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Teacher stress in Taiwanese primary schools

Chris Kyriacou and Pei-Yu Chien
Department of Educational Studies
University of York, United Kingdom

Abstract

A questionnaire was used to explore teacher stress amongst 203 teachers in primary schools in Taiwan. Twenty-six per cent of the teachers reported that being a teacher was either very or extremely stressful. The main source of stress identified was the changing education policies of the government. The most effective coping action reported was having a healthy home life. Teachers reported that the most effective action that schools or the government could take to reduce teacher stress was to decrease teachers' workload. These findings are in line with those reported in many western countries, where the stress caused by a heavy workload and coping with educational reforms have been very much in evidence.

Introduction

Teacher stress can be defined as the experience by a teacher of unpleasant negative emotions such as anger, frustration, anxiety, depression and nervousness, resulting from some aspect of their work (Kyriacou 2000). Since the early 1970s, the amount of research on teacher stress has increased steadily, and it is now a major topic of research in many countries (Kyriacou 2001; Troman & Woods 2001; Vandenberghe & Huberman 1999). However, very few studies reported to date have explored teacher stress in Taiwan. Social, cultural, economic and educational differences between countries mean that one must be very cautious in generalising from research done in one country to another. As such, there is an important need for basic research on teacher stress to be carried out in many countries, where the local circumstances can be taken account of in the design of the study.

The aim of this study was to explore teacher stress amongst teachers in primary schools in Taiwan. The researchers sought to explore the general level of teacher stress, the sources of teacher stress, the coping actions used by teachers, and what actions the teachers think could be taken by schools and the government to reduce teacher stress.

Primary schools in Taiwan

Taiwanese primary schools comprise six year groups, starting at the entry age of six years. Primary schools in Taiwan can be very large. Primary schools with over sixty classes, each containing 35–40 pupils, are not unusual. Three types of teaching position are held in primary schools: classroom teachers, subject teachers and administrative teachers. Classroom teachers teach the full range of subjects to one class and are responsible for everyday matters concerning their pupils, including making contact when appropriate with parents, dealing with pastoral matters, and dealing with pupil misbehaviour. Subject teachers tend to be specialists in one subject, which they teach to several different classes in the school. Administrative teachers are teachers who typically have a teaching load for about half of their time and spend the other half carrying out a range of administrative tasks.

There is a strongly competitive ethos in Taiwanese primary schools, with parents putting pressure on pupils to do well at school in order to gain access to the best universities and careers. This is often evident in parents being critical of teachers who they feel are not doing enough to help their child succeed, and parents are all too ready to give teachers advice on their teaching and to complain to the school principal if they are not satisfied. In addition, a certain degree of competitiveness has also been generated amongst teachers, as they vie with each other to help their pupils gain the top grades (Murphy & Liu 1998).

Further, primary schools in Taiwan have been subject to a series of curricula reforms since 1996, which have not been particularly successful in raising standards, and government and education officials have often been reported in the media as blaming teachers for the lack of success of these reforms because of their reluctance to change their practice, make sufficient effort, or to engage in appropriate professional development activities (Pan & Yu 1999; Tsai 2002).

Education policy makers in Taiwan have signalled the crucial importance of teacher development for educational reform and raising standards (Vulliamy 1998) and, in recent years, teachers have been put under increasing pressure by their principals to attend in-service training activities. However, as these activities are normally timed to occur on Wednesday afternoons (when pupils are not in school) or at weekends, many teachers feel frustrated by this. These reforms are also seen to have generated a lot of unnecessary paperwork and to have increased teachers' workloads (Yang 2001).

An unusual feature of primary teaching in Taiwan is that teachers' salary is not taxed. This tax-free status was conferred in the 1970s during a period of rapid economic expansion, when recruiting teachers became difficult. Despite the fact that this incentive is now widely regarded by teachers and members of the public as no longer necessary, the government has been reluctant to take this away and many members of the public are critical of teachers for having this privilege. In addition, teachers complain that the public seems to be unaware of the heavy workload that teachers have. When these are added to government criticisms of teachers for the failures in educational reforms, this has generated a feeling amongst teachers that they are misunderstood and no longer respected (Lan 2002).

