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Abstract

Occupational stress associated with teaching children in their early years is an emerging public health challenge which requires immediate attention, if the global goal of education for all is to be attained. This study therefore seeks to explore occupational stress amongst early childhood teachers in Benin City. To this end, three research questions were generated. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population included all private early childhood schools in Benin City. The sample for the study comprised 150 early childhood teachers selected through purposive sampling technique from private early childhood schools in Benin City. The instrument for the study was the 'Early Childhood Teachers Stress Survey'. The data generated was analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The findings indicated that mean rating for perceived occupational stressors within the teaching environment of early childhood teachers ranges from 3.02 to 3.97 which were considered as moderately to highly stressful. Furthermore, delay in payment of salaries was ranked 1st major stressor with a mean of 3.97. Poor school environment was rank 2nd with a mean of 3.91. However, children disruptive behavior was rank least (16th) with a mean of 3.02. Additionally, majority of the early childhood teachers agreed that occupational stress experienced by teachers had impact on job performance in the classroom. Based on the foregoing, it was recommended amongst others that Private early childhood care education and development operators should ensure prompt payment of salaries to their workers and government should ensure proper regulation of operations of private early childhood care provide

Keywords: Occupational stress, Early childhood teachers, Early childhood care and development

Introduction

One of the indices of measuring the intention of any nation moving towards path of national development is the level of priority accorded to education and human capital development. One category of such agents and drivers of national developments are teachers. Teachers, by calling, are significant others, role models, social agents and one of the self-sacrificing professionals dealing with children and students. Xhelilaj, Petani and Ntalla (2021) stated that besides, promoting learning and social-emotional development of the child. Teachers play pivotal role in stimulating the attainment of children's innate potentials (Committee on Science of Children, 2015). Globally, the recognition of the pivotal role of early childhood

education in the holistic development of the child has occupied the front burners of every nation's educational system. For example, the Nigeria government has demonstrated this by clearly according commitment to early childhood education in her National Policy on Education in 1977. Thus, the objectives, amongst others, include catching the children young by effecting the smooth transition of the children from home to school as well as providing care and supervision on behalf of the parents who are engaged in one profession or another (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). This became expedient due to changing roles of mothers from the traditional full time house wives to full time career women. Consequently, the increasing demand for child care and more children enrollment in early childhood education and care centres. Thereby bestowing the responsibilities on the early childhood teachers to act as care givers and loco parentis. The job of the early childhood teachers has been linked with propensity for physical and mental exhaustion (Kyriacou, 2001). The teaching profession like other field of human endeavors, is beset with myriads of unique occupational stressors confronting professional in the field on daily basis (Uwadiae & Owie, 2012). This assertion had been buttressed in the literature as studies opine that in recent times, teaching is increasingly becoming one of the highly stressful profession (Jepson & Forrest, 2006; Greenberg, Brown. & Abenavoli, 2016; Ozoemena *et. al.*, 2021). Quantifying the magnitude of how teachers perceived the stressful nature of their profession, Jepson and Forrest (2006) noted that 41 percent of teachers studied alluded to the fact that the job is indeed stressful. Hence, they tend to experience more psychological distress compared to other categories of workers (Titheradge *et. al.*, 2019). Though, this may vary with individuals' demographic variables, region of residence and working environment (Mohammed, 2018). This assertion was exemplified amongst Californian early childhood teachers who reported sometimes experiencing mild to moderate stress due to teachers-pupils' ratio (Brazil, 2013). Correspondingly, gender differences were evident in Western Canadian female teacher who demonstrated more stress associated with excessive workload and classroom behavior of children (Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

