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Stress among Special Education Teachers in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study investigates factors that contribute stress and level of occupational stress among special education teachers who are currently teaching in special education classes in the state of Penang, Malaysia. Result shows that there are five major factors that contribute to stress among special education teachers in Penang. A total of 92 special education teachers were chosen randomly to represent the population by using the cluster over cluster method. The instrument for this study was adapted from the Teacher Stress Inventory constructed by Boyle, Borg, Falzon and Baglioni (1995) and had been modified by Mokhtar (1998) and Mazlan (2002). A pilot study has been conducted and the Alpha Cronbach for the instrument was 0.982. The data have been analyzed using both descriptive (mean, frequency, and percentage) and inherecy methods (Independent t-Test, Pearson Correlation, and One Way ANOVA). Result indicates that the overall stress level of respondent is at moderate. Among the five stressors, pupil misbehavior is the strongest determinant of teacher stress with a mean of 3.70. Other factors are teacher workload (mean = 3.22), time and resources difficulties (mean = 3.11), recognition (mean = 3.05), and interpersonal relationships (mean = 3.00) respectively. The workload and other factors had caused a moderate stress on the respondents. The result also indicates that there is no significant difference of work stress among the respondent based on gender, marriage status, and highest academic qualification. Furthermore, the result of this study failed to indicate a significant correlation between teacher stress and demographic factors such as age, length of teaching experience, and the respondents' monthly salary.

Keywords: Occupational Stress, and Special Education Teachers;

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1. Introduction

Meeting the daily learning and behavioural needs of students makes teaching a stressful job. Not every type of stress that associated with teaching is negative. Stress that able to reduce teacher's motivation can have deleterious effects such as alienation from the workplace, absenteeism, and attrition. In fact, when special education teachers are severely stressed by the unmanageability of their workload, they are more likely to leave the special education classroom (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1995). The ability to successfully manage stresses related to teaching is critical if special education teachers are to survive and thrive in the classroom.

Despite the current trend toward school-based decision making, a lot of schools remain to implement bureaucratic organizations where teachers have little control over major decisions in their environments and frequently work in

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isolation (Skrtic, 1991). Further, with the increasing demands to be accountable, teachers' work is becoming more intense, leaving many teachers feeling emotionally exhausted (Hargreaves, 1994). Thus, in school bureaucracies, teachers may become stressed by role overload and lack of autonomy.

In 2001, Malaysian Ministry of Education had introduced the Education Development 2001-2010. Among the motives of this scheme is to develop individual potential entirely in order to produce mankind who are emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical balanced, consistent with the National Education Philosophy; to promote creativity and innovation among students; to enhance knowledge, science, and technology culture; to increase lifelong learning; to prepare an efficient and effective education system which can achieve international standard; to become the educational centre that can provide excellent education and to increase Malaysia education's prestige in international level (Education Development 2001-2010, 2001). In the realization of this motive, Malaysia has put a severe expectation in school teachers. They are perceived as the architect, designer, and saver of the future of our children who are responsible to educate them. However, we have to realize that teaching is not an easy job as what other people think and perceive. In fact, Claxton (1989) indicated that teaching is an occupation which is always demanding and changing.

Former Deputy Chancellor of University of Technology Malaysia, Tan Sri Ainuddin Wahid indicated that teachers' obligation is heavy, which every teacher plays an important role in the development of attitude and personality of Malaysian future generation other than delivering knowledge and become a role model to the students all the time (Yaacob, 1985). Teachers' task in this context is not only tied to teaching, educating, and guiding (Faridah Karim and Zubaidah Aman, 1998). In fact, teachers are required to equipped themselves with various quality, knowledge, and skills so that they can become ascetic model that should have ideal mannerism, become a role model to students, never make a mistake, and also manage to give an effective teaching (Peter Songan and Narawi, 2002). This stereotype and severe expectation in teachers is a source of teacher stress.

1. SAMPLE

Data were collected from special education teachers ($N = 92$) employed in 20 schools in the state of Penang. Samples were chosen randomly by using cluster over cluster method. To make sure the samples are enough, the researcher had determined the size of sample by using sample size table produced by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) as a guide.

