

Teaching profession is stressful: lesson learned from Heilongjiang Province

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have documented elevated levels of job-related stress among teachers worldwide. Prolonged exposure to high levels of stress among teachers ultimately results in career burnout, directly contributing to a decrease in teacher recruitment rates as well as the depletion of valuable teaching resources. This study's objective is to examine the causes of work stress among primary school teachers in Heilongjiang Province, China, and to explore the strategies adopted by headmasters to reduce teachers' work stress. This study adopts a qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six respondents from two primary schools in Heilongjiang, China. The finding indicates that primary school teachers have great work pressure, mainly from the factors of workload, interpersonal relationships, salary, and personal development. Some feasible countermeasures were put forward to relieve the pressure which include the management should establish good interpersonal relationships and appropriate evaluation and incentive mechanisms. Teachers' workload should be reduced, and unnecessary meetings and inspections should be reduced. Teachers should be guided to adjust their mentality and make reasonable career plans. This study concludes methods to alleviate work stress among teachers can be implemented through various means by school management.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching is commonly perceived as a low-pressure occupation. However, this perception is flawed. Numerous research findings indicate that teaching is among the most stress-inducing professions when compared to various other occupations. Despite being a highly fulfilling career, teaching is acknowledged as a taxing and high-pressure job. Numerous studies have documented elevated levels of job-related stress among teachers worldwide, with some research even suggesting that teachers are more susceptible to work-related stress than individuals in other lines of work [1], [2]. Based on a study conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research, 20% of teachers experience high levels of stress in their jobs consistently. In contrast, only 12.5% of individuals in comparable professions feel the same way [3].

In China, the increasing workload faced by primary school teachers is becoming increasingly noticeable. Studies indicate that teachers' satisfaction with their profession and working environment can significantly influence their stress levels at work, their teaching approach, their ability to foster cooperative relationships with fellow teachers in the school, as well as the academic performance of their students [4], [5]. Furthermore, elevated stress levels result in teachers departing from their profession, resulting in

instability within the staff, student body, as well as the community. Prolonged exposure to high levels of stress among teachers ultimately results in career burnout, directly contributing to a decrease in teacher recruitment rates as well as the depletion of valuable teaching resources.

Stress is a key factor that prompts teachers to exit the field, whether it is due to inherent attrition, which refers to leaving the profession altogether, or turnover, which involves switching between different schools and organizations [6]. In every field, vocational stress is an unavoidable aspect, yet there is a common misconception that primary school teachers, being relatively young, should experience minimal pressure. Nevertheless, the reality is quite different, as the stress faced by primary school teachers is often beyond the comprehension of the general populace. In China, a predominant trend emerges where the pressure on primary school teachers varies. Major subject teachers endure more stress than their counterparts in minor subjects, while prominent primary school teachers face greater pressure compared to their peers in regular primary schools. Furthermore, middle-aged teachers tend to grapple with more stress when compared to teachers of different age groups.

Furthermore, given the recent advancements in education, parents are increasingly focused on their children's educational development while becoming more concerned about the quality of education. Unfortunately, there is a growing concern about the rising turnover rate of teachers in public primary schools. This can be attributed to several factors, such as inadequate salaries, insufficient benefits, as well as excessive work pressure on teachers. These factors not only contribute to high teacher turnover but also deter individuals who aspire to pursue a career in education [7]. Teachers often experience stress due to overwhelming workloads, constant pressure to meet expectations, an excessive focus on testing, as well as stagnant or inadequate compensation packages that persist year after year.

As education and teaching reform in China continue to advance, primary school teachers are experiencing increasing levels of stress, and the well-being of teachers, both physically as well as mentally, is becoming an increasingly significant concern. Primary school teachers, as integral members of the teaching workforce, bear the responsibility of fostering professional skills, shouldering the duty of disseminating cultural knowledge as well as imparting values. They encounter pressures from society, the educational institution, and their own families [8]. The way they approach their work is intricately linked to student development, and the stress level they experience directly impacts the effectiveness of nurturing talent in educational institutions. When teachers are under too much pressure, it can result in strain and ultimately lead to teacher burnout (a state of attitudinal, physical, and emotional exhaustion) [9]. As an illustration, teachers must engage in essential tasks such as crafting lesson plans, grading assignments, as well as overseeing classroom management. In recent times, there has been a growing demand among primary school teachers to ease the weight of educational responsibilities. This indicates that primary teachers in China are finding it challenging to cope with the substantial academic as well as psychological pressures associated with their roles [10].

Teachers in public primary schools in Heilongjiang Province play a crucial role in China's education system, with some experiencing significant work pressure. This stress not only harms their physical as well as mental well-being but also hinders the overall progress of school education. Consequently, it is imperative to pinpoint the sources of this stress among primary school teachers in Heilongjiang Province as well as seek viable and rational methods to alleviate their work pressures. Therefore, this study aims to explore the factors that contribute to stress among primary school teachers and headmasters' tactics for reducing teachers' work stress in Heilongjiang Province, China. The research questions that follow are based on the goals of this study: i) what are the contributing causes of primary school teachers' work-related stress?; and ii) how do headmasters plan to lessen the workload stress experienced by primary school teachers?

2. THE COMPREHENSIVE THEORETICAL BASIS

Over the last five years, only a limited number of researchers have explored the various causes of occupational stress in teachers, with a greater emphasis placed on their inclination to leave their profession due to overwhelming stress [11]. Currently, there exists a widespread agreement within the contemporary educational field that teachers experience significant occupational stress. The origins of this stress among teachers are diverse, and given the distinct characteristics of the teaching profession, addressing teacher occupational stress should be a top priority. Chinese society is currently undergoing numerous concurrent transitions. These include the transformation of the economic and social systems, shifts in moral norms, as well as the emergence of a highly competitive modern society [6]. Teachers bear a crucial duty in instructing and enlightening students while they wield significant influence in advancing societal development.

The stress experienced by working professionals is widespread across various fields, while the unique demands of the teaching profession place significant pressure on teachers, particularly in the current context of extensive educational reform in China. In this situation, both the government and society have increased expectations for teachers, further intensifying their workload and stress levels. Numerous research

findings indicate that in recent times, teachers worldwide have expressed dissatisfaction with their careers, with estimates of teacher burnout ranging from 20% to 50% [12]. Due to the unique characteristics of the teaching profession, the occupational stress experienced by teachers can have immeasurable negative impacts on both teachers' teaching as well as the physical and mental growth of students.

