

Occupational Stress among Bhutanese Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the level of teacher stress and coping action among Bhutanese teachers. It further investigated if demographic variables (gender, experience, and school level) affected the level of stress on teachers. The population in this study consists of 150 teachers from 42 schools, while t-test and Oneway ANOVA are used for statistical analysis. 24.5% of the teachers reported that being a teacher was either very or extremely stressful. Male teachers faced more stress than their counterparts. The study also found that stress is most prevalent among teachers with an experience of over 10 years followed by teachers with 6-10 years of experience in teaching. The coping actions adopted by teachers were mostly palliative strategies, such as, 'having a healthy home life', followed by 'reduce extra activities during school time'. Teachers reported that the most effective action that schools or the government could take to reduce teacher stress was to decrease teachers' workload. These findings are in line with those reported in many western countries.

Keywords:gender, experience, school level, teacher stress, Bhutanese schools

INTRODUCTION

Teacher stress can be defined as the experience by a teacher of unpleasant negative emotions such as anger, frustration, anxiety, depression and nervousness, resulting from some aspect of their work (Kyriacou 2000). It occurs when there is a discrepancy between the demands of the workplace and that of individual's (Tsutsumi et al., 2009). Occupational stress in the human service professions, particularly in teachers, has been a focus of study in the last decades. Most surprisingly, school teachers have been considered to be under stress (Beer & Beer, 1992; Boyle et al., 1995; Hammen & De Mayo, 1982; Kinnunen, 1988; Kinnunen & Salo, 1994; Kyriacou, 1987; Malik, Mueller, & Meinke, 1991; Smith & Bourke, 1992; Pithers, 1995), undergoing the process of burnout (Beer & Beer, 1992; Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Kyriacou, 1987) or suffering from depressive symptoms (Beer & Beer, 1992; Hammen & De Mayo, 1982; Schonfeld, 1990; Schonfeld, 1992). There exists a substantial body of literature describing teaching as stressful occupation and suggesting that teacher stress appears to be an increasing problem (Antoniou et al., 2006; Chaplain, 1995; Guthrie, 2006; Kyriacou, 2001; Laughlin, 1984; Manthei & Gilmore, 1996; Munt, 2004; Punch & Tuetteman, 1996).

Since the early 1970s, the amount of research on teacher stress has increased steadily, and it is now a major topic of research in many countries (Kyriacou 2001; Troman & Woods 2001; Vandenberghe & Huberman 1999). However, no studies have explored teacher stress in Bhutan. Considering the social, cultural, economic and educational differences between countries one must be very careful in generalization. Therefore, there is critical need for basic research on teacher stress in many countries, where the local variables can be included in the study.

TEACHERS IN BHUTAN

The education sector in Bhutan has been growing steadily since the 1960s and the literacy rates of the population have also been steadily going up over time. The mostly mountainous country regards education as central to its national development. Every cohort has seen an increasing share of children going to school and the education system now strains to keep up with the speed with which enrolment has expanded over the last ten years, in-line with Bhutan's commitment to meet the education Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Findings from the Bhutan Learning Quality Survey, 2009). The need to improve education quality has become a priority for education policy makers and reformers in the country and there is widespread public concern over the perceived decline in education quality. Further, quality of education being a recent topic of discussion at the seminars, meetings, and even at the national assembly, affirms that teachers receive bounteous stress as they are the backbone of the education system where quality of education hinges on their quality and motivation. Most importantly, teachers in Bhutan are also understood as a means for the passing on of values that is based on the unique notion of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Considering its location and level of the schools, Bhutanese schools differ significantly in class size which is not unusual. Two types of teaching position are held in Bhutanese schools: classroom teachers and subject teachers. Classroom teachers teach the full range of subjects to one class and are responsible for everyday matters concerning their pupils, including making contact when appropriate with parents, and dealing with pupil misbehavior. Subject teachers tend to be specialists in one subject, which they teach to several different classes in the school.

