

Workload as a Factor in the Work Stress Level of Special Education Teachers

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i4/27012>

Published Online: 04 December 2025

Abstract

The pressure of dealing with the diversity of behavior of Special Education Needed Students (SEDs) is indeed synonymous with special education teachers. However, the workload carried by special education teachers nowadays is increasing, adding to the pressure they face. However, studies on workload and work pressure among special education teachers still receive little attention. Therefore, this study is to identify the level of work pressure experienced by special education teachers regarding the workload. The research conducted is a quantitative study and data has been collected online in the form of a 'google form' link. The study population is special education teachers in Maran District, Pahang. This questionnaire was distributed to the sample through simple random sampling. A total of 33 special education teachers in Maran District have answered the questionnaire. The data obtained was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. The results of the study obtained are the work pressure of special education teachers at a moderate level, which is a mean score of 2.54. The findings for the workload factor show that workload is the highest contributing factor influencing the work stress of special education teachers. Although the interpretation of the mean score for the workload factor is at a moderate level, it is undeniable that the workload mean score is higher than work environment. It is clear that work stress exists among special education teachers and this will have implications for the quality of the teachers' work if not handled well.

Keywords: Special Education Teacher, SEN, Stress Level, Work Pressure, Work Load

Introduction

Education is the foundation for the development and progress of a nation. In line with the National Education Philosophy, education is a continuous effort to ensure that Malaysian society contributes to national prosperity. Education must be implemented comprehensively and continuously without discriminating against any student, including Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN students). SEN students comprise six main categories: hearing impairment, visual impairment, learning disability, speech impairment, physical impairment, and multiple impairments.

To achieve this aspiration of inclusive education, teachers are the main pillar in ensuring the educational process runs smoothly. The teaching profession, in general, is among the essential occupations in the process of human, societal, and national development (Muh et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these heavy responsibilities make the teaching profession very challenging and categorize it as a high-stress occupation globally (Stela & Elida, 2013).

The tasks that must be carried out by special education teachers are even more challenging, considering that each SEN student has different ability levels and needs in the classroom (Junaidah & Nik Rosila, 2013). Special education teachers must not only implement creative, comprehensive teaching approaches tailored to the curriculum and the Individualised Education Plan (IEP) (Hannah Aqilah et al., 2019; Nurul Hidayah & Suziyani, 2023), but they must also be constantly ready to face current technological and pedagogical changes (Syed Sofian & Rohany, 2010).

Furthermore, the duties of a SET are not limited to teaching in the classroom alone. They also carry extensive administrative responsibilities similar to mainstream teachers, including preparing assessment papers, conducting extra classes, clerical tasks, and fulfilling roles as co-curricular advisors and holding various positions in school programs (Seriayuna, 2019; Syed Kamaruzaman et al., 2017). This increase in workload, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to a serious increase in work stress among SETs (Wong et al., 2022). The stress experienced is deeply concerning because it directly impacts work quality and teacher performance (Suhaimi & Muhamad Suhaimi, 2020), impacting their professional stability as educators (Junaidah & Nik Rosila, 2013).

Although work stress among teachers has been widely studied, there is still a need for more in-depth research focusing on the personal and organizational factors contributing to stress within the specific context of special education teachers in Malaysia, particularly in identifying effective coping strategies. Therefore, this study offers novelty by deeply analyzing the workload that influences the level of stress in special education teachers. The main contribution of this research to the field of social science (education) is to provide robust empirical evidence that can serve as a guide for the Ministry of Education Malaysia and teacher training institutions in formulating more targeted support interventions and optimizing workload distribution to ensure the professional sustainability of special education teachers in Malaysia.

Literature Review

A person cannot continue to work under stressful or coercive conditions. Special education teachers will choose to leave the classroom when feeling severely stressed by an unmanageable workload (Mohd Zuri et al. 2013). This indicates that stressed teachers cannot conduct Teaching and Learning (*PdP - Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran*) well and this will affect the students in that class. According to Haiyan Qin (2024), teachers who are under stress are unable to control students in the class, and the instructions delivered will not be effective.

Furthermore, the work stress experienced leading to teachers' desire for early retirement is very worrying (Todd et al. 2018). Increasingly high work stress leads to teachers' desire to leave the teaching profession (Abdul Said & Norhayati 2018) because they are unable to cope with excessive workload. Ibtasam (2018) also states that special education teachers choose

to quit their jobs or switch to other fields due to the stress experienced. This is highly concerning because the teaching profession is the main pillar in ensuring that the education process runs smoothly.

The work stress experienced can cause teachers to be unable to perform their duties well, especially during the Teaching and Learning process (*PdPc - Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran*). As a result of failing to control oneself from the work stress experienced, the relationship between teachers and students and the quality of *PdPc* will be affected (Mohamad Abdillah & Sew Fun 2008). The effects of the work stress experienced by special education teachers mostly bring harm to themselves and the work being done. Many studies have been conducted to look at the impact on education when teachers experience stress, but fewer studies focus on the special education stream.

