

Factors Impacting Teacher Stress and Mitigation of This Stress in UK School System

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ABSTRACT

Teacher plays an essential role in the lives of children. In addition to promoting their learning and improving academic performance, teachers have a major character in developing student's creative potential and growing into responsible citizens. However, in recent years, a report by National Foundation for Educational (2019) claimed that the teacher has faced many challenges than other occupations. Stress is one of the most challenges for the teacher to overcome. The main sources of teacher stress generally come from personal, interpersonal as well as organization. This essay explores and discusses the factors that impact or affect teacher stress, exploring the theories and concepts associated with teacher stress and mitigation practices for teacher stress in the United Kingdom school system- from primary and secondary school.

1. Introduction

The essay explores and discusses the factors that impact or affect teacher stress, exploring the theories and concepts associated with teacher stress and mitigation practices for teacher stress in the United Kingdom school system- from primary and secondary school. The goal and aim of this essay is driven by the fact that teachers may experience stress in the teaching-instructional environment, driven by a range of factors from their perception of demands of teaching, their lack of access to social and educational resources, as well as regulatory and social forces imposed on the teacher. It is noted that understanding the factors affecting teacher stress cannot be discussed without applying theories and concepts of stress provided by psychology. These that will be analysed and used in the essay will include the sympathetic-parasympathetic imbalance, chronic exposure to stress, exploring stress appraisal, decreased stress activation threshold. The essay will also discuss teacher stress based on chronic stress-neuroendocrinology theory, exploring monoamine neurotransmitters, norepinephrine, and cortisol. The essay will discuss teacher stress by starting by defining stress from language definitions and based on psychological theories defining stress. The paper then explores the theories

and concepts of stress, exploring how these theories try to explain teacher stress. The third section entails an exploration and discussion of the factors causing teacher stress based on evidence from literature in the UK, the globe, and by applying theories of stress to explain teacher stress and factors that cause this stress. The fourth part discusses the possible solutions and mitigation strategies to reduce teacher stress.

2. Central Focus

2.1 Definition of Teacher Stress

Stress is simply defined as the tension or pressure exerted on a person or individual, which is also a state or emotional strain or mental tension resulting from demanding or adverse circumstances the individual experiences. From the biological perspective, Fink (2016) noted that stress is the bodily reaction to changes which demand adjustment or responses, where these reactions entail changes in mental, physical, and emotional responses^[10]. The bodily reactions to stress or inability to adjust to responses can arise from the environment, the thoughts and body of the individual. Psychologists associate stress with increased anxiety, mental anguish, and physical strain as noted by Cotton (1990)^[6]. Sager and Wilson (1995) de-

defined stress as the physiological, emotional, and mental response to stimulus or stressor in the environment, which causes a lack of fit between the perceived demands of the stressors and the perceived ability of the individual to cope with the demands^[14]. Generally based on these definitions, it is evident that stress can be defined as the hypothetical construct consisting of equilibrium between the individual's response to the environmental demands and the actual conditions or factors of the environment, where disequilibrium from actual causes or perceived causes cause stress. The individual's inability to respond effectively to the environmental factors and forces, causes a disequilibrium between their coping response ability and the actual source of stress.

According to Aldwin (2007), stress can be external or internal, where internal stress affects the emotions, psychology, and mental stability of the individual, creating inability for the individual to mentally and emotionally cope with forces^[3]. The external stress is the actual physical inability for the individual to cope with forces, often evident in physical or bodily tension and strain. Stress can be active or passive, where active stress as defined as 'to stress', where the individual perceives the tension and adjustment problems to external forces, and experiences largely internal stress. Passive stress or 'to be stressed' can entail the external forces and pressure on the individual causing stress pressure, but not necessarily causing internal stress.

2.2 Theories and Concepts of Stress

A number of theories exist to explain stress and the symptoms of stress as drawn from the fields of biology and psychology. These include the sympathetic-parasympathetic imbalance or reciprocally inhibitory of stress. This theory is noted by Won and Kim (2016) to explain how stress affects the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), by directing rapid involuntary responses to stressful or dangerous situations, causing flash of hormones and blood in the body's system, increasing heart rate and alertness, and sending more blood to the body's muscles^[16]. The theory postulates that when the body and the individual experience tense situations or forces, their perception of the lack of imbalance between their stressors and their ability to respond can cause physical reactions in the nervous system, rapid blood and hormonal flow, alertness and increased heart rate, creating the flight stress response. This means that individuals tend to depict the flight response to stressors when they have too much sympathetic arousal. Secondly, under this theory, Sonnentag et al. (2009) noted that the individual may experience not enough parasympathetic activation, where they tend to

rest or relax, repair their body with normal cellular maintenance, as the heart rate remains normal, blood flow and hormones remain normal^[15].