Occupational stress in early childhood care centres and primary school teachers in Nigeria has been linked with myriads of challenges arising from the nature of the work. These occupational stress precipitating situations are numerous but the magnitudes of how they are rated tend to be contingent upon the prevailing working conditions, school ownership, regions and countries. As demonstrated in a comparative study on Netherlands and Germany school teachers, which indicated that the former were more prone to occupational stressors linked with personal factors compared to the latter whose occupational stressors were correlated with education and care, work factors, further work factors and organizational factors (Behnke, 2018). Congruently, Uwadiae, Osaigbovo and Osarenmwinda (2019) noted that frequent sources of job stress of public primary school teachers were associated with career growth (such as delay in promotion), time constraints (such as

short interval between examination and issuance report cards), pupils-related stressors, resource related and technologically induced stressors such as use of teachers' tablets in classroom teaching. In another study, early childhood teachers work stress were mainly induced by poor salaries, children disturbing behavior, engaging in additional paperwork such as assessment though, relations with colleague, parents and director hardly constitute stress (Brazil, 2013). Categorizing these stressors, Gbadegesin (2014) posited that quest for professional growth, administration and workload constitute main stressors while co-workers and pupils were least stressors in western, Nigeria. However, this was slightly different from a survey of Libyan school based in Turkey. As the interpersonal relationship with colleague and students' parents was itemized as constituting a major stressor in addition to nature of the job, work environment, social and educational network. Nevertheless, remunerations were considered least amongst in his sample (Mohamed, 2018). Concerned for teachers' stress in developed nations seems to have gained more attention in recent times with regards to research and management from government and employers (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2000; Uwadiae & Owie, 2012) but that of third world nations leave much to be desired. This situation, if not checked, may have multiplier effect on learning, socio-emotional development and quality of care received by the children as well as the health of the teacher. This therefore, call for a study of this magnitude to provide better understanding on the nature of occupational stress experienced by early childhood teachers in private schools which constitute bulk of the work force in early childhood care and development care providers in Benin City, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Teaching children is one of the self-sacrificing professions which help in unleashing the inherent potential of learners. Teaching at the ECCED level can be pleasant experience when the condition of service and the environment is conducive for the teachers as well as learners. However, teaching at this level had been speculated to be a daunting experience due to the multitudes of stressors. Ranging from work overload, children's misbehaviors, interpersonal relationship with co-workers and parents, insufficient instructional resources, poor remunerations, non-payment of salaries amongst others. Available studies had shown inconsistencies in how teachers perceived occupationally related stressors which tend to be influenced by the prevailing political and ecosystem within which such teachers carry out their task. Although there are increasing studies on teachers' occupational stress, only few indigenous studies have explored the early childhood teachers in Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that this study explored the occupational stress of early childhood teachers in Benin City.

Purpose of the Study

The objective of this study was to explore the occupational stress of early childhood care and development teachers in Benin City. Specifically, it seeks to find

out:

- a. investigated how early childhood care and development teachers perceive the nature of activities within their teaching environment in Benin City.
- b. determined the major occupational stressors of early childhood care and development teachers in Benin City, and
- c. determined the perceived impacts of occupational stress on early childhood care and development teachers in Benin City

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to drive the study:

1. How do early childhood care and development teachers perceive the nature of activities within their teaching environment in Benin City?
2. What are the major occupational stressors of early childhood care and development teachers in Benin City?
3. What are the perceived impacts of occupational stress on early childhood care and development teachers in Benin City?

Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive research design. The population of the study comprised all ECCED teachers from three local government areas that make up Benin City. The sample for the study was 150 ECCED teachers purposively selected from 30 early childhood care and development centres across the Benin City. The instrument used for the study was an adaptation of the 'Early Childhood Teachers Stress Survey'. The questionnaire had two sections: Section A elicited responses on the demographic details of the respondents. On the other hand, Section B contained questions which helped to seek information on the occupational stress that Early Childhood Care and Development Care teachers encountered. The questionnaire was a closed ended five points rating scale with the following anchor of 'always stressful', 'rarely stressful', 'sometimes stressful', 'Very often stressful' and 'never stressful'. The entire questionnaire has 43 items. The instrument was validated by three lecturers in Education and Measurement and Evaluation. They determined items appropriateness, ambiguity of question in the instrument and the final copy was modified in line with their opinions and recommendations. The reliability of the instrument was established on 30 early childhood teachers randomly selected from six ECCED centre. The internal consistency of the instrument was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha test of reliability which yielded a value of 0.82. The questionnaire was administered personally by the researchers and the instrument retrieved immediately. The data gathered were analysed using means, standard deviation.

