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ROLE OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN MITIGATING OCCUPATIONAL STRESS OF MATHEMATICS TEACHERS OF HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KERALA

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Abstract

Teaching mathematics is a highly demanding task, particularly in today's competitive educational environment. Mathematics teachers face numerous challenges, especially in higher secondary schools in Kerala, which can lead to significant stress; the stress experienced by teachers, in turn, affects their mental health and overall well-being, ultimately leading to poor student performance. This study examines the role of social integration in mitigating occupational stress among mathematics teachers. A random sample of 180 mathematics teachers from higher secondary schools in the Kollam district of Kerala was surveyed. Research tools, including the Teacher's Occupational Stress Scale (Sharma & Kaur, 2014) and a Social Integration Scale developed by the investigators, were used to collect data. The correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between social integration and occupational stress. These findings suggest that fostering social integration can help alleviate stress among mathematics teachers. The study concludes with implications for reducing teacher stress in the educational system.

Key Words: Social Integration, Occupational Stress, Mathematics Teachers, and Higher Secondary Schools

INTRODUCTION

Teaching has long been regarded as one of the most respected professions. Often referred to as the "mother of all professions," it serves as the foundation for all other areas of study and employment. Teachers play a vital role in the development of people and society because they not only teach but also inspire, mentor, and shape youngsters' values and character. Besides imparting academic knowledge, teachers are also responsible for fostering critical thinking, moral values, and essential life skills in their students. Their influence extends far beyond the four walls of the classroom, shaping not only what students know, but also how they think, behave, and interact with the world around them. Because of their profound influence on developing

minds, teachers are highly respected in many cultures, including India, and are frequently compared to parental figures. They make a significant and priceless contribution to nation-building by helping to lay the groundwork for students' personal and professional growth.

Although society values teachers for their role in influencing future generations, teaching can also be one of the most stressful professions. Teachers are expected to maintain discipline and cultivate warm relationships with students, parents, and colleagues while handling large classrooms, meeting academic targets, integrating technology, adapting to changing curricula, and meeting the needs of students with diverse learning styles. The constant pressure for high performance, combined with long working hours, administrative duties, and limited resources, often leads to high levels of stress among teachers. This is especially true for subjects like Mathematics, which are seen as crucial and highly demanding (Yadav, 2019) adding further pressure on the teachers responsible for them. In Kerala, where academic standards are high and expectations from both students and parents are strong, Mathematics teachers —especially at the higher secondary level— often face heavy workloads, strict deadlines, and the pressure to ensure good results.

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Occupational stress refers to the negative physical, emotional, and behavioural effects a person experiences due to the demands, environment, pressures, and challenges of his/her occupation. It is also known as work stress or job stress and is a chronic condition that can lead to physical and mental health problems and decreased performance. It is "a physiological and psychological response to events or conditions in the workplace that is detrimental to health and well-being. It is influenced by such factors as autonomy and independence, decision latitude, workload, level of responsibility, job security, physical environment and safety, the nature and pace of work, and relationships with co-workers and supervisors" (American Psychological Association, 2018). Stress resulting from the workplace is referred to as occupational stress, and it is widely recognized as one of the most significant global health concerns (Jacobs, 2024).

Teaching is undeniably becoming more challenging and intense, making it one of the professions most commonly associated with high to extremely high levels of occupational stress (Kyriacou, 2000). Teachers experience higher levels of psychological stress and burnout than professionals in other occupations (Kovess-Masfety et al., 2007; Fathi et al., 2021). Concerns about job security, long working hours, and low morale are increasingly contributing to teacher stress. These factors have been found to adversely affect teachers' mental health and well-being, which subsequently influences students and the overall educational scenario (Ishtiaq, 2023). According to Baliyan et al. (2018) the primary sources of stress are inconsistencies between school policies and the working environment, overwhelming workload due to teaching and extra duties, and disruptive behaviour from students in the classroom. The major consequences of stress on teachers' performance are: decreased morale and motivation, decreased job satisfaction, and heightened conflict in the workplace.

