

Occupational Stress among School Teachers around The Globe

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School teachers are exposed to a high level of stress, not only in India but around the globe. Socio-demographic variables, salary, working environment, work pressure play a significant role in causing stress across teachers of a different culture.

A collection of evidence links job-related stress to mental ill-health. Its symptoms include absenteeism, lost productivity, and physical ill-health, including particularly coronary disease. Though Kasl (1984) found that teachers and professors had significantly lower rates of arteriosclerotic heart disease than physicians, lawyers, pharmacists, and insurance agents, recent studies suggest that teachers face high and perhaps growing levels of occupational stress. It has been found that teacher stress is related to high rates of absenteeism and turnover (Borg & Riding, 1991; Cotanch, 1984). These employment-related effects of teachers' stress make it a potentially significant issue for school administrators and educational policymakers.

Conceptualization of teachers' stress

A first analysis came from Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978), who presented a model of teacher stress which conceptualized teachers' anxiety as "a response syndrome mediated by an appraisal of the threat to the teacher's self-esteem, well-being and by coping mechanisms activated to reduce the perceived threat" (p. 5). Tollenback, Brenner, and Lofgren (1983) introduced a conceptual model of teachers' stress which built upon the one proposed by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978). They incorporated neighborhood characteristics in this model. They also believed that "the social context of the school influences the frequency of stressors within it" (p. 20). This model was partially verified by later studies (Brenner & Bartell, 1984; Brenner, Sorbom & Wallius 1985). A more detailed analysis was made by Dunham (1992), who defined stress as a process of behavioral, emotional, physical, and mental reactions caused by prolonged, increasing or new pressures that are significantly greater than the availability of "coping" strategies. He advocated three main

approaches which could be used to understand the nature of stress in teaching. The first one is similar to the "engineering" model of anxiety. There are external pressures levied on teachers in schools, and teachers have limits to weight. In this approach, stress is defined as a set of causes. The second approach is wholly based on the "physiological" model, which focuses on the forms of reactions shown by teachers in response to these pressures. They may be emotional and bodily manifestations. The third one is the interaction approach that emphasizes the need to identify the significant sources of stress and the behavior that they adapt to cope with these demands. Before the 1990s, the concept of teachers' anxiety was mainly defined by the cause-and-effect approach. Dunham (1992) has demonstrated new insights by proposing a third emphasis on coping strategies that teachers can adapt to tackle stress problems. The rationale of this approach is that, to understand stress, more attention should be given to problem-solving and coping behavior

Conceptualization of burnout

It is necessary also to consider the interrelationship between stress and burnout. Freudenberger (1980) equated burnout with fear. Cherniss (1980) defined burnout as negative personal changes which occurred over time in professionals working in demanding or frustrating jobs. Cunningham (1983) considered exhaustion to be one negative consequence of the long-term effects of stress, but not all strains led to burnout. Maslach and Jackson (1981, 1986) described burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion (feeling overextended and worn-out from work), depersonalization (lack of reactivity); and lack of personal accomplishment (feeling incompetent and unsuccessful on the job). However, Farber (1984b) has been critical of the fact that there have not been many studies done on distinguishing between the concepts of teacher stress and teacher burnout. Stress can have both positive and negative effects; whereas burnout is a long-term negative result of work stress. In some more recent

studies, therefore, some researchers have begun to acknowledge the difference between the two concepts and do not only use the two terms interchangeably (Carpel, 1987, 1992; Jenkins & Calhoun, 1991).

What Does Research Tell About Stress and Burnout Among Teachers?

Let's categorize the literature on stress and burnout among teachers into four main areas: (a) prevalence of anxiety, (b) causes of stress, (c) effects of stress, and (d) coping strategies.

Comparisons between Teachers and Other Professionals

Several surveys have pointed to the comparatively stressful nature of teaching. Pratt (1976) reported that 60 percent of teachers and 51 percent of other professionals experienced some or severe nervous strain at work. T. Cox, Mackay, S. Cox, Watts, and Brockley (1978) revealed that 78 percent of teachers, but only 38 percent of other professionals, considered work as the primary source of stress in their lives. Kyriacou (1980) reported that teachers, in comparison with other professions, had the highest levels of occupational stress. It is clear from these research studies that teachers experience a higher level of stress than many other professionals.

Comparisons among Teachers

Evidence for the incidence of stress amongst different categories of teachers, however, is less conclusive. Dunham (1976) formulated a survey that included reports from 658 infant, juniors, and secondary school teachers in England and concluded that more teachers experience stress and that more teachers were experiencing severe anxiety. Smilansky (1984) found that, in the general context, better teachers reported higher levels of stress. Kyriacou (1987) revealed that staff in individual schools reported twice as many potential stressors as those in traditional schools. Trendall (1989) conducted a study of 237 teachers in primary, secondary, and special schools in one Local Education Authority in England. He found that primary teachers experienced more stress than other groups, while teachers in individual schools reported less stress. Beer and Beer (1992) compared 33 teachers from a particular school and 57 teachers from three high schools and found that those teaching in regular schools

experienced less burnout and stress than those in the individual school. It seems that the above findings are inconsistent.

