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Teacher Burnout and Coping Strategies to Remain in Teaching Job in Malaysia: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract: This study examines the basic underlying structure of burnout experiences among teachers in Malaysia by discovering the challenges which lead them to experience burnout. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the current study explores the coping strategies that these teachers used to remain in their profession. Ten teachers from two public high schools participated in the study. The data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analysed using the constant comparison method. The findings revealed challenges that cause teachers to experience burnout, which are student misbehaviour, insufficient parental collaboration, occupational stress in the teaching environment, and negative emotions. The themes related to the coping strategies used to remain in the teaching profession are understanding teaching and learning, positive approach, individual factors, and support system. This paper lists some recommendations for managing the issue of teacher burnout and facilitate teacher retention is proposed, which includes providing training and development activities for teachers, increasing salaries, helping teachers develop coping strategies, and creating adequate support systems.

Keywords: *Teacher burnout, coping strategies, teaching job, interpretative phenomenological analysis, Malaysian teachers.*

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Introduction

For the past four decades, the issue of teacher burnout has attracted the attention of researchers across the globe. Kim et al. (2017), for instance, found that burnout among young teachers was widespread and needed new and insightful findings. Teacher burnout has been identified in western countries including the UK, the USA, Israel, Australia, Russia, and Germany (Kyriacou, 1987; Rudow, 1999) as well as eastern countries such as Taiwan, Japan, and Hong Kong (Chang, 2009). It is related to the welfare, health and psychological wellbeing of teachers, which could affect their teaching performance. Stress and burnout have been reported to decrease teachers' vigour, which could have a great impact on their commitment level. Moreover, it may trigger attrition, which in turn could negatively impact students' achievement (Kim et al., 2017; Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

There is a wide range of internal and external factors that lead to teacher burnout. For example, school systems, as well as society, often put teachers at the risk of experiencing burnout, which eventually decreases their enthusiasm for teaching. The lack of teacher enthusiasm and passion for teaching results in increased negative effects for students learning outcomes as well as teacher performance (Fernet et al., 2014; Skinner & Jeffry, 2016). Moreover, teachers' work experiences, school norms, and policy contexts such as reducing budgets, increased accountability of increasing student achievement, and lack of administrative and parental support have been reported to increase pressure on teachers (Richards, 2012). Furthermore, poor infrastructure, lack of teaching resources, and classroom facilities are also known to be potential stressors for teachers (Fernet et al., 2012). Other factors such as poor quality of teacher induction training, mentoring, and lack of other forms of social support can also contribute to stress and burnout (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kim et al., 2017).

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Currently, schools are transforming at a fast pace which has changed and expanded the roles of teachers. Bas (2011) noted that in addition to educating students, teachers were also responsible for other matters such as developing curricula, assessments, mentoring, establishing communication links with parents, as well as taking part in community services and departmental duties. Unfortunately, the occurrence of social problems such as teenage pregnancy, alcohol consumption, and bullying is blamed on teachers and the school system (Denny et al., 2011). Such complexities have resulted in the teaching profession being ranked as one of the most stressful professions worldwide (Diehl & Carlotto, 2014; Shernoff et al., 2011). These types of expectations and pressures have consequently triggered stress and burnout among teachers. Thus, paying more attention to the well-being of teachers is of utmost importance. Teachers do not solely impart knowledge, they also play a vital role in helping students develop holistically.

Every year, large numbers of teachers and principals find themselves unable to continue working in the schools because they feel drained and exhausted (Gray & Taie, 2015; Herman & Marlowe, 2005; Moran, 2018). Several studies have reported that teachers commonly experienced exhaustion in their occupations (Antoniou et al., 2013; Clipa, 2017) leading to harmful personal consequences (Mark & Smith, 2012). This is an alarming situation that has persisted for decades. Truch (1980) reported that 90% of all teachers have experienced a certain level of burnout and more than 25% of them have experienced severe levels of burnout due to work (Bas, 2011). This finding is also supported by Aldrup et al. (2018), stating that student's misbehaviour increases exhaustion and decreases enthusiasm among teachers in Germany. More recently, Moran (2018) reported a disturbing figure that 3,750 teachers in England are on long-term stress leaves.

The literature on teacher burnout in Malaysia is still limited. Hence, the current research attempts to shed light on the ongoing struggles of teacher Malaysia. Consequently, the current study proposes a few practical suggestions and coping strategies that have been implemented by Malaysian teachers. The insights from this study could lead to a better understanding of teacher burnout.

Therefore, the specific research questions (RQs) guiding this research are:

RQ1: What are the challenges that led Malaysian teachers to experience burnout?

RQ2: What strategies do Malaysian teachers employ to cope with those challenges to remain in the teaching job?