Numerous international scholars have proposed various interpretations of "work stress", but the most widely acknowledged contemporary definitions of stress can be attributed to [13]. According to their definition, stress is perceived as a dynamic interaction between external stimuli and an individual's subjective response. In this framework, the pressure experienced by individuals emerges from the interplay between their perceptions and the objective factors at play. The concept of "teacher stress" was introduced by Kyriacou [14]. They characterized teacher stress as a negative emotional experience, encompassing feelings of anger, frustration, as well as tension that teachers encounter in specific facets of their profession. Moreover, Chinese researchers have also presented their interpretations of work stress among teachers in their studies. A study by Zeng and Liu [15] proposes that teachers experience work stress as a result of varying personalities and coping capabilities when exposed to prolonged as well as consistent stressors in their work environment. This stress can manifest through mental, physical, as well as behavioral responses, ultimately impacting their performance and professional objectives.

Teachers' pressures also stem from the work quality required. While Chinese primary school teachers may not experience explicit pressure to increase education rates, they still encounter significant demands to produce high-quality work. In addition to their regular teaching duties, primary school teachers often assume the responsibilities of a head teacher, which is known to be both physically as well as mentally taxing, leaving them feeling drained. Additionally, in Shaheen [16], the research highlighted that teachers encounter a variety of evaluations, assessments, as well as competitive pressures, leading to heightened anxiety among many teachers. Schools also subject teachers to numerous non-academic activities, including inspections, which often leave teachers dissatisfied. These additional responsibilities, including class attendance, lesson preparation, as well as homework grading, significantly disrupt daily teaching routines. Consequently, the quality of everyday education suffers. Furthermore, the time spent on these tasks needs to be compensated for later, increasing the overall burden on primary school teachers.

Referring to past research, it was asserted that interpersonal pressure is a pervasive aspect of various aspects of life, with teachers experiencing a distinctive form of interpersonal pressure. Given that teachers operate within intricate interpersonal dynamics and bear a profound historical responsibility, it is evident that they confront interpersonal pressure [17]. Owing to shifts in educational paradigms, the roles of teachers and students are undergoing subtle transformations. Teachers are transitioning from being "managers", "organizers" as well as "leaders" to becoming "guides", "respondents", and "collaborators". Furthermore, Glennie *et al.* research [18] discoveries also indicated that primary school teachers navigate a profession that combines cooperation and competition, with every standardized test ranking, professional evaluation, annual rewards, and penalties contributing significantly to the stress experienced by teachers.

Some research indicates that teachers' careers are influenced by personality factors, including their worldview, tolerance for frustration, level of psychological adjustment, and other related traits. The causes of stress on a teacher's personality can originate from various factors, such as the significance of their work, inadequate resources, unclear job roles, conflicts, interactions with colleagues, external pressures, increased workload, discipline problems, and low student motivation. Additionally, issues related to teacher discipline and insufficient peer, friend, and family support can contribute to this stress [3]. Teachers may also harbor concerns about their past teaching quality being evaluated if a student from another school receives a poor grade [19].

Furthermore, a deficiency in skillsets can also lead to stress among primary school teachers. In the fast-evolving society, fresh social insights, cutting-edge technology, and innovative ideas continuously surface, necessitating an ongoing process of learning and refreshing teachers' expertise and academic understanding. Recent educational reforms demand that teachers reshape their traditional notions concerning education, students, and teaching and embrace novel educational and instructional approaches.

Currently, as the national economy has rapidly advanced, there have been noteworthy transformations in the compensation and benefits received by teachers. There has been an increase in teachers' salaries. However, this has been overshadowed by surges in prices, housing costs, and oil prices. Furthermore, teacher salaries are contingent on factors such as years of service and professional rank, resulting in relatively modest compensation for younger teachers. When compared to government employees and employees in other sectors, the overall societal benefits for teachers are considerably lower, resulting in substantial financial strain for primary school teachers. Additionally, due to regional differences, wage disparities exist within the same city, with performance-based pay in prosperous cities far outpacing that in economically underdeveloped areas. These discrepancies in regional economic prosperity and income levels place significant stress on teachers, impacting their quality of life.

2.1. Karasek's demand-control-support model of stress

The “demand-control-support model of stress” put forth by Karasek serves as the basis for this study. This model, proposed by Karasek and Theorell [20], is a well-known theory explaining how aspects of a worker's job affect their psychological health. Figure 1 shows how stress can be brought on by workplace expectations, including a severe workload, role uncertainty, and strain from the job. However, Karasek [21] asserts that there are two fundamental aspects of any work environment that can be identified: the psychological demands of the job and the degree of control that employees have over these demands. This framework identifies particular circumstances and individual characteristics that are important during stressful periods, providing insightful information about stress management. Individuals can effectively manage these stressors by using their job-related abilities to achieve autonomy and control over their work, as per the paradigm presented in Figure 1 [21]. One way that workers might reduce stress is by giving themselves more authority over their work and cultivating good connections with their managers and coworkers. Additionally, when workers are in good physical and mental health, they exhibit successful coping with work-related pressures. Because they have faith in their capacity to cope with work-related stressors, individuals who demonstrate high levels of optimism and self-efficacy typically thrive in stress management [22].