Causes of Teachers' Stress

Quite several studies on teachers' stress and burnout have identified the reasons for fear. Similar results were obtained from studies done in different countries. In a Swedish research study, Wahlund and Nerell (1976) found that the most frequently used statement concerning the causes of stress were large class size, incompatible and excessive demands on teachers, and many school reforms. In the United Kingdom, T. Cox et al. (1978) recognized five factors associated with job satisfaction: school management, job demands, teaching resources and job environment, School climate, career and training, and pupil behavior. In a similar study, Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978b) reported four sources of stress which were common among teachers in the British comprehensive schools: pupil misbehavior, poor working conditions, time pressure, and poor school ethos. Smilansky (1984) examined teachers' work satisfaction and findings of job-related stress in some English elementary schools. He found that the general satisfaction and stress level of teachers at work were related mostly to their expressed feelings about what had happened within the respective class (such as relations with pupils, the teaching process, and pupil behavior in school) rather than to administrative or policy questions (such as intensity of work autonomy, relationships with principals). Carpel (1992) investigated the causes of stress and burnout in 405 middle- and upper-high school and sixth-form teachers at college in a Local Education Authority in England. Role conflict, locus, the stability of personality, and anxiety were found to be potential sources of stress and burnout. In the United States, Clark (1980) developed the Teachers' Occupational Stress Factor Questionnaire (TOSFQ) to identify five factors: group instruction, professional inadequacy, teacher-principal professional relationship, collegial relationship, and job overload. The constructive validity of this instrumental approach was later manifested by several studies done in the United States (Foxworth, Karnes, & Leonard, 1984; Morocco, Danford, & D'Arienzo, 1982).

Furthermore, Farber (1984a) examined and analyzed the sources of stress of 365 suburban teachers in the United States. The results show that excessive paperwork,

unsuccessful administrative meetings, and the lack of advancement opportunities in teaching cause stress. In a study undertaken in New Zealand, Dewe (1986) illustrated the following work stressors: task overload, lack of control over learner activities and outcomes, insufficient satisfaction from work, role conflicts, rapid or unpredictable changes, interpersonal conflict rate, unrealistic expectations, and feelings of inadequacy. Payne and Furnham (1987) verified data from 444 secondary teachers in Barbados and found that difficulties associated with instructional and managerial demands perceived to be the most stressful aspects of their work. Manso-Pinto (1989) administered the TOSFQ (Clark, 1980) to a sample of 186 elementary and secondary schoolteachers in Chile. Four main factors were identified: administrative support, professional distress, financial security, and students' discipline, among which lack of administrative support was perceived as the most stressful factor. Borg and Riding (1991) conducted a questionnaire survey of 710 Maltese primary schoolteachers and revealed four factors as sources of stress: pupil misbehavior, time or resource difficulties, professional recognition needs, and poor relationships with colleagues. Among these four factors, professional recognition needs had the most robust inverse relationship with job satisfaction and career commitment.

To summarize these various studies, the familiar sources of stress for teachers in Western countries are misbehavior of students, poor working conditions, and lack of resources for teachers, poor relationships with colleagues, overload with teaching and nonteaching duties, and reduced administrative support. Amongst this misbehavior of students, teaching and nonteaching "overload" are probably the most important sources of stress. As will be shown below, these are also significant stressors among Hong Kong teachers.

Effects of Teacher Stress - Dunham's Classification

Dunham (1984) summarized the most common manifestations of teacher stress as a feeling of exhaustion, irritability, tension, and headache. He (1992) further identified four kinds of stress effects: (a) behavioral (e.g., heavy smoking, absenteeism, and turnover); (b) emotional (e.g., nervousness, anxiety, and depression); (c) mental (e.g., inability to concentrate); and (d) physical (e.g., headache and gastrointestinal problems). Dunham (1984, 1992) has summarized well the common stress symptoms

that might be manifested by stressed teachers. They are, therefore, useful indicators for teachers to detect signs of stress themselves so that preventive and intervention procedures can be used.

Teachers' Burnout

Many studies reported a relationship between teaching and burnout. For example, burnout was found to be related to support and encouragement from administrators (R. H. Zabel & M. K. Zabel, 1982) and to personality and environmental factors (Nagy, 1982). Burke and Green glass (1989) investigated psychological burnout among 833 men and women in teaching using the Cherniss Model. They found that various outcome measures (mental and physical health, and job satisfaction) were related to psychological burnout. Nowadays, more than 40 variables are referred to as teachers' burnout. S. Nagy and C. Nagy (1992) grouped them into three categories, including environmental, intrapersonal, and professional factors.