Literature Review

Antecedents of Teacher Burnout

Studies on the antecedents of burnout suggest a list of factors that may trigger burnout experiences (Alson, 2019; Ghani et al., 2014). Among them are micro (i.e. academic and administrative factors) and macro (governmental and personal factors) which are claimed to have a strong connection to burnout (Cephe, 2010). Fernet et al. (2013) proposed that certain components of job characteristics such as job demands and job resources could potentially contribute to stress and the experience of burnout. Job demands refer to the job expectations related to tasks that employees must complete. They are categorised into three different elements: 1) quantitative demand, 2) cognitive demand, and 3) emotional demand. Once these demands became overloaded, teachers may feel stressed and eventually experience burnout. In addition to these factors, the absence of job resources also contributes to burnout among teaching staff. The core element of job resources is the social support that comes from supervisors, colleagues, and peers.

Individual factors have also been shown to have relationships with the concept of burnout. The factors comprise demographic characteristics, personality characteristics, and job attitudes. Furthermore, demographic variables such as gender, years of experiences, age, ethnicity, social-economic status, job characteristics (job demands and job resource), and marital status have been reported to be related to burnout syndrome. For example, it was reported that the level of burnout among young employees was higher than those who were 40 years old and above (Alhija, 2015; Mukundan & Ahour, 2011; Norlund et al., 2010). More specifically, Mousavy and Nimehchisalem (2014) reported that older teachers were more burned out than their younger colleagues in personal achievement and depersonalization.

Studies showed that female teachers tend to experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion compared to males (Antoniou et al., 2013; Norlund et al., 2010). Nonetheless, male teachers tended to have a higher level of depersonalization (Dagar & Mathur, 2016; Purvanova & Muros, 2010). On the contrary, Ghani et al. (2014) found no significant stress disparity among teachers based on gender. Finally, married teachers were less prone to burnout compared to those who were unmarried (Mousavy & Nimehchisalem, 2014). Specifically, married teachers having spouses as teachers experienced higher burnout than those having a non-teacher spouse (Yoganand et al., 2019).

Consequences of Teacher Burnout

The consequences of burnout among teachers include major health problems as well as physical and mental fatigue resulting from excessively long working hours (Cozolino, 2017; Kaschka et al., 2011). Stress has been reported to trigger physical health problems including insomnia, vertigo, headaches, difficulty relaxing, gastrointestinal disturbances, tiredness (Batista et al., 2013), tension, frustration, anxiety, fury and depression (Sandilos et al., 2018),

skin rashes, stomach ulcers, changes in appetite (Cezar-Vaz et al., 2015), recurrent cases of flu, infections, and colds (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). Stress also affects physical health and the psychological state of mind, including the experience of low self-esteem, depression, irritability, helplessness, anxiety (Burgard et al., 2012; Kaschka et al., 2011), loss of professional motivation, bitterness (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010), feelings of job insecurity (Aybas et al., 2015), and inefficiency in general teaching tasks (Sneha & Maheswari, 2020; Tahir, 2011).

Likewise, teachers reported that burnout symptoms have negatively affected their personal relationships, family lives, teacher-student relationships, and the quality of their teaching (Coulter & Abney, 2009; Ruyam, 2011). Burnout also resulted in reduced socialization which ultimately led to poorer relationships between colleagues. Other reported burnout symptoms are negative attitudes such as impatience, less tolerance, and a sense of dissatisfaction in the working environment or life (Sneha & Maheswari, 2020). With teacher-student relationship, teachers' positive emotions such as sympathy, cheerfulness, excitement, love, patience, and calmness were reported to be high when there is a good relationship with students with negative emotions (no enthusiasm, shame, anxiety, no excitement) for negative relationships (Stephanou & Athanasiadou, 2020). The most serious consequence of burnout is poor teacher retention, which has caused a shortage of teachers especially among those dealing with special needs students with behavioural disorders, emotional disturbances, severe disabilities, or learning disabilities (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010).

Coping Strategies for Teacher Burnout

The literature on teacher burnout also highlighted the mechanisms that teachers employ to cope with burnout. For example, Pogere et al. (2019) recognised two types of coping strategies among teachers, problem-focused and emotion-focused. The former refers to an active coping mechanism meant to adjust factors that manipulate the relationship between an individual and his surroundings. While the latter refers to self-distraction or denial coping that normalizes an individual's emotion. Scholars have also looked at internal and external support mechanisms that reduced burnout. Kebbi and Al-Hroub (2018) acknowledged two forms of supports, i.e., internal and external. Internal support is defined as a personal variable of an individual that includes both psychological and behavioural patterns (Betoret, 2009). External support comprises social and didactic resources. Social support is a vital element in assisting teachers in overcoming any difficulties they might face and may come from a school such as principals, colleagues, and so on. On the other hand, didactic resources referred to teacher support resources and school facilities that are believed to play important roles in assisting and facilitating teachers in their teaching progressions. Additionally, Zhang et al. (2014) stated that external support such as recreation, time management, educational interventions, rational emotive therapy, team building, training in interpersonal, social skills, and stress inoculation greatly reduces burnout.

