Chapter 15
Preschool Teachers' Experiences of Work-Related Stress: A Pilot Study of Singapore Teachers

EeLynn Ng and Emily Meow

Abstract Research has shown that early childhood teachers play a crucial role in supporting children's development via the provision of socially and emotionally supportive learning environments. However, teachers' abilities to provide such high-quality learning environments may be hindered by work-related stress. Prolonged exposure to stress is also associated with several undesirable outcomes, including lower job satisfaction and increased motivation to leave the teaching profession. Although research on teacher stress is actively conducted in many countries, very little has been done in Singapore. Yet, considering recent concerns about the high turnover rates of preschool teachers in Singapore and the scarcity of local studies on teacher stress, more research is needed to understand whether and how work-related stress affects preschool teachers in Singapore. This chapter is a first attempt at bridging the knowledge gap between international findings and local evidence. In the first section, we provide a review of the theory and empirical findings on work-related stress in teachers. In the second section, we report findings from a pilot study involving one-to-one interviews with preschool teachers to understand their experiences of stress at the workplace. We highlight common themes as well

This work was funded by the Education Research Funding Programme, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, project number and title: SUG 11/16 NEL, Work-related stress in preschool teachers and methods of assessing stress: A literature review. The views expressed in this paper are the authors' and do not necessarily represent the views of NIE.

E. Ng (✉)
Centre for Research in Child Development, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: eelynn.ng@nie.edu.sg

E. Meow
School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: emeow001@e.ntu.edu.sg

O. S. Tan et al. (eds.), *Early Childhood Development and Education in Singapore*, Empowering Teaching and Learning through Policies and Practice: Singapore and International Perspectives 2, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-7405-1_15

as unique perspectives that emerged from the interviews. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings and directions for future research.

Keywords Early childhood · Teacher well-being · Singapore · Preschool · Burnout · Motivation · Job demands-resources model

Research has shown that early childhood teachers play a crucial role in supporting children's development via the provision of socially and emotionally supportive learning environments (Jennings, 2015). For example, Mashburn et al. (2008) showed that effective instructional support (e.g. supporting the development of thinking skills and providing high-quality feedback) was associated with larger improvements in language and math skills in preschool. Through the provision of high-quality classroom interactions, teachers also foster the development of effective self-regulation skills in children (Blair & Raver, 2015).

However, teachers' abilities to provide such high-quality learning environments may be hindered by work-related stress (Downer et al., 2012). Several studies have reported a negative association between teacher stress and quality of classroom interactions (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Zinsser et al., 2013). Moreover, prolonged exposure to stress is associated with several undesirable outcomes, including lower job satisfaction, burnout and increased motivation to leave the teaching profession (Johnson et al., 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016; Zhai et al., 2011). In light of recent concerns about the high turnover rates of preschool teachers in Singapore (Ang, 2012) and the scarcity of local studies on teacher stress, it is clear that more research is needed to understand whether and how work-related stress affects preschool teachers in Singapore.

Although research on teacher stress is actively conducted in many countries, very little has been done in Singapore. This chapter is a first attempt at bridging this knowledge gap. In the first section, we provide a review of the literature on work-related stress in teachers. In the second section, we report findings from a pilot study involving one-to-one interviews with preschool teachers to understand their experiences of stress at the workplace. We highlight common themes as well as unique perspectives that emerged from the interviews. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings and directions for future research.

15.1 Teaching Is Stressful

Research has shown that teaching is a stressful occupation. Teacher stress is generally defined as the experience by teachers of negative or unpleasant emotions resulting from aspects of their work (Kyriacou, 1987). Importantly, stress involves the

contribution of personal and external factors, the individual's perception of these and the individual's resulting negative response or reaction (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995). In studies of high school and secondary school teachers (e.g. Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016), commonly reported sources of work-related stress include time pressure, heavy workloads, lack of support from colleagues and supervisors, low student motivation and management of difficult student behaviours. Similar stressors have also been reported by early childhood educators (e.g. Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014; McGrath & Huntington, 2007). However, early childhood educators also reported experiencing other stressors, including increased frequency of illness and health symptoms (e.g. backaches, general fatigue and muscle strain), dealing with administrative paperwork and other non-teaching tasks, maintaining early childhood philosophy and practice, meeting personal needs and handling issues with children's parents as well as others' perceptions about early childhood programmes (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014).

15.2 Effects of Work-Related Stress on Teachers and Children

Prolonged exposure to job stress has been linked to a variety of undesirable outcomes on teachers' well-being and motivation, including lower job satisfaction (Chan et al., 2000) and poorer psychological and physical well-being (Johnson et al., 2005; Tsai et al., 2006). Chan et al. (2000) reported that teachers, alongside nurses, were the least satisfied among six professional groups (including lawyers, general practitioners, life insurance personnel and engineers) involved in the study. For teachers, performance pressure was found to be the most stressful aspect of work and was also most strongly linked to job satisfaction and mental health (Chan et al., 2000). In a comparison among 26 occupations, Johnson et al. (2005) found that teachers were ranked the second least physically and psychologically healthy. Together, these findings imply that teachers are highly susceptible to poor physical and mental health, as well as dissatisfaction at work. Moreover, teacher stress leads to exhaustion, which in turn leads to an increased motivation to leave the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).

