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WORKLOAD AS A STRESSOR: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WORK-RELATED STRESS AND ITS SOURCES

BY

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The spirit of an organization

is created from the top.

If an organization is great in spirit,

it is because the spirit of its people is great.

If it decays, it does so because the top rots,

as the proverb has it "Trees die from the top".

- Peter Drucker

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ABSTRACT

There is a widespread believe that work-related stress among teachers is serious, with implications for teachers' woes, low morale and performance. Stress resulting from workload can cause undesirable effects detrimental to the overall well-being of the teaching profession. Researchers have shown that teachers who report high levels of stress also want to leave teaching and are not satisfied with their job. The present questionnaire survey conducted on 306 school teachers in Kelantan helps to address the prevalence of work-related stress among school teachers. One out of every two teachers reported their job as very or extremely stressful. A principal components factor analysis of the sources of stress and regression technique revealed five factors labelled 'work demands', 'professional recognition needs', 'pupil recalcitrance', 'inadequate incentives' and 'parents pressure' as the main factors that give rise to significantly high level of stress among school teachers. A one-way ANOVA computations revealed significant differences of work-related stress between primary and secondary, urban and non-urban school teachers. In addition, years of teaching experience in their respective schools, age, and position held in school were found to be significantly related to the main stress factors.

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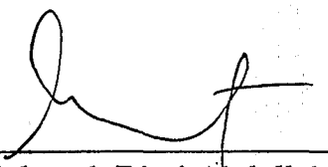

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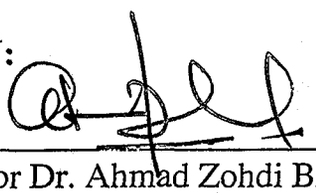

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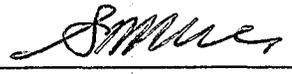

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references and a bibliography is appended.

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Dedicated to my wife Sock Hoon,
and children Ghee, Heen, Xuan and Ying
who made it all possible in their own
sweet and lovable ways.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

In recent years, there is a widespread debate in schools, society, and media on teacher workload. The following excerpt from The Star (1995) sum up the general perception and feelings of teachers towards the nature of their job:

> *Regret, Disgust, and Frustration - this sums up the long festering feelings among many disillusioned teachers. Over the years, they have seen their profession eroding in esteem and standing; and to top it all, their peers in other sectors overtaking them in position and income. Teachers are desperate to be heard, and if nothing is done for them, there might very well be anarchy in the staffroom.*

In her speech at the Second National Seminar for Education Administrators at Sri Layang, Genting Highlands, Pahang, Dato'Asiah Abu Samah stressed the importance of recognizing the increasing workload of teachers who have to carry the extra burden of various co-curricular and other out-of-school activities. She saw the need for education administrators to carry out a survey on teachers' workload (Utusan Malaysia, 1992).

On March 14, 1995 the First Teacher Memorandum, a report of agreement reached among the 250,000 teachers in the country which explain the urgent need for the government to set up a cabinet committee to reevaluate all aspects regarding appointment

and service in the education profession, was officially handed over to the Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (Guru Malaysia, 1995). The major problems identified were teacher woes and low morale, work overload in clerical and administrative jobs, administrative pressures, gardening, co-curricular duties, extra classes, holiday duties, attending courses, camps, and trainings during weekends or public holidays, overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortage, teaching non-optional subjects, deficiency of basic facilities, student discipline problems, parents' intervention, state and district educational department programmes, ill feelings over inequity between payment and input, and dissatisfaction over performance appraisal under the New Remuneration System.

The memorandum depicts the intensity of problems that have accumulated over the years and the critical level of dissatisfaction among teachers. The morale of the teaching profession is at its lowest state and rapidly deteriorating. The decline is very detrimental to education in the country.

The anaemic state of the teaching profession and the emergency measures being undertaken by the Education Ministry to continue freezing applications for optional retirement, show the crisis in classrooms. The signs of impoverishment are everywhere: too many students to too few classrooms, too few teachers to too many students. Lately, indiscipline has become a major problem in schools. More and more students are spoiling the classroom climate and infringe on the right of other students to learn. They don't pay attention, don't bring books and other learning materials, they talk and disturb class constantly, play truant, make disturbances in schools and public places, destroy school,

public and private properties, ignore teacher's authority, mark and scratch teachers' cars, and some even threaten, challenge and beat teachers up !

