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Unraveling teacher stressors in Bhutan: a qualitative exploration of contributing elements

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School teaching is widely acknowledged to be a highly demanding profession. Consequentially, an emerging academic literature deals with the stress levels teachers face. While existing studies predominantly focus on quantifying relevant stressors, this study investigates the subjective perceptions and interpretations of stressors by teachers. Data comes from Bhutan, a country with a high teacher resignation rate primarily due to teacher stress, despite being one of the highest-paid occupations. The results show that teacher stress in Bhutan predominantly emanates from heightened job demands. These demands are perceived differently in terms of how individuals view teaching responsibilities and non-academic obligations (e.g., Class Teacher). The pervasive impact of inadequate leadership and management exacerbates stress levels, directly encroaching upon psycho-social wellbeing. Ten teachers in Bhutan were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The interview data was recorded, transcribed, and coded using MAXQDA. Thematic analysis was then conducted based on the generated codes. By adopting a qualitative lens, this research enriches our understanding of teacher stress by unraveling how stressors are interconnected and how different teachers perceive the same stressor differently, providing insights on targeted interventions and support mechanisms. The results also show that supportive leadership can sometimes be viewed as a source of stress as opposed to the popular notion of perceiving it entirely as a stress-mitigating factor.

KEYWORDS

teachers, stress, teacher stress, teaching, job demands, stressor

1 Introduction

Globally, teaching is considered one of the most stressful professions ([Greenglass and Burke, 2003](#); [Johnson et al., 2005](#); [Ramli, 2023](#)). Therefore, understanding the impact of occupational stress on teacher wellbeing and efficacy has attracted huge research interest and emphasis since the 1970s. Understanding teacher stress has proven vital, especially in identifying effective intervention and prevention strategies ([Curby et al., 2013](#); [Hagermoser Sanetti et al., 2021](#); [Agyapong et al., 2023](#)). However, despite excellent researcher interest in the topic, much remains unexplored and unknown, especially around the in-depth exploration of individual factors contributing to teacher stress (see section 3).

In Bhutan, teacher stress has become a key concern among many other issues in education. As shown in [Table 1](#), for instance, except for a sudden drop in 2020, the teacher attrition rate is still rising despite being Bhutan's highest-paid profession ([Kuensel, 2021](#); [Times, 2021](#)). The annually increasing teacher attrition rate is largely attributed to teacher stress ([Wangchuk and Dorji, 2020](#); [Dorji et al., 2023](#)). This makes Bhutan a “critical case” ([Flyvbjerg, 2006](#), p. 230) for

TABLE 1 Number of public school teachers leaving the education system.

Year	Total teachers	Total resignation	Voluntary resignation
2016	8,297	290	200
2017	8,644	345	260
2018	8,824	355	263
2019	8,518	480	277
2020	9,388	163	112
2021	9,185	353	224
2022	9,860	478	307
2023	9,593	371	284

Source: Annual Education Statistics, Ministry of Education and Skills Development, Royal Government of Bhutan, Bhutan.

studying teacher stress. Moreover, though teacher stress has gained traction as a pertinent research area around the world, bibliometric research on teacher stress from 1956 to 2022 by Hoang (2023) revealed that there was a limited collaboration among the authors from different countries, highlighting the need to explore the nuanced insights on the topic from various countries and cultures.

A study conducted in 2019 among 200 secondary school teachers in the southern districts of Bhutan revealed that most teachers perceived work overload as the leading cause of their teacher stress (Subba and Bala, 2019). Likewise, according to Tashi (2014, p. 73), in Bhutan, teaching is more and more described as a high-stress job, though it is still widely regarded as a popular choice of profession. Teacher recruitment in Bhutan is healthy, but the retention of experienced teachers has become a cause of national concern (Katel, 2023). Many teachers even intend to retire early due to overwhelming teacher stress. Most teachers who left the profession found their jobs stressful due to work overload, unfair school administration, and poor school leadership (Wangchuk and Dorji, 2020). Other causes of teacher stress include student behavior, education policy, and leadership style (Wangdi, 2021).

While the recurring themes of these studies substantiate the causes of teacher stress in Bhutan, very little is known pertaining to how teachers perceive and formulate stressors (see section 3). Going beyond just the identification of the teacher stressors is vital as it is clear that a significant amount of occupational stress is prevalent among the teachers in Bhutan. Therefore, this study builds on the available research by explicitly focusing on how teachers in Bhutan construe teacher stress by qualitatively exploring the contributing factors.

2 What is teacher stress?

As this study circles around the term stress, it is crucial to establish the definition of the term stress first. While the dictionaries provide generic descriptions with emphasis only on the word's negative connotation, highlighting negative emotions, pressures, and problems, scientific definition describes it as a normal human reaction that occurs to everyone when faced with changes or challenges. Stress is also deemed positive, alerting the human body of dangers and motivating or pushing oneself to achieve more in some situations, such as tests and exams (Cleveland Clinic, 2021).