Teacher stress also has significant consequences for children's learning and development. Work-related stress hampers teachers' abilities to provide a high-quality learning environment, which is crucial for supporting children's cognitive, language and socio-emotional development (Blair & Raver, 2015; Jennings, 2015; Whitebook et al., 2014). Several studies have reported a negative relationship between teacher stress and the quality of emotional support that they provide in the classroom (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Zinsser et al., 2013). According to Jennings and Greenberg (2009), highly stressed teachers are susceptible to having conflictual interactions with their students and are less likely to establish supportive relationships with them, which could negatively influence the classroom's

emotional climate. More recently, Jennings (2015) found that preschool teachers who reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion were less able to provide quality instructional support (e.g. provide scaffolding to promote deeper engagement and understanding in learning activities) in the classroom.

Teacher stress has also been associated with various child outcomes, including poorer social skills (Siekkinen et al., 2013) and poorer socio-emotional functioning (Zinsser et al., 2013). For example, children in classrooms with more stressed teachers tended to display less productive involvement, emotional regulation and prosocial behaviours compared to their peers with less stressed teachers (Zinsser et al., 2013). From the perspective of stress-contagion theory (Milkie & Warner, 2011), stressful experiences can spill over from one stressed individual to another within a classroom. In a recent study involving elementary school teachers, higher levels of teacher burnout predicted higher levels of morning cortisol (indicative of higher stress) in students (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). This finding provides support for the notion that higher levels of occupational stress in teachers could transfer to their students. Another study found that elementary school children who were part of stressful classroom environments exhibited more behavioural and adjustment problems (Milkie & Warner, 2011).

To summarise, teacher stress has serious consequences for both teachers and children, as well as the quality of classroom interactions. Because teachers play a crucial role in supporting preschoolers' cognitive and socio-emotional development, it is important to understand the impact of teacher stress on teaching and learning in preschool and to identify ways to alleviate teacher stress. Although research on these issues is currently ongoing in many countries, very little has been done in Singapore.

15.3 Prior Research on Teacher Stress in Singapore

To our knowledge, only two studies have investigated the phenomenon of teacher stress in Singapore. In a survey conducted with 316 secondary and junior college teachers, Ko et al. (2000) presented a list of 49 items pertaining to work-related situations and asked respondents to indicate whether or not they had experienced those situations and the level of stress experienced on a 5-point scale (0 = not a source of stress; 4 = extreme stress). Of the 49 items, teachers rated 35 items as stressful (i.e. average rating was larger than 0). Ko et al. (2000) grouped these items under seven categories of teacher stress, of which the most commonly experienced source of stress were "work overload", "work interfering with personal and family life" and "unfulfilled job responsibilities and self-expectations". Less commonly experienced stressors were "unnecessary tasks and red tape", "insufficient support from colleagues", "low evaluation of teachers from society" and "conflicting or insufficient support from superiors". In another study, Chan et al. (2000) found that teachers reported the most stress compared to general practitioners, lawyers, engineers, nurses and life insurance personnel. Similar to Ko et al.'s (2000) results, teacher

stress was attributed mainly to performance pressure and work-family conflicts. It is important to note that both studies did not involve preschool teachers. In addition, there are as yet no local studies examining how stress impacts on teaching and learning in the classroom.

In a study commissioned by the Lien Foundation (a Singapore-based philanthropic organisation), Ang (2012) examined leading professionals' perspectives on improving the preschool sector in Singapore. The study participants comprised key stakeholders from the early childhood sector, including teachers, principals and training providers. A key finding that emerged from this study is "…an overwhelming concern over the turnover of qualified and experienced preschool teachers" (p. 51). The study also revealed that high turnover rates were mainly due to teachers either moving from one setting to another or leaving the profession altogether. Some media reports have also documented the substantial amount of stress that preschool teachers face on a daily basis (e.g. Foo, 2013).

Given that scant research has been done to understand the stressors faced by preschool teachers in Singapore, we still know very little about the extent to which work-related stress is a salient problem for our preschool teachers. As most 5- to 6-year-old children in Singapore spend a substantial portion of their time in preschool ("Childcare enrolment surges as more mums go back to work", 2016), it is essential to address this knowledge gap. Prior research indicates that an appropriate starting point would be to identify preschool teachers' job-related demands and resources, as these factors influence their well-being.

15.4 The Job Demands-Resources Model

Within the broader context of the occupational health literature, empirical studies have shown that job characteristics (comprising job demands and job resources) are predictive of employee well-being. The job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) provides an overarching theoretical framework of the associations between job demands and resources, employee well-being (strain and motivation) and organisational outcomes. The JD-R model assumes that there are specific psychological, physical, organisational and social aspects of any particular job. These can have either positive or negative influences on occupational outcomes. The JD-R model makes a distinction between job resources and job demands. The former refers to aspects of the job that either facilitate the attaining of work goals, minimise job demands and its related psychological and physiological costs or encourage personal growth, development and learning. Job demands refer to aspects of the job that require prolonged psychological and/or physical effort and are thus associated with specific psychological and/or physiological costs.

