

General Problems Experienced by Elementary Classroom Teachers

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini membentangkan masalah-masalah umum yang biasa dialami oleh guru sekolah rendah ($n = 439$) di salah sebuah negeri dalam daerah Midwest, USA. Masalah ini dilaporkan melalui versi ringkas instrumen 'Teacher Problem Checklist'. Lima masalah utama yang dilaporkan berlaku dalam kajian ini ialah: (1) masa tidak mencukupi untuk membuat persediaan mengajar; (2) masa tidak mencukupi untuk mengajar dan juga untuk menilai dan memperbaiki pengajaran; (3) masa lapang yang sangat terhad; (4) mendapatkan pelajar supaya menggunakan waktu santai dengan baik dan; (5) mendapatkan pelajar supaya mereka seronok belajar untuk mendapatkan ilmu. Lima masalah utama yang mengkusar jika ia berlaku adalah sama juga dengan senarai masalah yang dilaporkan itu.

ABSTRACT

This study presents the frequency and bothersomeness of some general problems of a sample of elementary school teachers ($n = 439$) in a Midwest state, USA. The problems are from self-reports of teachers measured using the abridged version of the teacher problem checklist. The top five problems of elementary school teachers reported in the study are: (1) insufficient preparation time; (2) insufficient time to teach and also to diagnose and evaluate teaching; (3) insufficient free time; (4) motivating students to use their leisure time well, and (5) motivating students to enjoy learning for its own sake. It was also found that the same top five problems bothered all the teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher problems have been studied since the early 1960s (Dropkin and Taylor 1963; Cruickshank and Leonard 1967; Cruickshank *et al.* 1968; Cruickshank and Broadbent 1968) and research interest in this area was sustained into the 1970s (Lee 1974; Cruickshank *et al.* 1974; Cruickshank and Myers 1975; Myers *et al.* 1975; Kennedy *et al.* 1976; Jalali 1978; Hunter 1979) up to the 1980s (Cruickshank and Associates 1980; Bainer 1986; Zulkifli 1987) and 1990s (Bainer 1993). The phenomenon was studied not only in the United States, but was also well researched in other parts of the world (Veenman 1984).

Before looking at classroom-related teacher problems let us examine what constitutes

a problem in general, i.e. what is a problem? There are several possible definitions, including: (1) a question or situation that presents uncertainty, perplexity or difficulty (2) an expression of unmet need or unfulfilled goal (3) a problem arises when we want something and we cannot have it and (4) a problem exists when an organism, e.g. a teacher, is motivated towards a goal and there is no ready way to achieve it. Some problems are more difficult than others and when we consider a problem to be difficult, or serious it is very likely that more than one element is involved. Teachers, like other people, are confronted by problems at their workplace. Cruickshank *et al.* (1980) put forward strong arguments for wanting to identify teacher problems in the workplace. These included:

(1) trying to lessen the teacher burden and making them more productive and constructive in carrying out their duties; (2) the implications for the teacher training curriculum, i.e. teacher preparation should be geared to, or based on, teachers' needs; and (3) unless classroom teachers are satisfied and happy, the increasing rate of teacher shortage will have detrimental effects on the education of future generations.

A teacher problem is an example of goal response interference occurring during the course of a school-day. In order to understand teacher problems, it is essential to know teacher goals. Teacher goals come from two sources. First, teachers have the same common goals as all humans, sometimes referred to as general human needs. These are subdivided into two categories, physiological needs and socio-psychological needs. Physiological needs refer to the organism's requirement for water, food and rest and so forth. Socio-psychological needs, on the other hand, are not inborn, but learned. These needs are acquired through the process of specialization. These learned needs – achievements, social approval, status and so forth – exhibit themselves in different forms and in different amounts in different individuals (Cruickshank and Associates 1980).

The second source of goals (Cruickshank and Associates 1980) arises when the individual takes on the role of a teacher and assumes role-derived needs. Here the person-as-teacher is expected, and usually expects, to behave in institutionally sanctioned ways. That is, assuming the role of teacher makes one behave toward students in ways demanded by the community or the teaching profession.