Over the years, many have tried to define and explain the term stress. However, certain authors and institutes, such as the American Institute of Stress, consider it difficult to define it as it is differently perceived by different people (Marksberry, 2023). Just as Selye (1970), popularly referred to as the father of stress, said, "Everyone knows what stress is, but nobody really knows," stress is difficult to define (Fink, 2016, p. 5). However, numerous definitions are still available that are mostly similar. For instance, Selye (1970) defined stress as a fundamental human body response to any demand. Selye's definition of stress is the most basic and all-purpose definition, which is more based on the scientific definition of stress rather than the dictionary meaning. Selye used two terms, eustress, and distress, to describe stress. While eustress was used to describe the stress that positively contributed toward challenging and motivating people, distress was used to describe the form of stress that was detrimental to an individual's mental and physical health (Kyriacou, 2001).

Other definitions are more detailed, such as the one by Fink (2016, p. 5), which includes "perception of threat, with resulting anxiety discomfort, emotional tension, and difficulty in adjustment." Stress is also deemed to occur on certain occasions of excessive environmental demands compared to one's discernment of the capability to manage it (Koolhaas et al., 2011).

So, what is teacher stress? Though stress is primarily considered a subjective matter to give one fixed definition, using the aforementioned basic understanding of stress (mainly the negative aspect) and after carefully reviewing various identified causes of teacher stress in Bhutan, this study adopted Selye's term distress, which describes the detrimental and unsavory aspects of the term stress, as the basis for understanding teacher stress. Therefore, in this study, teacher stress refers to any negative emotion or feelings such as anger, frustration, tiredness, anxiety, and depression resulting in physical or mental pressure arising from teachers' work, work-related issues, or the working environment. It can vary from teacher to teacher depending on how one perceives stress, but it is largely referred to as negative emotions.

3 What do we already know?

Existing literature on teacher stress provides a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and its implications for educators worldwide. Teacher stress has been a subject of significant research globally due to its pervasive nature and impact on education systems (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021). Early studies, such as those by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1977), marked the inception of systematic exploration into teacher stress. Subsequent research efforts have aimed to identify its sources (Litt and Turk, 1985), manifestations (Boyle et al., 1995), and impacts on teacher wellbeing (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2017). The rising teacher resignation rate around the globe, mostly citing teaching as a stressful occupation, demands continued and in-depth studies into the subject.

Studies have consistently highlighted multifaceted sources of teacher stress. These include but are not limited to workplace settings, including physical infrastructure and organizational culture (Sunarsi, 2019), administrative demands, lack of support from administration (Steiner and Woo, 2021), low salaries or inadequate resources (Carroll et al., 2021); professional challenges related to meeting administrative requirements, heavy workload, time pressures (Jomud et al., 2021),

disruptive classroom environments (Blase, 1986); teacher-pupil relationships including managing student behavior (Evans et al., 2019), addressing individual learning needs, maintaining classroom order (Carroll et al., 2022), and enforcing disciplinary measures (Farmer, 2020). Additionally, factors such as educational policies (Farley and Chamberlain, 2021), coping with change in the system (Sokal et al., 2020), standardized testing, and accountability measures (Erichsen and Reynolds, 2020) contribute to teachers' stress levels. Though there are some variations in how teacher stressors are termed by different authors, studies reveal similar factors to this day.

While the sources of teacher stress have been well-documented, the perception and interpretation of stressors vary among individual teachers. The current literature on teacher stress is predominantly characterized by quantitative methodologies that aim to quantify the prevalence of stress among teachers and identify its correlates and determinants (Polatcan et al., 2019; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021). Studies employing quantitative approaches often utilize standardized instruments, such as the Teacher Stress Inventory (TSI) or the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), to assess various dimensions of teacher stress (Stephenson, 2012). While quantitative studies provide valuable insights into the prevalence and correlates of teacher stress, they tend to oversimplify the multifaceted nature of stress experiences. They may overlook the subjective, context-dependent aspects of stress. Moreover, quantitative approaches often fail to capture teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, and coping mechanisms in diverse educational contexts (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2017).

Furthermore, existing literature predominantly focuses on identifying stressors rather than exploring how individual teachers construe and navigate stress experiences. Limited attention has been given to qualitative inquiries that delve into the subjective realities of teacher stress across diverse educational settings. Teachers' perceptions and interpretations of stressors vary based on individual experiences, coping mechanisms, and contextual factors (Herman et al., 2020). While some teachers may view challenges as opportunities for growth (eustress), others may perceive them as overwhelming burdens (distress) (Selye, 1970).

Research suggests that teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and coping strategies influence how they interpret and respond to stressors (Herman et al., 2020). For example, teachers with high levels of self-efficacy may perceive stressors as manageable obstacles, whereas those with low self-efficacy may feel powerless and overwhelmed (Marais-Opperman, 2020). Likewise, research has highlighted how various coping strategies and support systems in mitigating teacher stress are effective to varying degrees, primarily due to individual differences. Coping mechanisms such as problem-solving, seeking social support, mindfulness, and self-care practices can help teachers manage stressors effectively, but the effectiveness varies depending on individual perception of stress (Agyapong et al., 2023). Furthermore, supportive school environments, leadership practices, and professional development opportunities that play crucial roles in buffering against the adverse effects of stress (Curby et al., 2013) are also subjective to individual perceptions.

