

TEACHERS ARE LEAVING AND WE WONDER WHY

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ABSTRACT

Teachers often find it hard to switch off from their work. Whether it is administrative work or responding to messages left on their mobile, being at home does not mean they can shut down. Even on weekends, they are busy replying to parents or students via Whatsapp about which books or other items to bring for the next day. Just as they thought they could take a deep breath, they were to attend online meetings that could end just a few seconds before midnight. How will they sleep soundly knowing that there are so many urgent things to be done the next day? These were the case with 20 urban secondary school teachers in Selangor during a qualitative interview. They feel isolated and trapped between responsibility and society; they are exhausted, frustrated, and demoralized, not to mention the post-pandemic effect. Like a normal human being, this could cause stress, anxiety, and depression if not handled effectively. Will passion still be relevant to this profession with the negative work-life balance that seems to be the norm now? What motivates them to continue in service if they are no longer passionate and have gone cold? Most informants aged between 40 to 50 stated that they could not wait to retire early. While most countries worldwide lose their teachers from leaving the profession and taking early retirement, will Malaysia suffer the same as this current trend?

Keywords: Mental Health Stigma; Stress; Anxiety; Depression; Teacher; Retire Early

INTRODUCTION

Teachers all over the world are tired! Too dramatic? We disagree. There are too many reports annually supporting this. The increasing percentage of teachers suffering from burnout is eyebrow-raising and could lead to low job satisfaction, demoralization, stress, anxiety, and depression. Why are the teachers tired, you may ask? Although often called superheroes, many might be surprised to learn that teachers are human and they have feelings too. Studies have shown that a lack of support for early-career teachers leads to unhappiness, which could contribute to plans to leave the profession (Kelly et al., 2018). The likelihood that teachers will stay in the classroom and their level of job satisfaction are both influenced by acute stress at work. Stressful surroundings and circumstances can also impact academic performance and the motivation of teachers and principals. In Japan, 20% of teachers say they experience a lot of stress at work, which is statistically similar to the OECD average of 18% (OECD, 2020). Lack of resources and having too many students in a classroom are the two causes of work-related stress among ECEC personnel (OECD, 2021). Time management, followed by having too many things to do in a short time, and work-related factors are reasons teachers are stressed mostly (Pau et al., 2022).

Because teachers have numerous duties as part of their work, multitasking and being robust to mental health problems are expected from them. In a cross-national study between Australia and India, human resilience theories pinpoint indicators of a person's adjustment to life, which often includes their work (Athota et al., 2019). Conceptions of resilience involve teachers since resilience is crucial for dealing with the demands of complex organizations. Based on the hypothesis that instructors who remain in the field might demonstrate resilience as a personal attribute or character trait, similar to how students do in schools. Nevertheless, too much of everything could cause experienced teachers to leave early. Responding to a survey question about the most likely reasons for leaving the job, staff members mentioned retirement, health-related reasons, taking care of family obligations, and employment in

a different field outside of the ECEC sector. Hence, they typically believe there are few prospects for career progression inside the company (OECD, 2021). This study would like to delve into the situation to find out if there is a similar pattern in Malaysia by interviewing teachers from urban secondary schools in a state with the highest number of schools – Selangor.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers Are Leaving: Worldwide View

In 2021, about one in five teachers in the U.S. responded that they were considering leaving the profession and 50% of them said they were looking into other job opportunities both inside and outside of education without mentioning the COVID-19 pandemic. One even stated, "I'll go if anything better comes up" (Steiner & Woo, 2021). By the end of the 2020–2021 academic year, 23% of teachers said they had the intention to quit their present teaching positions. Most of these teachers were probably survivors of the epidemic. Teachers were somewhat more likely than employed employees to declare that they intended to leave their employment; 17% of employed adults said they were thinking about doing so. Since the fall of 2020, when asked the same question for the last time, the percentage of teachers contemplating leaving their jobs in January 2021 has remained constant (Kaufman et al., 2020). Before the pandemic, 16% of teachers quit their present position during the school year (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teaching remotely, adjusting to changes in their schools' instructional approaches this school year, engaging students, keeping in touch with students' families, and supporting students' social and emotional learning were teachers' most often stated sources of work-related stress. (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

The numbers seemed to be higher in the United Kingdom. A survey by The Teacher Well Being Index in 2021 showed that between 2017 and 2021, the proportion of teachers who thought about leaving their profession remained unchanged, ranging between 53 and 57%. The survey highlighted the number of employees reporting symptoms as potential indications of anxiety, which has not changed over the years. The staff from the education sector have encountered many challenges in the previous two years owing to the pandemic, which has come to mean working in a pressured and stressful environment (e.g., school closures, staff absenteeism due to COVID-19, teaching online, assessment issues, and others). Even though COVID-19 has grown to be a significant factor affecting staff wellness, 66% felt the absence of a work-life balance and 64% felt excessive workload continues to be the main workplace problem that contributes to poor mental health or well-being. Hence, whether or not there is a pandemic, levels of tension and anxiety continue to be unacceptably high (Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021).