According to the JD-R model, job demands and resources influence organisational outcomes via different pathways (see Fig. 15.1). First, job demands are associated with negative individual and organisational outcomes via increased physical and/or psychological strain. For example, chronic job demands (e.g. work overload,

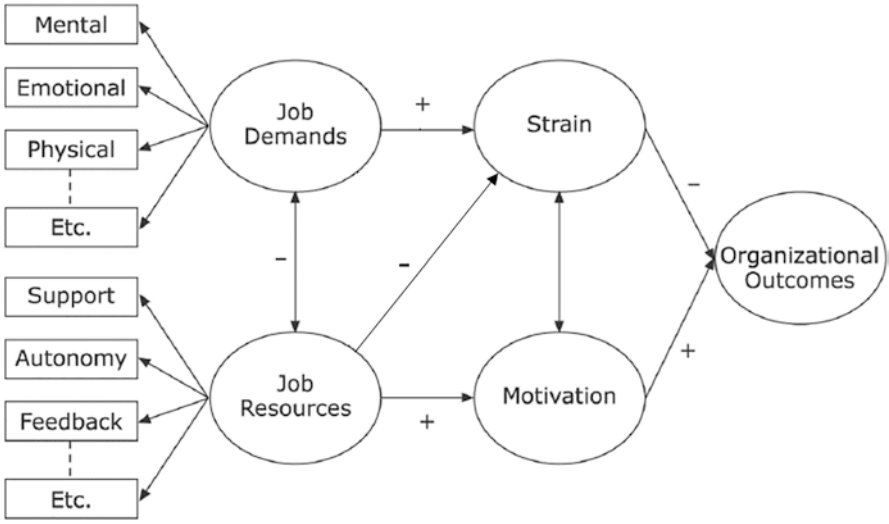

Fig. 15.1 The job demands-resources model. (Adapted from Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)

emotional demands) or poorly designed jobs exhaust employees' physical and mental resources, which may lead to health concerns and a state of exhaustion. Second, job resources are linked to positive organisational outcomes via increased motivation and work engagement. Either job resources may play an *intrinsic* motivational role by fostering employees' growth and learning, or they may play an *extrinsic* motivational role because they are contributing to achieving work goals (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In the former, appropriate feedback from one's supervisor fosters learning, thereby increasing job competence. In the latter, having supportive colleagues increases the likelihood of successfully achieving one's work goals. In both cases, the presence of job resources (i.e. proper feedback and social support from colleagues) leads to increased motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Conversely, a lack of job resources may have negative effects on teachers' well-being, i.e. increase levels of strain and burnout. In addition, recent findings suggest that job resources can buffer the adverse of job demands on strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In other words, employees with more job resources available are better able to cope with their job demands.

15.4.1 Job Demands and Resources of Teachers

The JD-R model has been used to investigate the associations between job demands, resources and well-being in teachers. We provide a brief review of these findings from studies conducted in the United States and Europe to demonstrate how various job demands and resources are linked to different indicators of well-being (e.g. burnout, ill health, motivation and work engagement).

Job Demands *Work overload* is one of the major sources of psychological strain among teachers (Hakanen et al., 2006). Teachers may have too many work demands and too few resources or have to perform complex tasks that are not in line with their experience and skills (Leiter & Maslach, 2003). Work overload may also refer to having to work quickly under time pressure (Ilies et al., 2015; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999) and being burdened with non-teaching-related tasks, such as meetings and administrative paperwork (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014). In particular, non-teaching-related tasks may be viewed as a burden, which distracts teachers from their core job of teaching (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014). Work overload has been linked to undesirable outcomes, including lower job satisfaction and general psychological well-being (e.g. Kusma et al., 2012), increased work-family conflict (Ilies et al., 2015) and burnout (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014). Another major reason for teachers' strain pertains to the *social-psychological aspects of teaching*, such as managing teacher-student relationships, student behaviour (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Dicke et al., 2018) and parent-teacher relationships (Faulkner et al., 2014). Teachers' perceptions of student misbehaviours in the classroom were linked to increased emotional exhaustion and reduced work enthusiasm (Aldrup et al., 2018). Poor parent-teacher relationships contributed to poorer teacher-student relationships and increased stress in childcare teachers (Faulkner et al., 2014). *Lack of rewards*, which refers to whether professionals feel properly recognised for their work, in either financial or social terms or both (Maslach et al., 2001), is another major stressor for teachers. For example, Blöchliger and Bauer (2018) found that lower satisfaction with one's pay was negatively associated with burnout in preschool teachers.

