachers' occupational stress. It was validated by two experts (one doctorate Psychology student, one Registered Guidance Counselor) and one lay expert (Master Teacher).

Data Analysis

Analysis was done using Collaizi (1978) thematic data analysis. This process of analysis involved sorting or coding the data into themes and categories by identifying and analyzing repeating patterns that exist in the data. Also, HyperRESEARCH software was used to code, retrieve and conduct qualitative data analysis. It is a licensed commercial software package used by researchers within the sciences, social sciences, and professions including education and medicine.

Consent from the participants were considered. Teachers were asked if they are willing to participate in the conduct of the study. Permission to audio-tape the interview was asked. The researcher explained the sustained commitment required of participants to gather meaningful data and remind them that they could withdraw their participation of the study anytime. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, the names and locations was not reported as this could lead to identification.

Research reflexivity was also observed. The researcher is also a teacher who is also experiencing stress in her profession, however, in this study the researcher placed herself as a faculty researcher seeking to describe the lived experiences of elementary teachers.

1.3 Results and Discussion

The researcher explored elementary teachers' experiences of stress in relation to their occupation. Nine themes emerged from the interviews as the dimensions of occupational stress. These dimensions are: (1) Work overload, (2) Students Misbehavior, (3) Poor Supervisory Style, (4) Lack of Parental Support, (5) Minimal Compensation, (6) Unconducive Physical Environment, (7) Poor working relationship with colleagues, (8) Lack of Available Resources, and (9) Poor Organizational System.

Almost all of the participants asserts that they are experiencing work overload which made their job stressful. This claim is supported by the study of Luvinga (2013) on Magnitude and Impact of Occupational Stress Among Secondary School Teachers in Kinondoni Municipality. It was found out that one of the factor that causes stress at the workplace is increased workloads which manifest into high turnover, impaired decisions, absenteeism and low service production. Moreover, Ncube and Tshabalala (2013) studied work stress among 200 teachers in Zimbabwe, and found that most of the teachers perceived work overload as one of the major causes of stress in their work. Teachers need to manage their time to be more productive at work failure to accomplish all those given task causes them stress.

Another major cause of stress mentioned by the participants are the negative behavior of the students. Feng (2010) found that teacher turnover was positively correlated with levels of disciplinary incidents. The participants felt overwhelmed by the students misbehavior such as being naughty and having difficulty disciplining the students. Paulse (2005) reported student behavior as most stressful for teachers, followed by support, the parents, personal competency, classroom and professional competency. Teachers having this experience were having higher level of stress. Similarly, Chaplain (1995) found significant differences between male and female teachers and experienced and inexperienced teachers. Men reported higher stress compared to women on pupil behavior and attitude. Also, Morton et al, (1997) reported students behavior significantly associated with stress among teachers. Similarly, Axup et al (2008) found that students behavior was significant cause of anxiety among teachers. Present study reveals that student behavior is a contributory factor to teachers' stress.

The kind of supervisory style also add to teachers' stress. This claim is supported by the study of Howard and Johnson (2004) it was found out that when teachers feel unwanted and feel the administration structure is very hierarchal and concentrated in the hands of few are experiencing stress. The study also revealed that teachers also experience stress when the principal has an autocratic leadership style. Although the participants in this study feel it is the principal's job to make leadership decisions, they feel not being included in the decision making process can be very stressful. Teachers revealed that immediate supervisor can also be the source of stress.

This present study also reveals that low salary of teachers is also one of the sources of stress. This claim is supported by the study of Mafuno & Chitsiko (2012) that reported having low salaries can cause teachers stress. Finances in school can add up to their expenses. Also, Kyriacou (1998) found out that teachers struggle with poor prospects relating to pay result in their stress. Participants experience of delayed salary, low pay and allowances is causing them stress.

Physical environment can also be the source of stress as revealed on this study. This is supported by the study of Hastings (2003) and Guglielmi (1998) which revealed that most stressors are associated with the working environment which includes unfavorable working condition. The working environment may also include physical stressors such as noise associated with teaching assignments, accrued classrooms, size of the classroom and/or school, security and violence among youth. Teachers claim that physical environment plays a vital role in the teaching and learning process.

Another stressor to the teachers is their relationship with their colleagues. Some of the participants' experience negative and poor interpersonal relationship with their workmates. Sabherwal, et al (2015) found out that poor relationships with the administration and colleagues cause occupational stress among teachers.

In addition, Akpinar (2008) stated that teachers experience stress is originating from colleagues are competition and ambition, widespread gossiping, shirking duties, having discords and not receiving support. Also, Kyriacou (2001) found that being exposed to a large amount of change and having difficult or challenging relationships with colleagues and administration can increase the amount of stress for teachers. This present study also revealed that poor relationship with colleagues contributes to teachers' stress.

Participants of this study also revealed that lack of resources regarding instruction and materials to meet the student's needs was a job stressor for them. Jazaar, Lambert & O'Donnell (2007) reported that elementary teachers reporting an intention to leave their current job for professional reasons such as higher classroom demands and fewer school-provided resources can result to higher occupational stress. In addition, Mafuno & Chitsiko (2012) pointed out that with the declining resources and increasing student population, teachers experience more stressful situations. This present study also concurs to the above mentioned studies since lacking and unavailable resources causes the participants to experience stress.

Lastly, organizational system was found to be one of the sources of stress among elementary teachers. This finding is supported by the study of Hanif, et.al., (2011) on identifying personal and job related predictors of teacher stress among the school teachers in Pakistan. In this study they cited the other predictors of job stress for teachers that were situational demands and appraisal to that situation. They found that school system is one of the significant predictors of teacher stress. Communication line between higher authorities and teachers in the system must be open and teachers should be guided properly considering that they are the implementers of guidelines, orders and memorandum. They should clearly understand what is going on in the organization. Poor organizational system in one way or another contributes to teacher stress.

1.4 Conclusions

1. Teaching is one of the most stressful and demanding profession.
2. Common occupational stressors of teachers identified using in-depth interview were work overload, student misbehaviour, poor supervisory style, lack of parental support, minimal compensation, unconducive physical environment, poor working relationship with colleagues, lack of available resources and poor organizational system.
3. Experiencing stress at work can have a negative impact on their performance. It is deemed important to identify, quantify and assess the level of occupational stress of teachers to understand and address issues on managing stress among teachers.

1.5 Recommendations

1. Inductive data should be used in conjunction with other methods in gathering data since a self-report information has its limitation such as interviewees' biases when narrating personal experiences.
2. In methodological standpoint, replication of the study be done on a similar sample in order to further explore underlying factors of occupational stress among elementary teachers.

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