In Bhutan, teachers work under three monitors within the organization. However, principal is the immediate boss while vice principal and subject monitor plays lesser roles. Within the district level the school is headed by assistant district/city education officers (ADEO/ATEO) and district education officers/city education officer (DEO/TDEO). The school and teacher's performance is further reviewed by education monitoring officers (EMO) at the ministry level. In addition, there is a performance management system (PMS) to evaluate the teacher's performance and determine the advancement of career within a school position or grade levels. The overall goal of the performance management system is to help boost the performance of the schools and districts in the delivery of quality education. Teachers who continue to underperform in spite of performance improvement plan will be deprived of renewal of Teaching License (Teacher HR policy, 2014). It is clear that the stress level among Bhutanese teachers is a steady and upward course.

Over the past years teachers have witnessed competitive ethos in Bhutanese schools, with parents especially in urban areas putting gargantuan pressure on pupils to do well at school in order to gain access to government scholarships and universities. This is often evident in parents being critical of teachers who they feel are not doing enough to help their child succeed, and parents are all too ready to complain to the school principal if they are not satisfied. However, a certain degree of competitiveness has also been generated among teachers, as they vie with each other to help their pupils gain the top grades (Murphy & Liu 1998).

Furthermore, Bhutanese schools have been subject to a series of curricula reforms since 1960s, which have not been particularly successful in raising standards, and stakeholders have often been reported in the media as blaming teachers for the lack of success of these reforms because of their reluctance to change their practice, make sufficient effort, or to engage in appropriate professional development activities. Education policy makers in Bhutan have signaled the crucial importance of teacher development for educational reform and raising standards, and in recent years, teachers have been put under increasing pressure

by their principals and DEOs to attend Distance Education (DE) programs. This program enrolls DE candidates based on their seniority forcing potential and junior teachers to wait for their turn. Moreover, as these activities are normally timed to occur on winter vacations, many teachers feel frustrated. These reforms are also seen to have generated a lot of anxiety. Teaching is a popular career choice in Bhutan, however, it is increasingly being described as a high-stress profession and both experienced and inexperienced teachers are keen to retire early.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to explore teacher stress among teachers in Bhutanese schools. The researcher sought to explore the general level of teacher stress, the sources of teacher stress, the coping actions used by teachers, and what actions the teachers think could be taken by schools and the government to reduce teacher stress. Further, it also aims to examine if demographic variables play center role in teacher stress. The study endeavored to answer the following research questions:

- i. What is the level of occupational stress in Bhutanese school teachers?
- ii. What are the main sources of teacher stress in Bhutanese schools?
- iii. What coping strategies are used to reduce stress?
- iv. Do the demographic factors (genders, teaching experiences, and school levels) impact teacher stress?

METHOD

The present work is a descriptive study investigating the general level of teacher stress, the sources of teacher stress, the coping actions used by teachers, and what actions the teachers think could be taken by schools and the government to reduce teacher stress. It also aims to investigate whether the occupational stress faced by the school teachers differed based on demographic factors. The sample consisted of 150 school teachers, selected from 42 schools of eastern, central and western Bhutan, in which 88 (58.7%) are male and 62 (41.3%) were female teachers. 4% had less than one year's teaching experience; 20% had 1–5 years; 55% had 6–10 years; and 21% had over 10 years. 69% percent were classroom teachers and 31% were subject teachers. 22% taught in Elementary school (PS), 17% in Lower Secondary school (LSS), 30% in Middle Secondary school (MSS), and 31% in Higher Secondary schools (HSS). 13.1%% of the schools are located in rural while 58.9%% are in semi-urban region. The remaining 28% are urban region schools. Most of the participants had B.Ed degree (71%) while 20.5% of them had certificate in teaching. 8.5% of them had master degree.

The questionnaire mainly comprised sets of items coupled with a five-point Likert scale (scored 1 to 5). The items were based on a consideration of studies of teacher stress in the West (eg Cockburn 1996; Kyriacou 2001; Troman & Woods 2001) together with research conducted in Taiwan (Chris Kyriacou and Pei-Yu Chien, 2004) and additional stress sources that are prevalent in Bhutan. The five-point Likert scale questionnaire was distributed to teachers in 42 schools mainly through email as it was felt that this would be the best form of distribution given the cost and distance of the participants. T-test and ANOVA are used for statistical analysis, for $P < 0.05$

RESULT AND DECLARATION

1. *The responses of the teachers to the question on the general level of stress experienced are reported in Table I.*

