

## Factors affecting work pressure among primary school teachers during the covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

Work stress exists in various organizations whether government or private sector. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world starting December 2019 caused work stress due to the closure of schools due to the Movement Control Order (MCO). This study involved 8 primary school teachers with more than 10 years of experience at Sekolah Kebangsaan Cheras Jaya, Taman Cheras Jaya, Balakong, Selangor who were involved in the Teaching and Learning (TL/PdP) process face to face for the "Catch Up Plan" programme (no rotation with online Home Teaching and Learning HTL/PdPr) involving pupils in years 1, 2 and 6 and the process of TLH/PdPr online (there is rotation with face-to-face TL/PdP) involving pupils in years 3, 4 and 5 from 10 January 2022 to 25 February 2022. This study uses a mixed-method design, combining both quantitative method (DASS-21 Screening Test) and qualitative method (interviews). The results of the study found that four teachers experienced depression, anxiety and stress in severe level due to two dominant factors of work stress which is workload and time constraints.



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## Introduction

In everyday life in this increasingly challenging era of globalization, each individual has various responsibilities, namely responsibilities to family, society and the workplace. With these, the risk of experiencing stress or stress becomes increased and needs to be addressed especially involving employees in both professional and non-professional groups in the government and private sectors. Han Selye, the founder of the theory of stress or pressure defined stress as a non-specific reaction by a person caused by a load that befalls (Ismail, Zainuddin & Zainal, 2016).

Work stress is often associated with job performance, health and productivity levels of an individual or employee (Zaidi & Abdol, 2017). Work stress can lead to positive behaviours known as eustress while uncontrolled stress that cannot be managed leads to negative effects known as distress. According to Lee (2016), contributing factors to work stress are such as excessive workload, unclear tasks in the workplace or role conflicts, unsecured jobs, poorly managed organization, lack of support from top management and poor communication.

In general, individual who often experiences stress in life will give negative effects such as anxiety, depression, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, low concentration and inability to control anger when faced with tense situations. However, moderate work stress can have a positive effect as it can help the body and mind to work properly (Yaacob, Majdi & Rashid, 2011). The Covid-19 pandemic that spread around the world starting December 2019 have caused an increase in work stress and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and so on. This work pressure also involved teachers following the closure of schools due to the

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Movement Control Order (MCO) following the outbreak of Covid -19. As a result, school pupils are unable to continue schooling and learning as usual due to limited social interaction. According to Sze, Surat and Amat (2022), in a study of teacher stress and challenge to the new norm during the Covid -19 pandemic in a district of Sarawak, found that the highest level of stress caused teachers to feel very tired spiritually, emotionally and physically after work while the highest challenge faced by teachers are attributes from pupils and parents.

### Research Background

Work stress in education is defined as negative emotions such as feelings of anger, anxiety, frustration and depression related to teaching activities (Kyriacou, 2001). Work stress is defined as a bodily reaction that disrupts the psychology and physicality of workers and invites the threat of discomfort to the worker's body. There are two theories related to stress in the workplace namely Psychoanalytic Theory by Sigmund Freud and Behaviourism Theory by B. F Skinner (Ganing, Hassan & Hamzah, 2020). Based on Psychoanalytic Theory, there is a link between anxiety and stress. Sigmund Freud views that employees who experience anxiety in the form of reality, moral and neurotic are usually in a state of depression. This reaction produces a variety of somatic symptoms such as increased heart rate, sweating, chills and abdominal cramps. Based on Behaviourism Theory, most employees show that stressful behaviour has been reinforced through past experience and respond to such stimuli. The reinforcement received by employees may be in the form of rewards such as wanting to be pitied, appreciated or noticed by peers.

Work stress in education is defined as negative emotions such as feelings of anger, anxiety, frustration and depression related to teaching activities. According to Amri et al. (2020), lack of digital technology skills and lack of devices (gadgets), workload, social support and family conflict have led to increased teacher stress during the Covid -19 epidemic outbreak. Individuals most prone to burnout or mental and physical fatigue are those who carry out jobs involving relationships with the community such as psychologists, nurses and teachers (Turtulla, 2017).

According to Ganing, Hassan and Hamzah (2020), there are seven sources of stress based on the Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI) namely, (1) intrinsic factors in the job such as work environment, repetitive tasks, role ambiguity, role conflict, responsibility towards others, lack of responsibility, lack of support from management, (2) lack of involvement in decision making process and meeting technological change rapid, (3) relationships in the workplace, (4) career development, (5) organizational structure and climate and (6) sources of work stress outside the organization such as family problems, life crises, financial problems, conflicts in the workplace and stress family.