Teacher stress has significant implications for educators' wellbeing and effectiveness in the classroom. High stress levels can lead to burnout, emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished teaching effectiveness (Lee et al., 2019). Moreover, prolonged exposure to stressors can negatively impact teachers' physical and mental health, leading to absenteeism, turnover, and

decreased morale (Steiner and Woo, 2021). Research from diverse cultural contexts provides valuable insights into the universal and context-specific dimensions of teacher stress. Cross-cultural studies have highlighted variations in stressors and coping mechanisms influenced by societal norms, educational policies, and institutional practices. For example, studies in Western contexts emphasize factors such as high-stakes testing, accountability measures, and insufficient resources as prominent stressors (Johnson et al., 2005; Hagermoser Sanetti et al., 2021). In contrast, studies in Asian countries like Bhutan may underscore cultural factors, community expectations, and socioeconomic challenges as additional stressors unique to the local context (Subba and Bala, 2019; Dorji et al., 2023).

These subjective aspects of stress underscore the need for nuanced exploration beyond the mere identification of stressors. Just as Kyriacou (2001) suggested five directions for future research into teacher stress, it is now more important to study how different teachers perceive various stressors differently. Such in-depth qualitative examination of the identified teacher stressors could inform focused and better educational reforms (Carroll et al., 2022) since examining how teachers perceive and interpret stressors contributes significantly to understanding their experiences and informing interventions (Herman et al., 2020).

There is also limited research on how teachers perceive and interpret stressors within specific cultural and contextual contexts. The existing literature on teacher stress provides valuable insights into common stressors and their impacts on educators' wellbeing. However, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of how teachers perceive and interpret stressors within specific cultural and contextual contexts, particularly in the global south. While previous studies have identified general sources of teacher stress, there is limited exploration of how these stressors are experienced and understood by teachers in Bhutan. Therefore, the research question emerges: How do teachers in Bhutan construe and interpret stressors within their cultural and educational context? This qualitative study aims to address this gap by exploring the subjective experiences and interpretations of teacher stress among educators in Bhutan, thereby contributing to the broader understanding of teacher stress and informing targeted intervention strategies in the Bhutanese education system.

4 Bhutanese education system

Until the late 1950s, education in Bhutan was primarily monastic. Even today, monastic institutions continue to offer traditional monastic education alongside modern school education. Therefore, Bhutan's education system comprises three main forms: formal school education, monastic education, and non-formal education. Today, formal school education is the predominant system. The Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD) manages Bhutan's school education system, while the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB), in collaboration with the MoESD, oversees tertiary education.

Bhutan's school-based education structure offers 13 years of free basic education from classes PP to XII, which includes 7 years of primary education (PP-VI) and 6 years of secondary education (VII-XII). Secondary education is further divided into lower (VII-VIII), middle (IX-X), and higher secondary (XI-XII) levels. Children typically enroll in school at age five. After completing class XII, students have the option

to pursue further studies at tertiary institutions within Bhutan for a diploma or bachelor's degree or to enter the job market. Some students also choose to study abroad. The education policy of Bhutan is guided by the country's unique developmental philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which emphasizes holistic development and the wellbeing of its citizens. Since the implementation of the first Five Year Plan (FYP) in 1961, the number of schools and educational institutes in the country has grown from about 11 prior to 1961 to 1,121 in 2023. Student enrolment has also increased significantly, from approximately 400 students in the early 1960s to 182,137 in 2022 (MoESD, 2023).

5 Materials and methods

Based on the nature of the research subject and objective, a basic interpretive qualitative study (Merriam, 2002) was considered the best methodological choice. Stress is a uniquely subjective matter, meaning that in order to understand the phenomenon, we need to focus on individual perceptions that are best uncovered via in-depth interviews.

Using an interpretive qualitative design approach that focuses on the voices of program participants, 10 teachers from various schools in Thimphu and Paro districts of Bhutan were chosen and interviewed using a semi-structured interview method. Several teachers appropriate for the interview were first contacted via phone to seek their approval and appointment for a one-on-one face-to-face interview. After the initial agreement by the respondents, the author sent the respondents a written summary comprising research intentions, foundational questions and format for the interview, and confidentiality assurance. Based on the final agreement from the respondents, 10 teachers were chosen for the interview using purposive sampling, particularly the maximum variation sampling, to be able to gather data from teachers with different profiles. The inclusion criteria for the sampling were qualification, experience, gender, grade levels taught and the type of school (private/public). In cases where multiple samples qualified under the same category, the sample nearest to the author was chosen due to time constraints.

Five of the respondents were female, while the other 5 were male. They were divided equally among the different levels of formal schooling in Bhutan; 2 from Lower Primary (PP–III), two from Upper Primary (IV–VI) 2 from Lower Secondary (VII–VIII), two from Middle Secondary (IX–X), and two from Higher Secondary (XI–XII). Also, an equal number of teachers with formal training and without were interviewed to have diversity. From each group, one teacher had undergone formal teacher training before joining the profession, while the other had no formal training. Five respondents had 10 years or more teaching experience, while the other 5 had less than 10 years of experience. The profiles of the respondents are given in Table 2. During the interview, emphasis was placed on exploring why and how teachers perceived various occupational stressors differently.