Teacher problems result as teachers try to meet both (1) their own human needs which are physiological or socio-psychological in nature and (2) role-derived needs that the job of teaching demands. It seems that most classroom-related problems result when persons assume the teacher role and must achieve goals that are completely new or for which they are unprepared or ill-prepared, such as in controlling and managing the classroom and motivating the students.

Their inability to satisfy these needs makes them feel alienated, discontented and frustrated. If this is allowed to accumulate over the years there is a tendency for teachers to become dissatisfied with their job and leave the profession in favour of another job, or opt for early retirement.

Classroom-related teacher problems arise when teachers are unable to achieve their goals or fulfil what they want to do in their workplace. For example, a certain teacher is highly motivated to teach a class in a mid-city school where the students are not interested in learning and other teachers are not enthusiastic to teach this class because of the students' backgrounds. The students are apathetic towards their education and nothing will motivate them to learn because most teachers expect them to fail. Out of special love and concern for the welfare and future of these students, the teacher goes all the way to reach out to these students. He wants them to learn and feel successful not only in school but also in later life. Even though repeated attempts are made to change their attitude to encourage them to come to school regularly, and behave appropriately in class, the teacher's effort is futile. When he visits their parents he is told to mind his own business. The teacher gets very frustrated because he is unable to let go of this desire to help his students.

In another case, a teacher is very enthusiastic in her work. She holds many positions in the school and she is also very active in the Parent-Teacher Association besides other community services. Because of these commitments and burgeoning paperwork in the teaching profession she is not able to cope up with her daily routine. She gets very tense and is sometimes unable to relate very well with her colleagues and students. She feels she is not doing a good job and feels unappreciated. She is often seen in the cafeteria eating alone during recess. These are just two vignettes of a 'slice of life' from the classroom and some of the related problems experienced by teachers in their workplace.

According to Cruickshank and Associates (1980) teacher problems can be grouped into

five categories: (1) affiliation; (2) control; (3) good parent relationships and understanding home conditions; (4) student success; and (5) time.

These five categories or factors were derived through factor analysis. The factors identified and the various items that load on them were later interpreted and presented as a teacher problem model based on the relationship among the items and the factors that underlie the relationship. This model was drawn up using the conventional path diagram and was the basis of the teacher problem validation studies (Zulkifli 1987; Zulkifli and Loadman [in progress]).

According to Cruickshank and Myers (1975), there is a common assertion that if you can find out what teachers' problems are, you have gained enormously valuable insight into their world and are in a position to help them at some level to consider and thus accept, reduce, or eliminate those problems.

Teacher problems are real and will not go away with the accumulation of teaching experience. If these problems are extremely bothersome they will affect teachers' performance and job satisfaction (Engelking 1986; Leslie 1989). In addition to that, problems in the workplace or 'environmental stressors' and job dissatisfaction contribute to stress and teacher burnout (Gold *et al.* 1992). Environmental stressors are a collection of stressors inherent in schools over which teachers have very little control. As such, the stage is set for job-related stress when involvement in work is high (as in teaching) but feelings of control or power in the work setting are limited (French 1993).

According to Wangberg (1984), teacher stress is not a simple issue. A review of the literature on teacher stress and dissatisfaction included many areas of concern, including poor working conditions, excessive paperwork, poor relationships with others in the workplace setting and loss of control over what happens with one's classroom. Several items from the 'affiliation' category of the original instrument used in this study purport to measure this problem. Lack of affiliation or alienation also results from the sense of

isolation that many teachers seem to experience. In a study of British teachers (Newell 1980) it was concluded that teachers with problems see themselves as different from others and think they alone are having problems. As a result they internalize their difficulties or problems rather than seeking aid or a solution. This is an unhealthy situation and should be looked into by teacher educators and teacher education policy-makers.