Work Stress

Stress is a condition where a person experiences a period of tension caused by events that are outside of one's control. The stress experienced causes the individual to be unable to control their behavior or emotions due to the burden carried (Arihasnida et al. 2023). That stress affects oneself, which may stem from internal factors or external factors of the individual (Ruslan 2011). According to Cyrill F.G. et al. (2020), work stress originates from problems arising in the workplace. The stress experienced can be in a positive or negative form. However, negative stress that affects one's mental, physical, or emotional state is an important factor that can disrupt the quality of life harmony of a worker (Cyril F.G. et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the stress experienced by one person does not necessarily occur to another individual.

Workload

Workload is the amount of tasks that need to be completed by a person until finished. According to Ibtasam (2018), special education teachers tend to feel more stressed due to the improper distribution of workload. Workload is the cause that most influences the level of work stress among special education teachers (Amalina & Azita 2016). Ibtasam (2018) states that the workload needs to be reduced so that teachers do not feel overly stressed. The responsibilities of special education teachers are also increasing in educating Students with Special Educational Needs (MBPK - *Murid Berkeperluan Pendidikan Khas*). Special education teachers are not excluded from performing the same duties as mainstream teachers. Besides clerical duties, special education teachers also need to deal with the constantly changing behavior of MBPK (Ibtasam 2018).

Special Education Teachers

The effectiveness of the Special Education Program depends on the competence of special education teachers in performing their duties. Special education teachers are trained to educate Students with Special Educational Needs (MBPK - *Murid Berkeperluan Pendidikan Khas*) using various teaching strategies. According to Junaidah and Nik Rosila (2013), special education teachers need to educate MBPK who exhibit diverse behaviors. In one class, MBPK consist of various categories of behavior and functional levels. Teachers who choose to teach the Special Education Program must always be prepared for any challenge both inside and outside the classroom. Special education teachers have to face various challenges, especially concerning self-management (Junaidah & Nik Rosila 2013). The stress experienced by special

education teachers is greater compared to mainstream teachers. This is stated in the study by Ibtasam (2018) that special education teachers are more likely to experience stress than mainstream teachers.

Objective

The objective of this study is to identify the level of work stress and the influence of workload on the work stress of special education teachers.

Methodology

The design of this study is a survey research. This study was conducted using a quantitative method to measure the level of work stress among special education teachers. The questionnaire instrument used in this study has two parts: Part A and Part B. Part A contains items about respondent profiles, such as gender, teaching experience, and teaching location. Part B contains items to measure the level of work stress among special education teachers. This section is measured using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Less Agree), 4 (Agree), and 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was administered via 'Google Form' and distributed to special education teachers online. The population of the study is special education teachers in two schools in Pahang. The sample was selected through simple random sampling, and 33 respondents completed the distributed questionnaire. The data obtained were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics were used for data analysis. The interpretation of the mean score is as follows:

Mean Score	Mean Score Interpretation
1.00 to 2.00	Low
2.01 to 3.00	Low to Moderate
3.01 to 4.00	Moderate to High
4.01 to 5.00	High

Results

Finding 1: Respondent Demographics

Table 1 is the demographic information of the study respondents, comprising 33 respondents who provided and filled in the questionnaire form distributed via 'Google Form'. Respondent demographics involved questions covering gender, age range, educational attainment, teaching experience, mandatory retirement age, intention for early retirement, and preferred age for early retirement. Based on Table 1, the number of female respondents recorded the highest count, which was 27 out of 33 respondents, equivalent to 81.8% of the total percentage, while the number of male respondents recorded the lowest count, with only 6 individuals, equivalent to (18.2%) of the total respondents. The majority of the respondents consisted of the 31-35 age range, with 11 individuals, equivalent to (33.3%). This was followed by respondents aged 36-40 years, with a count of 6 individuals, equivalent to (18.2%), and respondents aged 26-30 years, with 5 individuals (15.2%). Meanwle, respondents in the 51-55 age range recorded the lowest count, with only 1 individual, equivalent to (3.0%).