According to Kamarudin and Taat (2020), in a study of teachers stress factors in Sabah found that the highest stress factor is inefficient time management practices in managing and performing various tasks in schools which ultimately have a negative impact on professionalism. In general, individual who often experiences stress in life will have negative effects such as anxiety, depression, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, low concentration and inability to control anger when faced with tense situations leading to serious physical and mental illness and behavioural changes (Yaribeygi et al., 2017). However, moderate work stress can have a positive effect as it can help the body and mind to work properly. According to Sze, Surat and Amat (2022) in a study of teachers stress and challenges to the new norm during the Covid-19 pandemic in a district of Sarawak found that high levels of stress caused teachers to feel very tired spiritually, emotionally and physically after working hours.

Teachers are individuals who are responsible for imparting knowledge, educating, teaching and training pupils. The teaching profession is seen to be increasingly challenging especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift of traditional learning methods to fully online learning has resulted in teachers having to prepare themselves to undertake Distance Teaching (DT/PJJ) in a short period of time (Sokal, Trudel & Babb, 2020). Following the announcement of the opening of schools in stages according to the National Rehabilitation Plan (NRP/PPN) phase starting October 2021, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) has set the attendance of pupils by rotation of week (Teaching and Learning Operation Manual by Rotation by MOE Year 2021).

In addition, there are also "Catch Up Plan" programme by MOE (no rotation with Home Teaching and Learning (HTL/PdPr) online) involves pupils in years 1, 2 and 6 and HTL/PdPr online (there is rotation with face-to-face HTL/PdP) involves pupils in years 3, 4 and 5 from 10 January 2022 to 25 February 2022 (Sekolah Kebangsaan Cheras Jaya Notification Letter to Parents Dated 8 January 2022). With this, teachers especially primary schools are still exposed to work stress due to the process of division of TL/PdP and HTL/PdPr simultaneously. According to Fakrul (2020), online HTL/PdP presents a major challenge to teachers especially in rural areas with internet access problems. Thus, the objectives of this study are to: 1) identify

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levels of depression, anxiety and stress among primary school teachers during the Covid -19 pandemic dan 2) explore dominant work stress factors among primary school teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Method

### Research Design

This study involves a mixed method design, in which the first phase is quantitative method using a questionnaire based on psychological tests namely Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) uploaded using Google Forms. The DASS-21 test in this study aims to identify the level of depression, anxiety and stress and screening for the selection of the study sample. According to Fullan and Hargreaves (1993), the method of using questionnaires is suitable for obtaining a lot of information related to work stress factors in a short time.

Meanwhile, the second phase is a qualitative method used to explore and understand the objectives of the study in depth for the sample through the interview method. The approach in qualitative research is to use sentences, informational concepts and not involve them in the form of numbers (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Qualitative research can explain a person's experience and knowledge in depth and comprehensively (Merriam, 2009).

### Respondents

This study involved four teachers in Sekolah Kebangsaan Cheras Jaya, Taman Cheras Jaya, Balakong, Selangor who are involved in the process of Teaching and Learning (TL/PdP) in schools and Home Teaching and Learning (HTL/PdPr) involves pupils who are majority socio-economy of their parents under category B40 (Household Income below RM4,850 per month). The selection of respondents was through a simple random sampling method involving eight teachers who were screened using the DASS-21 test. Selection of study participants used a simple random sampling method to study and understand the phenomena studied (Creswell, 2014). After the screening was conducted, only four teachers were selected as the study sample to be interviewed because they experienced levels of depression, anxiety and stress in severe.

The selection of the study sample is appropriate because it has more than 10 years of experience as a primary school teacher and is involved in the TL/PdP process face to face for the "Catch Up Plan" programme (no rotation with online HTL/PdPr) involving pupils in years 1, 2 and 6 and online HTL/PdPr (there is a rotation with face to face TL) involving pupils in years 3, 4 and 5 from 10 January 2022 to 25 February 2022.

### Instruments

This study involves a combination of instruments as follows:

1. Quantitative

A set of questionnaires (Google Form), containing 2 parts; (1) Part A (Demographic Information): six items namely age, gender, race, marital status, grade of position and length of service, and (2) Part B (DASS-21): 21 items with a set of three self-reports designed to measure emotional states such as depression, anxiety and stress. Each of the three scales of the DASS-21 test contains seven items divided into sub-scales with similar content. The depression scale will assess dysphasia, hopelessness, devaluation of life, self-decline, lack of interest and involvement, anhedonia and inertia. The anxiety scale assesses autonomic stimuli, skeletal muscle effects, state anxiety and subjective experiences as a result of anxiety. The stress scale is sensitive to the level of chronic non-specific stimuli. It assesses difficulty relaxing, nerve stimulation, easily upset/anxious, easily upset/more reactive and impatient. The scoring method for depression, anxiety and stress is to sum the scores of each item involved. This DASS-21 test has been delimited and translated into a Malay version that has 21 items (Ramli, Mohd & Zaini, 2007). Each item was assessed using a scale of four answer choices namely Indirect/Never (0), Rarely (1), Often (2) and Very Often (3). The method of scoring DASS-21 test scores is as follows: Depression = [S3+S5+S10+S13+S16+S17+S21], Anxiety = [S2+S4+S7+S9+S15+S19+S20], Stress = [S1+S6+S8+S11+S12+S14+S18] = Stress Level

2. Qualitative

A set of interview protocol to identify the theme of issues related to the study. Berg and Lune (2012) states that case studies allow independent researchers to obtain the required information from the respondents as desired. The information obtained is more detailed, involves a small size

of respondents and is more focused on the issues to be studied in line with the objectives of the study.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2019. The study was analyzed into 2 main parts namely descriptive analysis involving data obtained from Part A (Demographics) and Part B (DASS-21 Test). While qualitative data were analyzed simultaneously between the interview process and interview transcript.