Nevertheless, teaching is a popular career choice in Taiwan, and there is intense competition between qualified teachers to gain a permanent post. However, teaching is increasingly being described as a high-stress profession and many experienced teachers are keen to retire early.

Method

A questionnaire was designed to explore the general level of teacher stress, the sources of teacher stress, the coping actions used by teachers, and what actions the teachers think could be taken by schools and the government to reduce teacher stress. The questionnaire mainly comprised sets of items coupled with a five-point Likert scale (scored 1 to 5). The items were based on a consideration of studies of teacher stress in the West (eg Cockburn 1996; Kyriacou 2001; Troman & Woods 2001) together with research conducted in Taiwan, which largely comprises unpublished MA theses (eg Cheng 1996; Chiang 2002; Lee 2002; Yang 2001; Yeh 1998; Yen 2002; Yeng 2001).

The English version of the questionnaire is shown in Appendix I. A Chinese language version of the questionnaire was distributed to teachers in 22 primary schools via a contact teacher in each of these schools who was approached by email, and who agreed to help with the study, with the instruction to ask 10–15 colleagues in the school to complete the questionnaire. As such, the questionnaire was essentially completed by those approached by the contact person who had agreed to complete the questionnaire. It was felt that this would be the best form of distribution given the distance of the participants from the UK. This meant that some degree of response bias might result, but this was likely to be no different than that for a random distribution of questionnaires with a modest response rate.

A total of 203 questionnaires were received. The sample comprised 72% females and 28% males. Six percent had less than one year's teaching experience; 30%: 1–5 years; 20%: 6–10 years; and 44%: over 10 years. Seventy-two percent were classroom teachers, 14% were subject teachers, and 14% administrative teachers. Fourteen percent taught in schools with less than 20 classes, 40% in schools with 21–40 classes, 8% in schools with 41–60 classes, and 37% in schools with over 60 classes. Significant differences between groups were identified using a t-test to compare two groups, and a one-way analysis of variance to compare three or more groups, for $P < 0.05$.

Results and discussion

The responses of the teachers to the question on the general level of stress experienced are shown in Table I. As can be seen, about 26% of the sample reported that being a teacher was very or extremely stressful. This proportion is in line with previous research in Taiwan (Chiang 2002; Lee 2002) and with studies in the UK, which typically report figures between 20% and 30% using this scale (Kyriacou 2000). No significant differences were obtained on this scale in terms of gender, length of teaching experience, or position held in the school, but those teachers based in large schools (ie with over 60 classes) did report a higher level of stress

than other teachers. Lee (2002) also reported that teacher stress was highest in large schools. Large schools are often located in cities, tend to be over-crowded and have a lower level of resources per teacher, which may explain this difference.

TABLE I: Overall teacher stress (percentages, N = 203)

Not at all stressful	Mildly stressful	Moderately stressful	Very stressful	Extremely stressful
1.4	24.3	48.0	22.3	4.0

The responses of the teachers to the 20 sources of stress are shown in Table II, in descending order of the percentage rating the item a source of extreme stress. As can be seen, the item 'changeable education policy of the government' received the highest rating, followed by: 'public's attitude and misunderstanding about primary teachers' workload'; 'additional administrative work'; 'being observed by colleagues, student teachers, college tutors or parents'; 'special needs pupils in the class'; and 'pupils' misbehaviour'. The high ratings for the items 'changeable education policy of the government' and 'pupils' misbehaviour' are consistent with the findings of other studies in Taiwan (eg Yang 2001; Yen 2002). The relative low rating for 'pupils who lack motivation' as a source of stress contrasts markedly with research reported in Western countries, where this typically features very highly. This can be explained by the generally high level of pupil motivation that characterises primary schools in Taiwan (Kyriacou 2001).