Across the OECD countries and economies in TALIS, the average teachers who report experiencing a lot of stress at work are twice as likely to indicate they will quit teaching in the next five years than their colleagues who reported feeling less pressured. Having too little time for lesson preparation, too many lessons to teach, too much administrative work, being held responsible for students' achievement, maintaining classroom discipline, being intimidated or verbally abused by students, addressing parents or guardians' concerns, and modifying lessons for students with special needs are among the stressors (OECD, 2020). For a variety of reasons, teachers choose to quit the teaching profession. Some reasons are either the external job market or the teaching profession's perks and working conditions. Age and location are examples of individual traits that connect to objective features such as stress from work. This indicator does not attempt to explain the link between teacher attrition and the variables that may enhance the possibility that teachers will quit teaching because the choice to leave the profession is the consequence of multiple and complicated circumstances (OECD, 2021).

Teachers Are Leaving: Malaysia

Many people started to pause earlier in 2022 when the National Union of Teachers announced that approximately 10,000 teachers had applied for early retirement for the past few years. On March 21, 2022, Senior Education Minister Datuk Dr. Radzi Jidin revealed that the number of teachers who had opted for early retirement was almost equal to those on compulsory retirement. This alarming trend could lead to a similar pattern to Australia's teacher shortage. Sitharavellu's post on April 23, 2022, in *New Straits Times Online* stated that there is a need to address this issue of teachers' retiring early. He added that the issue of teacher shortage is crucial to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and is consistent with our Malaysia Education Blueprint (2015–2025) objective of luring and keeping qualified teachers. Studies have shown many reasons contributing to this trend. D'Silva (2022) stated that increasing administrative work and demanding parents are among the reasons teachers quit early. His posting in the *New Straits Times Online* on April 26, 2022, stated that many teachers love their profession, but administrative work weighs them down. According to him, several teachers who had just resigned and are candidates for early retirement said that many teachers are choosing early retirement because they are burdened with tons of unrelated work that has little to do with teaching. He added that there may soon be a shortage of teachers due to the rising number of early retirees and the flood of new applications for early retirement.

Both before and after the pandemic, Malaysian teachers had to adjust to the new standard, which increased the number of responsibilities they already had to do. Zamri (2017) stated that other drawbacks include the possibility that teachers with poor mental health may also suffer from poor physical health, including lower back discomfort. In a vicious cycle, poor physical health can exacerbate teachers' stress and anxiety. In the same vein, the National Union of the Teaching Profession (NTUP) remarked that a teacher occasionally has to manage 60 students in a class while also carrying a heavy administrative workload in its posting in 2018. These situations should not be taken lightly, especially given that statistics indicate that 44% of Malaysian teachers experience stress and despair. It is crucial as the union constantly receives between 30 and 50 instances of stressed teachers each month. In addition to their responsibilities in the classroom, teachers in Malaysia nowadays also have a variety of extracurricular activities, parent interactions, and administrative duties to do (Othman & Sivasubramanian, 2019). Their responses demonstrate

that a significant portion of secondary school teachers in Malaysia believe they are at risk of having poor mental health and well-being, even if the self-reported symptoms are not professionally substantiated (Pau et al., 2022).

It appears that teachers all over the world are overburdened with work for many years. Unappreciated and accused of being shirkers and lazy, they are giving signals that they are tired of it; leaving the profession early is one of the signals. This study delves into the situation to find out if it is a similar case to that of Malaysian teachers and the factors behind it.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative study (REC/08/2020 (MR/203)), which employs interviews to delve deeply into the study's aims for the sample, has received permission from the UiTM Research Ethics Committee. A thorough and complete account of a person's experience and understanding may be provided by qualitative research (Merriam, 2015). Instead of using statistics, phrases and informative concepts are the preferred method in qualitative research (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Qualitative research is inductive by nature, and the researcher often examines meanings and insights in a specific context (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Levitt et al., 2017).