In normal circumstances, an individual teacher is expected to adopt a proactive attitude towards work by seeking hope in failure. Teachers must learn to see the positive side of things to deal correctly with the roots of stress in teaching and effective time management. Hence, an optimistic attitude towards implementing new changes through collective proactive strategies in school reforms reduced stress level (Tikkanen et al., 2020). Commitment towards new professional developments enhances teachers' interest in the workplace (Khan et al., 2014). Therefore, organizations can play a significant role in reducing the level of burnout among teachers. Furthermore, organizations have a responsibility to monitor and curb teacher burnout. Schools should provide a "stress inventory" for academic staff to increase awareness of stress (Lee et al., 2020). Further support that an organization can offer to prevent teacher burnout could be professional training sessions for teachers and teacher support groups to enhance their well-being (Zhang et al., 2014).

Teacher Burnout in a Malaysian Context

Teacher burnout not only negatively affects teachers' mental health but also school effectiveness and students' outcomes. Teachers in Malaysia are no exception. The Teacher Professional Development Sector (TPDS) was established, after the restructuring of the Ministry of Education Malaysia in 2008, to develop excellent teachers. Its main focus is to develop the quality of the teaching staff. Nevertheless, the TPDS has not included any component on the preservation of physical wellness and the psychological well-being of teachers, which are vital elements of the teaching process.

Studies in Malaysia provide evidence of teachers in Malaysia experiencing exhaustion and stress. They often succumbed to pressure from students, parents, and school management, making them unable to function effectively and fulfil the job requirements that the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has stipulated (Abdul-Samad et al., 2010). Mousavy and Nimehchisalem (2014) observed a significantly high burnout level among Malaysian teachers' personal accomplishment. On the other hand, Ghani et al. (2014) reported that teachers' stress level was moderate.

The growing problems of teacher burnout received great attention in 1996 when several teachers were reported to be stressed out and unable to function properly. In the states of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, for instance, teachers were labelled as "stressed" because they were required to spend up to 74 hours per week teaching and coordinating co-curricular activities for their students (Abdul-Samad et al., 2010). Wei and Abdullah (2016), in a study on Malaysian

teachers, reported that the level of teacher burnout for emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment was found to be moderately high. However, it did not show any relationship with teacher-reported job satisfaction. Similarly, Subon and Sigie (2016) reported that teachers in the West Malaysian districts experienced a moderate level of burnout and it was significantly related to their period of service. Antoniou et al. (2013) found that primary school teachers experienced greater levels of stress in comparison to their secondary school counterparts.

Teachers all around the world share similar professional objectives. They also thrive to achieve common goals by producing positive learning outcomes and improved student achievement. Individually, teachers deal with stress or burnout differently. Some can keep their stress under control while some others feel overwhelmed due to not having any coping strategy. The present study is an interpretative phenomenological analysis that explores the experiences of teachers in Malaysia concerning stress and the strategies they employed to remain in their job.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative research was conducted using an interpretative phenomenological analysis. An interpretative phenomenological analysis is concerned with investigating and understanding social and psychological phenomena from the collective perspectives of individuals who have lived and experienced them (Moustakas, 1994; Welman & Kruger, 1999). In an interpretative phenomenological analysis, researchers extend simple descriptions to make sense of participants' life experiences concerning social, cultural, and theoretical contexts. Moreover, the phenomenology approach has been widely accepted and effective in studying the burnout experiences of teachers (Gideon, 2014).

The epistemological position of this study is that the data required were contained within the experiences of teachers teaching at public schools in Malaysia. Therefore, the participants were engaged in interviews, where the data were gathered was interpreted in terms of their burnout experiences and the strategies used to cope with those challenges of the teaching job. Hence, the main objective of this study was to examine the human experience of being a teacher in a Malaysian education context. The experiences that led to burnout and the mechanisms the interviewees employed to cope with those challenges to remain in their jobs were the phenomena under investigation.

Sampling Procedures

According to Hycner (1999), "the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa), including even the type of participants" (p. 156). Therefore, this study employed a purposeful sampling to select the participants by using three criteria: 1) a participant should be a full-time teacher, 2) a participant should have teaching experiences of at least one year in a Malaysian public school, and 3) a participant should score at least 36 or more in the Teacher Burnout Scale. The original teacher burnout inventory's scoring scheme suggested that a score of 35 would indicate that a person had experienced burnout (Richmond et al., 2001). The 20 items in the instrument are responded to on a 1 to 5 scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree) for questions such as "I am tired of my students" and "I feel frustrated at work", which means that the higher the score the higher the burnout.