Job Resources *Autonomy* refers to the extent to which individuals have control and influence over their jobs according to their own ideas and wishes (Kusma et al., 2012; Leiter & Maslach, 2003). Empirical studies have shown that autonomy is an important resource for teachers. Autonomy is positively correlated with psychological well-being, work engagement and job satisfaction (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Kusma et al., 2012; Royer & Moreau, 2016) and negatively associated with burnout (Blöchliger & Bauer, 2018). Another important resource for teachers is *interpersonal relationships at work*, which reflects the extent to which one feels socially connected and supported at work by either their supervisors or co-workers (Leiter & Maslach, 2003). As teaching is a people-oriented job and involves a significant amount of interaction with others, having a positive social climate is crucial in facilitating teachers' work. In a study involving childcare teachers, Kusma et al. (2012) found that job resources associated with interpersonal relationships at work (i.e. sense of community and quality of leadership) were most strongly predictive of job satisfaction compared to other resources (e.g. opportunities for development, autonomy and meaning of work). Similarly, other studies have shown that social support from colleagues and supervisors is associated with increased engagement and lower levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion (e.g. Hakanen et al., 2006; Løvgren, 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

In summary, our review has shown that teachers are exposed to many different job demands, which in turn leads to an increase in job strain, burnout and exhaustion. However, there is also evidence to show that teachers with access to job resources are more likely to report an increase in motivation and engagement at work, as well as increased job satisfaction. In light of these findings, what do we know about the job demands and resources of preschool teachers in Singapore?

15.4.2 Job Demands and Resources of Preschool Teachers in Singapore: A Pilot Study

We conducted a pilot study to gain some initial insights about the job demands and resources of preschool teachers in Singapore. One-on-one interviews were conducted with three preschool teachers, L, A and F (all pseudonyms), to gather information about their work experiences. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, guided by a set of questions around the topics of teachers' job demands and resources. Table 15.1 provides a summary of the job demands and resources reported by the teachers during the interviews. It should be noted that each teacher had a different story to tell. Teacher L reported having multiple job resources but very few job demands. In comparison, Teacher A and Teacher F both reported multiple sources of job demands, but Teacher A had significantly more job resources than Teacher F. The following excerpts from the teachers' interviews provide more detailed descriptions about each teacher's experience.

Table 15.1 Job demands and resources reported by three preschool teachers

	Teacher L	Teacher A	Teacher F
Job demands			
1. Managing children with different needs	•	•	•
2. Demands and expectations from parents			•
3. High workload and time pressure		•	•
Job resources			
1. Opportunities for professional development	•	•	
2. Positively valued by society	•		
3. Job security	•	•	•
4. Support from supervisors	•	•	
5. Support from colleagues	•	•	•
6. Support from family and friends	•	•	•
7. Autonomy at work	•	•	

15.4.2.1 Teacher L (Low Job Demands; High Job Resources)

Teacher L is 55 years old and has 10 years of experience as a preschool teacher. She is currently teaching a K2 class. Teacher L's teaching career began at Sunday school in church. She was later inspired to become a preschool teacher after seeing how her Sunday school mentor made a difference in the children's lives. Teacher L is very interested in children's development and views teaching as a meaningful job as it prepares children for a lifelong journey of learning:

> Especially when you see the lights in the children's eyes. And you see the joy. Especially [when] they discover something they can do. Of course, children … tend to say "I can't do" … but once you see them actually doing it, and they see they can do it, it brings joy to them…. I am so especially privileged to be working here… it brings me much joy.

For Teacher L, it is a challenge to manage children with different developmental needs and issues within the same classroom:

> There will be some [children] who have difficulty adjusting socially, emotionally… Or sometimes when the child comes to K2, they may not have had the grounding in K1. Or this might be their first experience to school life. So that means I have to start from the basics with each child... And so you have different children at different stages of their development. Some children may have come to the school from N1 so they are familiar to the culture, familiar with the ways but for some children [they may only come] in term 2. So I have to ensure that the child has all the basic foundation.

Teacher L does not have many issues with excessive demands and expectations from parents. While she acknowledged that parents are more demanding now due to their concerns about their child's readiness for primary school, she feels that "they have been very supportive". Similarly, Teacher L finds her workload to be manageable although there are occasions where she would be "under time pressure", especially when handling several projects simultaneously. Compared to when she first started as a preschool teacher, Teacher L has more work-life balance now as she has time to attend to personal matters and to rest during the weekends.

Teacher L has multiple resources at work. She has some degree of autonomy in implementing her lesson plans and enjoys a good relationship with her supervisors and colleagues. Her family and friends also provide an additional source of social support:

> I like my colleagues and the environment. Where we all come in to help. For example, [for] the kids' graduation, we have the other teachers coming to help in doing the props. It really helps a lot. And also if you're not sure of something, we can always go and ask… I also have sources outside work and it really helps as well... family, friends, [and] children. Just lately, they have been calling me Teacher L … to [affirm] that [I am] a teacher.

Teacher L also thought that society's impression of preschool teachers has changed for the better over the years, "There is such a tremendous change that is something I am grateful for, especially now when they see the significance of preschool education…". Although there are opportunities for job advancement, she was not interested because she preferred to work directly with children and to witness their development:

> Yes, we are encouraged to go for courses and classes. It equips us with more…. But I don't really go for job advancement at the moment [because] I am interested in seeing the children develop. That's my key. To see them be able to do something they cannot do. That brings great joy.

Overall, Teacher L's experience as a preschool teacher has been largely positive. She works in a supportive and happy environment and receives strong social support from her family and friends. Although she has to handle a few demands at work, she appears to be coping well. Her passion to make a positive difference in children's lives also plays a significant motivating factor.

15.4.2.2 Teacher A (High Job Demands; High Job Resources)

Teacher A is 47 years old and has 18 years of experience as a preschool teacher. She is currently teaching Mother Tongue in K1 and K2, with classes in the morning and afternoon sessions. She also helps her colleagues to facilitate learning centre time and outdoor play. Teacher A joined the teaching profession because she has a passion for children and she felt that her personality was a good fit for the job.