Results

Research question 1

How do early childhood care and development teachers perceive the nature of activities within their teaching environment?

Table 1: Mean ratings of ECCED teachers' perception of the stressful nature of

Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Decision
Ratio of pupils in class room	3.40	1.14	Moderately stressful
Children disruptive behaviour in the classroom	3.02	1.04	Moderately stressful
Poor support from parents	3.43	1.05	Moderately stressful
Interaction with the parents	3.18	1.04	Moderately stressful
Engaging in non-teaching tasks such as cleaning and paper without assistant	3.67	1.21	Highly stressful
Relationship with my school head	3.03	1.16	Moderately stressful
The amounts of money paid for the work done	3.04	1.51	Moderately stressful
The structure of the school building	3.34	1.31	Moderately stressful
Inadequate space in the classroom	3.77	1.36	Highly stressful
Shortage of furniture/storage facilities in the school	3.79	1.33	Highly stressful
Work assigned to do as a teacher	3.36	1.29	Moderately stressful
Teaching preschool pupils	3.30	1.30	Moderately stressful
Unhealthy school environment	3.91	1.31	Highly stressful
Delay in payment of salaries	3.97	1.31	Highly stressful
Marking/scoring pupils' assignment/class work	3.11	1.44	Moderately stressful
1.50-2.49= lowly stressful; 2.50-3.49= moderately stressful; ≥ 3.50 =highly stressful			

The result in Table 1 shows the mean ratings of the stressful nature of activities within the teaching environment of early childhood teachers. The teacher agreed that delay in payment of salaries (Mean=3.97, SD=1.31), untidiness of the school environment (Mean=3.91, SD=1.31), shortage of furniture and storage facilities in the school (Mean=3.79, SD=1.33), inadequate space in the classroom (Mean=3.77, SD=1.36) and engaging in non- teaching tasks such as cleaning and paper without assistant (Mean=3.67, SD= 1.21) constituted high level of occupational stress. However, Poor supports from parents (Mean=3.43, SD= 1.05), the structure of the school building (Mean= 3.34, SD=1.31), ratio of pupils in class room (Mean=3.40, SD= 1.14) amongst others constituted moderate occupational stress.

Research question 2

What are the major occupational stressors of early childhood care and development teachers in Benin City?

Table 2: mean rating of occupational stressors of early childhood care and development teachers in Benin City

Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Ranking
Delay in payment of salaries	3.97	1.31	1st
Unhealthy school environment	3.91	1.31	2nd
Shortage of furniture/storage facilities in the school	3.79	1.33	3rd
Inadequate space in the classroom	3.77	1.36	4th
Engaging in non-teaching task, without assistance	3.67	1.21	5th
Poor support from parents	3.43	1.05	6th
Number of pupils assigned to your class	3.40	1.14	7th
Work assigned to do as a teacher	3.36	1.29	8th
The structure of the school building	3.34	1.31	9th
Teaching preschool pupils	3.30	1.30	10th
Interaction with parents	3.18	1.04	11th
Marking/scoring pupil's assignment/class work	3.11	1.44	12th
Holding/guiding the children to write or read	3.06	1.39	13th
The amount of money paid for work done	3.04	1.51	14th
Relationship with my school head	3.03	1.16	15th
Children disruptive behaviour in the classroom	3.02	1.04	16th

Criterion mean ≥ 2.50 = occupational stressor

Table 2 shows the mean rating and ranking of the sources of occupational stress perceived by early childhood teachers in Benin City. It further shows that, delay in the payment of salaries; unhealthy school environment; shortage of furniture and storage facilities in the school; inadequate space in the classroom and engaging in non-teaching task without assistance constituted the major perceived stressors of early childhood teachers. The least source of occupational stress was children disruptive behaviour.

Research question 3

What are the perceived impacts of occupational stress on early childhood care and development teachers in Benin City?