The study was conducted in a western state of Malaysia. As a mandatory practice in Malaysia, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the District Education Office that allowed a selection of any two public schools within the district. Two secondary schools, one from an urban setting and the other from a suburban setting were purposively chosen to avoid potential bias and access the experiences of teachers in diverse settings with diverse student backgrounds.

Five teachers were chosen from each school whose background information is shown in Table 1. The teachers were teaching the same subject at different grade levels. All secondary public schools in Malaysia, irrespective of their type (urban or suburban), have a standardized organizational structure that requires teachers to teach 25-30 periods a week, with each class of 45 minutes duration, and undertake certain administrative tasks such as organizing extra-curricular activities and guard duty. The class size across these schools range from 30 to 45 students per class. The age of the student population in secondary school ranges between 14 to 17 years. Their monthly salary ranges from 2000 to 7000 Malaysian Ringgits (USD 480 to USD 1700) which is determined based on their qualification and work experiences. All teachers are entitled to 25 days annual leave in addition to approximately 10 public holidays in a year. The demography, student population, infrastructure, and facilities were similar across both the schools.

Permission was obtained from the school management and they were briefed about this study. The teachers were invited by the school management to participate in the study voluntarily. To assess the level of stress among teachers, the Teacher Burnout Scale was distributed to all teachers in two secondary schools (Richmond et al., 2001). Teachers were asked to reflect on their teaching experiences while responding to the questionnaire. A total of 45 teachers returned the questionnaire. Eventually, ten teachers (Creswell, 1998) who scored 36 or more on the scale and also met two of the other selection criteria were invited to participate in a voluntary interview. The score on the teacher burnout scale of selected teachers ranged from 42-80. The individual score was indicated in qualitative findings with their

verbatim, for example, P1-55. The purpose of the research was explained to the teachers, and they were promised confidentiality in their responses.

Table 1. Information on the teacher participants

Teacher ID	Gender	Age	School Type	Teaching Experiences	Subject Taught
P1	Female	40	Urban	15	English
P2	Female	43	Urban	18	English
P3	Female	48	Urban	22	English
P4	Female	52	Urban	23	Mathematics
P5	Female	44	Urban	18	Bahasa Melayu
P6	Female	39	Suburban	14	English
P7	Male	32	Suburban	7	Mathematics
P8	Female	46	Suburban	15	English
P9	Male	41	Suburban	12	Mathematics
P10	Female	57	Suburban	31	Bahasa Melayu

The data was collected over five months during the school semester through face-to-face, in-depth interviews. Teachers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews either in school libraries or cafeterias during school hours. They were allowed to speak in English, Malay, Tamil, or Mandarin. The interviews were continued until the data was saturated or new information was obtained. Each interview lasted between 40-60 minutes and was digitally recorded. The written consent of the teachers was obtained before the recording of interviews. All recordings of the interviews were later transcribed in English and compiled into a single document. Further checking was conducted by sending the transcribed data back to the interviewees to check if any discrepancies occurred in the translation and the interpretation.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data from in-depth interviews were distributed among three researchers. The experiences of interviewees were considered to be the primary unit of analysis (Bless et al., 2000). In the first phase, each researcher read each transcript repeatedly to inductively reduce the experiences shared by the participants of their burnout experiences and their coping strategies to remain in their teaching jobs. The researchers carefully analysed the data to extract the meanings without including his/her presuppositions. In the second phase, the researchers distributed the data into two major categories: burnout experiences and coping strategies to remain in the teaching job. Following the guidelines of the constant comparative method (Patton, 1990), the three researchers met and compared their condensed data and assigned them into units based on their collective interpretations and agreement. Finally, the data units were merged under themes based on the proximity of content and repetition of phrases in the units.

Findings/Results

The results are discussed following the research questions. The inductive process for research question one produced four major themes, while four themes emerged for research question two as discussed below. Each theme contained quotations and passages using the codes that were assigned to each teacher.

RQ1: What are the challenges that led Malaysian teachers to experience burnout?

Students' Misbehaviours

According to the participants, the behaviours and attitudes of students played a significant role in shaping their teaching experiences which, in turn, affected their overall well-being. Behaviours such as students' unwillingness and student de-motivation significantly contributed to teachers' stress and frustration. One interviewee said:

... students who are not willing to study or have no motivation to learn. They fail to realize the importance of study because they think they can find a job without studying (P5-82).