Teacher A experiences mental, physical as well as emotional stress at work. She finds it particularly difficult to juggle her attention between children with different learning needs:

> Some children need more attention than others, especially those with learning need[s] … they find difficulty understanding the language, especially … mother tongue. These are the children who need more attention as we need to paraphrase each time if they don't understand. And also, children with learning needs … they are not able to sit and focus within a long time frame. So, I guess my attention to them depends on their learning needs. Some children need more, some children can just leave them with an instruction.

Similar to Teacher L, Teacher A does not have problems with excessive demands from parents, except for a handful of parents who make demands due to their concerns about their child's progress (e.g. "why can't my [K2] child read a book?"). Generally, Teacher A feels that she does not have an excessive workload and is able to strike a good work-life balance. However, during specific peak periods of the school year, she does struggle to manage her teaching and administrative duties:

> But during this peak period whereby you need to prepare for portfolio and prepare write up for documentation and you have events at school, which is concurrently happening at the same time, this is where the challenge comes in. That is why I have to bring work home to do. Then over the weekend, I will also do my work at home. If not, I will not manage to complete all my tasks on time… there are days where my stress level is really to the max.

Teacher A has adequate autonomy and flexibility to plan her own lessons and projects according to the children's profiles and needs. She also described her relationship with her supervisors and colleagues in a very positive light and noted that there is a strong culture based on teamwork and mutual support. In addition, Teacher A's family is proud of her, and her nieces view her as their role model:

> My centre head has been very supportive …. The teamwork here is excellent … very caring colleagues, they know when to render help and are more open. I guess [it's] the culture here that is developed. You are not on your own. Everything we do, even if it's ad-hoc events, we kind of help each other…. My family [is] proud of me. And I'm proud to say 3 of my nieces actually follow my footsteps…. They mention that, "Auntie, you are my mentor!"... So I'm proud to say that I am their role model.

While Teacher A acknowledged the support received from her colleagues and family, she also highlighted the importance of prioritising her tasks and to practice good time management in order to handle multiple responsibilities effectively:

> So, it all depends on how you manage your time and how you actually lay out the priority.... That's why I reflect on the way I did things…, okay which one is priority…. And of course sometimes ... the deadlines [are] very close to one another, and there [are] lots of things to do, so I need to prioritise….

Teacher A has had many opportunities to develop new skills by attending professional development courses as well as managing and running events (e.g. parent workshops). She feels that she is "growing year after year … and [the new skills] help with my daily practices". Her supervisors have also implemented a system that encourages her to reflect on the impact and meaningfulness of her work:

> So, what is the impact of your actions on the children or the parents or school as a whole? It … make[s] you reflect [on] what you have done and the impact of it. By understanding the impact you have created, it's more meaningful to you. Oh, I've done this and I can see the impact is such, I can see they are more interested in learning mother tongue and they can converse in mother tongue….

Although Teacher A highlighted many positive aspects associated with her job, she lamented the fact that society did not value her profession and viewed it as an easy job:

> They still have that mindset that kindergarten teacher, play play only … because they [do not have the] understanding that our preschool is adopting this holistic learning of the child. It's not just playing and don't learn anything…. We are no less than the … primary and secondary school teachers…. Regardless whether children, adolescents or growing up children, we [still] need to tackle the issue[s]. It's the ways that are different. But stress level still the same….

Teacher A faces several demands at work, but she also has multiple sources of support and opportunities for personal growth and reflection. At the same time, she is aware of the need to prioritise in order to manage her workload effectively. Teacher A genuinely loves her job and finds great joy in teaching.

15.4.2.3 Teacher F (High Job Demands; Low Job Resources)

Teacher F is 29 years old and has 10 years of experience as a preschool teacher. Ten years ago, she enrolled in a sponsored preschool diploma programme as teaching was "... something like a dream that I've always wanted". Although the realities of a teacher's job differed from her expectations, she remained in the profession

because she wanted to learn more and to see how the industry can grow. Currently, Teacher F works full-time as a K1 English teacher while pursuing a degree at a local university. She gave birth to a baby boy just over a year ago. Since she started working at her current preschool 9 months ago, she has faced numerous demands in her job while juggling additional demands at home. Her greatest challenges are taking care of children with special needs (e.g. children diagnosed with developmental disabilities) and managing the increasing demands from parents:

> Having to handle children with special needs [is] also something that can put a pressure on a teacher…. We're only trained for that few hours … just a touch-and-go kind of module. So when you have to handle a child with special needs, it's really very difficult … for us, it's 20 children to 1 teacher, so if you have 1 or 2 [children with special needs] inside the classroom … it's really very taxing on yourself as well.
>
> Some parents are … very demanding…. They'll [say], "in primary school they are doing this, why are we not doing this as well?" So, in a way, they feel we are very much similar but actually we are catering [to] the 5 and 6 year-olds, which for them, the milestones are different. But parents don't understand this…..