Informants and Data Collection

As highlighted by the Ministry of Education, there is a teacher shortage in Selangor and Johor, especially in urban areas (Musa, 2018). Well aware of how crucial this matter was, the Education Ministry recommended hiring additional counselors to assist instructors and raise awareness of stress management techniques (Daim, 2019). Public school teachers typically feel stress and burnout, which is made worse in urban schools where there are often many demands on their time and no support. The expectations of the profession and the resources available to them to satisfy those expectations impact the stress and burnout of urban teachers (Bottiani et al., 2019). According to figures from the Ministry of Education Malaysia, Selangor has the most urban secondary schools in Malaysia. As stated in Table 1, in 2018 Selangor had 156 urban secondary schools with 222,353 students and 16,152 teachers. As a result of population increase and demands, the number of secondary schools in Selangor has risen to 221 urban schools with 328,294 students and 22,365 teachers in 2019 and 2020, 221 urban schools. The school was operating with 326,308 students and 22,456 teachers. Since Selangor had the highest number of urban schools in Malaysia and considering the teacher shortage issue, this study chose the state's teachers from urban secondary schools as the sample of this study. Details in Table 1 show the increasing numbers.

Table 1. Urban Secondary schools in Selangor

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Students	Number of Teachers
2018	156	222,353	16,152
2019	222	328,504	22,881
2020	221	326,308	22,456

Source: EMIS, APDM, e-OPERASI 2021

Table 2. Urban Secondary schools with above 1800 students in Selangor

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Students	Number of Teachers
2018	37	83,527	5,400
2019	62	143,822	9,079
2020	59	138,187	8,583

Source: EMIS, APDM, e-OPERASI 2021

As there were 59 urban secondary schools with more than 1800 students in Selangor as stated in Table 2, all schools were listed for this study. Upon receiving the approval from the Ministry of Education (KPM.600-3/2/3-eras (11622)) and the State Education Department (JPNS.SPD.600-1/1/2 JLD.18 (57)), an email was sent to the schools for the principal’s approval and questionnaire distribution. Concerned that the interview will take off during the pandemic, the Education Ministry gave its approval on the condition that all informants be interviewed online rather than in person to curb the COVID-19 pandemic from spreading. To ensure this mandate was not taken lightly, every invitation was sent online. Out of 59 invitations sent, only 13 schools responded. The informants that had sent their responses were filtered through based on several criteria, one of which was that their DASS21 result had at least a mild status for either stress, anxiety, or depression; they had to be a secondary school teacher who was not under any external pressure to participate in this study and who was free of severe psychopathology and severe mental health problems (i.e., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, hallucinations, active psychosis, suicidality, homicidal thoughts, and active substance abuse/dependence) and they were willing to take part of the interview. 25 informants who fit the requirements were later contacted and agreed to participate. However, five of the informants felt uncomfortable being interviewed. For phenomenological research, several textbooks recommend various sample sizes, but in practice, a sample of between 6 and 20 people is enough. Consequently, studying the entire population is not essential to understand the answer to a question (Guest et al., 2020).

Profile of Informants

Two male and 18 female instructors were interviewed out of the 20 teachers that were gathered as informants for this study. There are both lower secondary and higher secondary students on this list. One of the five managed the Special Education Program, also known as PPKI, or Program PendidikanKhas Integrasi, while the other four taught Form 6 pupils. 17 Malay instructors, one Chinese teacher, and two Indian teachers made up the racial breakdown. 20-29 (1), 30-39 (5), 40-49 (8), and 50-59 werethe age groups that were broken down (6). Table 3 presents specific information for all informants.

Table 3. Demographic Profile of informants (N = 20)

Pseudo	Gender	Race	Class	Age	DASS	Stress	Anxiety	Depression
Mas	Female	Malay	4	59	No	Normal	Mild	Normal
Ani	Female	Malay	6	58	No	Normal	Moderate	Mild
Lis	Female	Malay	3, 4	57	No	Normal	Mild	Normal
Wong	Female	Chinese	4,5	55	No	Ext Severe	Ext Severe	Ext Severe
Fiza	Female	Malay	1, 2	53	No	Normal	Mild	Normal
Jamal	Male	Malay	1,2	50	No	Moderate	Ext Severe	Moderate
Zana	Female	Malay	4,5	49	No	Mild	Ext Severe	Moderate
Haya	Female	Malay	1,2	47	No	Normal	Moderate	Normal
Nur	Female	Malay	4,5	46	No	Mild	Severe	Mild
Wati	Female	Malay	3,4,5	46	No	Normal	Mild	Normal
Rani	Female	Indian	1,2	46	No	Ext Severe	Severe	Ext Severe
Pushpa	Female	Indian	PPKI	41	No	Normal	Mild	Normal
Hakim	Male	Malay	3,4,5	41	No	Normal	Moderate	Normal
Aida	Female	Malay	PPKI	40	No	Severe	Ext Severe	Ext Severe
Aisyah	Female	Malay	PPKI	39	No	Normal	Mild	Normal
Iza	Female	Malay	PPKI	38	No	Mild	Mild	Normal
Nisa	Female	Malay	3,5	37	Yes	Severe	Ext Severe	Moderate
Farah	Female	Malay	4,5	37	Yes	Mild	Severe	Moderate
Eli	Female	Malay	3,4,5	36	No	Normal	Mild	Mild
Azza	Female	Malay	3,4,5	26	Yes	Normal	Mild	Moderate

