

Exploring the Causes of Job Stress and Coping Strategies among the Faculty of Public Universities

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Abstract

Teacher stress has emerged as a topic of great concern in the world. The purpose of the study was to explore the causes of workplace stress among university teachers in Pakistan and the strategies they use to handle the stress. The study was qualitative in nature and narrative approach was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from a sample of 12 university teachers, representing three public universities of Lahore, i.e. four teachers from each university. Snowball sampling technique was used for the selection of the participants. All the participants were male faculty members and the range of their age was 40-57. Thematic analysis technique was used to extract major themes from recorded interviews. The study indicated workload, long duration of work hours, lack of professional development, role conflict, inappropriate behavior from students, unsupportive university administration and lack of resources as the major causes of job stress among university teachers. The study has a potential impact because a stress free teacher can work more efficiently and effectively and perform better as compared to a stressful teacher. It is recommended that teachers should be provided trainings and opportunities so they could enable them to minimize the stress.

Keywords: Job Stress, University Teachers, Qualitative Research, Coping Strategies

Introduction

Job stress has received substantial attention in the world over the last few years. The word stress is often associated with depression and traditionally, it was an area of research for psychologists only (Wolpert, 2001). Job stress in teachers is a serious problem that can lead to brain hemorrhage or even suicide attempt as reported in National Suicide Review Group Ireland in 2005. The study has been designed to explore the major causes behind job stress among university teachers. The general perception of public about public university teachers is that although their job is perceived very easy and relaxing, the reality may be different in local context of Pakistan (Chan & Hui, 2009). A number of researches deal with this topic and according to them, the most obvious causes of job stress among university teachers are slow learners, low salaries, heavy workload, and lack of teaching and learning materials (Mapfumo, Chitsiko, & Chireshe, 2012).

The researchers have selected the topic as there was no reasonable research on this topic. Public universities were not studied in the matter of causes of job stress among academic faculty. There was no study found despite of extensive search representing the sample in this study. The researchers have followed a similar research for the sake of conceptual framework of the study which is the research contribution of Kerr, Breen, Delaney, Kelly, and Miller (2011). That research was conducted in Ireland and the article facilitated the researcher in guiding the framework and methodology. McCormick (2012) has explored supervision related matters and poor physical conditions at workplace as main causes of job stress in teachers. McDonald (2012) defines stress as the dangerous physical and emotional responses that take place when the expectations and the requirements of the job do not match the competencies, resources or prerequisites of the worker.

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Here, the researchers would refer to some local researches related to the problem in the context of Pakistan. Ali, Ishtiaq, and Ahmed (2013) explored the factors contributing to job stress in teachers but that was at school level and their population was constrained to private schools only. Along with this, Shabbir and Wei (2014) identified the sources of stress such as workload, job insecurity, and media criticism pressure but their population was also school teachers of Azad Kashmir. The coping strategies are teacher training and crisis management courses which are recommended by the teachers. Hence, after studying literature related to the problem, it came to the knowledge of authors that the persons teaching in higher education institutions have not been studied yet in this respect. The study was designed to answer the following questions;

- ✚ What are the major causes of job stress among university teachers?
- ✚ What strategies, university teachers practice to cope with the job stress?

The researchers intended to identify the causes of stress at workplace among university teachers. The findings of this study would enable teachers to avoid the factors that cause stress in order to increase their productive performance. The second question of the study is constructed with the purpose that the findings would enable teachers to learn from their peer teachers that how they manage that stress. At the end, teachers would have a number of strategies that they can use to mitigate their job stress.

Literature Review

Job Stress is considered as the product of an imbalance between environmental demands and individual differences. Teachers play a vital role in human resource development of any society. There are a number of factors that cause job stress among teachers and consequently, the stress leads to poor health and adverse work performance. According to Portoghese et al. (2014), teaching has been ranked among the most stressful occupations. Most of the teachers reported high level of stress at work place (Jarvis, 2002). According to Nhundu (2009), stress is not a new term for human beings but nowadays, its frequency has been increased to a higher level that is causing threats to human life and people working in stressful environments. Stress has become a part of our daily routine and it is often very difficult to cope with it. The teachers at university level adopt various strategies to cope with work related stress; some of them at individual level and a few at organizational level. The continuous stress leads towards job dissatisfaction and eventually the turnover of teachers.

Borg (1990), reports that more than 30% of teachers revealed that they see their profession as very stressful. In the United States, 39 percent of teachers leave their career in teaching profession in the first five years (Rees & Hardy, 2004).