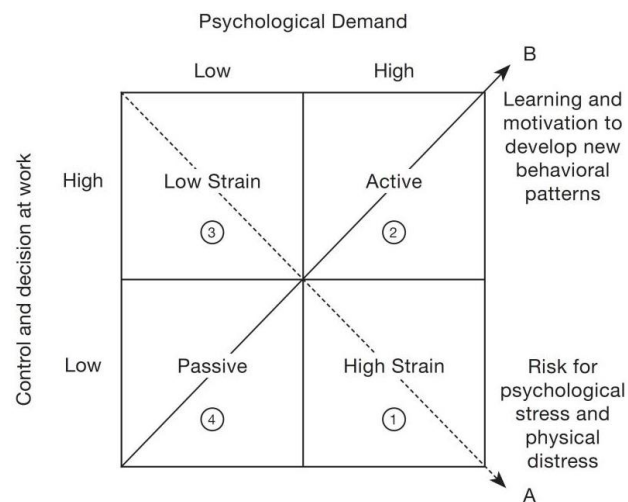


Figure 1. Karasek's demand-control-support model of stress [20]

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The research methodology for this study was a qualitative exploratory strategy, employing a case study approach. Since its first application in the legal and medical domains, case studies have found widespread use in the social sciences, including management, anthropology, psychology, and sociology [23]. Relevant to the purpose of this study, which was to investigate the stress concerns faced by primary school teachers and strategies of school headmasters to mitigate the issues, the case study method is especially helpful when trying to understand the subject of interest in great detail and gather research-related solutions [23]. A case study enables the researchers to thoroughly examine and evaluate several cases to produce findings that are pertinent to the inquiry and it does not restrict the quantity of data-gathering techniques the researchers may employ [23]. Thus, using the qualitative approach, the researchers have access to a range of data collection techniques, including observations and interviews.

3.1. Sample study

The study involved six respondents, consisting of four primary school teachers and two headmasters in Heilongjiang, China, selected using purposive sampling. The sampling method chosen ensures that participants with a wide range of experiences and opinions relevant to the research question were selected [24], allowing for the examination of the problems, obstacles, and solutions and giving a thorough picture of the journeys taken by the teachers and headmasters.

The sample size was determined using the data saturation concept as a guide, suggesting that data collection will continue until the interviews produce no further themes or information. This technique was chosen to gather a representative and information-rich sample of teachers, allowing for a thorough analysis of

their experiences. It provides a strong foundation for drawing relevant conclusions and implications while bolstering the validity and reliability of the study findings [25]. By regularly analyzing and interpreting the data that has been acquired, the researchers assessed if sufficient depth and breadth of insights have been gained. More interviews were deemed unnecessary when data saturation was reached and no new data was anticipated.

3.2. Data collection procedure

Interviews were conducted in this study to acquire data, examining respondents' viewpoints, experiences, and emotions. In-depth interviewing entails conducting lengthy, one-on-one interviews with a select group of respondents to learn about their viewpoints on a given concept, initiative, or circumstance [26]. A total of four teachers and two headmasters were interviewed, during which the researchers prepared open-ended questions. Each interview session with a respondent lasted approximately 30 minutes to an hour. During these sessions, respondents had the freedom to provide elaborations on certain questions once they comprehended them. The researcher also documented additional responses to questions that had not been addressed initially. Given that the data were gathered in Heilongjiang, China, the communication occurred fully in Chinese, necessitating the researcher to translate the interview process into English. The researchers maintain the confidentiality of the interview and protect the privacy of the interviewee when recording and compiling the responses. In addition to utilizing interviews as a data collection approach, the study also incorporated document analysis where relevant documents about teacher welfare and teacher manuals from various primary schools were employed to substantiate the research problems.

The application software ATLAS.ti was utilized for topic-based interview encoding. In order to facilitate data sorting and classification, all interview data was coded following various themes [27], which can facilitate a more intuitive extraction of crucial information by researchers. The software encrypts the interpretation of the interview material and ascertains the relationship between various data. The researchers also examined the study's data using the document analysis method to become closer to the research focus and improve understanding of the study challenge more clearly. By methodically searching through and comparing all of the data, more precise research findings can be attained.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Respondents' demographic profiles

The study involved six respondents with expertise in education. This group comprised four in-service teachers and two school headmasters with over a decade of experience. These respondents were selected from two primary schools in Heilongjiang Province. Among the primary teachers, four held bachelor's degrees and possessed a minimum of five years of teaching experience. Additionally, three of them served as head teachers, while one worked as a teaching assistant and specialized in psychology. The two participating school headmasters both held master's degrees in educational administration and possessed more than a decade of experience in school management.

4.2. Factors that cause teachers' work stress in primary schools

There were four themes related to teachers' work stress found based on the interview data. The four themes include poor pay for instructors, a heavy workload, challenging interpersonal connections, and other elements including a professional setting, cozy classrooms, and individual characteristics. The following section goes into great detail about each of the criteria.

4.2.1. Teachers' low income

Based on the collected data, a primary factor influencing the job-related stress experienced by primary school teachers is their low income. Specifically, three out of six respondents believe that the low income for teachers creates challenges in providing for their families' basic needs and job satisfaction. Furthermore, the income earned by teachers does not align with the demands of their workload, resulting in heightened stress levels during their work. For instance, respondent 4 stated:

“When they try their best to complete the work, they cannot get the corresponding remuneration, which not only makes the teacher expend energy and job burnout but also brings the pressure of economic problems.”

This is also aligned with the report by Ansah [28] which mentioned that teachers and leaders felt that the pay of being teachers was too low. Only 44% and 30% of the respondents were satisfied with their salaries. The substantial gap between regional economic disparities and financial remuneration places

considerable strain on teachers, resulting in heightened apprehension regarding their career prospects and ultimately contributing to elevated stress levels. It was also revealed that a quarter of teachers opted to leave their positions for employment at neighboring colleges and universities offering more competitive compensation packages. At the same time, some decided to explore alternative career paths. This underscores the profound influence of economic pressures stemming from teacher salaries on the stress levels experienced by primary school teachers. Respondent 2 established that a teacher's salary comprises a combination of basic salary, performance bonuses, head teacher's allowance, and additional subsidies, totaling just over 20,000 yuan for a half-year period:

"Teachers do not get much in the way of teacher benefits, no gifts, no year-end bonuses. This income makes it difficult for me to support the family." (Respondent 2)

This aligns with the findings discussed in the literature review earlier [29], which pertains to the rapid escalation of prices, including housing and oil prices. Teacher salaries are closely linked to both their age and job title, with younger teachers earning relatively lower incomes. In comparison to government employees and other sectors, the societal benefits for teachers are notably inferior, placing significant strain on primary schools. It has been proposed that the income of public-school teachers in China remains low, a stark reality. As salaries remain largely stagnant while the cost of living continues to rise, the workload of teachers is poised to increase significantly. Consequently, the results demonstrate that teachers in China belong to a group characterized by high levels of knowledge and education, often possessing bachelor's or master's degrees. Their pursuit of knowledge demands substantial dedication. Nevertheless, primary school teachers in China were offered low salaries and demanding workloads. This meager compensation not only places immense pressure on them but also results in a diminished quality of life, adversely affecting their commitment and performance, a disparity incongruent with their educational qualifications and the intensity of their work.