This is unlike the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) response, where the individual under the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) experiences calming and relaxation feeling in the body and mind. This theory is critical for explaining stress for it explores both dimensions of stress response, explaining why some individuals tend to flight under stress while others remain calm and indifferent under stress. Secondly, the theory is noted by Hellhammer and Hellhammer (2008) as useful in explaining the causes and effects of stress, because it explores automatic mental and bodily responses to responses^[11]. The theory is application in occupational and workplace wellbeing as it is used to explain the physical response of workers to worker stress, and hence makes it ideal in explaining teacher stress. The second concept critical in understanding stress, stress sources, and impact of stress on teachers is the chronic exposure to stress concept, which identifies stress appraisal on thought patterns of the teacher, decreased stress activation threshold where not much is required to activate stress response in an individual as noted by Field et al. (2013)^[9].

2.3 Factors Impacting Teacher Stress

According Ferguson (2019), teacher stress levels in the UK school system are very high, indicated by Charity's teacher wellbeing index, which shows that in the last three years, teacher stress levels among primary and secondary school teachers and leaders has been very high compared to other years^[8]. The research study reported that nearly three-quarters of teachers in the UK and 84% of the school leaders described themselves as being stressed, with more than a third of the professionals in the education sector have reported mental health issues in 2018-2019 academic year (Ferguson 2019)^[8]. One of the reported causes of stress for these teachers and education professionals is noted as the workplace environment, with 49% of the teachers and school leaders noting that the greater source of mental wellbeing and stress being the school environment. Ferguson (2019) reported that in the UK, school professionals no longer feel trusted as professionals by the society, students, and parents creating mistrust in their capability and hence placing undue stress on their work performance^[8].

More than half of the teachers surveyed in the report reported that the main source of teacher stress is the huge workload entailing the creation of teaching and learning materials, the curriculum, tests, and projects for each term and year, assessment, lesson plans, making individual

follow-up for each learner, discipline and class management among other school duties as reported by Ferguson (2019) ^[8]. This source of stress is closely followed by the feeling of not feeling being valued enough by the society, the government, parents, and students, noted by the many negative comments towards the teaching profession, the poor pay and remuneration, the constant monitoring and control by over domineering parents. Moreover, overwork has been normalised in the education system, placing immense pressure on teachers to carry out their education duties, teacher roles, as well as realise high performance in their students and classes each academic year. The academic and educational sector has become harsh towards teacher accountability, creating a state of distress among teachers, burn-out as they attempt to meet the huge performance demands, and for school leaders the challenge arises from the demands for effective management of limited school resources or running a school on limited state funds.

As psychologist Cotton (1990) noted, stress is associated with increased anxiety, mental anguish, and physical strain ^[6]. This is evident in the statistics and data presented by the teachers across the UK from the teacher wellbeing index, which shows that teacher stress has been on the increase in the past three years, with teachers reporting more mental and physical strain and anguish, and anxiety in the school environment. Moreover, as psychologist Wilson (1995) noted, stress is reported and noted in the emotional, physiological, and mental responses to stressors or factors causing stress in the environment, where the individual is unable to respond positively to these stressors or cope with the demands of the stressors. The reported data shows that many teachers experiencing stress in the education and school environment in the UK, find it a challenge to cope with the demands of this environment, especially when they feel unfairly treated and undervalued by the parents, society, students, and the education ministry as reported by Ferguson (2019). Moreover, the demands of teaching are another factor reported by the teachers and noted by psychologists as sources of stress ^[8]. Undue demand on the mental, emotional, and physical being of the teacher has been linked to teacher stress. In the statistical data presented by teacher wellbeing index, Ferguson (2019) noted that more than a half of the UK teachers surveyed reported feeling overworked and burdened, creating immense pressure for the teachers ^[8]. These reported factors causing teacher stress align with the definition of stress provided by Aldwin (2007), that stress is internal and external, with internal stress entailing the emotional and emotional tension, while external as the physical tension ^[3]. The teachers in the UK experience

external and internal factors creating undue stress, owing to their inability to cope with the demands of teaching and the school environment, they experience mental and emotional tension from their inability to effectively respond to the tense forces from the teaching environment. The teachers experience physical tensions from high work load, overworking, lack of recognition and respect in their profession, ability to manage limited resources and manage the school environment among other forces. Therefore, the undue internal tension from perception of their inability to cope with these demands causes internal stress.

