

Occupational Stress and Coping Strategies Used by Secondary School Teachers in Kisumu County, Kenya

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doi:10.56397/JARE.2025.09.05

Abstract

Although, teaching is a noble occupation, it comes with a lot of commitment and responsibilities that are highly demanding and which requires resilience to cope with stress. Teachers are predisposed to stress from lesson planning, heavy workload, strained relationships from the school administrators and colleagues as well as financial constraints, mental health issues and family work balance. Thus, the necessity to prioritize better coping strategies to help teachers manage occupational stress. This study assessed Occupational stress and coping strategies used by secondary school teachers in Kisumu County, Kenya. A mixed method research design was used in the study. Secondary school teachers in Kisumu County were the targeted population. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 100 teachers from secondary schools in Kisumu County. The data collection instruments were questionnaires and focused group discussions. Analysis of data was done through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis for the focus group discussions. Findings of the study indicate that teachers in Kisumu County are highly stressed. Results also point out that teachers use coping strategies ranging from mindfulness, religious activities, counseling, exercise, social support network, suicidal tendencies, reading, professional development, alcohol and substance abuse; some of which are unhealthy. The study recommends a counseling unit for teaching staff both at the school and county level. Teachers should also prioritize self-care for their own mental wellness. Moreover, the teacher's welfare should be put at the heart of educational institutions through open communication channels, active and empathic listening for enhanced performance and teachers' mental wellness.

Keywords: occupational, stress, coping, strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 Causes of Occupational Stress Among Teachers

Occupational stress refers to persistent stress that is related to the work environment. The stress may be caused by work responsibilities or by hostile work conditions (Ahmed, 2019). Other

studies define occupational stress as the physical and emotional reaction that takes place when an individual employee perceives an imbalance between their work demands and their ability or resources to meet the work demands and expectations (Punia & Balda, 2016; Gao, 2020). However, if the work pressures are not well

managed, occupational stress may not only be harmful to the physical and emotional wellbeing of an individual but also impact on their productivity (Gebrekirstos, 2015; Fadhel, 2020). Worldwide, research studies reveal that teachers play a key role as educational planners, learning facilitators, students' mentors, resource persons, content deliverers, curriculum developers and implementers and this increases the burden of occupational stress due to the heavy workload (Kang, Park & Park, 2020). The huge responsibilities and the need to create a balance further intensifies the level of stress among teachers. (Mills, 2002; Siswanto, 2015; Atieno, Ogalo, Odera & Ogogo, 2020; Chinthana et al, 2022). Several factors predispose teachers to have occupational stress. A research study by Kaupa (2020) among 100 high school teachers in the Khomas Region in Namibia reveals that teacher's heavy workload, understaffing in schools, inadequate resources, poor remuneration and unconducive work environment has led to chronic absenteeism. This has resulted in frequent teacher transfers, anger and suicidal ideation among teachers which impacts negatively on teacher performance.

Similarly, several studies indicate that job stress among teachers is aggravated by the heavy workload. The heavy burden of work includes number of lessons taught by a teacher weekly, setting and marking of class assessments, administrative roles and the discipline of learners. The studies indicate that the pressure of work is demanding due to understaffing in most schools hence work stress, exhaustion and burn out among teachers. (Kongcharoen et al, 2020; Freire et al, 2020; Fathi, Greenier & Derakhshan, 2021). Additionally, these studies indicate that student's needs, societal expectations and school evaluation and assessment create excessive tasks for teachers which can be overwhelming.

Comparatively, Nyambogi's (2013) study on the causes of Stress among teachers in public secondary schools in Starehe District, Kenya, reiterates that work overload, students' indiscipline, inadequate remuneration, strained relationships with colleagues and the school administration escalates the level of teacher stress which is not only harmful to their general wellbeing but also their performance. Moreover, research studies postulate that the cause of stress among teachers is work overload,

unconducive work environment, teacher-student interaction, staff communication, poor motivation, which leads to dismal performance (Prasad et al, 2016; Weiguo et al, 2022). On the other hand, research findings by Zhao, Liao, Li, Jiang and Ding (2022) on the relationship between job stress and burnout among Chinese primary and secondary school teachers argues that the imbalance between work and family contributes to stress and burnout among teachers. Moreover, chronic job stress heighten work-family tension, and this contribute to job burnout. Similarly, studies by Gao (2020) and Kang, Park and Park (2020) assert that when the emotional wellbeing of spouse and children are not seriously taken into consideration, family tension is bound to increase, hence affecting the performance of individual teachers.