Students' lack of attention and focus also acted as a potential factor in triggering stress for a teacher. One teacher felt disheartened that her efforts were wasted:

I feel that nowadays, maybe due to technology, students have difficulties in focusing! ... Not like students in previous times, they are more likely to rely on others, they think that they know everything through technological stuff... (P3-42).

Teachers also reported that often students did not respect them as teachers. They became rebellious, did not listen to their teachers' advice, and replied defiantly in response. A math teacher described this phenomenon:

Students are no longer like previous times, once you scold them, they scold you back (P4-43).

Students' lack of interest in learning was also a challenge for teachers and led to burnout experiences. Students had preconceived ideas about each subject and they behaved accordingly. One interviewee said:

Subjects like history and moral, the students tend to think that it is useless, and are not interested in it, so we find it hard to pass on the information to the students. Our students sleep during the class as well. Some of them claimed that they do not understand what the teacher said, and thus they choose to sleep (P5-82).

Moreover, students who were not cooperative and exhibited bad behaviours such as not doing homework or refusing to abide by deadlines also contributed to developing negative emotions and a sense of disappointment among teachers. One participant noted:

... the students are not cooperating with you when you are teaching, they refuse to receive whatever knowledge you impart (P6-69).

The results also showed that the teachers felt helpless when their students were incapable of achieving the desired standards set by the school because of poor foundations. Teachers had to put in extra efforts and time for their students to achieve those standards. A Bahasa Malay teacher stated that:

Because some of the students lack the ability to study, they lack even the basic foundation that is required before you get into secondary school... (Int.: Uh...Huh...) Although they are now in secondary school, they lack knowledge that should be known in primary school. Even if you give some exercise which is on a primary school level, they might not be able to complete it! But then, we still have to follow the secondary school syllabus (P10-66).

Lack of Parental Support

The insufficient collaboration of parents was found to be another major trigger for teachers' frustrations that eventually led them to feel burnout. Parents who were not concerned about their children's behaviour and academic progress caused distress among teachers. It was difficult for teachers to convince parents to attend parent-teacher meetings or respond to their inquiries. Several teachers had commented about this problem by saying:

With regards to parents, some are uncivilized and even unreasonable. Argh, they will not like listening to you, and always insist on their point of view (P1-55).

For example, we will contact the parents, and ask them to come over. But most of the time, they refuse to come (P5-82).

Parents don't like to read letters or notices we send home. This is how they miss most of the meetings...we can't do it by ourselves (P4-43).

Teachers also reported that parents rarely appreciated their efforts. There were occasions when parents would place blame on teachers for not trying hard enough.

Occupational Stressors in Teaching Environment

The data also revealed additional factors which contributed to teacher burnout. They included high workloads, role ambiguity, low remuneration and benefits, increased job responsibilities, pressure from superiors, not having proper rests, large classrooms, and lack of involvement in decision-making. One respondent said:

But I feel that it is okay for me to handle it, it is just that all of that stuff has deadlines to complete it, so there must be some stress.... If I can't finish all the registration before the deadlines, the students will not be able to take those examinations (P8-55).

Furthermore, school expectations from teachers to be involved in extracurricular activities created disequilibrium and frustration for teachers. An English teacher confirmed:

Because I believed that the main goal for all teachers is to impart knowledge, but I started to doubt my responsibilities on whether I am here for teaching or whether I am here to organize activities (P2-78).

On the other hand, participant 5, who was also a vice-principal and teacher in a school, identified that the requirements set by The Ministry of Education were one of the causes of stress in school settings:

If a particular school is getting bad results, the Ministry of Education will ask the school principal about the reason in front of all the other principals. Thus, we feel embarrassed and stressed (P5-82).

Emergence of Negative Emotions

The data revealed that teachers' emotions play an important role in developing burnout experiences. Negative emotions such as discouragement, depression, irritation, disappointment, and anger were potential causes. Sometimes students' poor performance on the national exams became a source of stress for teachers as they struggled to perceive themselves as being efficient and effective. Several teachers commented on this issue:

Originally, I would like to guide him to a better pathway, but then he refused, then I will feel discouraged, and feel that I was wasting time (P1-55).

...When we failed to achieve the target, we tend to feel disappointed... (P6-69).

So, when all of the things happen simultaneously, you will feel irritated (P2-78).

When students do not perform well..., we think we are not good enough to be teachers (P8-55).

Moreover, physical and mental fatigue caused by excessive work also triggered negative emotions. The extended work portfolio of teaching was likely to portray teaching as a less attractive job option. One respondent said:

Sometimes we work on holidays, mainly during our breaks we come for meetings or other duties...too much work brings a feeling that we don't want to continue (P9-72).

The themes generated for research question two on coping strategies that assisted teachers to remain in the teaching jobs are discussed below.