2. INSTRUMENT

Questionnaires have been used to collect information on teachers' stress. The self-report stress questionnaire was based on Teacher Stress Inventory, which has been developed by Boyle *et al.* (1995) and had been modified by Mokhtar (1998) and Mazlan (2002) to fit with Malaysian school context. Alpha Cronbach value for this instrument was 0.93. Minor changes have been made by the researchers to this instrument to reflect teacher stress among special education teachers in integration schools.

The questionnaire contained two sections. The first section was regarding respondents' biographical information such as gender, age, race, marriage status, field of study, academic qualification, length of teaching experience, and monthly salary. The second section consisted of 48 questions. In this section, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they found the aspects of their work is stressful (the 48 items included the following: pupils' misbehavior, teacher workload, time and resources difficulties, interpersonal relationships, and recognition). They were asked to rate how stressful they found each item based on a Five Point Likert scale as showed in Table 1.

Table 1: Five Point Likert-Type Scale

Score	Stress Level
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1	No Stress
2	Mild Stress
3	Moderate Stress
4	Severe Stress
5	Extremely Stress

3. PILOT SURVEY

The main objective of conducting a pilot survey is to ensure the consistency and accuracy of each item in a questionnaire. Through pilot survey, the appropriateness of the instrument such as the use of correct word and sentence can be determined. Before the pilot survey was done, the instrument was Checked and affirmed by Shafrin Ahmad (PhD) and Aznan Che Ahmad (PhD), both of them are senior lecturer in the field of psychology and special education in University Science Of Malaysia. The questionnaire was then pilot tested among 30 special education teachers and the Alpha Cronbach value was 0.982. The comments of these 30 teachers regarding the form, content and language used in the questionnaire indicated that this was suitable for use in the present context. Hence, the instrument developed can be accepted and used in actual survey.

4. RESULTS

Data were analyzed systematically by using SPSS version 15.0 software (Statistical Packages for Social Science). Stress levels for each stress factors were determined according to the table below:

Table 2: Categorization of Teacher Stress Level According to Mean Score

Total Score	Teacher Stress Level
1.00 to 2.33	Low
2.34 to 3.66	Moderate
3.67 to 5.00	Severe

(Source: Azizi *et al.*, 2003)

a. Stress Factors

Table 3 sets out the mean ratings and standard deviations to the five sources of stress for all samples. The means range from 3.43 to 2.85; standard deviations from 0.96 to 0.74. As evidenced by the mean ratings, the top source of stress for special education teachers is pupil misbehavior with mean score 3.43 (highest) and standard deviation 0.96. This followed by teacher workload (mean = 3.00), time and resources difficulties (mean = 2.97), recognition (mean = 2.90), and interpersonal relationships (mean = 2.85).

Table 3: Sources of Stress: Means and Standard Deviation

Teacher Stress Factor	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pupil Misbehavior	3.43	0.96
Teacher Workload	3.00	0.75
Time and Resources Difficulties	2.97	0.74
Interpersonal Relationships	2.85	0.81
Recognition	2.90	0.87

For pupil misbehavior, analysis reveals that the most significant cause of stress is pupils' reluctance to follow instruction, followed by pupils' impolite behavior, and handling problematic pupils such as autism and attention

deficit hyperactive disorder who are refuse to follow instruction and unable to sit still is very challenging and stressful. Based on Table 4, 41.3 percent of respondents fall into the serious stress category. Results also show that 41.3 percent and 17.4 percent of respondents have a moderate and mild stress respectively for pupils' misbehaviors.

Table 4: Teacher Stress Level for Pupil Misbehavior Factor: Frequency and Percentage

Stress Level	Frequency	Percentage
Low	16	17.4
Moderate	38	41.3
Severe	38	41.3
Total	92	100.0

The present study reveals that responsibility for pupils to be successful in examination and able to behave like normal student were the main workload that contributed to teacher stress. This followed by administrative work, attending workshop, stock and inventory, and too much work in one time. The least significant workload was attending courses, seminars, and workshops to improve teaching skills and knowledge. Results also indicated that 58.7 percent and 23.9 percent of the special education teachers fall into the moderate and low stress categories respectively. Result also showed that 17.4 percent of respondents are having serious stress for teacher workload factor.