In the push for excellence in education, administrators may forget that dissatisfied teachers can weaken the educational programme. Engelking (1986) identified significant dissatisfaction factors among teachers as 'relations with student and parents', 'lack of achievement by students or teachers' and 'communication with administrators'. This aspect is also measured by some items in the instrument of the current study. Examples of such items are: 'establishing good relations with parents and understanding home conditions', 'holding worthwhile conferences with parents', 'getting my students to enjoy learning for its own sake', 'overcoming anxieties related to being supervised', 'understanding and helping the atypical or special child' and 'helping my students to know and accept themselves as they are'. Being aware of the exodus of teachers from the teaching profession through early and/or optional retirement and realizing the importance of keeping teachers happy and satisfied in their workplace, this study seeks to identify some of the major classroom-related problems of elementary school teachers.

Sometimes a problem may occur frequently but it may not bother the teacher at all. On the other hand, some problems may occur less frequently but are bothersome.

A bothersome problem is one that produces a significant impact on the teacher's emotions and may linger in the teacher's life longer than other problems which are less bothersome. In this study, the researcher will identify not only the most frequent common problems of elementary classroom teachers but also identify the most bothersome ones.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions in this investigation are:

1. What are some common problems of elementary school teachers?
2. Which problems are the most bothersome?
3. What factors underlie all these problems?

METHOD

A survey of a sample of elementary school teachers in a Midwest state was carried out. A cluster sampling of classroom teachers was done using schools as the cluster. A systematic random sampling of 60 schools in local, city and exempted village school districts were selected to participate in this study. Every tenth school from the list provided by the State Education Directory was selected until 60 schools were selected. A total of 439 teachers from 51 schools participated in this study. This represented a 39% return rate for the teachers and 85% response rate for the schools. The sample was representative of the population of elementary school teachers in the sampling framework in terms of school districts and sex ratio of teachers.

INSTRUMENTATION

In the current study, the teacher problems investigated are self reports of a sample of elementary school teachers surveyed using an abridged version of the teacher problem checklist (TPC) which was developed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (Zulkifli 1987). This instrument was adapted from the original version used in the Bainer (1986) teacher problem study. The abridged version with two scales had 40 items. A list of these forty items is presented in Table 1.

Several items in the teacher problem checklist (TPC) specifically measure the problem related to stress. One such item is, 'Overcoming anxieties related to being supervised'. The concern with stress stems from mounting evidence that stress may significantly impair teachers' ability to dis-

play effective instructional behaviour and good working relationships with students. Another item in the TPC, 'Getting the understanding and sustenance of administrators and other teachers so that I can be efficient and feel professional' purports to measure problems related to stress. The two subscales employed in the teacher problem checklist were called 'Frequency' and 'Bothersomeness'. The problem statements or items were listed in a central column with the 'Frequency' of the problem placed on the left-hand side of the page and 'Bothersomeness' of the problem on the right-hand side. The problem statements were rated in terms of frequency of occurrence and degree of bothersomeness. Respondents had to rate each of the problem statements presented on a scale of 1 (lowest-never) to 5 (highest-always) on the frequency of the problems and 1 (lowest-not at all) to 5 (highest-extremely) on the bothersomeness of each of the problems presented. The dimensions of the problems are measured in two ways, i.e. in terms of their frequency and bothersomeness. The frequency of the problem subscale indicates how often the problem occurs to the teacher while the bothersomeness subscale indicates how bothersome the problem is to the teacher. Some problems may occur frequently but do not bother the teacher at all. However, some problems may occur less frequently but bother them tremendously, and different individuals have different degrees of tolerance of these bothersome problems. In addition, there were 19 demographic questions regarding the teachers' and schools' background and the teachers' level of satisfaction with their teacher preparation programme, teaching in general and the school in which they were currently teaching. This instrument was developed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and had both construct and concurrent validity (Zulkifli 1987). The internal consistencies of the items of both scales ranged from 0.71 to 0.90. This indicates an acceptable level of reliability of the abridged version of the TPC used in this study.