Defining Stress

To avoid confusion of multi-definitions, Rees and Hardy (2004) explained the term stress and stated that stress is a state of physiological and psychological imbalances between the demands of the situation and the ability and the capacity of an individual to meet the needs of that situation. The current use of the term stress has been taken from Selye's (1936) work which states that stress is the non-specific response of the body when it is being asked for a certain task as reported in Kerr et al. (2011).

Many researchers explored that an inappropriate behavior of students is a major cause of stress for university teachers. They need to spend their time and energy in managing the classrooms having such type of students. Stress can negatively affect a teacher's emotional health and effectiveness of classroom and school, overall (Kerr et al., 2011). Because of these malicious students, the classroom management becomes the most challenging task for teachers. Kyriacou (2001) reported inappropriate behavior of students and workload as the major causes of job stress for the university teachers.

At university level, the teachers have to perform a lot of administrative tasks as well as teaching classes and writing research papers. Consequently, they experience stress due to heavy workload and it affects their performance (Cooper, 2009). In the rapidly changing world, a nation cannot compete globally or even survive until it gives consideration to its teachers. Teachers in any society are often titled as nation builders. The need of the moment is to bring innovation in the education system so that teachers feel comfortable and enjoy their work. Stress causes low performance in teachers as stated by Wolpert (2001).

According to Ncube&Tshabalala (2012), heavy amount of work, long duration of working hours, role conflict, poor physical work conditions, unsupportive behavior of colleagues and administration, lack of resources and frequently changing curriculum are the major causes of stress in university teachers. The authors further elaborated that low salaries, insufficient professional development opportunities, fatigue and lack of motivation cause stress among university teachers.

According to Calabrese, Diamond and Mattson (2007), the negative effects of work-related stress include irritability, anger, fatigue, anxiety, depression, headaches, loss of concentration, sleep disturbances, persistent negative thoughts, low appetite, gastro intestinal problems, musculoskeletal problems, blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, cancer, suicide and many others. When the teachers continuously face stress, it can lead to low self-esteem, loss of confidence and illogical conflicts at the workplace that can further lead towards low performance and ultimately, the effectiveness of the institution gets affected (Nagra, 2010).

According to Ncube&Tshabalala (2012), majority of the teachers revealed the common notable causes of stress which were; low salaries, heavy workload, unsupportive management, insufficient resources, low status in society, no or minor support from colleagues and the inappropriate and unacceptable behavior of students. The teachers also reported lack of career development as a cause to job stress.

Farber (2012) stated that policy makers should put their best efforts to minimize stress among university teachers. It becomes the responsibility of state in public sector organizations and of management in private organizations to keep stress away from teachers so that it cannot influence their performance. According to Darlay (2008), a teacher having no stress can perform better both in teaching and administration and can contribute in quality education in a better way. The stress in teachers cannot be eliminated overnight. To handle the stress in different situations, teachers need both organizational and personal support and training in interpersonal problem solving skills and crisis management.

From the above studies, it can be concluded that stress can cause both mental and physical illness to the teachers. The researchers have identified various factors that teachers claim to cause stress at workplace. Excessive innovations and rapidly growing technology also contribute to stress as teachers don't become conformed to that (Ozturk, 2011). The most recommended strategy to minimize stress is teacher training, in particular, how to manage workload and emotions but still, the burden also lies on management to make policies and rules that reduce job stress.

Methodology

The research was qualitative in nature. Stress is always considered to be subjective (Joseph, 2010). The researcher explored the lived experiences of the participants about stress at job place, thus narrative qualitative approach was used. For the purpose of data collection, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The questions of the interview were adapted from the studies of Kerr et al. (2011), Kusi et al. (2014) and Ali, Ishtiaq, and Ahmed (2013). Contacts were made with participants through email and phone and the researcher visited their offices for data collection.

As the study was solely for university teachers, teachers were chosen for sample from three public universities of Lahore. Snowball sampling technique was used for the selection of participants. Primarily, the research was designed for both public and private university teachers but due to shortage of time, only public university teachers were included in sample.

One limitation of the study was that female teachers could not be accessed. The research subjects were requested to cooperate for data collection as they were assured that data would be used solely for research purposes. The range of age of participants was between 40 to 55 years, teaching different subjects but mainly social sciences.

For data collection, interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions. The researcher visited all 12 participants personally. It took approximately a month and each interview lasted approximately 13-15 minutes. The participants were given enough time to explain their lived experiences. Four teachers out of 12 allowed to audio record the interview and researcher recorded them in mobile phone. Rest of interviews could not be recorded due to ethical consideration as participants did not allow that. The researchers took notes of all major responses and saved them in written. The research ethics were followed and names of teachers and universities were not disclosed. There were no language barriers as all the teachers responded bilingually.