RQ2: What strategies do Malaysian teachers employ to cope with those challenges to remain in the teaching job?

Understanding Teaching and Learning

Teachers' understanding of the teaching and learning process helped them escape frustration in their teaching profession. Understanding the fundamentals of the teaching and learning process helped them develop realistic and positive thinking about the learning process of students. Some teachers mentioned that students should not be blamed for being disobedient. Instead, they must understand students' condition, age, and background. One participant stated her opinion:

Students are allowed to make mistakes in the school in order to make them aware of wrong behaviours, and attitudes. This is a part of normal human development (P3-42).

Sometimes, a better understanding of the teaching and learning process helped teachers to take appropriate actions, especially when dealing with various challenges. This was achieved by talking to students, creating a rapport with students by listening to their problems, and taking the student's views into account. Participants P1 and P3 described their approaches with the students:

I talked to them and understood the reason why they behaved like that. According to the reasons they shared, we think of some ways, some strategies to make some changes (P1-55).

...Always keep in touch with the trends; you have to understand what the favourites of teenagers are nowadays. Why they tend to favour this and that. You have to blend with them, and then you will only realize, eh, (that) they are not that hard to communicate with... (P3-42).

Teachers said that they were realistic and did not believe in forcing students to learn. As a part of the teaching and learning process, they understood that children have different abilities and cognitive processes to perform. One participant mentioned:

...Since their level is not good, and they even feel that geography is not an interesting subject. If they cannot manage to get good results, I will not feel sad, because we can't force abilities on them (P7-40).

Positive Approach

The data suggested that a positive approach towards challenges played a vital role in assisting teachers to cope with difficulties. Thus, teachers chose to convince themselves that problems were always solvable and tended to seek a balance between their capabilities and time in fulfilling their job duties. Participants P5 and P6, for instance, expressed their feelings:

For me, I tell myself that there is a limit. What you can do is only that much, do not overly stress yourself (P5-82).

I feel that every job has its own difficulties. After you have tided them over, it is no longer a problem. I feel that problems are always solvable. After I cope with it, I will feel like I am getting

to a higher level, although I know that there are many more difficulties waiting for me to overcome (P6-69).

Interestingly, instead of thinking about the stressful life that they are experiencing, most of the participants tended to see the meaningfulness that the teaching profession offered. Hence, they tended to feel a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, appreciation and pleasure in teaching. They also remembered good changes that happened to them and felt motivated to see their students progressing. The importance of and the opportunity to contribute to society in meaningful ways were also catalysts that helped the teachers cope with challenges and remain in their jobs. Some of the teacher participants described their positive approaches to their teaching practices as below:

When you manage to guide students who are weak or unruly towards a correct path, it becomes a great pleasure, it feels like an accomplishment (P1-55).

...As a teacher, your role is not only teaching, you also play a role in counselling or coaching... So that is the meaning (P3-42).

For the sake of society, I wish I can do something. I hope I can assist the next generation (P4-43).

The ease and flexibility in the teaching profession were also one of the reasons that attracted participants to the teaching profession. According to participant P7 and P4:

There are many holidays for a teacher. I get extra time to travel, so I choose to be a teacher (P7-40).

I feel that teaching is a career that is quite suitable for woman, when students have holidays, I also take a holiday; thus, I am able to take care of both my career and my family (P4-43).

Individual factors

Individual factors, which comprised of self-interest, self-discipline, physiological factors, good dispositions, family factors, personal thoughts, personality, self-confidence levels, and a sense of belonging, helped teachers to stay in their professions despite all the challenges they faced. Participants P1, P2 and P8 stated their reasons:

I am getting old When you are getting old and approaching a retirement age, no one requires you anymore (P1-55).

... If I give up teaching, I will feel like I am the one who lacks ability (P2-78).

I have no confidence if you ask me to go out from school and seek another job, I can't because I feel that I have been disconnected from this society for a long period of time (P8-55).

Furthermore, self-discipline keeps an individual from experiencing negative emotions and consequences. In this study, self-control, self-preparation, self-reliance, setting personal goals, self-encouragement, self-reflection, building a good disposition, self-relaxation, and self-regulation were found to have helped teachers as coping strategies. Participants P1 and P3 described their strategies to remain in the teaching profession:

Do not keep complaining about this and that! If you keep complaining, eventually you be the one to feel stress. ...As long as I am conscientious toward my job as a teacher, I would not feel any stress (P1-55).

... But you can actually adjust yourself, you can balance yourself.... The strategic point is how are you going to adapt to it, adjust your mood to adapt to it (P3-42).