The high workload and increased time pressure also pose a challenge for Teacher F. This becomes an additional source of frustration as she feels that some tasks do not bring direct benefits to children:

> You know all the other paper work that need[s] to be done, it's just not enough time… especially when you're rushing for your portfolio …. Because at the end of the day, when you ask us to do certain things…, we have to still take a look at whether it benefits the children. If it doesn't, and it's something that's so rushed because you expect certain things to be up because of certain events…, then I guess it's just not beneficial….. Especially when you need to complete a lot of things, it's really a time pressure.

While Teacher F lamented that "there is no such thing as work-life balance", she also acknowledged that it was up to the individual to decide which was more important:

> It's you who determine the work-life balance. If you feel that you [want to] have that work-life balance right, then … you have to … do certain things to make sure that you have that.

An additional challenge for Teacher F is juggling between her work and family responsibilities, including taking time off to deal with personal matters (e.g. taking care of her sick child):

> … when I want to seek that permission [to use my childcare leave] …, sometimes I'm hesitant knowing that sometimes the centre is in need of teachers ….. Most of the time … I would force my husband to take his childcare leave... it's really very hard … they say it's best for you to tell us beforehand when you [want to] take your childcare leave. But sometimes your child just fall sick just that night or the next [morning]... but because of my work commitment, I just got to … find other alternatives …. I'm a family person, so when I just have to put aside family just for work right, it annoys me a lot.

Teacher F also appears to be struggling to adapt to the working culture at her preschool. She feels that the centre is not run effectively as her supervisor is inflexible and does not give teachers the autonomy to make their own decisions:

> Lessons plans [are] … already something given, so I guess freedom, I would say … no …. When we plan for certain events, we plan it in a way that we feel and believe [is] beneficial for the children, but then … there is always people micro-managing. So sometimes when I do plan for event, I'll just come with a blank paper. Yeah, because regardless of what I plan, it's being micro-managed so I do not have much say. But I do not know, maybe because … I just came to the centre, so having to learn a centre's culture will take that one year also.

In addition to these challenges at work, Teacher F expressed disappointment at the lack of recognition and appreciation for the work that preschool teachers do:

> Ten years being in the industry, every year, they say, "Okay, there's a pay raise." No, it doesn't work that way… the appreciation for us is just still—just not there.... Some people still think that we are [a] nanny, you know…. It's kind of sad lah. Ten years down the road, [it is] still the same… parents' misconception [is] always like, "oh, preschool teachers are nothing"… there should really [be] a line drawn already, so that parents can start seeing us as professional[s].

Teacher F's family provides a strong pillar of support, especially her mother and her husband:

> I'm very thankful because I have very helpful family members. After I fetch my son, my mum will … just take care of him while I go and settle my own things…. [My husband] is very supportive…. When I feel stressed, like that time when I cried very badly …, he said that, well, this is the work life but it's my choice of how I want to see it. He will always remind me, work is work… It should not be my top priority because at the end of the day, my top priority should be my family….

Compared to Teacher L and Teacher A, Teacher F struggles with many different work demands, including adapting to a new work environment and balancing her roles as teacher, mother, wife and student. Nonetheless, Teacher F believes that she has a choice in maintaining some form of balance between work and family. Perhaps her family's support provides an important resource for her to continue in this profession.

15.5 Future Directions for Research and Policy

Researchers are increasingly recognising the relationship between preschool teachers' well-being and their capacity for providing high-quality education and care (Cumming, 2017). As a result, there has been a surge in research interest in educators' well-being over the past 10 years (Cumming, 2017; Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014). Concurrent developments in theory, particularly the emergence of the JD-R model, have provided a useful framework for understanding how teachers' job characteristics (i.e. job resources and job demands) influence their well-being and broader organisational outcomes. Against this backdrop, we have presented real-world examples of a variety of ways in which job demands and resources interact to affect job satisfaction and well-being of preschool teachers in Singapore.

Consistent with findings from the international literature, our participants spoke about the challenges of handling an excessive workload (Hakanen et al., 2006),

managing children with different needs (Baumgartner et al., 2009) and struggling with a lack of autonomy in decision-making and lesson-planning (Kusma et al., 2012). One participant also struggled with the challenge of managing parents' demands and expectations. On a more positive note, our participants also spoke about different resources that aided in their work, such as having supportive supervisors, colleagues, family and friends, as well as opportunities for personal development and growth. A key takeaway of our pilot study is the varied experiences of each teacher, despite the fact that all of them reported similar sources of job demands. Specifically, their lived experiences differed depending on the amount of job resources, their working environment and their personal circumstances. Despite the preliminary nature of our results, findings from our case studies provide a good starting point to think about some considerations for policy and research.

15.5.1 Teacher Well-Being as an Important Component of the Quality of Early Childhood Education

First, we posit that both practitioners and policymakers must acknowledge that preschool teachers' well-being is an important component of good-quality early childhood education. Much research links teacher stress to poorer physical, mental and emotional well-being in teachers (Johnson et al., 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016), as well as poorer quality of care and support for their students (e.g. Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Jennings, 2015). In other words, teacher well-being has significant impacts on the quality of their practice, which could lead to detrimental effects on children's socio-emotional and cognitive development. A decrease in teacher well-being is also associated with an increase in turnover rates, which is worrisome due to the threat that it poses to the stability of teacher-child attachment relationships and instructional methods (Royer & Moreau, 2016). Therefore, we argue that more systematic research is needed to better understand the factors that contribute to teacher well-being within the early childhood educational context in Singapore.