The interview was conducted between the period of 10–23 December 2021. During this period, schools had completed their 2021 academic year. Most of the teachers were either completing the preparation of the final exam results or waiting for the winter holidays to start. This period of the year was purposefully chosen to receive the responses without undue bias of their situation. The author implemented the following measures to minimize the potential distress respondents might experience during the interview. Before the interview began, the author reassured respondents of the complete data confidentiality and anonymity and sought their

consent to record and start the interview. The interviews proceeded only after the respondents consented. The interview was conducted primarily in English, but the interviewees were allowed to mix other languages in between. The interview was recorded using a voice recorder and took place in a private location chosen by the respondent. Before delving into the actual topic of stress, the author engaged in a short, casual conversation with the respondent. During the interview, the author reminded that the respondent could stop the interview or postpone it if s/he does not feel comfortable continuing. This option was also mentioned before the interview started too. The author refrained from taking notes during the interview to show support and acknowledge the respondent's views. Instead, the author maintained eye contact, nodded, and listened non-judgmentally throughout the interview.

The study utilized a semi-structured interview format to gather in-depth insights into teacher stress in Bhutan. The interview guide included a series of open-ended questions designed to explore various dimensions of stress experienced by teachers. The following main questions guided the interview.

- What aspects of your teaching job stress you the most? Why?
- Can you explain in detail how each of these causes you mentioned makes you stressed?

The interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature and consultation with the research supervisor. It also underwent a series of peer reviews within the research seminars the author attended as part of his postgraduate studies in Japan. While semi-structured interviews are inherently flexible and allow for in-depth exploration, it is important to acknowledge that the findings may be influenced by the researcher's interpretations and the specific context of Bhutan. Therefore, the results may not directly apply to other settings with different cultural dynamics.

The interview data were cleaned, sorted, and coded for this study using a qualitative analysis software called MAXQDA. Thematic analysis was done after extracting the coded data to see how teachers in Bhutan described teacher stress. The method focused on finding patterns across a data set to identify, analyze, and report themes. It involved the interpretation of identified codes, which ultimately formed the themes. The data set was analyzed using a basic interpretive qualitative design, a method used to make meaning of participants' experiences and perceptions (Patton, 2002). This analysis method also acknowledges that meaning-making processes change over time (Fossey et al., 2002). The interpretive paradigm also assumes that variables are multifaceted and interconnected, which is why it is often hard to measure (Glesne, 2016). Therefore, instead of studying the variables in isolation, using the interpretive approach, teacher stress was examined in their ordinary contexts without influencing or controlling the respondents' thoughts and experiences.

6 Findings and discussion

The findings of this study on teacher stress within the Bhutanese educational context resonate with broader research on educational systems worldwide. Adding to the existing research on the multifaceted nature of teacher stress, the findings of this study further explain how teacher stress is influenced by various factors, including

TABLE 2 Respondent profile of the research.

Grades	Children's age	Category	Name/Code	School	No. of years in service	Gender
PP-III	5–8 years	Trained	KT (R1)	Public school	2	Male
		Untrained	SWT (R2)	Private school	10	Female
IV-VI	9–11 years	Trained	TG (R3)	Public school	13	Male
		Untrained	PC (R4)	Private school	5	Female
VII-VIII	12–13 years	Trained	GO (R5)	Public school	15	Female
		Untrained	KD (R6)	Public school	9	Male
IX-X	14–15 years	Trained	SP (R7)	Public school	9	Male
		Untrained	PG (R8)	Public school	18	Female
XI-XII	16–17 years	Trained	TY (R9)	Public school	20	Female
		Untrained	DC (R10)	Private school	6	Male

Interviewee's names are abbreviated for anonymity. Source: Author.

workload, administrative responsibilities, and leadership dynamics (Tasleem et al., 2023). Varied perceptions of these identified stressors offer a nuanced understanding of how stressors are viewed differently based on individual contexts and character.

6.1 Excessive teaching workload

The participants consistently underscored the overwhelming nature of their teaching workload, elucidating this concern through four key factors. The findings of this study further explain Jomquad et al. (2021) findings on how work overload causes occupational stress among teachers. It illustrates the inner matrix of how workload is determined to be excessive by different teachers based on several interrelated factors collectively contributing toward it. The findings of this study further expand Hlado and Harvankova (2024) conclusions of how high job demands contribute to teacher stress and reduced perceived work ability.

6.1.1 High teacher-student ratios

The findings regarding excessive teaching workload align with existing research in educational psychology and teacher wellbeing studies, such as those by Hojo (2021), and have indeed highlighted the correlation between high teacher-student ratios and increased stress levels among educators. The most frequently cited factor for teacher stress in this research also was the substantial teacher-student ratios. One educator provided a stark illustration, stating, "I teach ICT. So, just under me, I have 494 students. I have to assess these many students' work." The lone ICT teacher in the school was teaching computer lessons to classes starting from pre-primary till grade six, totaling up to 494 students. This, in his opinion, significantly surpassed the official 1:32 ratio stipulated by the ministry, revealing a considerable disjunction between guidelines and actual teaching conditions. He felt that the ministry's 1:32 ratio derived from dividing the total number of students in the country by the total number of teachers did not capture the ground reality. He emphasized that the cumulative student assessment work he had to undertake because he was teaching multiple classes was extremely overwhelming. He concluded, "So, I do not understand what the ministry means by 1:32 ratio."