Table 3: Mean ratings impact of occupational stress on early childhood teachers

Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Remarks
Feeling exhausted and anxious	3.58	1.01	Agreed
Feeling frustrated and angry	3.58	1.06	Agreed
Feeling sense of emotional exhaustion at the end of the day	3.19	1.05	Agreed
Feeling physically exhausted at the end of the day	2.95	1.08	Agreed
Feeling the quality of your teaching has declined due to stress	3.93	1.01	Agreed
Relationships with immediate family members in the home	3.47	1.27	Agreed
Being prone to illness such as flu, headache, and crack voice	3.61	1.01	Agreed
Absent from work as a result of work related stress	4.03	1.06	Agreed
Taking medication to cushion the effect of stress	3.54	1.04	Agreed
Considering leaving teaching for a complete different profession	3.56	1.20	Agreed
Feeling that work done is not important and meaningful	2.33	1.47	Disagreed
Feeling not able to handle children behaviour in the class classroom	2.16	1.37	Disagreed

Criterion mean > 2.50= Agreed; <2.50=disagreed

The result in Table 4 shows the mean ratings of the professed impact of occupational stress on early childhood teachers. The Table further shows that agreed absenteeism from work; the decline in quality of teaching; being prone to illness such as flu, headache, and crack voice; exhaustion and anxiety are some of the negative impact of occupational stress experienced. However, the respondents disagreed that occupational stress does not affect the feeling that the work they do is not important and meaningful and feeling of inability to handle children behaviour in the class room.

Discussion of Findings

The objective of this study was to explore the occupational stress experienced by early childhood teachers as well as its impact on the teachers' job performance. The study indicated that early childhood teachers generally experience moderate to high level of occupational stress. This study is at variance with Brazil (2013) whose study found that early childhood teachers in Sacramento, California reported that they hardly and sometimes experienced stress on the job. The reason that may be adduced for this difference could be that the previous study was conducted in a developed nation while this study was carried out in Nigeria (a developing nation) hence the possibility of experiencing more occupational stress. The study further demonstrated that the five major sources of occupational stress were delayed payment of salaries, unhealthy school environment, shortage of furniture and storage facilities in the school and inadequate space in the classroom. This finding lends credence to earlier study by Greenberg et al (2016) that found school organizational factor were among the major stressors of teachers. It however at variance with Uwadiae, Osaigbovo and Osarenmwinda, (2019) which found that the major sources of public primary school teachers stress were delay in promotion, short interval between the conduct of examinations and issuance of end of term report cards. The plausible explanation for this difference could be attributed to a better remunerations of public school teachers compared to most private early childhood teachers that were used in this study. Finally, the study further revealed that early childhood teachers professed that occupational stress impact on their job performance. Implying, that there is mild impact of occupational stress on teachers' job performance in the classroom. It however does not affect the feelings they have concerning the worth and their capacity to handle the children. This finding in line with Brazil (2013) which found that early childhood teachers are confident in their capacity as a teacher and are

Conclusion

Occupational stress in teaching profession is a universal contemporary public health problem which required prompt management especially in third world nations such as Nigeria. This is expedient due to its negative effect on the children learning outcomes, teachers' job performance and health. Interestingly, occupational stress associated with teaching children had not received adequate attention it deserves from government and other stake holders in the educational sectors in this part of the world. Therefore, this study had convincingly noted that occupationally induced stress in early childhood care is real as the teacher agreed that they are moderate to high level stress in the course of carrying out their statutory responsibilities.

Recommendations

Emanating from the foregoing, the following recommendations were proffered:

1. Government should ensure proper regulation of operations of private early

- childhood care providers by ensuring implementation of workers welfare as a means of improving the condition of service in their organisations.
2. Private ECCED operators should ensure prompt payment of salaries to their workers.
3. School proprietors should employ more early childhood teachers and classroom assistants where necessary to reduce excessive workload.
4. Early childhood teachers should be routinely afforded the opportunity to routinely undergo on the job training on stress management techniques.

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