1.2 Teachers Coping Strategies

Research studies indicate that secondary school teachers used planning, active problem solving, positive reframing as strategies to cope with occupational stress (Freire, Ferrada's, Rodriquez, Valle, & Nunez, 2020; Amponsah, Adasi et al, 2020). Other studies by Johnson, Cooper et al, (2005) and Cinthatana, Ashok et al. (2022) report that secondary school teachers used withdrawal, intense hostility and substance use as coping strategies. On the other hand, studies (Al Tell, Mansor, 2019; Fadhel & Adawi, 2020) highlight the use of exercise, support seeking, religion and meditation as healthy coping strategies. Further research by Gowrie, Ramdass, Birbal, Dass, Singh and Rocke (2015) indicate that teachers should be engaged in fun activities that they enjoy; listening to music, gardening, exercising and art as such activities give teachers an outlet and takes their minds off the work pressures. Findings show that other coping strategies that teachers employ include seeking professional counseling, meditation and Yoga (Gebrekirstos, 2015).

2. Research Methodology

The study used a mixed method research design exploring both quantitative and qualitative methods. Secondary school teachers in Kisumu Central Sub County, Kisumu County were the targeted population. Simple random sampling technique was used in the study. The sample population was 100 teachers from secondary schools in Kisumu Central Sub County, Kisumu County. The data collection instruments were

questionnaires and focused group discussions. The questionnaires were used to seek information on the causes of stress among the teachers and the coping strategies that they use. The focus group discussions were used to harvest data on the coping strategies that teachers use to manage stress. The focus group discussion helped the researcher to have close interaction with the participants, and this helped in putting the teachers stress and coping strategies they use in perspective. Analysis of data was done through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis for the focus group

discussions. To ascertain the degree to which test items measure the characteristics for which they are designed to measure, reliability and validity of the instruments was done.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Participants Response on Signs of Occupational Stress

The findings in Table 1 present the teachers' opinion on the signs of occupational stress that they experience as a result of their work engagements.

Table 1. Participants Response on Signs of Occupational Stress

No	Signs of Occupational Stress	No of Teachers	Percentages
1	Back aches	9	11%
2	Chronic headaches	14	48%
3	Sleeplessness/Insomnia	16	30%
4	Severe illness	8	38%
5	Depression	11	26%
6	Lack of motivation	23	42%
7	Substance abuse/alcohol	15	36%
8	Forgetfulness	5	20%
9	Restlessness/Anxiety	9	54%
10	Anger	10	34%
11	Absenteeism	4	8%
		Total= 100	

Moreover, as presented in Table 2, a four-point rating scale, ranging from strongly agree (4) to strongly disagree (1), was used to record

responses of the teacher's opinion on causes of occupational stress.

Table 2. Secondary School Teachers View on Causes of Stress

No	Causes of Stress among teachers	Strongly Agree 4	Agree 3	Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree 1	Mean	Standard deviation
1	I am stressed because of my workload as a teacher	53%	37%	6%	4%	3.15	1.123
2	Family-work imbalance is a burden	33%	39%	15%	13%	2.72	0.998
3	I feel stressed due to poor remuneration	45%	38%	10%	7%	2.93	0.973
4	Threats, intimidation, forced transfers and interdiction by the school Administrator is a stressor to me	46%	50%	2%	2%	2.91	0.984

5	Students Indiscipline among students is stressful to teachers	24%	31%	34%	11%	2.01	0.785
6	Unhealthy Interaction with colleagues makes me stressed	33%	48%	11%	8%	2.12	0.798

The results in Table 2 show the causes of stress among the teachers. The findings on this table indicate that one of the causes of stress among the teachers is heavy workload which stands at 53% with a mean score of 3.15 and standard deviation of 1.123. Table 2 implies that teachers face stress due to high pressure in their workplace. Additionally, the findings from the focus group discussions revealed that most teachers were stressed due to heavy workload which stretched past the official working hours. Teachers face stress due to long working hours, high expectations from school management to produce good results as well as pressure from school administrators. From the focus group discussion, teachers were of the opinion that there should be flexibility on time required to administer any extra program beyond the official working hours.

We go through a lot of stress due to work overload which stretches as late as 10.00 pm and as early as 4.00 am. Teachers need to rest and rejuvenate after the day's activities in order to prepare for lessons the next morning. As teachers we have families to take care of, some of us with young children under our care. Therefore, family time should also be given priority.

Moreover, 39% of the respondents opine that work family imbalance is a stressor in their lives. Similarly, findings from the focus group discussion show that there is no work family balance as the teachers spend most of their time in school past the official working hours. Teachers are unable to balance work and family as more time is spent at work. Furthermore, the respondents felt that the late working hours is breaking families and creating conflicts between teachers and their spouses hence no peace at home.

"Due to late working hours, some of us go through constant disagreements and conflicts with our spouses hence no peace at home."