For data analysis, the thematic data analysis technique was used. The researcher computed all themes and findings for every participant. For the purpose, a content sheet was completed in each interview in which every response was outlined and organized. The researchers also made a table in which questions were placed in rows and teachers were coded as teacher 1, teacher2 and so on in columns. The researchers calculated each and every response to every question in the column of teacher 1, teacher 2 and so on respectively.

At the end, common themes were outlined and if in one question, more than 50% of teachers responded the same factor that was considered common theme and major cause of job stress among teachers in public universities of Lahore.

Results

In results, only major factors were described which were identified in interviews. The researcher noted the main points that the participants expressed during interviews. When the teachers were asked about the office place, 10 out of 12 teachers from public universities told that they possess formal offices e.g., separate rooms, only two teachers who were junior from all other ten said that they have a cabin to sit only. Major activities reported in office were counseling students, rest, checking of assignments and marking of papers. Only four teachers reported that they do research activities in their offices. No teacher claimed over poor working conditions at job place.

When the teachers were asked about the courses they teach in each semester and additional responsibilities they are assigned, they teach 4 courses as a mean average, i.e. some of them reported 3 courses and some reported to teach five courses in a semester. The teachers stated that they are assigned with additional responsibilities as one of them was the director of department, chairperson and two teachers were superintendent and warden of the hostels. Only four teachers said that they were just teaching. The teachers also reported that due to the additional charges of some positions, they need to attend a lot of meetings even 3-4 times a week. So, the teachers complained of workload as a source of stress. When the teachers were asked whether they find reasonable time for their professional development, and facilitation by the university, the teachers reported that university administration organizes a plethora of conferences, seminars and workshops but they do not find time for these activities. They reported that they usually leave office late just because a lot of work is pending.

When the teachers were asked about the research publications, the teachers reported that they need to publish research articles every year. They take it very seriously and often a burden as it is a basic requirement for promotion and sustainability. Two of the teachers were assistant professors from the last fifteen years and they could not get promotion just because of lack in research and some political grounds too. They reported that they were not given any training for research activities. Two out of twelve teachers responded that university organizes workshops for faculty for research training. They receive no support from the university in publishing research articles except that they can publish in the journal of their own department. One of the teachers shared his worst experience that he sent his article for publication but after a long wait of two years, it was rejected.

The teachers reported difficulties in interaction with heads and other colleagues as they were assigned additional responsibilities and in the consequence in some cases, the role conflict aroused. All twelve participants responded that although they were clear about their role at university as described in job description, but because of other responsibilities, role conflict arises and they used to face difficulties while interacting with heads and colleagues except their informal group members. Four teachers also reported that with change in administration, their roles remain changing and ultimately, conflict arises.

When the teachers were asked whether they receive reward on performance, the teachers responded that there was no formal system of reward and recognition. Four teachers cited that there is not even a single reward they have received till now. Two teachers told that they receive only TA/DA for a specific task or activity and no other reward except this. One teacher described that he seldom received a reward in form of bouquet or praise in a ceremony and nothing more than this. When the teachers were asked about the use of technology in their teaching, they cited that infrastructure was there but they had no training for proper utilization of gadgets and machines. Ten out of twelve teachers stated that they face difficulties while integrating technology in teaching. They further revealed that they did not receive any training from anybody to use those resources.

When the teachers were asked about the working hours at the university, the answers were surprising. Eight out of Twelve teachers stated that they have to work for twelve hours a day due to the evening classes held in the university. Two teachers said that they work only for eight hours and do not teach evening classes. When the teachers were asked about the salary, incentives and long term benefits of their job, the teachers cited that they are satisfied with the salary, they get for their work. Only two teachers said that they receive low salary. All twelve teachers described that job security, pension, and gratuity were the long term benefits of the job. Career development and professional advancement were their motivation towards job.

When the teachers were asked regarding the deadlines, they need to meet and what were the consequences if they fail to meet the deadlines; ten out of twelve teachers reported that they are required to meet deadlines most of the time. They are required to attend and organize conferences, giving results of students, reviews of journals of their institutions etc. Three teachers stated that they face no problem if they fail to meet the deadlines and three teachers reported the consequences like transfer, loss of authority and suspension of incentives.

When the teachers were asked about the inappropriate behavior of students in class, eight out of twelve teachers reported that most of the time, they face inappropriate behavior from students in class. They further revealed that mostly, boys bully and fight with other students. Some of the students were irresponsible and they did not participate in teamwork. Four teachers stated that they never faced such behavior from students. When the researcher asked them about the rules and regulations of the university to deal with such kind of behavior, all the participants revealed that rules and regulations are there, e.g. warning, fine and finally stuck off their name from university.