Table 5: Teacher Stress Level for Teacher Workload Factor: Frequency and Percentage

Stress Level	Frequency	Percentage
Low	22	23.9
Moderate	54	58.7
Severe	16	17.4
Total	92	100.0

For time and resources difficulties factor, "having a multiple disabilities of students" was determined as the most significant stress factor, followed by difficulty in completing syllabus in the time available, and lack of material resources in meeting new educational basis. According to Table 6, more than half of the respondents (58.7 percent) having moderate stress for this factor. The remaining respondents fall into the low (23.9 percent) and severe (17.4 percent) stress categories.

Table 6: Teacher Stress Level for Time and Resources Difficulties Factor: Frequency and Percentage

Stress Level	Frequency	Percentage
Low	22	23.9
Moderate	54	58.7

Severe	16	17.4
Total	92	100.0

Analysis of this study reveals that the most significant stress factor for interpersonal relationships is “receiving unclear instruction from the administrator”, followed by observation by education officers and lack of colleagues’ cooperation in conducting an activity especially from normal education teacher. Table 7 shows that almost half of the respondents fall into the moderate stress category. Results also showed that 29.3 percent and 21.7 percent of respondents are having a low and serious stress respectively for interpersonal relationships factor.

Table 7: Teacher Stress Level for Interpersonal Relationships Factor: Frequency and Percentage

Stress Level	Frequency	Percentage
Low	27	29.3
Moderate	45	48.9
Severe	20	21.7
Total	92	100.0

For the recognition factor, the present study reveals that “lack of recognition for your work from administrator” was the main stressor that contributed to teacher stress. This followed by poor promotion prospects and lack of encouragement to work better from administrators. Results also indicate that 47.8 percent and 27.2 percent of the special education teachers fall into the moderate and low stress categories respectively. Only 25.0 percent of respondents are found having serious stress for recognition factor.

Table 8: Teacher Stress Level for Recognition Factor: Frequency and Percentage

Stress Level	Frequency	Percentage
Low	25	27.2
Moderate	44	47.8
Severe	23	25.0
Total	92	100.0

b. Stress Levels

Table 9: Teacher Stress Level for Each Factor: Mean and Standard Deviation

Teacher Stress Factor	Mean	Standard Deviation	Stress Level
Pupil Misbehavior	3.43	0.96	Moderate

Teacher Workload	3.00	0.75	Moderate
Time and Resources	2.97	0.74	Moderate
Difficulties			
Interpersonal Relationships	2.85	0.81	Moderate
Recognition	2.90	0.87	Moderate
Overall	3.02	0.72	Moderate

Table 9 shows the stress level among special education teachers according to mean and standard deviation for each factor. Results indicate that all five stressors cause a moderate stress to special education teachers separately. In overall, it can be said that special education teachers are having a moderate occupational stress with mean 3.02 and standard deviation 0.72.

c. Gender Differences in Stress Levels.

Table 10: Gender Differences in Stress Levels: Mean and Coefficient of Significant (n = 92)

Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	t	Significant
Male	54	3.02	0.79	90	-0.05	0.43
Female	38	3.02	0.62	88.8	-0.05	

* $p < 0.05$

A t-test has been conducted to compare the special education teachers based on their gender on total scores on the Teacher Stress Inventory. The results revealed that there is no significant difference between male and female special education teachers ($p > 0.05$).

d. Marriage Status Differences in Stress Levels.

Table 11: Marriage Status Differences in Stress Levels: Mean and Coefficient of Significant (n = 92)

	df	Mean	F	Significant
Between Groups	2	0.099	0.187	0.83
Within Groups	89	0.528		

* $p < 0.05$

Researchers used one-way ANOVA to compare the three marriage status groups: married, single and others. Table 11 shows the one-way ANOVA results which indicates that there is no significant differences between the three marriage status groups in stress levels with coefficient of significant 0.83, larger than $p = 0.05$.

e. Highest Academic Qualification Differences in Stress Levels.

Table 12: Highest Academic Qualification Differences in Stress Levels: Mean and Coefficient of Significant (n = 92)

	df	Mean	F	Significant
Between Groups	2	0.353	0.676	0.511
Within Groups	89	0.522		

* p < 0.05

One-way ANOVA also has been used to compare the five highest academic qualification groups: SPM (Malaysian school certificate), STPM (Malaysian higher school certificate), Diploma, Degree, and others. Table 12 reveals that there is no significant differences between the five highest academic qualification groups in stress levels with coefficient of significant 0.511, larger than p = 0.05.

f. Correlation between Age and Stress Levels.