Nevertheless, empirical studies of psychological burnout among teachers sometimes reveal inconsistent results (Maslach, 1982; Russell, Altmaier, & Van Velzen, 1987). Farber (1984b) further argued that "Teachers are not burned out, they are worn out, instead of burning out from overwork, they turn-off to the job and stop attempting to succeed in situations that appear hopeless" (p. 328). He argued that those burned-out teachers had once been the most dedicated teachers in their schools. Therefore, he clarified that there are more worn-out teachers than burned out ones.

Psychological Distress

Schonfeld (1990b) criticized the literature on teacher stress for its lack of construct validity of stress and burnout instruments. In his study of anxiety among 67 teachers, from New York City, he established the close correlation between the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale and the Psycho physiologic Symptom Scale and concluded that they measured the same construct, called psychological distress. This construct is different from job-related morale (e.g., motivation to continue teaching and job satisfaction). The validity of the findings obtained from studies done on the causes and effects of teacher stress and burnout has been criticized. It seems that only certain groups of teachers are more

susceptible to specific sources of stress. The argument is that there are vast individual differences among teachers and some factors, including those external to teaching (e.g., personality) should also be taken into consideration.

Furthermore, there are weaknesses in the design of some empirical research. Most studies have adopted mail surveys with response rates between 50 and 60 percent. It may be the case that burned-out teachers were unwilling to respond. Another problem arising from the survey type of studies is that subjects are asked to respond to "forced-choice" questions, in which the items are artificial and "theoretical." Perhaps a greater variety of methodologies should be used, such as the one employed by Russell et al. (1987), who asked the subjects to list the three most stressful events they had experienced at work in the previous school year.

Coping Strategies - Social Support

The concept of coping is one of the critical facets of stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) viewed dealing as a stabilizing factor that may help individuals maintain psychosocial adaptability during stressful periods. Many studies suggested that social support may be a useful strategy for preventing teacher burnout (Moracco & McFadden, 1982; Paine, 1981; Russell et al., 1987). However, the findings of research on the effectiveness of social support to cope with stress are inconsistent (Brenner et al., 1985; Burke & Green glass, 1993; Dunham, 1984; Kyriacou, 1980, 1981).

Direct Action

Brenner et al. (1985) found that a coping strategy labeled "direct action" appeared to mitigate job-related stress. Schonfeld (1990a) demonstrated that advice seeking and direct action were mostly related to lower depressive and psycho physiologic symptom levels. Jenkins and Calhoun (1991) categorized immediate action as those methods that "have a direct impact on the source of stress, such as improving the teacher-administrative relationship, job redesign, staff development and improving teacher status" (p. 62).

Indirect Method

The literature reviewed so far has demonstrated that, even though some of the findings are not entirely consistent, there do appear to be ways to improve

teachers' ability to cope with stress. Despite strengthening the role of social support, the direct action approach can be faulted. Jenkins and Calhoun (1991) argued that an "indirect method" is also beneficial. This approach aims at helping individual teachers to "make some changes in interpretation, behavior, or other response to the stressor" (p. 62).

Behavioral Problems in Classrooms

As already discussed, behavioral problems in classrooms have some causes: frustrations with English as the medium of instruction; lack of motivation in the rigid common-core curriculum; and difficulties arising from classes of mixed abilities. The Education Commission Report No. 4 (1990) advocated several proposals to alleviate students' misbehavior, and the Education Department has implemented some of its suggestions. The Education Commission Report No. 4 (1990) suggested setting up three practical schools to provide a diversified curriculum comprising academic and practical subjects. So far, three possible schools have been built to admit unmotivated pupils and those who are of lower learning abilities. Some educationists have asked for building of more such schools in the future. However, this involves a value judgment: is it worthwhile to spend more money on the minority (about 14 percent) rather than on the majority of students who are in regular schools? Perhaps a less costly solution, as proposed by Lee (1991), is to promote "value education" through the integration of formal curriculum and the informal system such as extracurricular activities. Another solution for students' behavioral problems is to operate primary schools on a whole day, rather than a bi-sectional basis. The rationale for this proposal is that pupils, in particular, Primary 5's and 6's, may engage in delinquent behavior on the streets after school. The government has planned that "all new primary schools operate on a whole day basis from September 1993 in addition to the 39 existing bi-sectional schools which are already due to become whole-day over the next five years" (Governor's Report, 1992, p. 9). But the implementation of this proposal requires extra funding, and teachers are obliged to stay longer every day in school. This proposal has been partially achieved so far. Recognizing that quite a sizable percentage of students who display behavioral problems are those who are newly arrived, most recently, the government has initiated

orientation programs for these students. Human service agents run the programs. The expenditure allocated for this project is about 3 million dollars a year.

The purpose of such programs is to help those children to become more familiar with the social situation and school curriculum. Most important of all, Basic to advanced English course is offered because those children mainly speak their mother tongue. It is hoped that through this project, students' misbehavior will be reduced, and in turn, teachers' stress will be reduced.

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