RESULT

Further interviews were conducted to see if they had thoughts of leaving the profession. Most of the informants who were aged below 50 responded "Yes, they would like to retire early," while informants who were aged above 50 responded "Yes, they are looking forward to retiring." A theme and subtheme were produced to understand the reason behind this, as documented in Table 4.

Table 4. Theme and sub-theme emerged from qualitative interviews with informants

Theme	Subtheme
I am demoralized	Low Teaching Satisfaction
	Low work life balance
	Society

When asked what made them look forward to retiring, the informants mentioned low teaching satisfaction, low work-life balance, and society as the reasons why.

"I am just waiting for my pension. Teaching is not what it used to be. There is too much admin work, online forms, parents interfering, and no respect for teachers. What will happen to our future society?" (Lis, 57 female).

"I have to admit that I am tired of these clerical things, administrative, online things, especially PdPR, reports, and all this is making me lose my passion. I am no longer motivated, and I can assure you that most teachers are just waiting for their early retirement" (Haya, 47 female).

"Either we are not prepared for this, or society isn't. With low participation, lack of cooperation, and too much stuff on my plate... even the strongest would feel inferior. I keep telling myself, just a few more years to go" (Nur, 46 female).

"I don't know what will happen in the future; I just do my job. They give me a task; I try to finish it. I know it is a long way to go, but I think I want to enroll for an early pension" (Pushpa, 41 female).

"We have no choice but to adapt it." I mean... times like these, with the current economy, you'd feel ungrateful to complain. Like it or not, it is going to be the norm now since the pandemic is staying. Just be grateful that you still have a job. But sometimes you get tired of trying so hard to motivate yourself, right? It's okay. I just have a few more years, then I can rest" (Wati, 46 female).

Most informants stated they were too tired and believed that voicing out their dilemma was pointless. Society will judge as they expect teachers to be resilient to stress, anxiety, and depression. Having to hear this directly from the informants - If this is not a loss of hope, then we do not know what to call it.

Discussion and Recommendations

From the word demoralized, this discussion could harbour the findings of this study and reveal why the informants were looking forward to their retirement. As they tried to be resilient to work-related stress for years, the informants noticed that they became passive when handling their daily routines. Nevertheless, it came to a point where they felt they were stuck between the management and society's expectations. They know it is part of their job description as a teacher, but multitasking must have its limitations. Santoro (2018) suggested that many mid-career teachers leave the field not because their internal drive has been extinguished by the physical demands of the job but because they have "conscientiously objected" to what the profession has come to demand of them. Many teachers still have strong enthusiasm for teaching but have realized that to carry out their duties as teachers, they were required to sacrifice their moral convictions. Demoralization is Santoro's term for this stage of the battle. Likewise in the case of the informants of this study, the informants are still passionate with their professions, nonetheless demoralization builds low job satisfaction.

"There is a love-hate relationship between teachers and filing. Love because if the school administration wants it there and then, we will be able to hand it over. We hate because we feel that it is not our job to do it. Admin is not only about filing; handling other stuff is part of it. Like meeting, getting information, and activities. Each of us handles our own area, or Koko, or clubs, and for each and every one of them, we have to handle the admin. Imagine how much paperwork, reporting, and filing we have to do. Imagine doing this for years. Now if you ask me why I look forward to my early retirement, this is my answer" (Zana, 49, female).

*"This is a difficult time to be a teacher. Not only do I have to take my administrative job home because I can't finish it at school, but meetings are scheduled after working hours. Sometimes online meetings can finish late at night. I have children of my own who need my attention too. I come home and I see these faces who want to tell their stories and what they have been through at school. But then again, I often felt tired attending to their needs... *takes a deep breath. You know, I make sure my job is done, I make sure I take care of other people's children, but I don't have time for my children. I felt like I was a bad mother. I am serious when I put up my name for the application to retire early"* (Aida, 40, female).

"No, there is no satisfaction in teaching now. There is just no soul in it. Try teaching online and try asking the students back what they have learnt. I could picture their blurry faces even when they switched off their cameras. I am so tired, I wish I could go off early" (Nisa, 37 female).

