

# Occupational stress in teaching profession health essay

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## **INTRODUCTION**

" Teaching has come to be regarded as a highly stressed occupation. To a great extent it seems to be assumed that the source of this stress can be found in the classroom and general working conditions associated with teaching in modern times, not only with the teachers themselves."

## **Background**

The greatest asset an organization should have is not just its financial capital but also its employees. Employees are the intellectual capital of an organization (Nancy, 2010). They are not only offering their skills and talents; they also bring ideas, commitment, creativity and innovation.

However, employees are only human. Sometimes their personal problems can affect their job and creep into the workplace. It also can be the other way around which means the workplace problems might follow them back into their personal life. Say it marital issues, drug or health problems or maybe suffering from any stage of stress due to the demands they need to deal in both work life and home life. As employees in teaching profession, teachers have been reported to be in a highly stressful profession (Santavirta, Solovieva & Thorell, 2007). Being connected to multiple skills and goals to be achieved every day, teachers are pressured in ensuring the students good results in academic, to correct social problems by inculcating the positive moral values, to help students find their potentials in various talents and wide range of abilities as well as providing a positive ethical development in schools. Occupational stress in teaching profession has been a long-standing concern (Nurul Izzah, Zailina, Saidi & Haslinda, 2010; Teresa,

2010; Dana, 2009; Karen, 2009; Konnie, 2009; Ross Azura & Normah, 2008; McCormick & Ayres, 2008; Antoniou, Polychroni & Vlachakis, 2006) among school teachers around the world including Malaysia. Teaching profession not only comes in educating but other roles as well. The commitments toward students, the community and clerical works in teaching profession has obviously marked as the sources of occupational stress in teaching profession in this country (NUTP, 2008; Hassan & Nurul Hazeran, 2005; Marzita, 2005). Occupational stress has been described as an incompatibility between the individual working environments. It includes emotional, mental, and behavioural reaction to vulnerability caused by elements in the job environment that are, in large part, out of the awareness of the worker (Edimansyah, 2008). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) also defines occupational stress as;" The harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when therequirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker."(NIOSH, 2008)According to Lazarus & Cohen (1977) and Lazarus & Folkman (1987) long time ago, the occupational stress in teaching profession demand to be managed as it affects the balance of the psychological and physiological state of any teacher. Still, teacher stress and burnout has been the subject of numerous articles and researches that seemed like endless. Nowadays, teachers around the world, including in Malaysia, still dealing with unmanageable stress. As teaching profession demands change every here and forth, teachers must be ready to adapt new curricular and current teaching methods based on the fast growing need of the education system globally.

## 1. 1 Understanding the Scenario

Currently, there are counseling services provided for the benefit of teachers throughout Malaysia. Among the services provided are in person counseling, via email counseling, and telephone counseling. However, counseling via email can only be obtained systematically through Bahagian Psikologi dan Kaunseling, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia (Division of Psychology and Counseling, Ministry of Education). It means that, teachers can systematically choose any available counselor to communicate by email and wait for an email reply from the counselor. While for the telephone counseling service, teachers may contact the Division of Psychology and Counseling, Ministry of Education for any problems and talk to any counselor who is on the phone line. In the Sector of Psychology and Counseling, State Education Departments as well as the District Education Offices, teachers can also connect to the counselor via phone or email. However, the appointment date will be proposed to the teacher to facilitate face-to-face counseling. The counseling sessions will be conducted at each State Education Department or District Education Offices, and if necessary, the teacher can also directly meet the counselor based on the appointment basis at the Division of Psychology and Counseling, Ministry of Education, located in Putrajaya. Realizing the need and the importance of counseling services in teaching profession, an early interview had been conducted to collect some basic understanding among the teachers in the Gombak District about their experiences dealing with stresses and how do they feel about getting help from the counselor through the services provided. All from the fifteen teachers admitted, they struggled dealing to handle work-life in school and