Secondly, applying the Sympathetic-parasympathetic imbalance or reciprocally inhibitory of stress theory can explain the factors causing teacher stress. The theory identifies that stress affects the (SNS) sympathetic nervous system Won and Kim (2016), where external tensions cause internal stress responses, entailing rapid involuntary response of the respiratory and circulatory systems, increasing heart rate, alertness, hormones, and blood flow, as well as adrenaline causing the sense of flight ^[16]. It is for this reason, the factors causing stress, like overwork, underpayment, lack of recognition and lack of feeling trusted, cause many teacher's stress response to be flight. The mental and physical reaction by the body of many of the teachers is to flee from the school and education environment causing stress, hence many are reported to resign or take breaks from teaching. Busby (2019) noted that some of the reasons driving many teachers to stress in the UK are driving them to resign and take breaks, with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) reporting that teachers are more likely to leave the teaching profession than other professionals ^[5]. The NFER (2019) also reported that one in five teachers are more tense over their job most of the time compared to 13% in other occupations. Busby (2019) reported that two out of five or 41% of the teachers reported being dissatisfied with the leisure time given as compared to 32% of individuals in similar professions ^[5]. The study found that despite the working hours for teachers being the same with other professions in the UK in one year, teachers work more intensively over few weeks of the same year causing poor work-life balance and high levels of stress as reported by Busby (2019) ^[5]. This implies that despite teachers having long breaks from work during the summer holidays and other school holidays, the few weeks of the school term they are at work, they over-work, work more intensively on completing the curriculum, setting and marking assessments, assessing and following up on the learning progress of each student and potentially students with learning disabilities, dealing with parents and guardians, maintaining

discipline in the school environment, and maintaining their teaching professional standards among other duties and responsibilities.

Therefore, according to the theory of stress affecting the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and causing stress flight response, this explains why Busby (2019) reported that many teachers in the UK are leaving the profession as quickly as they join the profession. Busby (2019) noted the high workloads, the testing culture of teacher's performance based on student's performance, the endless accountability for each of their actions in the school environment, underfunded and flat pay deals each year, are the main reasons why teachers in the UK are displaying the flight response to stressors and stress^[4]. Education Support (2019) noted that more than three-quarters or 76% surveyed reported work-related psychological, physical, and behavioural symptoms, with more than half or 57% of the teacher surveyed reporting considering leaving the profession owing to poor health, and 47% reported experiencing anxiety, depression, and panic attacks owing to work. The most hit are senior teachers, with 80% reporting suffering from work-related stress, 63% considering leaving the profession, and 40% suffering from depression symptoms. These present the stress on parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) responses of indifference and calm or relaxation in the profession. Other physical responses noted by the Education Support (2019) survey concerning teacher stress and in correspondence to the SNS theory include 41-56% of the teachers reporting insomnia, 37-51% reporting mood swings or irritability, 31-44% reporting tearfulness, 27-41% reporting forgetfulness, and 27-40% reporting difficulty concentrating.

At the same time, the Sympathetic-Parasympathetic imbalance or reciprocally inhibitory of stress identifies the effects of stress on parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), which result to experiences calming and relaxation feeling in the body and mind as reported by Jänig (2008)^[12]. This theory is used to explain why some individuals while experiencing stress may remain calm and relaxed, either by their ability to balance their perception of the stress and their responses to the stressors or from their ability to remove their emotions and mental perceptions of the stressors, being indifferent and distancing themselves from the stress. Busby (2019) noted that despite the challenges in recruiting sufficient numbers of teachers, there still are individuals interested in the teaching profession with its stressors, while others remain working in the field of education despite its working conditions to retirement^[5].

A second concept used to explain chronic exposure to stress is stress appraisal, where the individual appraises stress impacting their thought patterns. According to

Adams and Sutker (2002), an individual may perceive a stressor as very stressful on their being, creating stressful thought and mental patterns^[2]. In the case of the primary and secondary school teachers in the UK surveyed by NFER (2019) one such act of stress appraisal is the perception that the teacher is not recognised, trusted, and valued. The consequence of this is mental anguish and stress for many teachers perceiving this. Additionally, the decreased stress activation threshold, holds that individuals easily stress from small stressors, an indication of underlying and existing stress. In the surveys, it was noted that owing to the unfavourable working conditions, many teachers were not only stressed but equally experienced insomnia, anxiety, depression, and high emotions to various forces including mistrust from the public towards the profession and work overload (Busby 2019)^[4]. Cullen et al. (2012) equally noted that chronic stress impacts on the mind and memory, causing memory problems, insomnia, among other mental issues^[7]. In the survey of the primary and secondary school teachers, it was noted that stressors caused internal stress that affected teachers, causing insomnia, forgetfulness, depression, anxiety, tearfulness, mood swings among other emotional effects.