Similarly, research on teacher workload management has emphasized the importance of considering not only official guidelines but also the practical realities of classroom conditions (Hanaysha et al., 2023). However, the current study offers nuanced insights into the specific challenges teachers face in managing workload. While high teacher-student ratios remain a central concern, it embodies other factors, such as the lack of voice and influence that educators experience in addressing these issues. This aspect adds a layer of complexity to the understanding of teacher stress and workload management, highlighting the disconnect between policymakers' decisions and teachers' lived experiences. Teachers perceived that the Ministry of Education and Skills Development's calculation of teacher-student ratios did not align with the ground realities. One respondent expressed, "I just do not understand how the ministry calculates the teacher-student ratio," emphasizing the need to consider school size, subject specialization, and classes taught by individual teachers for a more accurate ratio determination. This finding contradicts Saloviita and Pakarinen (2021) finding that class sizes have minimal effect on teacher stress. The participants also lamented that their voices on this issue remained unheard by the authorities. A respondent conveyed the prevailing sentiment, stating, "They never listen to us," highlighting the perceived lack of responsiveness from the ministry. Engaging teachers in educational policy and decision-making has been shown to effectively improve teacher wellbeing and classroom productivity (Tohidian and Nodooshan, 2021). However, the findings of this study suggest that policymakers and higher authorities in the Bhutanese educational system might be overlooking the benefits of incorporating teacher input.

The interviews vividly depicted the stark contrast between official teacher-student ratios and the actual classroom realities. It also highlighted that teachers' perception of not having a say in the matters that affect them further exacerbates their stress levels. Highlighting the discrepancy between official ratios and classroom realities, teachers' voices echoed the need for a realistic approach to workload management, emphasizing the detrimental impact on educator wellbeing.

6.1.2 Multiple grades and subject specialization

The second salient factor contributing to the overwhelming teaching workload is the widespread practice of educators being compelled to teach multiple grades and subjects outside their

areas of specialization. This finding validates earlier studies where job satisfaction among the teachers was found to be positively linked to strong pedagogical expertise (González-Calvo et al., 2020) while negatively associated with misaligned teaching expectations and experience (Alves et al., 2019; Simonton et al., 2021; Smythe-Thompson, 2022). While some participants expressed their discontent over the current trends of school management allocating several sections of the same grade level just because they were teaching the same subject, others were unhappy that they were required to teach one subject for various grade levels just because they happened to be the subject specialist. In some cases, classes and subjects were allocated just to meet the required period of classroom teaching set by the school administration.

Some participants perceived that this challenge had become worse from a shortage of teachers due to colleagues voluntarily resigning in recent years, forcing the existing ones to take on additional responsibilities (Katel, 2023). The consequences are particularly evident in instances where teachers find themselves managing multiple sections across different grade levels, as highlighted by a participant who shared, *“I’m teaching five sections of class 12 and one section of class 11. So I cannot imagine the workload, especially related to assessment.”* The inherent complexities of catering to diverse grade levels, each with its unique curriculum and learning objectives, pose considerable challenges for teachers, affecting not only their efficiency but also the quality of education delivered. However, some participants did not mind any number of teaching hours as long as they were not assigned other non-teaching responsibilities. A respondent said, *“If it’s just teaching, they can give me any number of hours, but with teaching comes other tasks”*. The respondents shared the feelings of Italian teachers who “reported being frustrated by the demands of the school system, such as excessive workloads and new responsibilities” (Conte et al., 2024, p. 8). Teachers felt overwhelmed by the numerous tasks that came as part of the regular classroom instruction, finding it nearly impossible to handle everything due to insufficient time.

To some participants, the added task of school management requiring teachers to conduct remedial lessons for academically struggling students caused them more stress than the classroom teaching. These remedial lessons were taught after school or during weekends and holidays. While teachers understood and agreed with the need to provide remedial lessons to their students, they complained that they were not given proper time to plan and properly execute these lessons adequately. A respondent said, *“We have to do regular teaching. Of course, that’s our duty, but we are also required to do remedial lessons for weak students. That means we have to find time after school hours to conduct the remedial lessons.”* Due to limited time, teachers often became frustrated and demotivated to carry out these remedial lessons. Teachers felt that lack of time for proper preparation ultimately results in poor delivery and not much improvement in the students. That is why teachers saw remedial lessons as *“extra work”* rather than an appropriate intervention. While it resonates with a recent study of teacher stress in relation to the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Robinson et al., 2023), the findings seem unique to Bhutanese teachers.

Furthermore, the strain intensified when teachers were required to teach subjects beyond their specialization, as this necessitated additional effort for lesson preparation and mastery of unfamiliar content. This multifaceted demand on teachers not only seem to

compromise their ability to provide focused and specialized instruction but also underscores the role of teacher shortages in alleviating teacher stress.