4.2.2. High intensity of workload

The primary factor frequently cited by respondents as a source of stress for teachers is the substantial workload intensity. As per the feedback provided by respondents, three individuals highlighted that the heavy nature of the work and the significant physical and mental demands are key contributors to stress among primary school teachers. The profession of teaching is characterized by its intricate, demanding, and high-stress nature, with work intensity-induced stress being the predominant factor among primary school teachers. Respondent 2, during the interview, noted that teachers in public primary schools are experiencing a gradual increase in their working hours. Beyond the responsibilities of class preparation, lectures, and training, they must also experience an overwhelming volume of instructional materials.

"...prepare lessons, tutoring after class, safety education, left-behind students, other poverty subsidies statistics, class meetings, students talk, home school contact, class expenses..... A lot of work needs to do." And "...I can reach a maximum of 28 classes per week. Although a class only lasts 45 minutes, many teachers spend at least three hours preparing for the lesson." (Respondent 2)

Moreover, other respondents stated that the increasing workload as well as hours of being a class teacher are some other factors that contributed to work stress. Primary school teachers have a substantial weekly workload encompassing various subjects. On average, a teacher conducts between 16 to 20 lectures and manages 2 to 31 different courses each week. The majority of these teachers specialize in either Chinese or Mathematics, delivering instruction to approximately 10 to 14 classes weekly. Besides that, respondent 3 expressed that the shortage of teachers was also challenging and making teachers stressed.

"Many good teachers have to take several different classes at once, and some teachers have to take several classes. If they do not achieve the teaching goals, they will not pass the school assessment." (Respondent 3)

In addition to their departmental duties, the school administrator must participate in eight to ten classes. Furthermore, teachers devote a minimum of three hours to grading students' assignments and providing individual assistance. Some teachers may experience anxiety and even hold themselves responsible for their students' subpar academic performance. This aligns with the perspective by Zeng and Liu [15] in the earlier literature review, wherein she established that primary school teachers generally face a workload exceeding 14 class hours per week. Moreover, many teachers are heavily involved in student management, encompassing tasks such as lesson preparation, teaching, homework evaluation, extracurricular guidance, and assessment coordination during the teaching process.

Furthermore, as reported by Shaheen [16], teachers are confronted with a multitude of assessments, evaluations, and competitions, creating a sense of unease among many teachers. The educational institutions also undergo various non-academic activities and inspections, exacerbating teachers' workloads and significantly impacting day-to-day teaching. The high workload intensity takes a toll on their mental well-being. Simultaneously, two respondents highlighted that, in order to fulfill the long-term development needs of schools and enhance their own teaching quality, teachers frequently have to engage in a diverse range of training initiatives, such as modern educational technology training and pre-employment training, among others. These training endeavors demand a substantial amount of time and energy from teachers, compelling them to labor in schools during the weekdays and attend training sessions on weekends. This arrangement leaves teachers fatigued and fails to achieve the intended training outcomes, instead adding to their heavy pressure. Respondent 4 further noted that, in addition to class preparations, lectures, and training, they are burdened with numerous unseen responsibilities.

"... Safety education, left-behind students, other poverty assistance statistics, class meeting, student talk, home-school contact, class expenses..." (Respondent 4)

Respondent 4 also mentioned that enhancing the teachers' individual competence posed a challenge. This involved continuously updating their knowledge through methods such as teaching, research, training, and graduate school. The weekends were packed with training, leaving little time for rest. Teachers were also required to take on projects and publish papers to enhance their overall quality. Consequently, our research supports the notion that there exists a direct relationship between the work pressure faced by teachers and their workload. The high-intensity workload and the numerous monotonous learning and training activities exert significant pressure on teachers.

In addition, respondent 1 stated that in her work experience in recent years, her biggest stress came from the heavy workload. She mentioned that upon assuming the role of head teacher, the workload escalated significantly, with working hours extending well beyond teaching responsibilities. This led to a growing work burden and heightened psychological stress, as she pointed out:

"...Parents may ask about homework and student learning at any time or ask for the resolution of conflicts between students at school. This kind of hidden delay work lets my psychological pressure be very big and the burden is very heavy." (Respondent 1)

Additionally, Liu and Onwuegbuzie [6] discovered that primary school teachers encounter students with poor study habits and behaviors, resulting in them having to invest more energy and effort than typical teachers. This extra effort often leads to teacher burnout and exacerbates student behavior issues, contributing to the overall high levels of stress experienced by teachers. Consequently, when considering the amassed data and literature review, it becomes evident that the demanding workload and responsibilities borne by teachers significantly contribute to their heightened professional pressure.

4.2.3. Difficult interpersonal relationships

This study also discovered that disharmonious and challenging interpersonal relationships contribute to work-related stress among primary school teachers. The literature review highlights that one of the external factors leading to teachers' work stress is interpersonal issues. Kirby *et al.* [17] established that teachers operate within intricate interpersonal dynamics and bear significant responsibilities. It is reasonable to assume that teachers encounter interpersonal pressures in their professional roles. In a previous survey, 72% of teachers reported experiencing difficulties getting along with their colleagues.