Table I. Overall teacher stress (percentages, N = 150)

<i>Not at all stressful</i>	<i>Mildly stressful(1)</i>	<i>Moderately stressful(2)</i>	<i>Very stressful(4)</i>	<i>Extremely stressful(5)</i>
2.1%	24.1%	49.3%	20.1%	4.4%

Results show that more than half of teachers regard teaching profession as moderately stressful. Further investigation indicates that about 24.5% of the sample reported that being a teacher was very/extremely stressful. However, only 2.1% of them indicated that they are not at all stressful. Particularly, the figure for very stressful category is in line with previous research studies in the UK, which typically report figures between 20% and 30% using this scale (Kyriacou 2000). Furthermore, it is also in line with research conducted in Taiwan (Chiang 2002; Lee 2002; Chien 2004).

2. *The responses of the teachers to the question on source of stress are reported in Table II*

Table 2. Sources of teacher stress (percentages, N = 150)

<i>Source of stress</i>	<i>No stress(1)</i>	<i>A little stress(2)</i>	<i>Some stress(3)</i>	<i>A lot of stress(4)</i>	<i>Extreme stress(5)</i>
Education policy reforms	1.1	9.9	28.1	24.9	36
Additional job responsibilities	6.9	19.2	21.2	32.6	20.1
Not enough teaching resources	6.1	15.2	31.2	28	19.5
Too much subject matter to teach	10.5	20.1	24.2	26.8	18.4
Public's attitude and misunderstanding about teachers' workload	11.9	19.9	22.2	27.8	18.2
Performance management system (PMS)	6.5	16.9	32.1	26.6	17.9
Management style of the school principal	12.3	20.5	25.1	24.3	17.8
Being observed by colleagues, focal teachers, tutors or parents	10.1	18.9	25.2	28.2	17.6
Too many pupils in one class	10.8	27.4	24.9	25.3	11.6
Special needs pupils in the class (eg with autism, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), low ability or low emotional intelligence)	12.7	26.6	26.3	24.6	10.8
Poor working conditions	15.3	28.4	25.1	20.5	10.7

Teaching a subject or grade that does not fit expectations or teacher's ability	11.1	28.2	31.1	19.5	10.1
Pupils' misbehavior	5.6	21.5	39.5	24.2	9.2
Pupils' poor attitudes toward classroom tasks	3.1	31.5	41.8	19	4.6
Break time is too short	11.2	31.2	30.6	22.5	4.5
Pupils who lack motivation	4.5	31.2	36.5	23.6	4.2
Competition between classes/colleagues	13.1	27.5	26.1	29.2	4.1
Communications to and from parents	13.8	30.1	29.4	22.9	3.8
Instructing pupils who take part in a local or national competition	12.6	36.8	31.5	16.1	3.0
Sundry class duties (eg collecting school development fund (SDF), fee for food etc.)	30.1	26.4	32.5	8.9	2.1
Having to join too many teacher research and study seminars	30.1	42.8	18.6	7.4	1.1

The details of the responses of the teachers to the 21 sources of stress are shown in Table 2, in descending order of the percentage rating the item a source of extreme stress. The results show that 'education policy reforms' received the highest rating, followed by: 'additional Job responsibilities'; 'not enough teaching resources'; 'too much subject matter to teach'; 'public's attitude and misunderstanding about teachers' workload'; and 'performance management system (PMS)'. The high ratings for the items 'education policy reforms' are consistent with the findings in the west. Further investigation reveal that the most lowest rating for teachers stress is 'having to join too many teacher research and study seminars', which is preceded by; 'pupils who lack motivation'; 'competition between classes/colleagues'; 'communications to and from parents'; 'instructing pupils who take part in a local or national competition'; and 'sundry class duties (eg collecting school development fund (SDF), fee for food etc.)'. Over the past years, curriculum has been reformed for numerous times, which added too much subject matter to teach; besides classroom teaching there have been increased job responsibilities, and most importantly, most schools doesn't have enough teaching resources. Furthermore, position classification system also contributed greatly on teacher stress. On the other hand, teachers rated least on 'having to join too many teacher researches and study seminars'. As indicated Bhutanese teacher seldom attain research/study seminars apart from occasional teaching workshops. Further, they also rated low for 'pupils who lack motivation', which can be explained by the fact that most of all Bhutanese students are highly motivated to study. School education up to middle school is absolutely free in Bhutan, therefore, there are exceptional, and relatively low sundry duties.