When the teachers were asked about teacher evaluation by students in the form of feedback, the answers were astonishing. All twelve teachers stated that there is no formal system of feedback from students. Appraisals and performance evaluation reports formerly, annual confidential reports are written solely by the director or dean of the institution. Moreover, they stated that they were not satisfied with the criteria being used for teacher evaluation.

At the end of the interviews, the teachers were asked three unstructured questions for in-depth understanding of their views. The teachers were asked that whether they feel stressed at workplace sometimes. One teacher reported that he does not feel any stress at job place rather he enjoys it.

The teachers were asked about the causes of their stress at job place. Ten, out of twelve teachers reported workload as the major source of stress at workplace. Eight teachers cited bad administration and management of university as cause of stress, four teachers stated lack of resources as cause of stress, and eight teachers revealed that low social status of teachers in society causes stress in them. One teacher reported that his interpersonal skills were insufficient to meet the requirements of the job and it caused stress to him. All the twelve teachers revealed that they have too much workload because of the supervision of research projects for higher degree classes.

The last question asked from teachers was about the strategies they use to cope with job stress; the teachers stated different strategies from which majors were training by self on voluntary basis, extra time to job place, behavioral study of students, listening motivational speeches and accepting and performing responsibilities to avoid any conflict.

In Summary, majority of the participants reported workload, long duration of work hours, lack of professional development, role conflict, inappropriate behavior from students, unsupportive university administration and lack of resources as the major causes of work stress among university teachers.

Discussion

The results of all twelve interviews have been discussed. The researchers explored the causes of stress at job place among university teachers and coping strategies used by teachers. The findings of the study supported the international literature and most of the causes of stress were same as identified by Kerr et al. (2011), Kusi et al. (2014), and Ali et al. (2013).

Ali et al. (2013) identified many factors causing stress and one of them was job insecurity. When this was asked from public university teachers, they stated this factor as only motivation to their job. Workload was the major reason to job stress among university teachers. They were required to attend various meetings and evening classes also. The teachers also need to work as administrators, heads of departments and deans; this enhances the workload on them. The administrative role of university teachers was also identified by Kusi et al. (2014) and they further stated that it causes stress in them.

The results also revealed that teachers need to publish research papers on regular basis for the promotions or the other incentives from the university administration or from Higher Education Commission. The teachers reported that there was no proper system of reward and recognition for the efforts and inputs provided by them. They also expressed that they receive no training or support from the University for their Career Development. These findings are supported by Kerr et al. (2011), as the author identified similar factors causing stress in university teachers in Turkey.

Majority of the teachers also reported the inappropriate behavior of students as a source of stress for them in classroom management. Although rules and regulations were there, no strict disciplinary actions were taken except few major cases. The fact has also been supported by Kusi et al. (2014), Shabbir and Wei (2014) and Kerr et al. (2011) regarding the inappropriate behavior of the students e.g. bullying, fighting etc. The teachers also stated some miscellaneous causes of stress at workplace, which were poor management by university administration, lack of resources, and organizational politics of the institutions. The factor of organizational politics was new in Pakistani context. Furthermore, teachers revealed that they need to join teacher's associations to survive in organizations. Ultimately, it leads towards organizational politics.

The teachers' responses about the coping strategies for stress were that they do not get a formal training for this. They reported that they minimize stress by attending seminars, listening to a motivational speech, and giving extra time to office in order to finish the work. Internationally, the strategies used by university teachers to handle job stress, were going for recreation with family, getting training and help from psychologist or counselors and by improving their interpersonal skills.

Conclusion

The causes of stress identified by this study are similar to those found in the literature which include workload, administrative responsibilities, lack of research opportunities, no support or training from university, rapidly changing technology, role of conflict, lack of reward and recognition, long duration of work hours at job place, inappropriate behavior of students, a large numbers of research supervisees, lack of resources and poor university administration. The commonly used strategies to minimize stress were accepting and performing additional responsibilities without questioning, getting some training or attend a workshop, giving extra time to office or listening motivational speeches. A few teachers reported to sit in informal groups to release the stress.

Recommendations

Keeping in view the results of the study, it was strongly recommended that workload of university teachers should be reduced and the additional responsibilities should be made very clear to avoid any role conflict in organizations. University administration should consider the capacity of a person and research supervisees should be reduced to a limit to produce quality research contributions. Administration should organize and encourage teachers to participate in workshops and trainings in which, new and useful strategies should be introduced to minimize job stress. Moreover, there should be a permanent seat of counselor who must be available only for teachers and help them live a better and healthy life. It was further recommended that a similar study can be carried out with a larger sample that will include female teachers as well as private universities. A relationship of stress can be identified with motivation, self-efficiency and personality etc.

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