Table 1
Respondent Demographics

Demographic	Details	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	21-25 years old	2	6.1
	26-30 years old	5	15.2
	31-35 years old	11	33.3
	36-40 years old	6	18.2
	41-45 years old	4	12.1
	46-50 years old	2	6.1
	51-55 years old	1	3.0
	56-60 years old	0	0
Gender	Male	6	18.2
	Female	27	81.8
Teaching experience	Below 5 years	8	24.2
	6-10 years	13	39.4
	11-15 years	4	12.1
	16-20 years	4	12.1
	21 years above	4	12.1
Education level	Diploma	1	3.0
	Bachelor's Degree	32	97.0
	Master's Degree	0	0
	Doctoral Degree	0	0
School location	City area	22	66.7
	Rural area	11	33.3
School category	Preschool	3	9.1
	Primary school	3	9.1
	Secondary school	27	81.8
Compulsory retirement age	56 years old	3	9.1
	58 years old	3	9.1
	60 years old	27	81.8
Desire for early retirement	Yes	32	97.0
	No	1	3.0
Optional early retirement age	45 years old	2	6.1
	50 years old	7	21.2
	54 years old	1	3.0
	55 years old	8	24.2
	56 years old	9	27.3
	58 years old	5	15.2
	59 years old	1	3.0
Total, N		33	100

The table above also shows that respondents with 6 to 10 years of teaching experience were the highest, with 13 people (39.4%). Meanwhile, respondents with less than 5 years of teaching experience were the second highest, with 8 people (24.2%). The respondent demographic findings also show that 32 people had the desire to retire early, which is 97.0%, and only one respondent (3.0%) stated they did not want to retire early. A total of nine respondents (27.3%) chose the age of 56 for early retirement, followed by eight respondents (24.2%) who chose 55 as the preferred age for early retirement.

Finding 2: Level of Work Stress of Special Education Teachers

Table 2 shows the level of work stress experienced by the 33 respondents during their period of service at school.

Table 2

Level of Work Stress

Construct	Mean Score	Mean Interpretation
Stress level	2.54	Low to Moderate

Based on Table 2, the level of work stress among special education teachers is at a moderately low level. This indicates that the level of work stress among special education teachers is not alarming but should be given attention so that it does not reach a high level.

Finding 3: Factors Contributing to Work Stress among Special Education Teachers

Table 3

Factors Contributing to Work Stress

Construct	Mean Score	Mean Interpretation
Workload	2.60	Low to Moderate
Work environment	2.50	Low to Moderate

Table 3 shows the mean scores for factors contributing to the work stress of special education teachers. The workload factor is at a moderately low level with a mean score of 2.60. Meanwhile, the mean score for the work environment factor is 2.50 and is also at a moderately low level. Although the difference is very small, it still proves that the workload factor indeed contributes to the work stress of special education teachers.

Discussion

Through the findings of this study, the researcher was able to identify the level of work stress experienced by special education teachers in two schools in Pahang. The results of the analysis show that the mean score is at a moderate level. This proves that special education teachers agree that they indeed experience work stress. Although the interpretation of the mean score indicates that the stress experienced is only at a moderately low level, the teachers are still considered to be in a stressed condition. These findings are consistent with the study by Amalina & Azita (2016), which stated that special education teachers in Johor also experienced stress at a moderate level.

The findings for the workload factor show that workload is the highest contributing factor influencing the work stress of special education teachers. Although the interpretation of the mean score for the workload factor is at a moderate level, it is undeniable that the workload mean score is the highest. For the items in this workload construct, the highest mean score is the item 'I will overeat/undereat when there is a lot of work to be done,' followed by the item 'I feel unpleasant working when I have to perform side duties.' The study findings also show that the majority of teachers agree that the quality of the tasks to be performed will decline as the number of tasks increases. Consistent with the studies by Mohd Zuri et al. (2013) and Schaufeli (2017), teachers will become negligent in performing their core duty—conducting the T&L process—when there are too many side duties to complete.

As for the work environment construct, the item with the highest mean score is the item 'I frequently think about retiring earlier than the mandatory retirement age,' followed by the item 'I feel extremely exhausted emotionally, physically, and spiritually after work.' Due to the work environment influencing the stress of special education teachers, the desire for early retirement arises, as stated in the studies by Abdul Said & Norhayati (2018) and Todd et al. (2018). Their studies stated that teachers make the decision to retire early or quit their jobs due to the work stress experienced. This indicates that the same situation applies to special education teachers who wish to retire early as a step to manage the stress they face. This indirectly is very worrying and will affect the education profession.

Therefore, the findings of this study show that the overall stress level of special education teachers is at a moderate level. However, special education teachers agree that the factor most influencing their work stress is the workload factor.

Conclusion

Overall, the researcher found that this study has achieved its objectives. All statements have been supported with evidence and research findings that were analysed using SPSS. Through descriptive statistical analysis, the level of work stress among special education teachers is at a moderate level. Therefore, the researcher hopes that this study can provide a clear picture of issues related to the work stress of special education teachers. The researcher also hopes that this study can become a medium for special education teachers to express their unspoken problems. Furthermore, the work stress experienced by special education teachers needs to be addressed, and the government should be more receptive to the teachers' suggestions to improve the quality of education for SEN Students (MBPK).

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