TABLE II: Sources of teacher stress (percentages, N = 203)

Source of stress	No stress	A little stress	Some stress	A lot of stress	Extreme stress
Changeable education policy of the government	1.5	10.8	21.7	30.5	35.5
Public's attitude and misunderstanding about primary teachers' workload	6.0	18.9	30.3	25.9	18.9
Additional administrative work	5.9	18.8	26.7	29.7	18.8
Being observed by colleagues, student teachers, college tutors or parents	8.5	22.4	31.3	19.4	18.4

Special needs pupils in the class (eg with autism, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), low ability or low emotional intelligence)	6.9	14.4	28.2	32.7	17.8
Pupils' misbehaviour	1.0	15.3	39.1	28.7	15.8
Sundry class duties (eg collecting money for lunch/tuition fees or samples for parasite/urine inspection)	9.9	31.0	24.6	19.2	15.3
Communications to and from parents	8.9	26.7	33.7	19.8	10.9
Too many pupils in one class	10.8	22.7	35.0	21.2	10.3
Poor working conditions	10.8	36.0	29.1	16.7	7.4
Management style of the school principal	7.4	32.2	36.6	16.3	7.4
Not enough teaching resources	4.5	25.7	43.6	19.3	6.9
Too much subject matter to teach	9.4	28.2	36.1	19.8	6.4
Having to join too many teacher research and study seminars	21.7	34.0	25.6	12.8	5.9
Instructing pupils who take part in a local or national competition	12.3	32.0	37.4	12.3	5.9
Break time is too short	24.6	34.5	24.6	10.3	5.9
Pupils' poor attitudes toward classroom tasks	2.0	31.0	38.9	22.7	5.4
Pupils who lack motivation	3.5	29.9	42.3	20.4	4.0
Teaching a subject or grade that does not fit expectations or teacher's ability	13.8	36.9	29.1	17.2	3.0

Competition between classes/colleagues	29.1	43.3	19.7	6.9	1.0

Female teachers reported more stress for the item 'special needs pupils in the class'. The most experienced teachers (more than 10 years) reported experiencing less stress from pupils who lack motivation and from pupils' misbehaviour than other teachers. Subject teachers reported less stress than other teachers concerning the management style of the school principal and additional administrative work. Teachers in large schools (over 60 classes) reported more stress for competition between classes/colleagues, too many pupils in one class, poor working conditions, and the need to join too many teacher research and study seminars, whilst teachers in small schools (less than 20 classes) reported more stress for additional administrative work.

The responses of the teachers to the 25 coping actions are shown in Table III in descending order of the percentage rating the item as extremely effective. As can be seen, the item with the highest rating was 'have a healthy home life', followed by 'ensure someone understands you and stands by you'; 'ensure that you understand the work you are about to do'; 'see the humour in the situation'; 'learn how to control emotion'; and 'relax after work'.

Kyriacou (2000, 2001) makes a distinction between two main types of coping strategies: direct action strategies, that deal with action taken to reduce the source of stress itself; and palliative strategies, that involve relief and/or controlling emotion. It is interesting to note that five of these six items are palliative coping strategies rather than direct action coping strategies; the only example of the latter was the item concerning understanding the work. It is also interesting to note the relatively high rating for 'learn how to control emotion', which is a coping strategy increasingly being advocated in western countries (Kyriacou 2000). Given the frequent use by the Taiwanese of consulting fortune tellers and deities when facing problems, it was expected that religion would feature more often as an extremely effective coping action compared with seeking psychological counselling. The figures obtained here are fairly consistent with this expectation whereas, in Western countries, religion and professional counselling tend to be rated fairly equally (Kyriacou 2000).

TABLE III: Coping actions (percentages, N = 203)

Coping action	Ineffective or never used	A little effective	Moderately effective	Very effective	Extremely effective
Have a healthy home life	6.4	4.5	16.8	46.5	25.7

Ensure someone understands you and stands by you	1.5	9.0	21.4	45.3	22.9
Ensure that you understand the work you are about to teach	0.5	5.0	24.3	48.0	22.3
See the humour in the situation	0.5	7.9	22.3	49.0	20.3
Learn how to control emotion	0.5	5.9	21.3	53.5	18.8
Relax after work	2.0	9.4	21.8	48.0	18.8
Avoid confrontations	4.5	6.4	24.8	46.0	18.3
Continue further education	0.5	8.9	30.2	42.1	18.3
Forget things that happened in school after work	11.4	18.3	21.3	32.2	16.8
Plan ahead and prioritise	5.0	7.0	28.4	46.3	13.4
Think about the coming vacation	3.5	14.4	30.7	38.1	13.4
Get to know your pupils as individuals	2.5	7.4	34.7	44.6	10.9
Share your failures	3.0	10.9	35.6	40.6	9.9
Start the term with clearly defined classroom rules and expectations	1.5	5.4	29.2	55.0	8.9
Practice religion	31.2	26.7	18.3	15.3	8.4