TABLE 1
Items in the abridged teacher problem checklist

Factor 1 – Professionalism

Items

1. Employing retribution or punishment.
2. Working effectively with university student teacher supervisors.
3. Getting the understanding and sustenance of administrators and other teachers so that I can be efficient and feel professional.
4. Dealing with students' absenteeism and tardiness.
5. Establishing and maintaining rapport with other teachers.
6. Being awake and alert.
7. Overcoming or counteracting interruptions to my teaching or classroom routine.
8. Helping my students to feel secure and unafraid.
9. Developing confidence in my colleagues.
10. Eliminating parental interference with my teaching.
11. Improving conditions so that students can study better at home.
12. Getting students to enjoy learning for its own sake.
13. Holding worthwhile conferences with parents.
14. Overcoming anxieties related to being supervised.
15. Liking my students.
16. Dealing with students who have been abused or neglected.
17. Monitoring the behaviour of students outside the classroom but still in the school area.
18. Establishing good relations with parents and understanding home conditions.
19. Understanding and helping the atypical or special child.
20. Handling problems that may have racial implications.
21. Helping my students to know and accept themselves as they are.
22. Maintaining student attention.
23. Planning and monitoring more than one classroom activity at a time.
24. Extending learning beyond the classroom.
25. Promoting student self-evaluation.
26. Overcoming students' feelings of upset or frustration with themselves.

Factor 2 – Time Management

Items

1. Having enough free time.
2. Having enough preparation time.
3. Having enough time to teach and also to diagnose and evaluate learning.
4. Avoiding duties inappropriate to my professional role.
5. Controlling and using my professional time in the most functional, efficient way.

Factor 3 – Relationships

1. Maintaining order, quiet, or control.
2. Getting students to use their leisure time well.
3. Getting students to behave appropriately.
4. Creating interest in the topic being taught.
5. Enforcing considerate treatment of property.
6. Helping students academically and personally – helping them to be efficient and effective.
7. Getting my students to feel successful in school.
8. Helping students improve academically.
9. Getting all my students to participate in class.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the data analysis presented an ordered list of the classroom related problems and the problems that were bothersome. In general, the top five problems reported to occur frequently were: (1) having enough preparation time; (2) having enough time to teach and also to diagnose and evaluate teaching; (3) having enough free time; (4) getting students to use their leisure time well; and (5) getting my students to enjoy learning for its own sake. The top three items come from the "time management" factor of the instrument, and were from the 'time' factor of the original teacher problem checklist (Cruickshank and Associates 1980). Time is a finite commodity and in the classroom time is a major problem with most teachers. There is an increasing amount of paperwork, clerical and non-teaching duties expected of teachers so they have been deprived of much valuable time that could be used for more productive teaching and the evaluation of learning in the classroom. This problem of time constraint is also mentioned in a recent study in Malaysia regarding the problems of teachers in the implementation of the school-based evaluation programme in the new primary school curriculum (Mohd. Yasin 1994). It was reported that the frequency of testing (35 times per academic year) and incessant record-keeping and paperwork is taking too much of their professional time. As a result of this problem many teachers were dissatisfied with their job, especially those with large classes of more than 35 students.

The fourth-ranking problem 'getting students to use their leisure time well' is from the 'relationships' factor; this item is from the 'student success' factor of the original TPC. Dedicated teachers always strive for a good relationship with their students and they are concerned about the welfare of their students in and out of the classroom. They want their students to succeed in their academic and personal life. The inability to fulfil this function makes teachers feel inadequate and perceive it to be problematic. The fifth-ranking item, 'Getting my students to enjoy learning for its own sake'

comes from the 'professionalism' factor identified in the current study. One of the virtues of professionals is the desire to provide sincere services to their clients. Getting students to learn something for its own sake is a big problem for many teachers because students perceive learning as preparation only for examinations. Teachers who are successful (no problem) in this aspect tend to have students who learn not only for examination purposes but also to continually seek knowledge for the love of it.