Teachers also reported themselves as being self-regulated and reflective teachers. They understood that their job was very important. They also realised that their teaching job comes with enormous responsibilities to students, parents, school management, as well as society. Therefore, teachers reported that it was important for them to discipline themselves and to critically evaluate their actions for improvement. One teacher shared her views:

...Even though it is stressful, I sometimes like to reflect and evaluate if I am responsible for that mistake. I think like a mother, if a teacher does not take responsibility, my own children will suffer in future (P5-82).

Support System

Previous literature highlighted the value and significance of teacher support systems as a coping strategy. The findings of the current study revealed that different forms of supports from colleagues, friends, students, family, reading materials, relaxation or engaging in activities, and attending educational courses also helped teachers cope with their stressful job. Participants P3, P10 and P2 expressed their feelings:

Among colleagues we have a very good relationship, sometimes when you face difficulties they show concern for you, which makes you feel warm and thoughtful, and then I feel that my working environment is not bad (P3-42).

... When I see my children get good results, it works like compensation for what I was encountering, what I suffered, I felt that God really sees my effort, I will just continue to do my part (P10-66).

Sometimes when I feel that some methods are no longer suitable for me to teach, I browse through the Internet and find out other interesting ways to teach ... (P2-78).

Most of the teachers were encouraged by external factors such as positive responses from students. The teachers tended to feel warm and attached to their working environments. For participant P3, there is always a bright side to teaching duty:

Although it is stressful, when you see there is a bottle of milk or sweets placed on your working table by some caring students, that kind of caring will make you feel that people are concerned about you and you have a duty towards them (P3-42).

Discussion

The findings revealed four major factors that lead to teachers' burnout. They are student's misbehaviours, lack of parental support, occupational stressors in a teaching environment, and the emergence of negative emotions. Student indiscipline was the primary factor that is consistent with the notion that a lack of discipline among students is a persistent issue for teachers (Bas, 2011). It is also in line with a study by Aldrup et al. (2018) that reported student misbehaviour increases exhaustion and decreases enthusiasm among teachers in Germany. On the other hand, the findings also revealed that teachers faced difficulties dealing with parents, especially those who were not highly qualified. Previous literature suggests that teachers often find it challenging to deal with students whose parents were unwilling to collaborate, listen, and understand their child's issues. According to Zedan and Falah (2016), the quality of the relationship between teachers and parents enhances teachers' emotional well-being and reduces the experiences of burnout.

The findings highlight a lack of didactic support such as proper school facilities, lack of professional development activities and resources were the main elements that lead teachers to experience burnout (Hadi et al., 2009). Several studies have claimed that burnout also has connections with work-related depression (Cephe, 2010; Sandilos et al., 2018), mental and physical exhaustion, a sense of failure, and a state of fatigue (Cozolino, 2017; Kaschka et al., 2011). Furthermore, the findings also suggest that teaching job stressors such as different types of job demands, spending extra times to supervise co-curricular activities (Han et al., 2020), dealing with inappropriate work demands (Fernet et al., 2013), role conflicts, ambiguity (Xu, 2019), and large class sizes (Kunkulol et al., 2013) were factors that added to the stress levels of teachers. As a result, teachers' experiences of negative emotion such as anger, disappointment, and anxiety contributed to their experiences of burnout. In this study, the high demands from the supervisors and the Ministry of Education contributed significantly to the occurrence of stress among teachers. These findings align with the findings of previous studies and contribute additional evidence that negative emotions confirm the existence of burnout syndromes among teaching staff (Fernet et al., 2013; Frenzel, 2014).

Concerning the coping mechanism, four major themes emerged. They are understanding teaching and learning, positive approach, individual factors, and support system. The first theme suggests that if teachers were given proper training or are made aware of potential challenges they may face in teaching and learning, they are more likely to find it easier to cope with the challenges involved in the profession. Hence, if teachers participated in professional development courses that focus on teaching and learning processes, they can develop skills to understand student development and tackle challenges efficiently (Khan et al., 2014). The second theme suggests that teachers with positive attitudes towards the teaching profession were able to cope successfully with stress. This is in line with the findings of studies conducted by Tikkanen et al. (2020) and Khan et al. (2014), which found that if people viewed high workload as valuable and rewarding and also sought hope in times of failure or derived pleasure from the progress of their students, they became more capable of handling their workload. In other words, to cope with difficulties or challenges, one must positively look at things and take a realistic approach to the challenges.

Moreover, these findings enhanced our understanding of the coping strategies utilised by some teachers in Malaysia. The teachers used self-control, self-reflection, and self-regulation to successfully pass through the transition periods in their teaching years. The results of previous studies indicated that self-discipline, reflection, personal thoughts, personality, and family factors contributed significantly towards teachers developing coping strategies to remain in teaching (Alhija, 2015). In the present study, an effective support system was found to be a potential source for coping, which is consistent with the ideas of Cezar-Vaz et al. (2015) and Khan et al. (2014). They mentioned that external support comprising of social support, which mainly comes from colleagues and family, could facilitate coping with stress. Kebbi and Al-Hroub (2018) proposed that material support also played a central role in coping mechanisms.