According to the findings from data collection, all four primary school teachers interviewed concurred that workplace interpersonal relationships were problematic and a source of stress for them. They expressed that teachers invest a considerable amount of time and energy in navigating workplace interpersonal dynamics. Specifically, respondents 1 and 3 both noted potential disparities in opinions and work objectives within their roles. Teachers exhibit a high level of independence in their work, employ distinct approaches, have relatively low collaboration requirements, and have fewer opportunities to enhance harmony through mutual cooperation. This complexity in teachers' interpersonal relationships distinguishes them from other groups, aligning with previous findings [30] that excessive time spent with colleagues inevitably leads to conflicts and differences of opinion, resulting in interpersonal pressure for teachers. Furthermore, it is believed that leadership style significantly impacts work-related stress in interpersonal relationships. For instance, some school leaders are described as overly bureaucratic and impersonal in their management style, issuing strict orders and frequently criticizing teachers in public. This also contributes to teachers' elevated stress levels. In this context, respondent 1 also highlighted a similar perspective:

“...especially when I just enter a new environment, adapt to a new identity, I need to quickly establish a good interpersonal relationship with colleagues, good relationship with the students, more importantly, I need to be familiar with the working style of each leader. Even now, I still feel pressure to interact with people.” (Respondent 1)

Additionally, two respondents expressed the viewpoint that teachers exhibit both collaboration and rivalry tendencies. They emphasized that any decline in the competitive atmosphere within the professional setting can significantly adversely affect individuals psychologically. Within various teacher assessment systems in the workplace, competition is inherent and contributes to a widespread social phenomenon. Respondent 2 suggested that individuals placed in an unfavorable competitive position tend to experience heightened insecurity and increased pressure. For instance, she stated that:

“Workplace work cannot be done without the support and cooperation of people around, and many tasks can only be completed by the strength of the team. Therefore, the level of support from colleagues and subordinates also has an important impact on an individual’s perception of stress.” (Respondent 2)

Respondent 4 emphasized that teachers’ responsibilities involve managing a range of interpersonal relationships, leading to an unavoidable occurrence of communication challenges and pressure:

“Some teachers are bothered by students who do not like them, some are bothered by difficult colleagues, and some are tired of dealing with parents.” (Respondent 4)

Respondent 3 established the need for current work stress to align with the demands of multiple social roles. She elaborated on how teachers take on a diverse range of social roles, including teacher, parent, student, and friend, which undergo constant fluctuations. An instance of this would be being rigidly attached to a particular role like that of a teacher and being unable to adapt it to the environmental demands. This inflexibility in identity shifts and ensuing psychological distress could contribute to her work-related stress.

“Teachers are prone to imbalance due to the inadaptation of multiple social roles. On the one hand, they are role models as teachers. On the other hand, they are ordinary people with desires, and it is difficult to deal with the conflict between changing roles.” (Respondent 3)

This aligns with Kim’s prior literature review [31], where it was noted that primary school teachers possess a dual nature of cooperation and competition, and any unified examination ranking places considerable stress on them. Consequently, the findings indicate the likelihood that the teacher’s interpersonal dynamics primarily manifest in their associations with leaders, peers, family, and students. If these connections are not managed effectively, teachers may experience prolonged interpersonal strain, leading to work-related depression and frustration. Moreover, the intensifying rivalry among teachers further exacerbates tensions within their interpersonal relationships.

4.2.4. Other external factors (environment, character, and society)

Additionally, other factors mentioned by respondents, such as the professional environment and comfortable teaching conditions, directly impact the quality and effectiveness of teachers’ performance. In this context, respondents 5 and 6 both emphasized the importance of enhancing the school environment, which includes aspects like teaching equipment and support for teachers. By addressing these needs, teachers can experience a more comfortable and relaxed working environment. This viewpoint aligns with Ertürk [27] discussion. Based on the article written by Ertürk [27], he recommended that schools cultivate a relaxed, democratic atmosphere characterized by mutual respect and equal treatment. This approach fosters the development of teachers’ personalities, promotes harmonious interpersonal relationships [32], and ultimately enhances teachers’ job satisfaction and enthusiasm, enabling them to work in a more relaxed manner.

In addition to the factors that contribute to the work pressure experienced by teachers, there is also the influence of personality traits. These personality traits are connected to an individual’s perspective on life, their ability to tolerate frustration, their level of psychological adjustment, and other related factors. Furthermore, in addition to the previously mentioned high ambition commonly found in teachers, they are also highly attuned to external evaluations. This aligns with the perspective presented by Fabbro *et al.* in the literature [19], which suggests that many teachers have lofty expectations or overly idealistic goals, leading to increased stress as they strive to meet these standards. This factor underscores that teachers exhibit varying levels of psychological resilience based on their attitudes towards work and life, as well as their interpersonal communication skills and ability to navigate social relationships.

For instance, teachers with limited teaching abilities and low psychological tolerance tend to lag in various performance measures, which can result in self-doubt regarding their suitability for their profession. This self-doubt, in turn, affects their positive work outlook, diminishes their sense of accomplishment, and contributes to work-related stress. Respondent 4 also stated that the low probability with regard to promotion is among the reasons for the pressure. She described that job titles depend on seniority.

“It is difficult for them to be promoted until they reach a certain age and wait for senior teachers to retire. And the teacher’s title directly determines the teacher’s salary.” (Respondent 4)

Consequently, veteran teachers find themselves assigned fewer teaching responsibilities, yet they retain the title of senior teachers, which comes with the comparatively highest income, leaving younger teachers with limited opportunities. Moreover, as per respondent 3, school administrators have heightened their expectations of teachers.

“They are more strict and demanding in the management of teachers. Some leaders are too bureaucratic, school management lacks humanity, and they are outspoken with teachers and often criticize them in public, which can also bring great pressure on us.” (Respondent 3)

Subsequently, respondent 1 expressed that she places excessive demands on herself, leading to idealistic work objectives that are, at times, unattainable. This, in turn, contributes to heightened work-related stress. Furthermore, teachers’ stress is also exacerbated by societal factors. Two respondents highlighted how the public holds high expectations for the role of teachers, not only expecting them to impart knowledge but also to instill life’s fundamental truths. This places an immense burden on teachers. Moreover, society exclusively assigns the responsibility of education to teachers, neglecting the impact of other environmental factors on students’ development and academic performance. It underscores the significant responsibility placed on teachers, inevitably leading to substantial psychological pressure on them.

4.3. Strategies to reduce the primary school teachers’ work stress

The themes of strategies to reduce teachers’ work stress based on the interview data extracted were listed as: i) appropriately improve teachers’ salary; ii) reduce teachers’ workload; and iii) establish a good interpersonal relationship. The details of each theme will be explained in the following sub-sections.