6.1.3 Time constraints for lesson planning and assessment

The third critical aspect contributing to the burdensome teaching workload is the pervasive issue of inadequate time during the school day for lesson planning. Teachers, consistently echoing frustration, emphasized the scarcity of free periods dedicated to crafting effective lesson plans. A participant articulated this concern, stating, *“We hardly get time to plan our lessons in the school. We hardly get a few free periods, and those free periods are mostly gone in taking care of our extra-curricular activities or meetings.”* This challenge is exacerbated as teachers are compelled to take work home, sacrificing personal time, including weekends and holidays, for preparatory tasks related to teaching. Another respondent said, *“They want us to do everything, and they want quality, but they will not give us time.”* The findings validate the existing literature identifying lack of preparation time as one of the causes of teacher stress (Zydziunaite et al., 2020).

The consequence is a detrimental impact on the overall wellbeing, as the boundary between professional and personal life becomes blurred. The lack of dedicated time for lesson planning not only hampers the quality of instruction but also impedes educators’ ability to innovate and adapt their teaching methods to meet evolving educational needs (Pajak and Blase, 1989). Furthermore, it raises questions about the sustainability of such a demanding workload in the long term, potentially leading to burnout among educators. Addressing this issue necessitates a re-evaluation of school schedules and a commitment to providing educators with the necessary time and resources for effective lesson planning during the school day, ultimately fostering a more conducive environment for both teaching excellence and teacher wellbeing.

6.1.4 Curriculum changes and increased expectations

The introduction of numerous curriculum changes emerges as the fourth significant factor contributing to the escalating burden on teachers. This finding validates and adds to the theories of curriculum overload (OECD, 2020). Respondents expressed heightened stress attributed to the implementation of the New Normal Curriculum, underscoring its transformative nature and the lack of adequate training provided beforehand. A teacher explained, *“The New Normal Curriculum also gave us stress because it was a big change, a big jump, and because we were not provided with any proper training before its implementation.”* The requirement for detailed lesson plans and individual assessment records, integral components of these curriculum changes, further amplified the workload strain on teachers. The respondents voiced feeling *“pressured”* and *“stressed”* due to school authorities expecting exceptional academic results despite the overwhelming classroom teaching duties. A respondent said, *“They just expect me to bring excellent results even though they know that I have many classes to teach.”* Another respondent said, *“I’m required to keep track of every single student and their progress. How can I do that? I have more than 200 students to assess.”*

This raises pertinent questions about the realistic expectations placed on teachers, especially when grappling with substantial changes

in educational frameworks. The disconnect between the evolving demands of curricular modifications and the support mechanisms provided to teachers calls for a critical examination of the implementation processes. The rushed implementation of curriculum changes during the COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns. A teacher described it as “a sudden change” with inadequate preparation. A teacher shared, “I did not get any guidance from the management either. So, I have to see what others are doing and learn from them.” The findings are consistent with the experiences of teachers in India, who reported feeling negatively impacted by the sudden shift in the mode of education due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gupta et al., 2022). This abrupt transition created significant challenges, as teachers had to quickly adapt to new teaching methods and technologies, which added to their stress and workload. Therefore, the finding underscores the broader implications of how sudden changes in educational delivery modes can adversely affect teacher wellbeing. Ensuring that educators receive comprehensive training, sufficient resources, and ongoing support during the transition to new curricula becomes imperative to mitigate the stress and foster a conducive environment for effective teaching.

I have 214 students, and for 214 students, we have an assessment for reading portfolio and writing portfolios. So you imagine 428 files piled up on my table. And in that reading and writing portfolio, imagine the draft that students have written. We have to go through each draft because the writing process is all about how a child has progressed from the first draft through the last. Let me tell you, just to correct one writing portfolio, it almost takes 30 minutes, and that's just one article. Moreover, I have to see each child to give them feedback. And I'm talking about over 214 children. That's the reason sometimes I go home by 10:30 p.m.

Such a demanding situation for teachers emphasizes the necessity of aligning expectations with available resources to create a sustainable educational ecosystem that prioritizes both the quality of education and wellbeing.

In summary, the interviews revealed that excessive classroom teaching duties, coupled with the demand for individual planning and detailed progressive assessment, created a challenging environment for educators. The findings underscore the need for a reassessment of teacher workload and support mechanisms to ensure both quality education delivery and wellbeing.

6.2 Non-academic responsibilities

The imposition of non-academic responsibilities emerged as a significant stressor for educators, primarily due to their perception that these tasks fall outside the purview of their core duties. Participants called these responsibilities “not our work.” Teachers indicated that they do not welcome these non-academic responsibilities. They explained that they did not appreciate being given these responsibilities over and above their teaching duties. A respondent said, “I do not understand why we have to do this” and another said, “In my opinion, clubs and sports should be taken care by support staff.” Awang et al. (2021) studied the relationship between academic and non-academic responsibilities and teacher stress among

academicians at a Malaysian public university. They found that while academic tasks did not significantly impact stress levels, non-academic tasks marginally contributed to increased stress. Similarly, the respondents in this study perceived non-academic responsibilities as contributors to their stress. However, unlike Malaysian academicians, they felt that non-academic duties were a major source of their occupational stress.