Group Differences by Gender

The mean scores of teacher stress for male and female teachers are found 54.30 and 48.70 with SDs of 16.45 and 16.80 respectively. T-test was performed to examine the gender differences and while comparing between two groups, the difference between comparison groups is found statistically significant ($t=3.08$, $P<0.01$). It is a widely accepted fact that

modern schools are heading towards the work environments that are non-masculinized. The finding is supported by Byrne (1998) who emphasized that the causes leading to burnout/stress affect male teachers more than the female teachers who have higher motivation. Further investigation reveal that female teachers reported more stress for the item 'pupil misbehavior'.

Group Differences By Experiences

The results show that teachers with an experience of over 10 years have significant highest mean teacher stress scores ($M=57.19$, $SD=18.56$) than the other three teaching experience groups. Similarly, those teachers with 6-10 years of teaching experience have significantly higher teacher stress scores ($M=57.13$, $SD=17.31$) than those with 1-5 years. Further investigations reveal that the most experienced teachers (more than 10 years) reported experiencing less stress from 'pupils' misbehavior' than other teachers. Teachers in PS reported less stress for 'competition between classes/colleagues', 'too many pupils in one class', 'poor working conditions', and 'the need to join too many teacher research and study seminars', whilst teachers in MSS, HSS and LSS reported more stress for 'additional job responsibilities'. This result indicates that the stress in teachers increases with an increase in the years of their teaching experience. Similarly, this study finds that those with an average range of experience, that is, over 6-10 years appear to have similar level of stress when compared to teachers with over 10 years. This can be contended, as the experience in Bhutanese teacher increases, they become more saturated, tired and worn out. This can be related to limited teacher award, incentives, and recognition programs in the country. This may make them feel less competent, less successful and incompetent to cope with the challenging demands of their jobs. Some even quit the profession, though their experiences vary to certain extent.

Group Differences by Type/Level of School

One-way ANOVA was computed to examine group differences among the teachers in different levels of school, namely, PS, LSS, MSS, and HSS. There was statistically significant difference on teacher stress at the $p<.05$ level for the four conditions. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for the MSS was significantly higher than other three schools. HSS showed higher mean score than LSS, while PS had the lowest mean score. Some of the sources of teacher stress in MSS and HSS can be attributed but are not limited to board examination, large number of students, curriculum, pressure from stakeholders, and student misbehavior etc.

COPING ACTIONS

Kyriacou (2000, 2001) makes a distinction between two main types of coping strategies: direct action strategies, which deal with action taken to reduce the source of stress itself; and palliative strategies, that involve relief and/or controlling emotion. It is interesting to note that Bhutanese teachers employ both the strategies to overcome the stress. The responses of the teachers to the 28 coping actions show that the item with the highest rating was 'have a healthy home life' (30.4%), followed by 'ensure someone understands you and stands by you' (23.8%); 'practice religion' (22.1%); 'see the humor in the situation' (21.4%); 'learn how to control emotion' (19.6%);, 'change your school' (18.2%). Considering the Bhutanese tradition of consulting astrologers and protecting deities when facing problems, it was evident that religion featured more often as an extremely effective coping action when compared with seeking psychological counselling, however, in Western countries, religion and professional counselling tend to be rated fairly equally (Kyriacou 2000). Although only 19.6% of teachers learn how to control emotion while having stress, it is important to note

that this coping strategy is increasingly being advocated in western countries (Kyriacou 2000). On the other hand, 18.2% of them indicated that ‘change your school’ as more effective way to reduce stress. Further investigation of the data reveals that female teachers rated ‘see the humor in the situation’ as more effective than did male teachers. The least experienced teachers rated ‘ensure that you understand the work you are about to teach’, ‘spend time alone’, share your failure’; and ‘plan ahead and prioritize’ as less effective than did more experienced teachers. Teachers in HSS and MSS rated ‘take absence’ as more effective than other teachers. Teachers over 10 year experience rated ‘religion’ and ‘avoid comparing with others’, as more effective than the other two groups.