Previous research studies report higher stress levels among teachers across various levels and provide substantial evidence that institutional factors contribute to stress among teachers in various contexts. Ryan and Quirap (2024) observed that teachers experience high stress from work challenges and moderate stress from

subject-related issues. Their professional growth aspirations also increase overall work stress. According to Pendharkar (2024), teachers in various levels of educational institutions in Nagpur city experience a moderate level of stress, with heavy workload, poor interpersonal relationships, and administrative inefficiency being the major stress factors that affect their performance. Similarly, Rani (2023) reported higher stress levels among mathematics teachers especially in private higher education institutions. Agyapong et al. (2022) opined that while teaching is a rewarding profession, it comes with significant challenges linked to high levels of stress and mental health issues. Based on a survey among 749 Australian teachers, Carroll et al. (2022) reported that more than half of the respondents are very or extremely stressed; they were planning to leave the profession. Cayao and Arenga (2021) have shown that teachers experience moderately high levels of stress from work, family, personal, and subject-related sources.

According to Wong (2020) teachers experience moderate levels of job-related stress because of job demands, work-life balance, and control over work. A significant gender disparity was reported in areas like psycho-social work environment, health and well-being, and workplace relations; male teachers reported higher stress levels. Almahsneh (2020) evaluated the occupational stress among teachers (N = 280) in Jordan and indicated that a majority of teachers experience work-related stress due to poor working conditions, service related factors, want of support, and student-related issues. Suleman et al. (2018) showed a strong negative association between perceived occupational stress and psychological well-being among secondary school heads. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2016) identified seven potential sources of occupational stress of teachers: discipline problems, low student motivation, time pressure, conflict with co-workers, value conflict, lack of supervisory support, and student diversity. These studies consistently have shown that both institutional and work-related factors really contribute to the stress that teachers experience across various contexts.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Social integration is defined as the degree to which a person is associated and involved in various levels of their social environment, including community, social networks, and close relationships. It stands in contrast with social isolation, which refers to a lack of regular interaction with friends, family, colleagues, and social groups (Graham et al., 2007). It refers to the ability of individuals to coexist respectfully, upholding the dignity of each person, accepting the common good, pluralism, diversity, non-violence, and solidarity. It also involves active participation in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres, encompassing every aspect of social development (United Nations, 1996). Thus social integration can be considered as the extent of an individual's involvement in his/her social environment, promoting peaceful coexistence, participation in various societal activities, and maintaining values like dignity, diversity, and solidarity in a social environment. Previous studies have shown that social integration promotes subjective well-being; individuals who are better socially integrated experience higher levels of well-being (Pamela & Gary, 2005; Camacho et al., 2019).

Social integration is beneficial in many ways, positively influencing both physical and mental health. Maintaining strong social connections and a sense of community can mitigate stress levels and enhance emotional resilience. Feelings of isolation and loneliness may contribute to poor mental health conditions. But

a person's social connections provides emotional support, boosts self-esteem, and offers opportunities to share his/her experiences, leading to better psychological well-being. Social integration cultivates a sense of belonging and we-feeling and this sense of connectedness not only strengthens individual self-worth but also enhances motivation and engagement in various aspects of life, including one's occupation. It will also help individuals develop life skills, such as effective communication, conflict resolution, empathy, and cooperation. These skills are vital in addressing social, cultural, and professional environments.

Several studies highlight the significance of social competence and connectedness in promoting emotional health of teachers. In a recent study, Einav et al. (2024) examined how teachers' personal connections and traits affect their risk of burning out, which really takes a toll on their emotional health and physical well-being. They gathered data from 248 teachers in Israel, mostly from high schools, who filled out surveys about their burnout levels along with their social support, feelings of gratitude, hope, entitlement, and loneliness. The findings showed that burnout negatively correlates with social support, gratitude, and hope, meaning that when these factors are high, burnout tends to be lower; loneliness was linked to increased burnout. Wijaya et al. (2023) studied how teachers' social competence improves the quality of education, particularly in the midst of challenges of rapidly changing times. A literature review was conducted that analysed various concepts and theories from numerous published sources. The findings highlight the critical role of teachers in elevating educational quality; when teachers exhibit social competence, they serve as positive role models for their students. Hence striving for high social competence among teachers is indispensable, as it can significantly enhance the overall quality of education. New and Win (2023).examined the relationship between teachers' social emotional competence and occupational stress using a descriptive survey among 452 teachers from four districts in Yangon and Mandalay regions. Findings showed significant differences in social emotional competence and occupational stress based on age, designation, and work experience. Social emotional competence was negatively correlated with occupational stress, indicating that higher social emotional competence is related to low occupational stress.