"Administrative loads are getting from bearable to ridiculously crazy. I can't even focus on teaching due to the workloads. It keeps on coming. Most of the time, I have to bring it home to finish it. I have no choice; it was given to me, and I have to finish it. Come to think of it, I don't even have time for myself. (Long sigh) I am signing up early. I must" (Nur, 46 female).

Most informants stated they were too tired and believed that voicing out their dilemma was pointless. Society will judge as they expect teachers to be resilient to stress, anxiety, and depression. Having to hear this directly from the informants - If this is not a loss of hope, then we do not know what to call it. Ahmad stated in her post in New Straits Times Online on May 5th, 2022, excessive workloads, shortage of teaching personnel, subpar classroom environment, and lack of administrative and technical support from the ministry and state education department may influence a teacher's choice to quit include. Additionally, pressure from parents and society, inadequate facilities, and a lack of financial support for their teaching endeavours also influence their decision to leave early. As shown by studies, teacher stress has contributed to turnover (i.e., mobility and attrition), which is critical given concerns about teacher shortages and the links between turnover and student achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Kaufman & Diliberti, 2020; Ryan et al., 2017; Singer, 2021; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

2022 has witnessed many teachers go on strike to voice out their dilemmas. Disagreeing government policies, higher wages, smaller class sizes, and more mental health services were the main issues. The teachers from France, Puerto Rico, Minneapolis, the four UK nations, Palestinian teachers, Ohio, and teachers from Seattle are among many. Details in Table 5 explains.

Table 5. Teachers On Strike 2022

Year	Teachers from	Author	Source
Jan, 2022	Paris, France	Chrisafis A.	The Guardian
Feb, 2022	Puerto Rico	Wyss J.	Aljazeera
Feb, 2022	Minneapolis	Karnowski S	The Columbian
July, 2022	United Kingdom	Seith E.	Tes Magazine
May 2022	Palestine	CPT	CPT
Aug, 2022	Ohio	Allen J	Reuters
Sept, 2022	Seattle	Mcknight M.	Reuters

Earlier, the land from down under had a similar situation. Loomes from New Castle Herald Online on March 2, 2022, reported that Australia had a teacher crisis. His posting entitled "More than 10,000 NSW teachers quit in 2021" stated that experienced teachers left and inexperienced teachers replaced them. Those who are still in service land with more responsibilities than they are paid for. As a result, the public-school teachers voted to strike on November 2021.

Likewise, the teacher crisis seemed to be putting Malaysia in a similar situation as other countries worldwide. Abdullah reported in New Straits Times Online on May 16, 2022, that the Ministry has successfully recruited and deployed 13,770 candidates to schools that were facing shortages of teachers. This is based on the Ministry's announcement in 2021 that a one-time teacher intake would include 18,702 Education Officers for grade DG41. Nevertheless, the Ministry ought to address issues that caused the teachers to retire early in the first place. As prevention is better than cure, it is best to understand the root cause and address it the soonest.

According to research from the RAND Corporation in the U.S., policymakers and educational leaders can better support teachers by having a better awareness of their sources of work-related stress, which may also help keep teachers from quitting their jobs or the profession altogether (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Looking at the track records in the U.K., this is proven to be effective. From 36% in 2017 to 44% in 2021, the U.K. employees' evaluations of how well their organisation supports education staff with mental health problems and well-being have grown. But the percentage increased to 50% in 2020, which may mean that organisations gave this a higher priority at that time (Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021). Therefore, increasing the support and dealing with the teacher stress initiatives need to be consistent as it will reduce the number of teachers leaving the profession.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that most of the urban secondary school teachers in Selangor aged 50 and above are looking forward to their retirement and leaving their profession. Similarly, informants below 50 have intentions to submit their retirement forms early. Regardless of gender, most felt tired and overburdened with non-teaching work for many years. It hurts them when their profession is unappreciated, and they are accused of being shirkers and lazy by society. Stigma by many often points out that teachers have nothing to do and have too many days of leave during school holidays for doing nothing. Reports show that compared to women, men find it harder to show signs of mental health issues (MOH, 2019). Since most informants were women, this study suggests seeking more male informants for future research to understand the stigma. There were very high expectations by parents, and the management left them under-pressured, according to this study. As they try hard to juggle their daily responsibilities, another pile of new tasks comes in. Not many can take up this profession and still be passionate about it. We could imagine having a fraction of it and having high blood pressure the next day. Now let's ask ourselves and answer sincerely: with huge responsibilities and the world on their shoulders yet unappreciated, would we be insane to question why they are leaving?

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