home-life at the same time. Nine from fifteen teachers admitted that, at the most crucial time they went on medical leave for a day or two to ease the stresses away. They have to be prepared to deal with new challenges every working day. Ten of these teachers are located as a primary school teacher and face many surprise occasions at school such as dealing with uncertain parents who will knock at the classroom door in the middle of the lesson, sick students and being call for meetings and discussions as well as to keep track on the students' development occasionally. Other than that, they need to hold positions as the committee members in certain units and boards at school which requires them to prepare reports and do filing works. At the end of every working day, these teachers admitted to be exhausted. There are times, when they tried to talk about work with family and friends, they were afraid to be looked as ungrateful and feels ashamed to do so. Asked on their opinion about the counseling services provided for teachers, eleven from the fifteen teachers felt afraid to express their feelings to the counselors because they are uncertain about how the services might work for them. They also think, that the proposed time for the counseling session will be on their working days and the location of each counselor are not comfortable enough for them as they might see other officials or people they knew from work during their way to attend the session to meet the counselor. Based on the interview, combinations of organizational change and occupational stress management programs or services might be the most successful approach to reduce stress in teaching profession. Personal and public awareness of the need for a betterment in counseling services in every public school starts with distribution of information. This information, which hopefully was

transmitted to respondents while they completed the questionnaires or while reading the results of the completed survey, is that all teachers are human beings who experience a range of human problems and there are services for them to rely on by joining and taking part. It is important for teachers to stay balanced emotionally as it will also reflect in being healthy physically.

## **1. 2Employee Assistance Services: A Brief Glance**

The Employee Assistance Services (EAS) also known as the Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are employee benefit programs offered by many employers around the world nowadays. The services are designated and intended to help employees deal with problems that might adversely impact their work performance, health, and well-being. EAS has been used as a tool in managing the occupational stress in diverse working field (Freda, 2000; Tamara, 1999). Generally, it includes assessment, short-term counseling and referral services for employees and their household members. Additional to the face-to-face and group counseling, EAS also provides online counseling and consultation through the Internet and toll free telephone services 24 hours a day. Employee Assistance Services has been widely part in teaching profession abroad (BIE, 2011; Shasta, 2011; CCOHS, 2009; Nebo, 2007; VHI, 2001). Through reading and reviews of the past conducted researches, I have found that the stress levels among teachers are decreased after joining the services provided in EAS. However, research and studies on EAS are still rare in Malaysia especially when it comes to the education management field as one of the occupational stress management method. According to Sandys (2012), EAPs are an effective way to address mental health and substance abuse problems in the workplace. Proven results have been shown that EAPs

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help employees improve workplace performance (Harris, Adams, Hill, Morgan, & Soliz, 2002; Hargrave et al., 2008), employee mental health, wellness and substance abuse (McLeod, 2001), turnover (Hughes, Elkin, & Epstein, 2004), as well as presenteeism and productivity (Hargrave et al., 2008). Researches in EAS and EAPs reported that the programs can help employees to improve their work-life and home-life motivation as well as increase their productivity (UNDP, 2004; Paul Steele, 1998; Shirley, 1997; Megranahan, 1995; Scanlon, 1990). However, before the actual implementation of the services, an in-depth assessment through a proper research approach must be conducted in order to design and develop the services according to the characteristics that reflect on the current scenario. Identifying employees in need of assistance based on declining work performance is an essential aspect of EAS.

### **1.3 Statement of Problem**

Many teachers are experiencing and exposed to emotional and psychological problems (Yeh, 2006; Karen, 2009). The issue of occupational stress in teaching profession obviously has been the topic of a great deal of research throughout the years in this country and abroad. According to Sandeep (2010), classrooms in developing countries remain overcrowded and the teachers face intensive verbal communication, prolonged standing, high volume of workload and the environment of working place has given a high impact on the level of stress. The vulnerability of teachers to stress was also based upon grade level and the school location (Mulvihill, 2007). The primary school teachers reported a moderate vulnerability to stress compared to secondary school which revealed serious vulnerability to stress. As for