After delivering his New Year message to senior officials of the Education Ministry, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said that currently at some schools, teachers have to carry out clerical work as their schools do not have the support staff or are facing a staff shortage. He said the ministry would recruit 14,000 support staff for schools nationwide to ease the administrative burden of teachers. The additional staff will cover categories of administrative assistant, laboratory assistant, and junior general assistant. This should be good news for teachers. The recruitment will reduce significantly the clerical and administrative duties and paperwork currently done by teachers.

On September 12, 1995, a task force headed by former director-general of education Tan Sri Abdul Rahman Arshad was formed to study teachers' grouses. A review carried out by the special committee made 82 recommendations to the government to overcome grievances of the 250,000 teachers, including their scheme of service and workload. The report addresses almost all problems in the teaching profession, job specifications as well as proposals for a better career programme and staff-replacement scheme (New Sunday Times, 1996). This clearly shows that the government has acknowledged the workload of teachers. Work overload ought to be alleviated to improve teachers' morale and lessen their burden and stress.

1.2 NEED FOR THE STUDY

In Malaysia at present, a large number of teachers are opting for early retirement. It has been reported that almost 400 teachers apply for retirement every month (The New Straits Times, September 27, 1994). Many factors contribute to this. Teachers are currently experiencing a significant amount of job dissatisfaction. Time pressures and role overload are serious sources of stress. So many tasks must be accomplished during the school days, and less and less time is available to complete them. Teachers must be clerks, counsellors, imparters of knowledge, public relations specialist, nurses, parents, and play many other roles. The paperwork pressure has also become tremendous. The introduction of the New Remuneration Scheme as an appraisal system has led to considerable amount of stress because teachers feel that the rewards earned do not seem to commensurate with the effort expended.

In order to fulfil the aspirations stated in the country's Philosophy of Education and the aspirations of the country's prolific and far-sighted leaders, many educational reforms are taking place in Malaysia. As teachers play a major role in the creation of the future generation, it is of paramount importance that the overall effectiveness of the teachers as educators is not undermined by the stresses they encounter. Thus a study on teacher's workload is important. It will help an educator to ward off many stress-related illnesses.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The present study is designed to answer questions concerning teachers' perceptions of their workload:

a. To what extent do teachers perceived their workload as stressful?

b. What do teachers feel are the main sources of work-related stress?

c. Are there differences in self-reported stress for different biographical characteristics - gender, age, years of teaching experience, length of teaching in present school, current position in school, school type, school's location, qualifications, marital status, and salary?

d. Are there differences in stress factors for different biographical characteristics?

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first two sections of this chapter present definitions of stress and job stress. The subsequent sections deal with variables of job stress and sources of teacher stress.

2.1 STRESS

In general, stress refers to a complex pattern of emotional state, physiological reactions, and related thoughts occurring in response to external demands called stressors. Strain is a related term which refers to the effects of stress, primarily to deviations from normal states or performance resulting from exposure to stressful events (Greenberg and Baron, 1997). Greenberg and Baron (1997) reminded that a key point should be considered with respect to stress, that is, whether and to what extent it occurs in a given situation, depends heavily on people's interpretation of what is happening to them - their cognitive appraisal of the stressors they confront. According to them, stress occurs only to the extent that people perceive that the situation they face is somehow threatening to them, and they will be unable to cope with these potential dangers or demands - that the situation is, in some sense, beyond their control.

2.2 JOB STRESS

Job stress is defined as the interaction of work conditions with characteristics of the worker such that the demands of work exceed the ability of the worker to cope with them (Ross and Altmaeir, 1994). Work-related stress can be considered as an accumulation of stressors in job-related situations that are considered stressful. For example, a stressful work situation may be one with many demands placed upon the employee, with little time for meeting them and with increased pressures from managers. Alternatively, we could think about job stress as the stress experienced by a particular individual on a particular job.