3. *School or Government intervention strategies*

Table 3. School or government intervention strategies (percentages, N = 150)

<i>Intervention</i>	<i>Ineffective</i>	<i>A little effective</i>	<i>Moderately effective</i>	<i>Very effective</i>	<i>Extremely effective</i>
Decrease teachers’ workload	0.0	2.9	3.4	43.2	50.5
Reduce extra activities during school time	0.5	3.1	8.2	42.1	46.1
Increase teachers’ salary	0.5	4.5	9.0	48.2	37.8
Provide professional administrators	0.5	3.1	15.3	45.4	35.7
Change education policy less frequently	1.1	4.2	10.4	50.2	34.1
Increase teaching resources	0.5	3.8	16.0	51.3	28.4
Improve working conditions	3.1	19.4	26.8	32.0	18.7
Institutionalize and make transparent personnel matters in school	3.9	17.2	27.0	39.5	12.4
Establish workshops to reduce teacher stress	4.9	19.7	38.1	25.6	11.7

The responses of the teachers to the nine actions that schools or the government could take to reduce teacher stress are shown in Table 3 in descending order of the percentage rating the item as extremely effective. As shown, the item with the highest rating was ‘decrease

teachers' workload', followed by: 'reduce extra activities during school time' and 'increase teachers' salary'. Further investigation reveals that female teachers rated 'decrease teachers' workload' as more effective than did male teachers. Teachers with the longest teaching experience (over 10 years) rated 'reduce extra activities during school time' as more effective than did other teachers. Teachers in PS and LSS rated 'provide professional administrators' and 'Increase teaching resources' as more effective; and teachers in large schools such as HSS and MSS rated 'increase teachers' salary' as more effective than did other teachers. Although most principals in Bhutan lack professional training in terms of administration, PS and LSS showed higher rating score than other two, however, 81.1% of them indicated that they need professional administrators inclusive of all the school types. When teachers were asked to write additional cause of stress, most of them complained about having too much teaching to do and not enough time for preparation. Similarly, when they were asked again to list the ways that would reduce their stress effectively, most of them suggested that education officials and policy makers made too many changes in curriculum, and that if education officials and policy makers paid more attention to the views of teachers and spent less time blaming teachers, that would have a major impact on reducing stress and school improvement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicated teacher stress is a growing problem in Bhutan, which is almost on par with levels of stress typically reported in western countries. The dominant sources of stress in Bhutan appeared to be education policy reforms and additional job responsibilities. The study concludes that nearly half of the teachers are in moderately stressed group while 24.5% of them suffered from very/extremely stressful. Male teachers face more stress than their counterparts. Further, the study also found that stress is most prevalent among teachers with an experience of over 10 years followed by 6-10 years of experience in teaching. Stress affects the efficiency of the individual. So, there is a need to provide proper conducive environment and support to teachers to maintain individual stress at their workplace. The coping actions adopted by teachers was mostly palliative strategies, such as, 'having a healthy home life' followed by 'reduce extra activities during school time.' The problem caused by a heavy workload and coping with educational reforms is now evident in many western countries, and it is interesting to see that this has also emerged in Bhutan. It is recommended that regular assessment of stress level should be conducted for preventive measures. The institution should check that, supervision, support and relationship with the teachers is properly taken care of and enhanced most strongly. Furthermore, it is recommended that principals and supervisors should examine the causes for stress and evaluate the organizational climate of the school. They should also suggest ways, like workshops and seminars to alleviate and cope with stress. They will need to take action to address this if teacher stress is to be reduced.

Due to location and partly due to cost and time I have used e-mail to gather data. Since electronic interviewing lacks face-to-face interaction, other forms of qualitative research such as, focus group interviews are recommended. Above all the number of participants is limited to 150 teachers from 42 schools of eastern, central and western Bhutan, so the breadth for making generalizations is relatively shallow. Similarly, most of the participants' schools are from semi-urban and urban regions. Future researchers should include more demographic information, such as qualification, salary, subjects taught and marital status, region etc.

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