Read books about stress	11.9	23.8	36.1	20.3	7.9
Analyse and try to keep problems in perspective	1.0	9.0	34.0	49.0	7.0
Discuss your problems with colleagues or friends	0.5	10.9	35.8	46.8	6.0
Devote yourself to free-time activities	31.7	14.4	27.7	20.3	5.9
Spend more time communicating with parents	2.5	23.4	44.3	24.4	5.5
Spend time alone	10.0	29.5	35.0	21.5	4.0
Take absence	64.9	15.3	9.4	6.4	4.0
Do deep breathing	13.9	37.6	30.7	16.3	1.5
Take psychological counselling	56.7	7.5	21.9	12.4	1.5
Change your school	54.2	18.4	18.9	7.0	1.5

Male teachers rated ‘learning how to control emotion’ as more effective than did female teachers. The least experienced teachers rated ‘ensure that you understand the work you are about to teach’, ‘religion’, ‘have a healthy home life’, and ‘plan ahead and prioritise’ as less effective than did more experienced teachers. Subject teachers rated ‘deep breathing’, ‘religion’, and ‘avoid comparing with others’, as less effective than the other two groups. Teachers in large schools rated absence as more effective than did other teachers.

The responses of the teachers to the nine actions that schools or the government could take to reduce teacher stress are shown in Table IV in descending order of the percentage rating the item as extremely effective. As can be seen, the item with the highest rating was ‘decrease teachers’ workload’, followed by: ‘provide professional administrators’; and ‘increase teachers’ salary’. Female teachers rated ‘decrease teachers’ workload’ as more effective than did male teachers. Teachers with the longest teaching experience (over 10 years) rated

'institutionalise and make transparent personnel matters in school' as more effective than did other teachers. Teachers in small schools (less than 20 classes) rated 'provide professional administrators' as more effective; and teachers in large schools (more than 60 classes) rated 'increase teachers' salary' as more effective than did other teachers.

TABLE IV: School or government intervention strategies (percentages, N = 203)

Intervention	Ineffective	A little effective	Moderately effective	Very effective	Extremely effective
Decrease teachers' workload	0.0	2.5	14.4	31.7	51.5
Provide professional administrators	1.0	3.5	14.9	35.6	45.0
Increase teachers' salary	1.0	8.0	23.4	30.8	36.8
Improve working conditions	0.5	2.5	15.9	46.3	34.8
Change education policy less frequently	1.0	4.4	13.8	47.8	33.0
Increase teaching resources	0.5	3.0	18.3	50.5	27.7
Establish workshops to reduce teacher stress	4.0	18.4	28.9	31.8	16.9
Institutionalise and make transparent personnel matters in school	3.5	12.4	28.4	42.3	13.4
Reduce extra activities during school time	3.5	12.6	37.2	35.2	11.6

The aim of the first open-ended question was to extend the exploration of sources of stress. The responses made were consistent with the ratings already

reported above. However, it is interesting to note that the most frequent and detailed concerns expressed by teachers were to do with the pressure on teachers coming from parents who expected teachers to bring about greater progress for their children, and who were quick to complain to the teacher and the school principal if they were not satisfied with the teacher's effectiveness. The second most frequent category of responses here concerned complaints about having too much teaching to do and not enough time for preparation.

The aim of the second open-ended question was to extend the exploration of coping strategies and the action that could be taken to reduce stress. Again, the responses were consistent with the ratings already reported above. The largest category of responses comprised descriptions of what individual teachers said they did to cope with stress, and the most common action cited was the development of interests outside school. The second largest category of responses comprised complaints about the way education officials and policy makers made too many changes in education, and that if education officials and policy makers paid more attention to the views of teachers and spent less time blaming teachers, that would have a major impact on reducing stress.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate teacher stress in primary schools is a problem in Taiwan, on a par with levels of stress typically reported for western countries. The dominant sources of stress in Taiwan appear to be a heavy workload and coping with educational reforms. The coping actions adopted by teachers seem to be dominated by palliative strategies, with particular importance placed on having a healthy home life and social support. Not surprisingly, a decrease in teachers' workload was seen to be the most effective action that could be taken by schools or the government to reduce teacher stress. The problems caused by a heavy workload and coping with educational reforms is now evident in many western countries, and it is interesting to see that this has also emerged here. The government in Taiwan will need to take action to address this if teacher stress is to be reduced.