4.3.1. Appropriately improve teachers’ salary

Based on the gathered information, we determined that enhancing teachers’ income and offering teacher benefits serve as effective strategies for alleviating the pressures experienced by them. This approach can be succinctly described as implementing a dual-tier salary system consisting of a basic salary and performance-based rewards. The basic salary for primary school teachers serves two critical purposes: firstly, it caters to their essential living expenses, akin to the needs of school teachers, fostering their commitment to the teaching profession and promoting the long-term growth of the education sector. Secondly, this basic salary system essentially guarantees their sustenance, allowing them to focus on scholarly pursuits and avoid pursuing immediate success. As per the feedback from the survey respondents, the primary focus in augmenting primary teachers’ salaries lies in elevating the basic salary. This endeavor seeks to enhance the quality of life for school teachers while simultaneously enhancing the overall development of higher education institutions. This perspective aligns with the research findings on improving teachers’ salaries from the earlier literature review. It underscores the importance of relevant authorities establishing equitable salary standards, considering the local, provincial, and national cost of living indexes in determining teachers’ remuneration. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need to bridge the substantial wage gap among teachers to ensure the financial well-being of primary school teachers.

Simultaneously, Yong *et al.* [33] recommended that governments at various levels should enhance law enforcement, continually boost investments in education, enhance the economic rewards and social standing of teachers, and elevate teaching to the most esteemed and coveted profession. Upon scrutinizing the survey data and examining the literature, it is evident that the stress experienced by teachers is linked to their salary levels, and a combination of salary increments and incentives is an effective approach to mitigate teacher burnout. Conversely, both respondents 5 and 6 mentioned that teachers are provided with pertinent benefits, such as regular health check-ups and opportunities for recovery based on local conditions. Respondent 5 conveyed this information:

“... Medical institutions also facilitate medical treatment for teachers. Retired teachers will enjoy benefits provided by the state.” (Respondent 5)

For instance, the pension ratio for experienced retired primary school teachers should be suitably increased. Nonetheless, respondent 6 holds a distinct perspective from respondent 5 regarding teacher benefits. He mentioned that one of the perks they offer to teachers is supplying free meals.

“...we provide teachers with free lunch. For those teachers who are busy with work and family, they do not have the time and energy to prepare their own lunch; our school has a canteen open for teachers for free.” He also stated that they offer incentives, special achievement awards, training, job rotations and so on. Holiday gifts and department parties are also part of employee benefits.” (Respondent 6)

Offering teachers benefits will foster a heightened level of enthusiasm for their job. These benefits, including typical performance rewards, can instill a deep sense of school membership, teamwork, and dedication among teachers, ultimately enhancing their overall job satisfaction.

4.3.2. Reduce teachers' workload

According to the data collected, the strategy most frequently cited by survey respondents for alleviating the work-related stress experienced by teachers is the reduction of their workload. Three teachers who were interviewed while experiencing work-related stress emphasized that the workload of teachers is both extensive and fragmented. Furthermore, they highlighted the prevalent occurrence of part-time teaching roles among primary school teachers. Typically, the teachers are responsible for more than 14 classes per week, with a substantial focus on student management. When the interviewed school headmasters were asked about reducing teachers' workloads, the respondent 5 conveyed their opinion:

“... that the total amount of working hours and its specific allocation are the most direct reflection of the workload of teachers. As a school leader, I need to approve the overall working hours according to the relevant rules and regulations, that is, the hours that teachers need to work each week.” (Respondent 5)

Next, the focus lies on strategically managing teachers' work schedules. The primary role of teachers revolves around imparting knowledge and nurturing students, underscoring the importance of preserving ample time for teachers to engage in classroom instruction, lesson preparation, homework grading, and assessment. This aligns with prior research findings. Drawing from the insights presented in JiaHui literature review [34], it is advocated that educational institutions should foster specialization among primary school teachers. This entails teachers honing their expertise in specific subject areas, refining their proficiency across various subjects, and mitigating the practice of teachers juggling multiple subjects concurrently. Additionally, there should be judicious expansion of teaching staff. For instance, teachers with lighter teaching loads can be assigned to alleviate the workload of their colleagues. Furthermore, the study revealed that lightening the burden on teachers also enhances the methods used for teacher inspection and evaluation. This implies enhancing the evaluation system, which should reflect a differentiation principle and strive to simplify processes while eliminating redundant steps and data-intensive assessments. It is imperative to shift the focus towards evaluating job performance rather than solely relying on marking as the sole yardstick for assessing work effectiveness. According to respondent 6 years of experience in administrating schools, he proposed that the most efficient strategy he employed in reducing staff pressure:

“..... was to reduce their heavy work. In this regard, I did so by reducing various school report fillers. It means standardizing and simplifying the filling of various forms to prevent teachers from repeating data and filling in multiple forms.” (Respondent 6)

4.3.3. Establish a good interpersonal relationship

The factors mentioned earlier are the primary contributors to the workload experienced by primary school teachers. Consequently, based on the data gathered from interviews with school headmasters, suitable strategies can effectively mitigate and alleviate the excessive pressure on teachers. One effective approach to alleviating the work pressure of teachers is to cultivate a positive interpersonal relationship and organizational setting. Respondent 6 highlighted that the occupational environment encompasses not only the general conditions that influence school teaching activities but also the physical and psychological aspects. According to his perspective, when teachers find themselves in a comfortable and nurturing professional environment, their emotional well-being improves, aiding in the reduction of certain challenges and stressors. A teacher's responsibilities involve extensive interpersonal interactions, covering various aspects of human relations. Hence, it is essential for schools to establish a democratic, transparent, and harmonious organizational atmosphere to ensure that teachers feel at ease within the school environment. For instance,

implementing a democratic and transparent management approach allows teachers to participate in and contribute to school management decisions, enhances their sense of responsibility and security, and addresses work-related stress through diverse, effective methods. In this context, as per the collected data, respondent 5 emphasized:

“...In establishing the school management system and formulating related policies, I try my best to put teachers’ interests first.”