However, teachers lacked any decision-making power to shift the responsibilities of non-academic programs to other school members. Since it is a common practice nationwide, teachers accepted these responsibilities, although they were unhappy about them. Teachers found themselves tasked with coordinating extra-curricular activities and shouldering various administrative roles, including responsibilities in accounting, games, sports, the Head of the Department (HoD), Committee Members, Acting Principal or Vice Principal, Transportation Duty, Health In-charge, Cultural In-charge and the demanding role of a Class Teacher. The inherent challenges of coordinating co-curricular activities were articulated by a teacher who stated,

When I have to multitask between administrative responsibilities and delivering classroom lessons, it is very tiring. At the end of the day, I always go home so tired, and it hamper the way I deliver my lessons in the classroom because I don't get enough time to focus on the preparation and the delivery.

To make matters worse, these responsibilities were not a one-off event. It was mostly throughout the academic year, which meant that they had to share their time to fulfill the mandates of these responsibilities throughout the academic year.

... on Wednesdays, we have club activities. So, we have to have an action plan for every club period. So we need to take some time from our normal teaching, learning and material making, lesson making time—from that, we have to take out some time to do club activity designing. So, doing this, every week is a lot of work.

Last year, I was HOD, I was an acting Vice Principal, I was an SMT member, and I was a class teacher. And I had to teach three sections of class 12. I think I was being pulled here and there.

From among the non-teaching duties, the intricate nature of the Class Teacher's role, mostly involving the collation of detailed student information, was particularly emphasized, with one teacher explaining, “Getting every student's detail is quite challenging. Even though we communicate with different mediums... still, some parents never adhere to the school instruction.” Once the role of a class teacher was assigned to a teacher, he/she was held responsible for almost everything to do with that particular class. All the respondents had either been class teachers in the previous years or were currently serving as one. Respondents said that some teachers escape this role only in the big schools where there are many teachers. Teachers viewed the class teacher's role as extra work with no end. The role of a class teacher is not specific. Instead, it is responsible for the overall management of the class under his/her care, which is why they were held responsible for almost everything

regarding the class to which they were assigned. This finding supports Wink et al. (2024) conclusion that teacher stress is associated with their responsibilities in catering to students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs over and above academic instruction. Similarly, the role of the class teacher as described by the respondents in this study resembled the above-mentioned external demands and pressures, as well as a lack of sufficient time to fulfil these responsibilities.

It's not only the student's details but also exam result preparation, disciplinary issues, classroom decoration, class competitions, field trips and many more.

To make matters worse, non-academic and administrative roles are assigned with very limited or no proper training or guidance. Even the teachers who underwent training before joining the profession had not learned how to shoulder non-teaching duties in schools. Instead, their curriculum was focused on sharpening their teaching and classroom management skills. Therefore, all the teachers learned how to undertake non-academic responsibilities by doing the job after they joined the teaching profession. A participant complained, "We aren't really trained for the clerical tasks that we have to carry out."

The added stress of managing parental complaints further compounds the burden, as expressed by a teacher who noted, "There's this constant fear of them coming to the school and complaining against you." Class teachers were the contact points for parents. Therefore, whenever there was anything that the parents wanted to discuss about their child, they first contacted the class teachers. Likewise, they were also the first in the line of defense for any complaints from the parents. Receiving and responding to the complaints from the parents required much control over their emotions. The issue of having parents come to school with complaints was more prevalent, primarily in private schools than in public schools.

These extra responsibilities were perceived to interfere with their primary teaching duties since teachers had to work over and above their regular teaching duties. It was thus perceived to negatively impact their efficiency and outcome in the classroom. Teachers' accounts shed light on the challenges posed by non-academic responsibilities, calling for a reconsideration of their duties outside of classroom teaching. The strain of handling administrative duties alongside teaching responsibilities is evident in their narratives.

6.3 Leadership and workplace support

The role of school leadership emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping the stress levels experienced by teachers, as highlighted by the sentiments expressed by the participants.

Supportive leaders are acknowledged as crucial sources of motivation, fostering a positive work environment that encourages teacher engagement and contribution. A teacher shared a positive experience, stating, "With my current Principal, I think I'm being appreciated... I really look forward to work and contribute." The findings highlight the positive impact of distributed school leadership

on teacher wellbeing (Li et al., 2024). Conversely, the detrimental impact of unsupportive leadership is evident, leaving teachers feeling unappreciated and potentially contributing to heightened stress levels. A participant shared a distressing experience, asserting, "My Principal deters me from doing the things that I love and also denies me the opportunities that I deserve. And I am kind of side-lined. And that's affecting me mentally and emotionally." This finding supports the existing literature surrounding the role of leadership in teacher wellbeing (Kaiser and Thompson, 2021; Jentsch et al., 2023). The pivotal role of school leadership in shaping teacher experiences also highlights the potential for leaders to either alleviate or exacerbate workplace stress. This underscores the critical influence of school leadership on overall wellbeing, emphasizing the imperative of cultivating leadership styles that prioritize teacher support, appreciation and building trust (P et al., 2024).

The role of school leadership in shaping teacher experiences extends beyond individual wellbeing. It also has broader implications for the overall effectiveness of the educational system. Teachers, while expecting understanding and guidance from their superiors, expressed demotivation and stress when their hard work went unrecognized or was not acknowledged for its efficacy. Referring to evaluative processes such as the Bhutan Professional Standard for Teachers (BPST) and routine inspections by school principals, participants shared their remorse over what they perceived as inadequate leadership. A poignant example was provided by a teacher who recounted efforts to assist a student with frequent class absences. The teacher expressed frustration, stating, "We do our part, but then that's not always enough; we know that. But then, sometimes the school management administration feels that we did not do much to help the student or solve the issues."