On the whole, the top five problems bothersome to the teachers in the study were the same. The correlations of the scores on the 'Frequency' and 'Bothersomeness' scales were quite high, ranging from .48 to .77. It was also observed that the mean of the items in the bothersomeness scales was always higher than the means of the frequency scale. What it implied is that most problems bothered the teachers very much whenever they occurred. The results of this study were similar to the trend found in the Bainer (1986) study. The means, standard deviations and rank order of the problems that occur frequently and the problems that were bothersome are presented in Table 2. The minimum value recorded for each of the problems was 1 and the maximum was 5 in both scales of the instrument. However, the highest mean value for the frequency scale was recorded for the item, 'having enough preparation time' (3.92). As mentioned earlier, the mean for the items on the bothersomeness scale was higher (4.15) than that of the frequency scale.

Separate analyses of the subsamples from urban, suburban and rural areas indicated that the top five problems occurring most frequently as reported by the teachers were not significantly different. This finding concurs with that of Cruickshank *et al.* (1968). However, the top five problems that bothered the suburban and rural elementary school teachers were a little different from those of their urban counterparts. The suburban teachers reported problems of 'maintaining order, quiet, or control' and 'getting students to behave appropriately'. However, the fifth-ranking problem that bothered rural teachers was 'dealing with students who have been

TABLE 2

Means, standard deviations and rank order of top five items in the frequency and bothersomeness scale

Items	Frequency		Bothersomeness		Rank
	Means	S.D	Means	S.D	
1. Having enough preparation time.	3.92	1.19	4.15	1.27	1
2. Having enough time to teach and also to diagnose and evaluate teaching.	3.86	1.16	4.05	1.23	2
3. Having enough free time.	3.77	1.12	3.80	1.43	3
4. Getting students to use their leisure time well.	3.26	1.13	3.39	1.47	4
5. Getting students to enjoy learning for its own sake.	2.99	1.34	3.36	1.33	5

N = 439

abused or neglected'. This same bothersome problem was also reported by Bainer (1993).

Exploratory factor analysis of the frequency of the problem data from Bainer (1986) reported in Zulkifli (1987) revealed that three factors: (1) professionalism; (2) time management; and (3) relationships, underlie the various problems experienced by the elementary school teachers. This was further confirmed with new data in the second phase of the teacher problem study through confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL (Zulkifli 1987). The factor loadings of the items on the three factors are presented in Table 3. Readers are reminded that in confirmatory factor analysis the researcher has the ability to fix the loading of specific items on specified factors to be zero, because based on prior research findings, theory and expert opinion from the field, certain items are not supposed to load significantly on any but the major specified factor. This will enhance interpretability of the results.

These factors were labelled as such based on the items loaded on them. 'Professionalism' was chosen because the items loaded on this factor described the qualities that a teacher should have in order to function well in the profession. It included good interpersonal relationships with other people in the workplace (superiors, colleagues, subordinates or clients), feeling of responsibility and accountability towards the success of students in and beyond the classroom, and having good communication skills for effec-

tive interaction with parents of students. These items came from the categories called 'affiliation', 'student success' and 'good parent relationship and understanding home conditions' as presented by Cruickshank and Associates (1980).

'Time management' was chosen as a label for the second factor because of the items that reflect wise or effective use of time loaded on this factor. These items came from the category called 'time' in Cruickshank and Associates (1980).

'Relationships' was chosen as the label for the third factor because the items loaded on it reflected relationships teachers should have with their clients or students as the person in control in the classroom. The items reflected that teachers assumed this role out of their concern for the students' academic and social success. These items came from the categories known as 'control' and 'student success' (Cruickshank and Associates 1980).

The three factors that underlie teacher problems in this study were highly correlated with each other, varying from .445 to .937. What it means is that teachers who reported problems in the category of 'professionalism' tend to have problems in 'time management' and 'relationships' as well. The reverse is also true.