15.5.2 Systematic Research on Preschool Teachers' Job Demands and Resources

A logical next step would be to mount larger-scale studies to identify the job demands and resources pertinent to preschool teachers in Singapore. Certainly, the demands and resources described by our case study participants are not exhaustive, as the data was obtained from a very small sample of teachers who have been in the profession for a relatively long period of time (i.e. at least 10 years). Thus, it is plausible that their experiences differ from student teachers (i.e. prospective teachers) and their counterparts who have had fewer years of teaching experience. It is

also important to gather information about teachers' job demands and resources from external sources, such as spousal reports (Ilies et al., 2015). Other variables to consider are teachers' age, classes taught (i.e. English versus mother tongue), age profiles of children in the classroom (e.g. same age versus mixed age groups, pre-nursery- versus kindergarten-age children), number of children with special needs and overall class size. Our pilot findings also highlight the importance of considering the influence of personal and situational factors on teachers' well-being in future studies.

A subsequent line of research might focus on evaluating the impact of job demands and resources on teachers' well-being and organisational outcomes, as well as children's learning and development. Which aspects of preschool teachers' job demands are predictive of strain and burnout? Which aspects of preschool teachers' job resources are predictive of work engagement and motivation? To what extent do job resources buffer the adverse effect of job demands on strain and burnout? How does preschool teachers' well-being impact on children's socio-emotional, language and cognitive development? Findings could be leveraged to identify strategies that may be implemented to support teachers in their work, reducing job demands and increasing their resources, thus leading to more positive outcomes for teachers and the children in their classroom.

15.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have reviewed the literature on the impact of work-related stress on teachers and children and highlighted the importance of investigating the phenomenon of work-related stress in preschool teachers internationally and within Singapore. We briefly introduced the job demands-resources model, a well-known theoretical framework linking job demands and resources to teacher well-being, and discussed some of the demands and resources reported by teachers in previous studies. Findings from a recently completed pilot study illustrate some of the job demands and resources of three preschool teachers in Singapore. Based on these findings and the extant literature, we argue that it is important to consider teacher well-being as a key component of quality early childhood education and provide some directions for future research.

References

Aldrup, K., Klusmann, U., Lüdtke, O., Göllner, R., & Trautwein, U. (2018). Student misbehavior and teacher well-being: Testing the mediating role of the teacher-student relationship. *Learning and Instruction, 58*, 126–136. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2018.05.006

Ang, L. (2012). *Vital voices for vital years: A study of leaders' perspectives on improving the early childhood sector in Singapore*. Lien Foundation.

Bakker, A. B., & Bal, M. P. (2010). Weekly work engagement and performance: A study among starting teachers. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 83*(1), 189–206. https://doi.org/10.1348/096317909X402596

Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The job demands-resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 22*(3), 309–328. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940710733115

Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2017). Job demands–resources theory: Taking stock and looking forward. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 22*(*3*), 273–285. https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000056

Baumgartner, J. J., Carson, R. L., Apavaloaie, L., & Tsouloupas, C. (2009). Uncovering common stressful factors and coping strategies among childcare providers. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 38*(5), 239–251. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-009-9079-5

Blair, C., & Raver, C. C. (2015). School readiness and self-regulation: A developmental psychobiological approach. *Annual Review of Psychology, 66*, 711–731. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010814-015221

Blöchliger, O. R., & Bauer, G. F. (2018). Correlates of burnout symptoms among child care teachers. A multilevel modeling approach. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 26*(1), 7–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1412012

Chan, K.-B., Lai, G., Ko, Y.-C., & Boey, K.-W. (2000). Work stress among six professional groups: the Singapore experience. *Social Science and Medicine, 50*(10), 1415–1432. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(99)00397-4

Childcare enrolment surges as more mums go back to work. (2016, 28 February). *The Straits Times*, Singapore.

Cumming, T. (2017). Early childhood educators' well-being: An updated review of the literature. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 45*(5), 583–593. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-016-0818-6

Dicke, T., Stebner, F., Linninger, C., Kunter, M., & Leutner, D. (2018). A longitudinal study of teachers' occupational well-being: Applying the job demands-resources model. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 23*(2), 262–277. https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000070

Downer, J. T., Jamil, F., & Maier, M. (2012). Implications of information processing theory for professional development of early educators. In C. Howes, B. K. Hamre, & R. Pianta (Eds.), *Effective early childhood professional development: Improving teacher practice and child outcomes* (pp. 131–155). Brookes.

Faulkner, M., Gerstenblatt, P., Lee, A., Vallejo, V., & Travis, D. (2014). Childcare providers: Work stress and personal well-being. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 14*(3), 280–293. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X14552871

Foo, J. Y. (2013, 14 July). Ex-childcare centre teacher says: Hours were long and pay was peanuts. *The New Paper*, Singapore.

Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Raver, C. C., Morris, P. A., & Jones, S. M. (2014). The role of classroom-level child behavior problems in predicting preschool teacher stress and classroom emotional climate. *Early Education and Development, 25*(4), 530–552. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2013.817030

Hakanen, J. J., Bakker, A. B., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2006). Burnout and work engagement among teachers. *Journal of School Psychology, 43*(6), 495–513. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2005.11.001

Hall-Kenyon, K. M., Bullough, R. V., MacKay, K. L., & Marshall, E. E. (2014). Preschool teacher well-being: A review of the literature. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 42*(3), 153–162. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-013-0595-4

Ilies, R., Huth, M., Ryan, A. M., & Dimotakis, N. (2015). Explaining the links between workload, distress, and work–family conflict among school employees: Physical, cognitive, and emotional fatigue. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 107*(4), 1136–1149. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000029

Jennings, P. A. (2015). Early childhood teachers' well-being, mindfulness, and self-compassion in relation to classroom quality and attitudes towards challenging students. *Mindfulness, 6*(4), 732–743. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-014-0312-4

Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research, 79*(1), 491–525. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693

Johnson, S., Cooper, C. L., Cartwright, S., Donald, I., Taylor, P., & Millet, C. (2005). The experience of work-related stress across occupations. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 20*(2), 178–187. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940510579803

Kelly, A. L., & Berthelsen, D. C. (1995). Preschool teachers' experiences of stress. *Teaching & Teacher Education, 11*(4), 345–357. https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X(94)00038-8

Ko, Y.-C., Chan, K.-B., Lai, G., & Boey, K.-W. (2000). Stress and coping of Singapore teachers: A quantitative and qualitative analysis. *Journal of Developing Societies, 16*(2), 181–200. https://doi.org/10.1163/156852200512049

Kusma, B., Groneberg, D. A., Nienhaus, A., & Mache, S. (2012). Determinants of day care teachers' job satisfaction. *Central European Journal of Public Health, 20*(3), 191–198.

Kyriacou, C. (1987). Teacher stress and burnout: An international review. *Educational Research, 29*, 146–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/0013188870290207

Leiter, M. P., & Maslach, C. (2003). Areas of worklife: A structured approach to organizational predictors of job burnout. In P. Perrewe & D. Ganster (Eds.), *Emotional and physiological processes and positive intervention strategies (Research in occupational stress and well being)* (Vol. 3, pp. 91–134). Emerald Group Publishing.

Løvgren, M. (2016). Emotional exhaustion in day-care workers. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 24*(1), 157–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2015.1120525

Mashburn, A. J., Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., Downer, J. T., Barbarin, O. A., Bryant, D., … Howes, C. (2008). Measures of classroom quality in prekindergarten and children's development of academic, language, and social skills. *Child Development, 79*(3), 732–749. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01154.x

Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W. B., & Leiter, M. P. (2001). Job burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology, 52*(1), 397–422. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.397

McGrath, B. J., & Huntington, A. D. (2007). The health and wellbeing of adults working in early childhood education. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 32*(3), 33–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/183693910703200306

Milkie, M. A., & Warner, C. H. (2011). Classroom learning environments and the mental health of first grade children. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 52*(1), 4–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146510394952

Oberle, E., & Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2016). Stress contagion in the classroom? The link between classroom teacher burnout and morning cortisol in elementary school students. *Social Science and Medicine, 159*, 30–37. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.04.031

Royer, N., & Moreau, C. (2016). A survey of Canadian early childhood educators' psychological wellbeing at work. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 44*(2), 135–146. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-015-0696-3

Siekkinen, M., Pakarinen, E., Lerkkanen, M.-K., Poikkeus, A.-M., Salminen, J., Poskiparta, E., & Nurmi, J.-E. (2013). Social competence among 6-year-old children and classroom instructional support and teacher stress. *Early Education and Development, 24*, 877–897. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2013.745183

Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2011). Teacher job satisfaction and motivation to leave the teaching profession: Relations with school context, feeling of belonging, and emotional exhaustion. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(6), 1029–1038. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2011.04.001

Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2016). Teacher stress and teacher self-efficacy as predictors of engagement, emotional exhaustion, and motivation to leave the teaching profession. *Creative Education, 7*, 1785–1799. https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2016.713182

Tsai, E., Fung, L., & Chow, L. (2006). Sources and manifestations of stress in female kindergarten teachers. *International Education Journal, 7*(3), 364–370.

Van der Doef, M., & Maes, S. (1999). The job demand-control (-support) model and psychological well-being: A review of 20 years of empirical research. *Work & Stress: An International Journal of Work, Health & Organisations, 13*(2), 87–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/026783799296084

Van Droogenbroeck, F., Spruyt, B., & Vanroelen, C. (2014). Burnout among senior teachers: Investigating the role of workload and interpersonal relationships at work. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 43*, 99–109. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.07.005

Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). *Worthy work, Still unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

Zhai, F., Raver, C. C., & Li-Grining, C. (2011). Classroom-based interventions and teachers' perceived job stressors and confidence: Evidence from a randomized trial in Head Start settings. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 26*, 442–452. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2011.03.003

Zinsser, K. M., Bailey, C. S., Curby, T. W., Denham, S. A., & Bassett, H. H. (2013). Exploring the predictable classroom: Preschool teacher stress, emotional supportiveness, and students' social-emotional behavior in private and Head Start classrooms. *Dialog, 16*(2), 90–108.