Throughout the interviews, respondents consistently expressed a sense of frustration and perceived neglect by higher authorities, including the Ministry of Education and District Education Officers. Certain respondents exhibited a degree of rebellion in their responses, highlighting a disconnect between teacher experiences and the understanding of educational policymakers. Gestures such as clicking tongues during responses served as non-verbal indicators of the respondents' shared sentiment that their concerns regarding heavy teacher workload remain unaddressed. When questioned about raising concerns with the Ministry of Education, a recurring response was, "Who listens to us?" or "They never listen to us." This not only underscores the magnitude of the issue but also points to a perceived lack of communication channels or responsiveness in the educational leadership structure, thereby warranting a critical examination of the mechanisms in place for teacher feedback and support.

Similar to earlier studies, this research also found that leadership and the working environment directly impact the enhancement and discouragement of teachers' job satisfaction (Hartinah et al., 2020). In fact, respondents highlighted that having a positive relationship with colleagues, a conducive working environment, and supportive leaders always help manage their stress levels. Teachers shared their past experiences of how their colleagues and managers showed support verbally (consoling) or physically (patting or hugging) during some stressful times, which immediately helped them start feeling better. In some situations, teachers felt motivated to overcome the stressful situation due to the support they received from their colleagues and seniors.

Unique to the previous findings, this study discovered that support from the leaders could also be construed as a source of stress. Some respondents felt that while they appreciated the encouragement and support from their leaders, sometimes it is difficult for them to decline the tasks assigned to them due to the immense support and recognition received earlier. Such situations led to teachers accepting an undue amount of work to avoid the leader feeling disappointed. A teacher shared, *“I think stress also comes from the expectation placed on you. I can smile and say that, yes, I have something; people are expecting something from me, and I have to do it. And then when you have that feeling, and when you do it, you become stressed again.”*

The respondent further explained it by narrating that she felt happy that her Principal recognized her potential and pushed her to greater heights. However, she also wished she had less work to do, like colleagues who usually have it easy. She exerted certain humility by trying to question if she really had the potential her leader saw in her or if it was a mere strategy to give her more work. However, in the end, she concluded that she trusted her Principal’s judgment but also wished she had better ways to manage the stress that came with such expectations. *“I feel blessed to have a very supportive Principal and seniors, but that does not mean I do not feel the stress of the work I am asked/expected to do,”* said another respondent.

On further inquiry, this seems to be a uniquely Bhutanese case since it’s rooted in the Bhutanese culture of saying YES to the elders and leaders. Saying No, especially to your boss, is considered disrespectful in Bhutanese culture. Due to the above-mentioned societal norms, some teachers described their life as having “No life outside work” (Mondal et al., 2011) to explain both their dedication, satisfaction, and frustration over the aspect of having a supportive leader whose encouragement and support often require them to spend too much time attending to their job requirements. An increase in the variety and number of tasks that require additional work hours outside of regular school hours leads to conflict with family and friends, ultimately increasing teacher stress. Likewise, frequent ineffective meetings and trivial tasks required to be done for no apparent good reason beyond teaching duties contributed to teacher stress, too (Brown et al., 2002).

7 Conclusion

This study delves into the nuanced landscape of teacher stress, using Bhutan as a critical case to provide an in-depth examination of teachers’ perceptions of main stressors. The findings explicate the pervasive nature of stress emanating from excessive teaching workload, non-academic responsibilities, and leadership dynamics. This shows that stressors do not work in isolation, but instead, they are interconnected based on one’s perception. The additional understanding of how supportive leadership can also be viewed as a source of stress offers a new look at the role of leadership in mitigating teacher stress. While previous studies highlight the role of unsupportive or absent leadership in teacher stress, this study demonstrates that supportive leadership is also perceived as a source of stress.

8 Limitations and implications of the study

Before outlining the potential implications of this study, it is important to note the following limitations. Firstly, while the use of semi-structured interviews facilitated a nuanced understanding of teacher stress in Bhutan, the sample size was limited to only 10 teachers. Consequently, although the findings reveal some of the intricate complexities of stress dynamics among teachers, they may not be sufficient to provide comprehensive reformative recommendations. Secondly, the study’s qualitative nature, with thematic analysis conducted solely by the author, introduces the possibility of personal bias, representing a methodological limitation. Thirdly, given that the data was collected exclusively in Bhutan, the findings may not be directly applicable to countries with different cultural contexts.

However, these findings still hold some important implications, especially for education planners and policymakers in Bhutan. An in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive stress, with insights into the nuanced and interconnected nature of stressors, can help policymakers identify strategic interventions to support teacher wellbeing. Additionally, the unique finding that supportive leadership can sometimes be perceived as a stressor rather than a stress mitigator challenges the existing understanding of supportive leadership. Given that this finding is associated with Bhutanese culture, further research is needed to explore how leadership is perceived in different cultural contexts.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the author, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because this research didn’t involve any vulnerable group nor was the subject of research considered too private, which had a high risk of causing harm to the participants. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

TD: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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