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location, rural teachers reported a moderate vulnerability to stress while urban teachers reported a serious vulnerability. For teachers who are vulnerable, their stress can get worse and may lead to burnout. According to the National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP) in Malaysia, evidence has shown that the main sources of the current high levels of teachers' stress include excessive workload and working hours that are often intensified by governmental initiatives, such as large class sizes, pressures of assessment targets and inspections, pressure by administrators and lack of professional development opportunities (NUTP, 2011). Crute (2004) stated that teaching profession is at particularly high risk of stress because of the overpowering combination of the overcrowded classrooms, testing pressures, paperwork, anxious parents, and rambunctious students. These findings were proven by the research done by Wilkerson & Bellini (2006), which consequently found that, the increased level of stress in the teaching profession may lead to ineffective delivery of services, exhaustion, physical complaints, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Based on an article written by Siti Nor Afzan (2009), teaching profession in Malaysia are exposed to severely high risk of mental illnesses. The burdens carried by teachers in the profession are complex and can lead to bipolar, depression and schizophrenia. Other than these illnesses, teachers are found dealing with high blood pressure and migraine. These findings are supported by Sveinsdottir, Gunarsdottir & Fridriksdottir (2007), which proved that psychiatric or psychosomatic disorders are the leading causes of premature retirement among teachers. Apart all these stresses, there are evidence showing that teachers in Gombak District are reluctant to join the counseling services and programs



voluntarily. The percentage of teachers signing in as clients in the counseling services is poor despite the news and research findings on their stresses and workloads. An informal observation and interviews with teachers from the Gombak District showed that they agreed on the positive quality and results they might get from the counseling services. However, most of them fear the consequences from joining the services in terms of what people around them might perceive. These teachers are afraid if they are misunderstood of having psychosomatic disorders. Some of these teachers were mentioning on the working hour constraints as the counselors have to be out for other programs during their available time. Other than that, a few teachers admitted that they are not sure how to fix appointments and the procedure they have to go through to see the counselors. Marwaha & Livingston (2002) had discovered that several factors were posited for this general trend in getting professional help through counseling. The factors are including fear of being stereotyped, mistrust in counseling professionals, shame, embarrassment and fear of being perceived as weak. As psychotherapy been perceived as ' a potentially difficult, embarrassing, and overall risky enterprise', it often cultivates fear and avoidance of mental health services. As the result, seeking professional counseling is viewed only as the last resort (Vogel, Wester, Wei & Boysen, 2005). A review of the literature also reveals several variables which are related to impact one's perception towards seeking professional counseling. Some of the variables are fear of disclosing distressing information (Komiya, Good & Sherrodi, 2000), anticipated risks and social stigma attached to mental health services (Vogel et al., 2005), avoidance of painful emotions (Kahn & Hessling, 2001),

religiosity (Komiya et al., 2000) as well as fear of embarrassment (Outram, Murphy & Cockburn, 2004). In order to acculturate trust in seeking help through counseling, many countries have taken another step to improve the counseling services to another dimension. According to Ruiz (2006), Employee Assistance Services (EAS) have become a very important and popular institutional mechanism in many enterprises for promoting health and emotional well-being, reducing absenteeism and improving performance. Studies from Chan, Neighbors & Merlatte (2004) and Elliot & Shelley (2005) earlier also showed that EAS has significant impact on improving workers productivity and adversely impact their work performance, health and well-being. In Canada education management system, the EAS has been implemented by outsourcing it and funded by the Department of Education and Science to a specialist support group (VHI, 2010). However, some organizations and schools have set up their own internal EAS group or team which managed by their Human Resource Department (Snyder, 2004). This purpose of EAS has been said to provide employees and teachers in these countries with easy access to confidential counseling and to assist them in coping with either personal or job related issues. The findings have proven the EAS potentials in changing the existing counseling services to more acceptance level. It might be another occupational stress management intervention in our educational institution as well. Therefore, a thorough observations and research need to be made to identify whether an EAS can be a method to help teachers in Gombak District dealing with matters impacting their work-life and home-life stresses and problems. Hence, this research was based on the following questions; What

are the teachers' perceptions toward help seeking in counseling services?  
What are the teachers' expectations toward Employee Assistance Services?  
What are the suitable criteria of an Employee Assistance Services (EAS) module for school teachers in Gombak District? How effective is the Employee Assistance Services (EAS) module developed for the school teachers?