2.3 VARIABLES OF JOB STRESS

Ross and Altmaeir (1994) outlined two categories of concepts to describe factors which influence job stress. The two categories are personality characteristics and work setting variables. The personality characteristics are characteristics that describe an individual's behaviour manifested in his or her job. Work setting variables are factors in the workplace which are linked to job stress. It is important to note the interaction between the individual and the work environment by considering the role overload, role conflict, work pace, task attributes, and interpersonal work relationship.

2.3.1 Role Overload

Ivancevich and Matteson (1980) noted that role pressure occurs when an individual's expectations or demands conflict with the expectations and demands of the organization. Role overload is said to result when an individual is not able to complete the work or job. The concept of 'too much work' can be divided into two categories (Ross and Altmaeir, 1994). The first category is named quantitative role overload which occurs when the individual does not have enough time to complete all of the work that is required of a job (French and Caplan, 1973).

The other kind of role overload is qualitative in nature. In this case, 'too much work' is not associated with time but involves not having adequate skills to do a particular job. Qualitative role overload happen when an employee does not perform adequately with the effort or skills he possesses. Peter and Hull (1969) noted that the qualitative role overload can result when a formerly successful employee is moved to a new job that requires skills he does not have. This situation happens in many organizations where employees are continually promoted until they reach a job they cannot do. Both types of overload are unpleasant and can lead to high levels of stress (Greenberg and Baron, 1997).

2.3.2 Role Conflict

Role conflict is said to exist whenever compliance with one set of role pressures make compliance with another set of role pressures objectional or impossible (Beehr, 1985; Ivancevich and Matteson, 1980) . Four main different types of role conflict have been identified. They are intersender role conflict - a situation in which expectations, pressures, or demands from one person conflict with the demand of another person; intrasender role conflict which occur when an employee is given two incompatible activities or job to perform; person-role conflict which happen when the demands of an individual's work roles conflict with the individual's personal values; and inter-role conflict which result when an employee experiences conflict between the expectations and demands of people at work and the expectations and demands of people outside of work.

2.3.3 Work Pace

Work pace is one of the characteristics that influences job stress. Work pace is concerned with who or what controls the pace of work, particularly the amount of control an employee has over the work process (Ross and Altmaier, 1994) . Salvendy (1981) presented two types of work pace. The first is machine pacing which explains a work condition in which the speed of operation and production are controlled by some source

other than the employee. The other type is human pacing which refers to a situation in which the employee or some other person in the work setting controls the process of work.

According to Smith (1985), at least three factors are consistently linked to stress-related difficulties resulting from pacing. The first factor is the potential lack of control the worker perceives he has over the work process. The second factor is the amount of repetition that characterizes the pace of work. The final factor is the amount of pressure or demand the employee feels in relation to pacing of work. Those workers who experience a work pace as full of pressure or highly demanding are likely to experience the greatest amount of stress. An employee might also feel stress to perform if work pace is tied to compensation. For instance, being paid or evaluated for the number of assignments produced in a specified short period of time.

2.3.4 Task Attributes

Task attributes affect directly or indirectly the affective and behavioural responses of an employee to a job (Turner and Lawrence, 1965). Task attributes include variety of tasks prescribed for a job, autonomy or the amount of discretion the employee has to carry out the job, the amount of interaction or face-to-face communication required to complete the tasks, the amount of optional or voluntary face-to-face communication

needed, knowledge and skill required to do the job, and responsibility or accountability required for the task completion.

2.3.5 Interpersonal Work Relationship

Payne (1980) noted that the quality of relationships that employee have at work has consistently been linked to job stress. There are at least four types of interpersonal relationships (Vries, 1984) - relationships with co-workers, relationships within work groups, and relationships with supervisors/leaders (Vries, 1984), and relationships with clients or customers (Pines and Aronson, 1981).

Social support influences how individuals deal with stress and adequate social support buffers the negative effects of stress. Poor co-worker relationships are associated with low trust, low supportiveness, and low interest or willingness to listen and be emphatic (French and Caplan, 1973) . Employees who have poor relationships with co-workers blamed the job stress they experienced on their co-workers. On the other hand, those workers who report the greatest amount of group cohesion are best able to cope with stress on the job (Vries, 1984) .

Relationship with supervisors is important in determining the amount of stress an employee has with his boss. Ivancevich and Matteson (1980) suggested that supervisors are responsible for people (the activities and work of subordinates) and at the