Additionally, she sincerely engaged with the teachers, affording them opportunities to voice their opinions and offer suggestions. This approach not only addresses the teachers’ need for respect but also provides them with greater clarity regarding their work objectives and tasks, ultimately bolstering their sense of control over their work and reducing their work-related stress. This outcome aligns with earlier research Glennie *et al.* [18] who recommended that educational leaders and administrators implement various strategies to proactively enhance teachers’ interpersonal relationships. The school’s commitment to supporting its teachers contributes to their physical and mental well-being, alleviating the psychological pressures they face. When comparing our findings to those of prior studies, it underscores that schools serve as the primary setting where teachers both work and reside. Consequently, optimizing the school environment and fostering positive interpersonal connections can significantly contribute to maintaining teachers’ positive morale. For instance, as highlighted by respondent 5, the implementation of a comprehensive communication system and the organization of various school cultural activities can foster improved interpersonal relationships, actively promoting the establishment of a harmonious social environment.

“...organize teachers to take sightseeing during holidays to strengthen mutual support between teachers, between teachers and administrators, and between teachers and students, and actively promote the formation of a harmonious interpersonal and cultural environment.” (Respondent 5)

Another encouraging discovery revolved around respondent 6’s mention of health psychology promotion, counseling, and educational initiatives within their school, which were integrated into ongoing teacher training programs. The school effectively addressed the work-related stress experienced by teachers by offering mental health education and psychological counseling. This outcome aligns with the findings presented by JiaHui [34] in her research article. In her study, she advocated for school management to bolster humanistic support, establish mechanisms for psychological consultations for teachers, and actively address teachers’ issues. For instance, this could involve guiding teachers in effectively managing psychological stress and enhancing their resilience.

4.4. Discussion

Instead of addressing the underlying causes of teachers’ occupational stress, research over the last five years has mostly concentrated on teacher burnout and the desire to quit the field as a result of extreme stress [11]. Research by Ma *et al.* [12] found that burnout rates for teachers range from 20% to 50% worldwide, indicating the increased strain that primary school teachers face in their professions. Teachers report discontent with their careers. Interviews revealed that almost all of the teachers said they were under stress at work, which highlights how urgent it is to address this problem. Due to the particular demands of the teaching profession, a number of factors contribute to the professional strain that instructors face and necessitate special consideration.

Teachers face stress due to a variety of factors, such as complicated workloads, difficult interpersonal connections, and low pay. Teachers expressed serious concerns about low compensation in relation to workload, which affected their financial security and job happiness. From this finding, for instance, that “despite their best efforts, they are unable to receive the appropriate compensation, which not only causes the teacher to expend energy and experience job burnout but also adds pressure from financial difficulties.” This is similar to the study done previously [29] which stated that performance salaries in developed cities are substantially greater than those in other economically disadvantaged places. Teachers typically perform poorly due to the disparity between their financial income and regional economic status, which puts a lot of strain on their lives. The high intensity of workload is the issue that is most frequently indicated as contributing to teachers’ work-related stress.

Three respondents stated in their comments that elementary school teachers experience stress due to a severe workload and a high physical and mental burden. Teachers have a difficult, demanding, and stressful job, and among primary school teachers, the stress caused by the intensity of their work is the most significant element. Simultaneously, this aligns with the perspectives by Xiaojuan and Yuanfang [15] in the

previously mentioned literature review. She also mentioned that primary school teachers typically work more than 14 hours a week in addition to being heavily involved in student management. Workplace stress was further intensified by the weight of administrative responsibilities and the need to reach performance targets. Furthermore, Shaheen [16] demonstrated that teachers must deal with a variety of tests, evaluations, and competitions, which causes anxiety in many of them. In addition, a great deal of non-educational work is done in schools, including inspections and other activities that have no bearing on the curriculum. This adds significantly to the burden on teachers and causes mental stress due to the intense nature of the work.

Teachers' stress levels were further increased by managing interpersonal interactions at work, which included confrontations with leaders and coworkers. Teachers' psychological load was further increased by the heavy demand society put on them. This is aligned with the previous research which suggested that teachers play a significant role and operate in complicated interpersonal relationships. It is possible that educators deal with interpersonal pressure on the job. This is also in line with the article findings of Shibiti [30], who stated that spending an excessive amount of time with coworkers inevitably results in disagreements and confrontations, which puts interpersonal strain on teachers.

The interviewees emphasized the direct impact that favorable teaching conditions and a professional environment have on the performance and well-being of instructors. In order to provide a calm and cozy environment that is conducive to teaching, respondents 5 and 6 underlined the significance of improving the school environment, including addressing teachers' demands and upgrading hardware facilities. This is in line with Jason recommendation [35] to establish a courteous and encouraging school climate that builds strong interpersonal bonds and increases instructors' contentment and zeal. Furthermore, personality qualities influence instructors' stress levels; for example, sensitivity to criticism and ambition might lead to differing levels of psychological endurance. In addition, instructors face a great deal of pressure from society, which frequently ignores outside influences on student performance and places the entire duty on educators. This emphasizes how important it is to identify and deal with the social influences that add to the psychological and spiritual stress that teachers experience. This is comparable to the argument made in the literature by Fabbro *et al.* [19] who stated that many instructors have unrealistic expectations or are overly idealistic in order to accomplish their goals, which makes their work more stressful. This aspect explains why teachers range in their psychological endurance because of their varied perspectives on life and work, as well as their varied aptitudes for interacting with people and managing social situations.

After the principal causes of primary school teachers' work-related stress were determined, headmasters who were interviewed investigated practical ways to reduce this stress. The establishment of constructive interpersonal interactions and the development of a supportive work environment were identified as the primary remedies. The sixth interviewee emphasized the importance of the work environment and how it affects teachers' emotions and stress levels. The establishment of a democratic, transparent, and peaceful environment in schools was considered crucial for the welfare of educators. Respondents underscored the importance of leaders giving teachers' interests top priority and offering them chances to participate in decision-making processes; this is consistent with earlier studies that promote better teacher-student relationships [18]. In keeping with suggestions from earlier research, respondent 6 also mentioned the use of health psychology promotion and counseling initiatives as a component of initiatives to address teachers' mental health issues. These results highlight how crucial it is to enhance the learning environment in schools and foster positive interpersonal interactions in order to improve teachers' well-being and reduce work-related stress. This outcome is in line with earlier studies that [34] suggested. In her paper, she advocated for school administration to improve humanistic care, set up a system for psychological consultation with teachers, and find solutions to issues that arise for them.