## Results and Discussions

### Demographic Data

There are a total of eight teachers recruited as respondents to this research, four male teachers and four female teachers. The breakdown by race was four Malay teachers, two Chinese teachers, one Indian teacher, and 1 Siamese teacher. The breakdown by marital status involved five teachers who were married (62.5%), 1 teacher single (12.5%), 1 teacher widow (12.5%) and 1 teacher widower (12.5%). The breakdown by position grade involved 7 DG44 teachers (87.5%) and 1 DG41 teacher (12.5%). While the breakdown according to length of service involves 4 teachers serving for 11 years (50%), 2 teachers serving for 10 years (25%) and 2 teachers serving for 15 years (25%). Details information for all respondents are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' demographic data

Respondent	Age	Gender	Race	Marriage Status	Length of Service
1	41	Male	Malay	Widowed	11 years
2	42	Male	Malay	Married	15 years
3	42	Male	Indian	Married	15 years
4	37	Female	Malay	Married	11 years
5	34	Female	Siamese	Widowed	10 years
6	44	Female	Malay	Married	11 years
7	42	Male	Chinese	Single	11 years
8	37	Female	Chinese	Married	10 years

### Respondents' Depression, Anxiety and Stress Levels

DASS-21 test on eight respondents of the study answered the first objective of the study which is to identify the level of depression, anxiety and stress among primary school teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic, as indicated in Table 2

Table 2. Respondents' DASS-21 test result

Psychological Effects	Depression		Anxiety		Stress	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Normal	2	25	2	25	2	25
Mild	2	25	3	37.5	2	25
Moderate	3	37.5	2	25	2	25
Severe	1	12.5	1	12.5	2	25
Extremely Severe	0	0	0	0	0	0

Based on the DASS-21 test results table above, a total of six respondents (75%) experienced depression, anxiety and stress in the normal and mild levels, a total of seven respondents (87.5%) experienced depression, anxiety and stress in the moderate level and a total of four respondents (50%) experienced depression, anxiety and stress in the severe level. With this, all four respondents experienced depression, anxiety and stress in severe levels were selected as respondents for qualitative phase of the study.

### Qualitative Result

The qualitative interviews with the four respondents have produced themes and sub-themes to answer the second objective of the study which is to explore the dominant work stress factors among primary school teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes emerged from qualitative interviews with respondents

Theme	Sub-theme
Workload	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SOP compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic during Teaching and Learning (TL/PdP)</li> <li>• The attitude of pupils not completing homework or parents who help pupils complete the assignment causes a learning gap for pupils</li> </ul>
Time Constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bear the work of teachers infected with the COVID-19 epidemic</li> <li>• Various curriculum materials need to be prepared and implemented according to the set date in conjunction with the “Catch-Up Plan” programme due to the COVID-19 pandemic</li> </ul>

## Discussions

A study of factors influencing work stress among teachers in primary schools during the Covid-19 pandemic in the state of Selangor shows that there are still teachers who suffer from mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and stress at the level of severe due to workload and time constraints in the TL/PdP and HTL/PdPr process. The first factor of teacher workload is due to compliance with SOP during the Covid-19 pandemic during TL/PdP such as recording attendance and scanning the temperature of pupils when entering school, learning activities to be a mediator in the purchase of food and beverages during breaks and pupil health concerns because have not yet been vaccinated.

In addition, the second factor of teacher workload is due to the attitude of pupils who do not complete homework or parents who help pupils complete assignments during TL/PdP or HTL/PdPr online or offline causing pupil learning gaps. These findings support the study of Sze, Surat and Amat (2022) who found that the highest challenge for teachers is dealing with pupils and parents. However, Ismail's (2020) study found that pupils also face some challenges when learning online, adapting to using digital learning technology and changing attitudes towards accepting online learning practices. The third factor of teacher workload is from bearing the work of other teachers infected with the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Lee (2016), contributing factors to work stress are such as excessive workload, unclear tasks in the workplace or role conflicts, unsecured jobs, poorly managed organization, lack of support from top management and poor communication.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, teachers' work stress is due to time constraints in the preparation of various curriculum materials and assessments to achieve the goals or targets of TL/PdP and HTL/PdPr string from the Catch Up Plan programme starting 10 January 2022 and ending 25 February 2022 to reduce the pupil learning gap due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Stress in the workplace involving teachers if not managed properly can cause various mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and stress.

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