Nearly half of the teachers (45%) strongly agreed that they are stressed due to poor remuneration. The findings show that teachers face financial challenges. On the same note, results from the focus group discussion reveal that teachers are

struggling financially due to low pay which forces them to survive on loans thus fueling unresolved domestic issues. The respondents felt that the issue of poor salaries should be addressed by the employer. The findings also show that a majority of the teachers (50%) with a mean of 2.91 agree that threats, intimidation, forced transfers and interdiction by the school Administrators contribute to stress. Results from the focus group discussion further indicate that a major source of stress at the workplace is caused by threats and intimidation by the administration. The teachers reported that they are scared about withdrawal of lessons allocated to them, show cause or disciplinary letters, interdiction and abrupt transfer to other schools. The respondents as well reported that they feel stressed because the administration has little regards and respect for teachers, always ordering and communicating with them using disrespectful language. Teachers felt that they are being harassed and as such, communication channels should be improved, and teachers' opinion should also count.

We live in constant fear due to threats and intimidation by the school administrators, withdrawal of lessons allocated to us, show cause or disciplinary letters, interdiction and abrupt transfers to other schools, the teachers reiterated.

Another key challenge that predisposes teachers to stress is student indiscipline, which stands at 31% with a mean score of 2.01. Additionally, 48% of teachers were of the opinion that unhealthy interaction with colleagues makes them stressed. Moreover, the focus group discussion revealed that the respondents felt that there was little support among teacher colleagues due to mistrust, gossip and rumour mongering. Consequently, teachers are afraid of being reported negatively to the administration, so everyone keeps to themselves.

Table 3 shows how often the respondents used coping strategies to manage occupational stress. A four-point rating scale, ranging from; most often (4) to less often (1), was used to record responses of the teachers on coping strategies used to manage occupational stress.

Table 3. Teachers view on Coping Strategies they use to manage stress

No	Coping Strategies	Most often 4	More often 3	Often 2	Less often 1
1	Mindfulness	10%	15%	25%	50%
2	Religious activities	18%	32%	29%	21%
3	Counseling	16%	14%	25%	45%
4	Time management	48.5%	32.5%	15%	4%
5	Exercise/ outdoor activities	23.2%	28.8%	33%	15%
6	social support network	35.7%	13%	31%	21%
7	Suicidal tendencies	28%	16%	5%	51%
6	Hobbies/reading	25.7%	29%	36%	30%
9	professional development	12.5%	38.5%	40%	5%
10	Alcohol and Substance abuse	44%	26%	10%	20%

The findings on Table 3 show that most teachers cope with stress by using diverse coping strategies: mindfulness, religion, counseling, time management, social support networks, exercises, suicidal tendencies, reading, professional development and alcohol and substance abuse. The table above indicates that 50% of the respondents less often use meditation while 18% and 16% use religious activities and counseling respectively. Moreover, 48.5% use time management whereas 33% often engage in exercise and other outdoor activities. The results clearly point out that although 35.7% of the teachers seek social support, 28% of the teachers most often explore suicidal tendencies. From Table 3, it is indicated that 44% of teachers often use alcohol and other addictive substances when they are stressed. The results also indicate that 29% of the respondents more often use reading and other hobbies to cope with stress.

However, 38.5 % get involved in professional development when stressed. Generally, the results in Table 3 reveal that some teachers use coping mechanisms which are healthy and problem solving oriented such as mindfulness, religion, counseling, time management, social support networks and exercises. On the contrary, the findings presented in Table 3 also indicate that teachers use unhealthy coping strategies (suicidal tendencies, alcohol and substance abuse) some of which are detrimental to their health, performance and wellbeing. The results of the current study were consistent with previous research (Freire, Ferrada's, Rodriquez, Valle, & Nunez, 2020; Amponsah, Adasi et al, 2020), which reported that religion, meditation, fun activities, planning and positive reframing

were more effective than use of withdrawal and substance use (Cinthatana, Ashok et al, 2022).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the teachers in Kisumu County are stressed due to unconducive work environment, the teachers' heavy work load with some programs running past the official working hours. Moreover, it is not easy achieving work family balance, and this degenerates family conflicts. The teachers are also stressed because of too much pressure imposed on them by the school administration, poor pay and indiscipline among students. Therefore, the school administration should create a conducive work environment as this is not only significant for effective academic performance but also plays a key role in the general well-being of the teachers. Teachers also use diverse coping strategies ranging from mindfulness, religious activities, counseling, exercise, social support network, suicidal tendencies, reading, professional development, alcohol and substance abuse.

5. Recommendation

Based on these results, the study recommends that the school administrators and the Ministry of Education should introduce occupational stress management programs and a counseling unit for teaching staff both at the school and county level. Teachers should also prioritize self-care for their own mental wellness. Moreover, school administrators should create a friendly conducive environment to enhance performance and general wellbeing of the teachers. The teacher's welfare should be put at the heart of educational institutions through

open communication channels, active and empathic listening. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with the school administrators should effectively implement teacher mentorship programs to offer support, counseling, guidance and team building to teachers in need.

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