Increasing teacher pay and offering perks have been shown to be successful methods of easing the strain of the job. It was suggested that a basic pay-plus performance award system be established to support teachers' living expenses and maintain their dedication to the field. The respondents underscored the significance of augmenting base salaries to safeguard the well-being of educators and foster sustainable advancements in education. This is consistent with earlier studies by Yong *et al.* [33] that support fair compensation guidelines and the reduction of wage disparities. The provision of benefits including health checks, medical care, and retirement benefits was also emphasized by the respondents. Incentives, training, and free lunches were also highlighted by some respondents as ways to increase teachers' passion and job satisfaction. These results highlight how important it is to address pay scales and offer benefits to reduce work-related stress and improve the well-being of teachers.

One important tactic to relieve job pressure, according to respondents, is to lessen the burden on instructors. Numerous issues were noted by them, such as primary school teachers' widely pervasive part-time teaching and divided workloads. In order to achieve successful teaching and student management, it is suggested that the significance of limiting working hours and allocating teachers' time objectively. This is consistent with earlier research [34] supporting the creation of specialized teaching positions, a decrease in workload, and enhancements to evaluation methods to improve the performance of teachers. The focus on

creating impartial and equitable performance evaluation systems highlights the necessity of an all-encompassing strategy to lessen teacher stress and encourage efficient teaching techniques.

Improving pay structures, creating supportive interpersonal relationships in schools, and improving working conditions are just a few of the many strategies needed to address pressures among primary school teachers. Stress associated with workload can be reduced by giving teachers access to sufficient resources and easing administrative responsibilities. In addition, fostering a supportive school climate and improving lines of communication can lessen interpersonal disputes. Teachers' psychological load can also be reduced by acknowledging the expectations society has of them and supporting a more equitable division of educational duties.

4.5. Implication of findings

In general, encouraging teacher retention and well-being requires an awareness of and commitment to resolving the issues causing teachers' work-related stress. Educational institutions may foster a more sustainable and supportive work environment for teachers by implementing focused interventions to address these stressors, which will eventually benefit both instructors and students. Such efforts are crucial as primary school teachers play a crucial role in the teaching team and are tasked with fostering practical skills as well as carrying out the objective of promoting cultural awareness and values. In many respects, they are under pressure from the family, the school, and society, and the development of students is directly correlated with their work ethic. Thus, monitoring the stress levels of primary school teachers is essential for maintaining their physical and mental well-being as well as the steady advancement of their entire educational careers.

The researcher expects to conduct an empirical investigation based on the study of existing literature and the actual situation in two primary schools in Heilongjiang Province. The study's theory is impacted by the paucity of domestic scholars' research on primary school teachers' work stress. The research findings on teachers' work stress will be enhanced by analyzing the causes of work stress among primary teachers and suggesting solutions or strategies to reduce it. It will also raise the standard of management of educational institutions and support the stability of the primary teachers' faculty.

Primary school teachers do not experience enrollment stress in comparison to their conventional high school counterparts, but their work objectives and content do have unique qualities. The general quality of the student population has decreased in China as a result of the country's recent school enrollment boom, and teachers' jobs are becoming more difficult. Additionally, a low sense of teaching achievement and a significant sense of work burnout pose serious challenges to teachers' stability at work. These pressures have been made worse by COVID-19, which forces teachers to adapt to new teaching strategies and experience increased workloads, and hampered oversight and communication. Therefore, the researchers expect that by sharing the results of this study, people will become more aware of the stress that primary school teachers face at work and will be able to better understand and assist them. The findings of this study will give primary school administrators useful information that will help them pay attention to the physical and mental health of their teachers and serve as a resource for the application of humanized management techniques which are to create a healthy learning environment for students, acknowledge their differences, and provide home-school cooperation education so that they develop into qualified students. Adding to that is to suggest countermeasures for teachers to relieve their own stress and personal professional development, to mentor teachers to improve their teaching attitude and behavior, and to enhance their professional ability.

Furthermore, this study also draws the conclusion that methods to alleviate work stress among teachers can be implemented through various means. Educational management should judiciously distribute teachers' workloads, moderately enhance their salaries and benefits, and extend support for their professional growth. Schools should institute a participatory management approach, foster a conducive external atmosphere, and employ incentivizing mechanisms to enhance teacher performance. On a personal level, teachers should proactively adapt, enhance their competencies, and endeavor to cultivate positive interpersonal relationships to mitigate work-related stress.

5. CONCLUSION

This research delves into the factors and countermeasures concerning work-related stress experienced by primary school teachers. Four respondents' interviews with teachers in primary schools revealed a variety of factors contributing to their work-related stress. Extended work hours and unfulfilled objectives lead to stress, with workload serving as a frequent cause of anxiety. The main stressors mentioned by the respondents were high-intensity employment, poor income, and disrespect. Moreover, a major factor in work stress is interpersonal dynamics, which includes issues with leaders, students, and coworkers. The problem is made worse by the strain of maintaining several social positions, the competition for promotions, and the ongoing urge to improve oneself. Overall, primary school teachers experience a complicated terrain

of stress due to the intricate interactions between their workload, income, interpersonal connections, and external obstacles such as the epidemic.

The interview data also reported that headmasters use a wide range of techniques to help primary school teachers cope with work-related stress to create a positive and upbeat work environment, highlighting the need for various strategies to tackle this widespread problem. Headmasters acknowledged that stress was common among teachers and showed that they were prepared to handle the issue by identifying external signs of stress or by providing proactive support. This demonstrates their dedication to putting teachers' welfare first even in the absence of complaints. A thorough analysis of the factors influencing teachers' work-related stress was conducted, and one headmaster focused on the conflict between personal and professional obligations and financial limitations, while the other highlighted the difficulties in adjusting to the ever-changing information landscape and weaknesses in performance evaluation systems. Additionally, both headmasters understood how important the work environment was in molding teachers' experiences, therefore they made a conscious effort to reduce stress by providing useful advantages and creating supportive learning settings. Lastly, the findings highlight the role of society in recognizing and appreciating educators, highlighting the necessity of a positive public impression to reduce teachers' stress. Overall, this study advances the teaching profession as a whole and emphasizes the beneficial effects of taking proactive steps to manage stress at work.

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