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Appendix I

Questionnaire

Taiwanese primary school teachers' stress and coping strategies

Dear Teacher,

This questionnaire is designed to explore the possible causes of stress and coping strategies for primary school teachers in Taiwan.

This questionnaire is anonymous and confidential.

Please tick responses as honestly and spontaneously as possible.

Yours faithfully,

Pei-Yu Chien

Postgraduate student, Department of Educational Studies, University of York, UK.

Please place a tick in the appropriate boxes

1. Gender

Female	
Male	

2. Age:

under 30	
31–40	
41–50	
over 50	

3. Teaching experience (after receiving your primary teacher licence)

less than 1 year	
1–5 years	
6–10 years	
over 10 years	

4. Which title best describes your post

Tutor	
Subject teacher	
Teacher serving as an administrator	

5. School size

under 20 classes	
21–40 classes	
41–60 classes	
over 60 classes	

6. Where is your school? _____ (county/city)

7. As a teacher, how great a source of stress are these factors to you?

	No stress 1	**A little stress 2**	**Some stress 3**	**A lot of stress 4**	**Extreme stress 5**
1. Pupils who lack motivation					

2. Communications to and from parents					
3. Public's attitude and misunderstanding about primary teachers' workload					
4. Pupils' misbehaviour					
5. Management style of the school principal					
6. Additional administrative work					
7. Competition between classes/colleagues					
8. Instructing pupils who take part in local or national competition					
9. Too many pupils in one class					
10. Poor working conditions					
11. Having to join too many teacher research and study seminars					
12. Sundry class duties (eg collecting money for lunch/tuition fee or samples for parasite/urine inspection)					
13. Subject or grade taught does not fit expectations or self ability					
14. Changeable education policy of the government					

15. Special pupils in the class (eg with autism, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), low ability or low emotional intelligence)					
16. Not enough teaching resources					
17. Pupils' poor attitudes toward classroom tasks					
18. Being observed by colleagues, student teachers, college tutors or parents					
19. Too much subject matter to teach					
20. Break time is too short					

8. Please list below anything else that has caused you stress

9. In general, how stressful do you find being a primary school teacher?

Not at all stressful	**Mildly stressful**	**Moderately stressful**	**Very stressful**	**Extremely stressful**

10. When you experience stress, how effective do you find these coping actions?

	Ineffective or never used 1	**A little effective 2**	**Moderately effective 3**	**Very effective 4**	**Extremely effective 5**
1. Discussing your problems with colleagues or friends					
2. Starting the term with clearly defined classroom rules and expectations					
3. Relaxing after work					
4. Taking absence					
5. Analysing and trying to keep problems in perspective					
6. Psychological counselling					
7. Deep breathing					
8. Ensuring that you understand the work you are about to teach					

9. Devoting oneself to free-time activities					
10. Getting to know your pupils as individuals					
11. Spending more time communicating with parents					
12. Thinking about the coming vacation					
13. Practising religion					
14. Being alone					
15. Forgetting things that happened in school after work					
16. Having a healthy home life					
17. Learning how to control emotion					
18. Seeing the humour in the situation					
19. Avoiding confrontations					

20. Continuing further education					
21. Sharing your failures					
22. Ensuring someone understands you and stands by you					
23. Changing your school					
24. Planning ahead and prioritising					
25. Reading books about stress					

11. How effective would these actions by the school or government be in reducing your stress?

	Ineffective 1	**A little effective 2**	**Moderately effective 3**	**Very effective 4**	**Extremely effective 5**
1. Institutionalise and make transparent personnel matters in school					
2. Change education policy less frequently					
3. Reduce extra activities during school time					

4. Improve working conditions					
5. Increase teaching resources					
6. Provide professional administrators					
7. Establish workshops to reduce teacher stress					
8. Decrease teachers' workload					
9. Increase teachers' salary					

12. Please list below anything else you or others can do that could reduce your stress effectively.

Thank you very much!