2.4 Mitigating Teacher Stress

A number of proposals have been made towards mitigating teacher stress, which include the improvement of the working conditions of teachers. Busby (2019) noted that the greatest factor for reducing teacher stress and attrition entails improving working conditions including improving recruitment and retention rates for teachers to reduce workload on teachers, providing better work-life balance for teachers by reducing workload and enabling teachers enjoy both work and personal life benefits^[4]. Additionally, the report by NEFR (2019) noted that by improving recruitment and simplifying the application process for teachers, it is possible for the ministry of education to reduce the workload on teachers as the teacher-student ratio will improve. Another solution suggested is the reduction in the workload for teachers in order to prevent teachers from quitting the profession. Moreover, the NEFR (2019) report noted that nurturing, valuing, and supporting teachers by the government, ministry, society, and administration is important in order to make the teaching profession rewarding, motivating, and attractive as a career choice.

Further, Education Support (2019) noted at the end of the survey that some of the recommendations made to mitigate teacher stress include the mandatory provision of mental health and wellbeing guidance for all teachers during teacher training programs, the prioritisation of the

wellbeing of the teaching staff in assessment frameworks, mandatory annual staff surveys, increase creation of signposting, knowledge, and awareness of the existing services to teachers to improve their working conditions^[1]. The creation and access of employee assistance programmes and facilitated peer support programmes for all teachers to create a supporting working environment. These are to deal with teacher stress like disengagement, disruption of relationships between the teacher and students, improve job satisfaction among teachers, motivate teachers, provide effective and inclusive leadership in schools.

According to Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2016), one of the measures to deal with the mental and emotional effects of teacher stress include mindfulness and stress management programs, meant to train and assist teachers learn how to cope with stress and stressors, manage effects of stress like sense of flight, indifference and disengagement, feeling depressed and de-motivated to work and desire to leave the teaching profession^[13]. Secondly, he recommends that teachers should be engaged in mentoring programs, especially for new teachers and recruits, that pair up new teachers to more experienced teachers, experiencing mentoring and coaching facilities in the real classroom situation, enabling teachers to learn how to deal with stressors and cope with stress at work. Mentoring programs are ideal in dealing with teacher stress for they equally provide the teacher a ground for sharing with fellow teachers, sharing their experiences with various stressful situations and events, stressors, and stress factors, internal and external. Thereby, mentorship programs provide the teachers an opportunity to share internal and external stressful situations, finding solutions, empathy, and motivation to work despite stressors from other teachers. This can be supported by workplace wellness programs including a cafe and restaurant for teachers, gym and wellness centre, in-house counsellor and psychologists, social programs and team building programs, all designed to create a social environment in which the teacher discusses, shares, interacts, and socialises with other teachers. Wellness programs effectively deal with mental health of the teachers in the workplace, they improve their motivation and engagement to work, ability to deal with stress, and as Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2016) noted they reduce the medical cost associated with teacher stress, depression, and absenteeism^[13]. Therefore, it is essential for schools and the education ministry to consider workplace wellness programs for schools and school districts, to handle the emotional, psychological, and mental stresses teachers experience in their profession. To deal with stressors like lack of recognition, appreciation, and trust by parents, students, and society towards teachers, which

causes stress, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2016) recommends the creation of social and emotional learning programs for students^[13]. These products train students on social and emotional behaviour, exhibiting appropriate classroom behaviour, responses to academic stress, and appreciation of the teacher, which equally causes parents and the society to appreciate the teacher. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2016) noted that in the UK, schools do not provide such important programs, hence measures to reduce teacher stress should start with the school administration, school district, government and ministry of education to create policies and procedures for mitigating teacher stress^[13].

3. Conclusions

The essay explored and discussed the factors that impact or affect teacher stress, exploring the theories and concepts associated with teacher stress and mitigation practices for teacher stress in the United Kingdom school system- from primary and secondary school. It was revealed that teacher stress arises from lack of trust and recognition of the profession and their duties, poor working conditions, especially work overload in the few weeks schools are in session, poor pay and remuneration, poor work-life balance. These stressors cause internal and external stress, which have adverse effects from depression, insomnia, anxiety and panic attacks, sense of flight leading to teachers resigning and leaving the profession, absenteeism or taking frequent breaks, mood swings, and other emotional reactions. It is recommended that schools and the government create mentorship programs, wellness programs, social and emotional learning programs for students, improve work conditions, and improve recruitment and retention practices.

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