Akinyemi et al. (2020) examined the role of positive working relationships among teachers (N = 79) in communities of practice as a means of professional development. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and questionnaires were administered among the sample. The results showed that teachers generally had strong connections, allowing them to collaborate, lend support, and share their classroom challenges. The study suggests that teachers should carve out enough time for meetings, see each other as teammates, work together in teams, and focus on building trust and stronger relationships. In a study among prospective teachers Dubey (2020) observed a positive correlation between social competence and attitudes toward teaching, signifying that high social competence is linked to more favourable teaching attitudes. Jennings (2016) found that social emotional competence supports teacher well-being by helping them manage classroom stress, augmenting their teaching effectiveness, and improving student-teacher relationships, classroom management practices, and social emotional learning.

Social integration not only promotes well-being but also enriches personal development, providing individuals with the resources and support they need to thrive in various aspects of life. Hence, it becomes an essential attribute for teachers to maintain a mentally healthy life.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Kerala, academic expectations are intense, particularly in higher secondary schools, as the Plus Two courses serve as an important gateway to many professions. In these courses, mathematics is a highly demanding subject, as high performance in it is essential for entry into professional programmes. Due to this, mathematics teachers face institutional pressures and parental demands for excellent results. These expectations and the associated workload eventually lead to stress among teachers. Such stress negatively impacts teachers' well-being (Baliyan et al., 2018; Suleman et al., 2018; Agyapong et al., 2022; Ishtiaq, 2023) and, ultimately, student performance and academic outcomes. There is now a growing concern over the high levels of occupational stress faced by mathematics teachers. Researchers have highlighted several strategies and techniques to minimize teachers' occupational stress (Platsidou & Daniilidou, 2021; Wilcoxen et al., 2020; Fan & Liu, 2024). Social integration—the extent to which a person is associated with and involved in various levels of their social environment—is generally recognized as a mitigating factor for stress (Pamela & Gary, 2005; Camacho et al., 2019; Einav et al., 2024). The current study seeks to explore the relationship between the occupational stress of mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools and their social integration, thereby examining whether higher levels of social integration can help minimize occupational stress.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To assess the extent of occupational stress experienced by mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools
2. To examine the level of social integration among mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools
3. To find out the relationship between social integration and occupational stress among mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools

HYPOTHESES

1. There is a significant inverse relationship between social integration and occupational stress among mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design was used in this study to evaluate the variables— occupational stress and social integration—among mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools in Kerala. The population for this research study consist of mathematics teachers of various higher secondary schools in Kerala. For the survey, and a sample of 180 teachers was selected randomly from the Kollam district of Kerala. The Teachers' Occupational Stress Scale developed and standardized by Sharma and Kaur (2014) was adopted for assessing occupational stress. This scale includes 30 items and the total score ranges from a minimum of 30 to a possible

maximum of 150. The mid-value of the scale is 90, with high scores demonstrating high levels of occupational stress. The authors of the scale report high reliability, with a test-retest reliability coefficient of .801. The scale also demonstrates sufficient validity, as it was validated against a previously published similar instrument—the Occupational Stress Index standardized by Srivastava and Singh in 1984. This validation was conducted among a sample of 80 teachers and obtained a significant validity coefficient of .782.