Table 13: Correlation Between Age and Stress Levels: Pearson Correlation and Coefficient of Significant

		Teachers' Stress
Age	Pearson Correlation	0.068
	Significant (2-tailed)	0.518
	N	92

* p < 0.05

Table 13 indicates that there is no significant correlation between age and stress levels among special education teachers with coefficient of significant higher than 0.05. This means the age of respondents is not associated with their stress levels. Older teachers are not necessarily having higher stress levels than their younger colleagues, vice versa.

g. Correlation between Length of Teaching Experience and Stress Levels.

Table 14: Correlation Between Length of Teaching Experience and Stress Levels: Pearson Correlation and Coefficient of Significant

		Teachers' Stress
Length of Teaching Experience	Pearson Correlation	0.060
	Significant (2-tailed)	0.567
	N	92

* p < 0.05

Table 14 reveals that there is no significant correlation between length of teaching experience and stress levels among special education teachers with coefficient of significant higher than 0.05. This means the length of teaching experience is not associated with teacher stress levels. More experienced teachers are not necessarily having more stress compared to their less experienced colleagues, and vice versa.

h. Correlation between Monthly Salary and Stress Levels.

Table 15: Correlation Between Monthly Salary and Stress Levels: Pearson Correlation and Coefficient of Significant

		Teacher Stress
Monthly Salary	Pearson Correlation	-0.088 1
	Significant (2-tailed)	0.405
	N	92

* $p < 0.05$

Table 15 shows that there is no significant correlation between monthly salary and stress levels among special education teachers with coefficient of significant higher than 0.05. This means the monthly salary does not associated with teacher stress levels. Teachers with higher monthly income are not necessarily having higher stress levels than their colleagues with lower monthly income, and vice versa.

5. DISCUSSION

The main objectives of this study are to identify the main sources of stress and consequent stress levels among special education teachers, and to examine the differences in stress levels based on the demographic factors (gender, marriage status, and highest academic qualification), as well as examining the relationship between stress levels and demographic factor (age, length of teaching experience, and monthly salary). The result of this study has shown that, in line with other studies elsewhere (e.g. Zakiah, 2003; Dussault, 1997; Ahmad, 1998), the overall stress levels among teachers is moderate. In addition to the sources of stress, the present study identified pupil misbehavior as the main source of teacher stress among special education teachers, followed by workload, time and resources difficulties, recognition, and interpersonal relationship. These results are consistent with the findings of Ramli (2003), Pratt (1978), Abdul Rahim (2002), and Mazlan (2002) which indicated that pupil misbehavior is the main cause of teachers' stress.

The results reveal that no gender differences in stress levels, which means that male and female special education teachers appeared to have the same levels of stress. These results are consistent with the findings of Abouserie (1996), Tuettemann and Punch (1990), Spooner (1984), and Zakiah (2003), but not with Dussault (1997), Siti Rohaini (1991), Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978), and Borg, Riding and Fazlon (1991) who have a different result base on gender issues. The present study also indicated that stress levels among special education teachers does not influenced by their marriage status. This result is not consistent with the findings of Gold and Roth (1993), which stated that single teachers showed a higher stress level compared to those who are married. The result of this study also indicates that academic qualification is not a factor that contributed to stress among special education teachers. This result is consistent with the findings of Zakiah (2003) and Mohd. Hasidin Zaini (1995). However, studies by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978) and Siti Rohaini (1991) have proved that teachers with higher academic qualification, such as bachelor or higher were less stress than their colleagues with lower academic qualification, such as diploma. The present study also indicates that there is no significant correlation between stress levels and demographic factors, such as age, length of teaching experience, and monthly salary among special education teachers. These findings are inconsistent with Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978) and Siti Rohaini (1991), who concluded that age and length of teaching experience are associated with teacher stress level. Recently, teacher stress and burnout have become an area of interest among researchers and practitioners in this country. Although this present study has indicated that the stress levels among special education teachers in Penang are still at the moderate level, but

teachers' stress is a profound problem that must be attended to and concerned if the quality and productivity of education is not to be undermined.

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