## **1. 4 Research Objectives**

The results of this study provided answers to the following objectives: To identify the teachers' perceptions toward help seeking in counseling services. To determine the teachers' expectations toward Employee Assistance Services. To develop suitable criteria of an Employee Assistance Services (EAS) module for school teachers in Gombak District. To identify the effectiveness of the Employee Assistance Services (EAS) module developed for the school teachers.

## **1. 5 Significance of the Study**

The intent of this research is to add a greater body of knowledge by providing an in-depth understanding of the teachers' perceptions on help seeking through counseling services as part of the occupational stress management method. From there, this study aimed to develop an EAS module by perceiving suitable criteria from the focus group as well as combining the teachers' expectations toward Employee Assistance Services. This study also identified the effectiveness of the EAS module that was tested among the school teachers in Gombak District. Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor & Millet (2005) published a survey on

occupational stress and compared the experiences of occupational stress across a large and diverse set of occupations by evaluating three stress related variables which are psychological well-being, physical health, and job satisfaction. They ranked teaching as the second most stressful job out of the twenty six (26) occupations analyzed. Teaching profession is surpassed one step only by the ambulance drivers' profession. Hence, this research attempts to assess the EAS as a medium to help teachers dealing with the occupational stress and helping them to manage a better perspective in their occupation. As observed and searched in dissertation databases in Malaysia, very few documented studies on occupational stress management through EAS has been conducted especially in teaching profession. However, it is undeniable that studies on workload and factors of stress on teachers are wide and has been done numerously in the country. The results of the study hopefully contribute to the betterment of the occupational stress management services that is offered nowadays as well as in work-life and home-life of these teachers. The findings can be used to enhance the existing programs and services of stress management among teachers and to provide guidance as well as to improve EAS planning, implementation, and evaluation in the future. Through conducting this research, it is hopefully will contribute to the occupational stress management and its' issues in this country regarding to the teaching profession as well as contribute to the academic field as a source of knowledge in other researches of this kind in the future. This research shall be another open arm to future research of its kind. It is important to learn from comments and critics, if any, and be widely open to accept opinions from others. Hence, it will also help to revise the

existing counseling services as the occupational stress management method through developing an EAS for the school teachers.

## **1. 6Scope of Study**

Research scope is the specific area that a researcher wants to cover in the study. Therefore, this research is to identify the teachers' perceptions toward the existing practices of counseling services as a method for occupational stress management in teaching profession, to determine the teachers' expectations toward stress management services, to develop suitable criteria of an Employee Assistance Services (EAS) module for school teachers in Gombak District, and to identify the effectiveness of the Employee Assistance Services (EAS) module that will be developed among the school teachers. This research only focused on full-time pre-school, primary and secondary national daily school teachers, school administrators in Gombak District, and counselors from Pejabat Pelajaran Daerah Gombak (Gombak District Education Office), Jabatan Pelajaran Negeri Selangor (Selangor State Education Department) as well as Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia (Ministry of Education Malaysia). The research excluded part-time and temporary teachers as well as the non academic staffs in these schools. Only national daily schools in Gombak District are considered as the source of potential respondents in this research despite of the schools' locations, types, and differences in the culture of administration in each school. By means, this research is excluding all the religious and boarding schools existed in the Gombak District. The teachers' perceptions toward the existing practices of counseling services as a method for occupational stress management in teaching profession are including their opinion toward counseling services

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implemented by other agencies and units through other ministries in the government such as the Credit Management and Counseling Agency (AKPK), National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN) as well as the National Anti-Drug Agency (AADK).

## **1. 7 Definition of Terms**

**Employee Assistance Services –**

**Perception –**

**Stigma Tolerance –**

**Anticipated Risk –**

**Emotional Openness –**

## **1. 8 Structure of the Thesis**

**Chapter I –**

**Chapter II –**

**Chapter III –**

**Chapter IV –**

**Chapter V –**