To assess the level of social integration among teachers, the investigators developed a Social Integration Scale based on dimensions such as collaboration and teamwork, sense of belonging and recognition, overcoming challenges, and professional growth and support. The scale consisted of 40 Likert-type items, with a maximum possible score of 200 and a minimum of 40. A higher score on the scale indicates greater social integration, and vice versa. To ensure content validity, the investigators consulted experts, whose feedback led to the modification and omission of certain items before finalizing the instrument. The test-retest reliability of the scale was found to be 0.875.

The research tools were administered to the selected sample of teachers after obtaining their informed consent and assuring them of the confidentiality of the data. The data were subjected to both statistical analyses, including the calculation of average, standard deviation, and Pearson's correlation test.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Occupational stress experienced by mathematics teachers

The descriptive analysis of occupational stress scores of mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools measured by the Teachers' Occupational Stress Scale (Sharma & Kaur, 2014) indicated a moderate level of occupational stress (M = 94.21, SD = 15.26) as the mean score exceeds the midpoint, 90, of the scale. Mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools experience job-related stress to a considerable extent, confirming the findings of earlier studies including Carroll et al. (2022), who reported high stress levels in more than half of Australian teachers, as well as those reported by Rani (2023) and Pendharkar (2024). Similar findings were reported in Wong (2020) and Almahsneh (2020) also.

The findings related to occupational stress level of mathematics teachers in Kerala suggest that teachers often experience significant occupational stress due to several factors. The strong emphasis on education and consistently high academic expectations may exert significant pressure on teachers to ensure student success. The need to complete a vast syllabus within limited time and manage classrooms where many students struggle with math-related anxiety adds to their workload.

2. Level of social integration among mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools

The social integration level of mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools was assessed by a Likert-model Social Integration Scale developed by the researchers including 40 items, with a maximum possible score of 200 and a minimum of 40. The statistical analysis shows that mathematics teachers in general possess moderate to high level of social integration as the mean score (M = 148.30, SD = 17.65) is greater than the mid-value, 120 of the scale. Most of the teachers participated in the survey engage in their social

environment and maintain social relations to a certain extent. Such engagement in social environment facilitates collaboration, support, and open discussion of classroom challenges (Akinyemi et al., 2020).

3. Relationship between social integration and occupational stress among mathematics teachers

Pearson's product-moment correlation test was employed to ascertain the association between occupational stress and social integration of mathematics teachers. Table 1 depicts the test details.

Table 1

Relationship between Occupational Stress and Social Integration of Mathematics Teachers (N= 180)

Variables correlated	r	t_r	SEr	99% Confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
Occupational Stress Vs. Social Integration	-.411	6.015	.062	-.251	-.571

The correlation coefficient between the occupational stress scores and social integration scores of mathematics teachers is -.411. The value of correlation coefficient exceeds the critical table value required for significance at the .01 level (Garrett, 1966, p. 201). The calculated 't_r' value (6.015) surpasses the critical value, 2.58, for significance at the .01 level (Best & Kahn, 2011). Therefore, the correlation is statistically significant at the .01 level. The 99% confidence interval for the correlation coefficient is between -.251 and -.571, and since this interval does not include zero, it confirms the conclusion of a significant negative relationship. With an r value between -.4 and -.7, the relationship is considered substantial (Garrett, 1966, p. 176). Thus, it can be concluded that there is a substantial negative correlation between occupational stress and social integration among higher secondary school mathematics teachers, indicating that lower occupational stress is linked to higher level of social integration. The findings confirm the hypothesis that "there is a significant inverse relationship between social integration and occupational stress among mathematics teachers in higher secondary schools."

The significant and substantial negative correlation between occupational stress and social integration among higher secondary school mathematics teachers observed in this study is consistent with the findings of earlier research examining teacher stress and its social dimensions. New and Win (2023) reported that teachers' socio-emotional competence, which is essential for social integration, is significantly and inversely related to their occupational stress. Similarly, Jennings (2016) also found that social emotional competence supports teacher well-being by reducing stress.

4. Relationship between social integration and occupational stress among mathematics teachers in the subsamples

Pearson's correlation analysis was employed to find out the association between occupational stress and social integration of mathematics teachers in the subsamples based on gender and locality of institution. Table 2 shows the details of analysis.