The top three reported problems on the frequency and bothersomeness scales came from the 'time management' category while the fourth-ranking problem came from 'relationships' and the fifth-ranking problem

TABLE 3
Factor loading of items in the instrument

Items	Professionalism	Time Management	Relationship
1.	.266	0	0
2.	.449	0	0
3.	.161	0	0
4.	.294	0	0
5.	.540	0	0
6.	.541	0	0
7.	.245	0	0
8.	.279	0	0
9.	.496	0	0
10.	.514	0	0
11.	.399	0	0
12.	.634	0	0
13.	.396	0	0
14.	.515	0	0
15.	.333	0	0
16.	.615	0	0
17.	.493	0	0
18.	.353	0	0
19.	.459	0	0
20.	.577	0	0
21.	.579	0	0
22.	.503	0	0
23.	.625	0	0
24.	.324	0	0
25.	.606	0	0
26.	.505	0	0
27.	0	.679	0
28.	0	.721	0
29.	0	.682	0
30.	0	.413	0
31.	0	.399	0
32.	0	0	.449
33.	0	0	.552
34.	0	0	.635
35.	0	0	.548
36.	0	0	.616
37.	0	0	.606
38.	0	0	.689
39.	0	0	.733
40.	0	0	.715

was from the 'professionalism' category. These problems and their ranking were similar to those found in Bainer (1986, 1993) teacher problem studies.

Even though the findings of this study explained the relationship among the problems with only three factors, its meaning and significance were not different from those

problems and factors identified in previous teacher problem studies. The essence of the five-factor teacher problem model suggested in Cruickshank and Associates (1980) was not lost at all. They were just summarized succinctly into three new interpretable factors. If a phenomenon can be explained in a few factors as possible without losing signifi-

cant information then it should be the model of choice. Every researcher has his or her idiosyncratic way of labelling factors based on their interpretations and this should be acceptable as long as it does not deviate too much from the ideas and knowledge already established and known in the field.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Teacher problems are real and numerous. However the problems that occur most frequently as reported by teachers in the current study were: (1) having enough preparation time; (2) having enough time to teach and also to diagnose and evaluate teaching; (3) having enough free time; (4) getting students to use their leisure time well; and (5) getting students to enjoy learning for its own sake. These problems were also the most bothersome. In this study the results showed that there is a strong relationship between the responses on the frequency scale and the responses on the bothersomeness scale. Generally speaking, if the problem occurs frequently, then the problem is more likely to bother the teacher.

Even though there are numerous classroom-related problems experienced by teachers, these problems are interrelated and can be classified into three major underlying factors categories: (1) professionalism; (2) time management; and (3) relationships. These problem categories or factors have been identified and confirmed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis.

Teacher problems exist, and steps must be taken to look into this phenomenon in order to help teachers stay satisfied in the workplace. Knowing their problems should help curriculum planners to incorporate courses in future teacher education programmes to help teachers deal with these problems. Courses or workshops for future teachers on topics such as 'time management', 'professionalism' and 'relationships' are examples of ways to help them cope in the workplace. Teacher education programmes have been criticized for not preparing teachers based on their needs in the workplace (Smith *et al.* 1969; Smith 1980)

and that most teacher education programmes were designed to cater to teachers in suburban areas (Bainer 1993). Classroom related teacher problems exist and cannot be ignored. They affect teacher performance and job satisfaction and contribute to teacher stress and burnout (Gold *et al.* 1992). Teacher educators need to be sensitive to this issue and make a conscious effort to try to eliminate or reduce these problems. Restructuring or refining the courses in teacher preparation programmes to prepare them realistically for their workplace is one way to help alleviate the problem. As Bainer (1993) noted, teachers in different school localities have different kinds of problems and unless teachers are trained to prepare themselves for various kinds of work environment, new teachers will find themselves struggling to cope with the challenge of the workplace. This is because most teacher preparation programmes prepare teachers for the general and ideal school situation that usually fits the description of a suburban upper-middle class neighbourhoods. New teachers will experience problems if they are placed in a workplace environment very different from what they expect.

Teacher trainees should be exposed to at least a simulation of the various work environments they could be faced with to prevent culture shock on the first day of the teaching assignment.

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