They claimed that such support might provide new methods for teachers to apply and obtain desirable outcomes. Finally, the current findings support the ideas of Russell (2008) who identified that a quality support system enhances psychological well-being and satisfaction which, in turn, were related to the retention of teachers. It also aligns with a study by Guo et al. (2020) on teacher support and well-being in China that found teacher support enhancing mental well-being and decreasing negative emotion as well as increasing resilience among teachers in China.

Ultimately, teacher burnout may lead to poor teacher retention. In the United Kingdom, for example, a shortage of teachers due to teacher burnout has been reported. It is also very difficult to maintain or provide training and development to teachers due to high levels of teacher turnover. Prentice (2016) from *The Guardian* wrote about teacher networks and stated that low salaries were one of the biggest reasons teachers left their teaching professions. Therefore, teacher salaries should be increased to encourage fresh graduates to join the profession and to motivate career-switchers to stay. Moreover, promotion, not competition should be a common practice. The concept of effective teaching should be broadened by celebrating the academic achievement of students, and the individual progress of teachers. According to Strauss (2015) from *The Washington Post*, a teacher shortage exists across the United States. Unfortunately, the areas which lack teachers are key subject areas. In Australia, the issue of teacher shortage is also alarming.

Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated that teacher burnout continues to be a pressing issue in Malaysia. The findings reported some challenges Malaysian teachers in public high schools encountered that led to burnout. Nonetheless, additional investigations into the strategies that helped teachers cope with those challenges which assisted them to remain in their teaching professions are critical. The coping strategies are especially pertinent when nations across the world have been struggling with the poor retention of teachers. On the other hand, teacher shortages due to burnout, low salaries and actual teaching have become a global problem that needs to be seriously addressed by education departments around the world. Ministries or educational departments should not be solely responsible. School leaders and management also have roles to play in this matter. School management and administrators, in particular, should realize that the physical and mental well-being of their teachers is central to effective functioning teachers. The global agenda of quality education, education for all, lifelong learning, and implementation of educational reforms are greatly dependent on the effective functioning of teachers. In a situation where a teacher becomes mentally unstable, the first victim will most definitely be students and the quality of teaching they receive. Hence, serious consideration of the challenges that surround the teaching profession is required.

Recommendations

This study makes a significant contribution to knowledge about the pertinent issue of teacher burnout in Malaysia. The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of the current issues and challenges that Malaysian teachers encounter serves as an alarm bell for school administrators and education authorities and suggests appropriate support mechanisms to increase the effective functioning of teachers. It is evident that Malaysian teachers, like teachers around the world, are heavily burdened which, in turn, has not only affected their teaching effectiveness but also their physiological and psychological health.

Nevertheless, teachers in Malaysia have developed coping strategies to remain within the teaching profession, as teaching is their passion. While teachers struggle to cope with their plight, it is time for policymakers and members of the wider educational community to address the causes of teacher burnout with urgency. School management and administrators must take appropriate steps to prevent burnout, decrease teacher turnover, and teacher absenteeism. They need to provide activities, training and seminars for teachers to assist them in identifying symptoms of burnout, learn burnout coping and prevention strategies, and identify ways to improve teachers' mental health (Noman et al., 2017). Research on teacher wellness, satisfaction and professional growth are often the top priorities of the policymakers at the Education Ministry as teachers' wellness is directly associated with teaching quality and academic output. Empirically, teachers' quality has been ranked as the first factor that influences learning and student achievement (Amzat, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2004; Noman & Kaur, 2015). Hence, this study also contributes to the global body of ongoing research on teacher development, teacher welfare, and professional development. With this in mind, teachers' development and well-being need serious attention and demands improvements.

Finally, this study also recommended further research to focus more on public primary and secondary schools which are located in different states of Malaysia which perhaps, might show some level of differences in terms of the challenges in teaching life and the coping strategies used by the teaching staff as well as the factors that encourage them to remain as teachers. Furthermore, quantitative research is suggested to further investigate if there is any cause-and-effect relationship between the demographic data onto the teachers and their burnout levels.

Limitations

This study was restricted to teachers in some schools in urban and suburban areas in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was also restricted to Chinese public schools in Kuala Lumpur as the majority of the participants were Chinese Malaysians.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Amzat: Concept and design, supervision, drafting manuscript, final approval. Kaur: Critical revision of manuscript, interpretation. Al-Ani: Securing funding and admin and support. Mun: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis. Ahmadu: Technical or material & critical revision of manuscript

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