Table 2

Relationship between Occupational Stress and Social Integration of Mathematics Teachers in the Subsamples

Subsample	r	t_r	SEr	99% Confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
Male (N = 41)	-.438	3.043	.126	-.112	-.763
Female (N = 139)	-.409	5.246	.071	-.226	-.591
Rural (N = 119)	-.520	6.585	.067	-.374	-.693
Urban (N = 61)	-.188	1.470	.123	+.131	-.507

Among male mathematics teachers, a substantial negative correlation (r = -.438) is observed between occupational stress and social integration. This indicates that as social integration increases, occupational stress tends to decrease. The relationship is statistically significant at .01 level, as illustrated by the t_r value of 3.043, which is greater than 2.58. The 99% confidence interval ranges from -.763 to -.112; since the confidence interval does not include zero, it confirms that the negative association is not due to chance and is significant.

For female mathematics teachers, a similar substantial negative correlation (r = -.409) exists between occupational stress and social integration. The relationship is statistically significant as reflected by a high t_r value of 5.246, and the 99% confidence interval ranging from -.591 to -.226. As the confidence interval excludes zero, it indicates a real inverse relationship, signifying that higher occupational stress levels among female teachers are associated with lower levels of social integration.

Mathematics teachers from rural schools also exhibit a substantial negative relationship (r = -.520) between occupational stress and social integration. The t_r value of 6.585 indicates a significant relationship (at .01 level). The 99% confidence interval ranging from -.693 to -.374, excluding zero, further supports the statistical significance of coefficient of correlation. This suggests that rural school teachers who are more socially integrated experience lower level of occupational stress.

Contrary to the findings related to other subsamples, mathematics teachers from urban higher secondary schools show a weak negative correlation (r = -.188) between occupational stress and social integration. The lower t_r value of 1.470 indicates that this relationship is not statistically significant. Moreover, the 99% confidence interval ranges from +.131 to -.507, which includes zero. This suggests that the correlation is not significant at the .01 level of significance. Therefore, there is no significant relationship between occupational stress and social integration among urban school teachers. The lack of a notable relationship between occupational stress and social integration among urban respondents, in contrast to other subsamples, may be due to several factors specific to urban educational environments. In urban areas, teachers may have weaker social relationships due to the individualistic lifestyle, which can limit peer interactions. Urban schools are usually bigger and more diverse, which can split up social networks, making it harder for teachers to build those strong, supportive relationships at workplace. A lot of urban teachers might turn to outside help—like seeing a counselor or finding hobbies—to cope instead of leaning on colleagues for support. Such factors suggest that,

for urban school teachers, occupational stress may stem from a broader range of influences beyond social integration, explaining the weak and statistically non-significant correlation observed in this study.

CONCLUSION

Current study explored the levels of occupational stress and social integration among higher secondary school mathematics teachers in Kerala, together with the association between these two variables. The results of the study indicated that mathematics teachers experience a moderate level of occupational stress, confirming previous studies conducted in India and abroad. The study also revealed that the teachers generally possess moderate to high levels of social integration.

The major outcome of this study is the finding that there is a significant and substantial negative relationship between occupational stress and social integration among teachers (r = -.411), suggesting that a higher level of social integration is associated with lower occupational stress. This finding supports the research hypothesis and aligns with earlier studies that highlight the protective role of social-emotional competencies and social connectedness in managing occupational stress. Subsample analysis further revealed that this inverse relationship holds true for both male and female teachers, as well as for teachers from rural schools, suggesting that social integration acts as a buffer against stress, particularly in contexts where community relationships are strong. However, in urban schools, the relationship was weak and statistically non-significant. This contrast may be attributed to weaker social networks and greater external stressors commonly found in urban environments.

The findings of the study highlight the importance of nurturing social integration among higher secondary school mathematics teachers, particularly in lessening occupational stress. While social connectedness clearly benefits most teachers, the lack of a significant relationship in urban contexts points to the need for specific strategies and interventions that consider the unique dynamics of different educational settings.

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