Action Research to Enhance Coping of International School Teachers

Kanu Priya Mohan[1], *Asst.Prof.Dr.Wiladlak Chuawanlee,*
Assoc.Prof.Dr.Pachongchit Intasuwan, Dr.Chomchuen Somprasert
Behavioral Science Research Institute, Srinakharinwirot University

Abstract

Teaching in international schools is a challenging and often a stressful task. This research was conducted to understand the work stress of international school teachers, and to apply knowledge through an action research project to facilitate teachers to develop effective coping skills. During three months, twelve participant teachers working in an international school in Bangkok, Thailand, collaborated actively in four cycles of action research to enhance coping with the work demands.

Keywords : Coping, Action Research, International school teachers

Introduction

The term work stress has been extensively researched and its impacts have been documented in details. Researchers note the harmful impact of work stress on other domains of life as well. The researcher's experience of working as a human resources manager at an international school stimulated the interest in this research. A review of literature expanded the understanding of this phenomenon of 'teacher stress'. To appreciate the importance of the study, we must gain an insight in to the relevant research contexts.

International Education in Thailand

According to Hayden & Thompson (2000), a striking picture of an international school or international education is a lack of homogeneity or a presence of heterogeneity. Further explained by Walker (2000), the deliberate planned interaction of students from different cultural backgrounds is widely regarded as a corner stone of international education. Over the last few decades, there has been a spurt in the number of international schools in Thailand too (Bangkok Post, 2007). Here most of the international schools are registered with a body called "ISAT" or the *International Schools Association of Thailand.* The ISAT (www.isat.or.th) reports that starting from 45 original members in 1994 it has now over 86 member schools offering a range of curricula from American, British and International systems.

Working in international school has a special challenge for the teachers. Aptly stated by Hayden & Thompson (2000), the multicultural diversity of the international school environment adds to the usual work demands of the teachers working there.

Job Well-Being of Teachers

The pressures of work impact the job well-being of international school teachers. Explaining the general construct of job well-being to Warr (1999) refers it to the extent to which a person feels satisfied with his or her job as a whole. Researchers like Strauser, Ketz,

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& Keim, (2002) have emphasized that both work stress and job satisfaction are important factors which directly influence organizational outcomes. The researcher's earlier study (Mohan, 2007) had investigated and verified the experience high levels of 'perceived work stress' international school teachers. The consequences of this stress affect the individual, the students, the school, and the society at large. Hence, from both practical and academic view, it is imperative to understand as well as promote the job well-being of teachers.

Coping and Job Well-Being

The academic and applied interest in the process by which people 'cope' with stress has grown dramatically over the past few decades. The starting point for much of this is the conceptual analysis of stress and coping was offered by Lazarus in 1966 (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) by identifying its three processes, the primary appraisal, the secondary appraisal and coping is the process of executing a response. Researchers have established that effective coping strategies reduce workplace related stress (Pines & Aronson, 1988). As teachers experience high levels of stress at work, it is well-advised for them to develop strategies to cope with stress in their work as well as their personal lives. Literature indicates that coping strategies can be developed. In this study, enhancing coping of international school teachers was the desired objective and action research was the technique of implementing this.

The Action Research Method

According to Kemmis & Mc Taggart, (1982), the linking of the terms 'action' and 'research' highlights the essential feature of the method: trying out ideas in practice as means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge. The choice of action research in the current research provided the technique to implement an 'action' based project involving teachers to improve their coping and also to augment the 'research' based knowledge of job well-being. Action research is a systematic and reflective model, which consists of four phases that take place in a cycle. As depicted in figure 1, these are: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The cycles of research continue till the desired information is saturated.
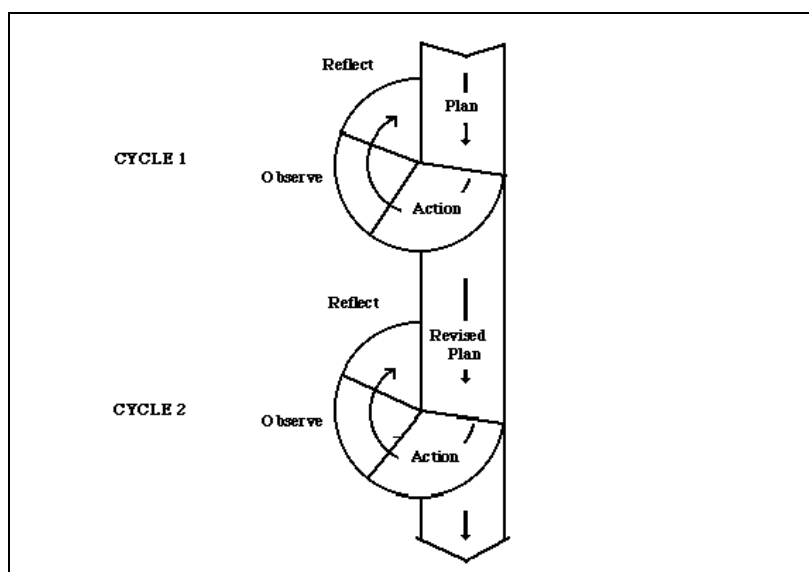

Figure 1: The Cyclical Nature of Action Research Model

Method
The design of this study was based on the action research approach to facilitate teachers to actively learn to cope better with their work demands. Based on the action research postulate, the study was divided into cyclical investigations. In implementing the research, four cycles were carried out over a three months period, till the saturation point was obtained in terms of information to be obtained from the research.

Participants

The participants of the study were teachers working in an international school in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants were invited to join on a voluntary basis. Twelve teachers, who participated in the action research cycles, worked in the three different school sections- three in the kindergarten, five in the elementary and four in the secondary.

Procedure

The implementation of the research was initiated through a staff meeting organized by the school head along with the researcher. Information was shared with all the teachers about this "human resource development project" (as it was called at this school). Twelve of these teachers joined and participated in the project. An introductory meeting was held for the participants and details about project were shared with them. At the end of this initial meeting , the teachers from each section of the school (kindergarten, elementary and secondary) decided to meet separately in section groups. A series of workshops was organized by the researcher to meet the three groups and implement the project.

Data Collection

Guided by the essence of the action research methodology, qualitative data was collected over a period of three months for this research. The sources of data were the participants, the documents used and the environment in which it was gathered. The workshops and interviews with the participants were held in the school's premises. Efforts were made to make the participants comfortable for the meetings and the schedules of the meetings and interviews were adjusted according to their availability. A triangulation of methods was employed to collect information from participants. The group members shared their feelings and suggestions during the course of these 'group discussions'. Individual feedback questionnaires and 'reflection journals' were given to each teacher to observe and record his/her feelings during the process. Voice recordings were also made.
As there were three groups participating in the project, a triangulation of the process was set in motion. All three went through the action research process separately but simultaneously. Triangulation, according to Bryman (2006), refers to "the use of more than one approach to the investigation of the research question in order to enhance the confidence in the ensuing findings". Attempts were made to uphold the trustworthiness, rigour and quality in obtaining the findings of this study.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the action research was analyzed utilizing interpretative inductive approaches of qualitative data analyses as mentioned by Stringer (1999). Analyzing information was indeed time-consuming as categories, themes and patterns emerged from the data, and then these were sorted out according to the objectives of the research.

Another important facet of this was the sharing of the consolidated information with the group of participants who generated it, and with the other groups in the project, as well as with the school head and the management. Any modifications suggested were incorporated in the process.

Results

The research investigations lead the teachers to comprehend the importance of their job well-being, identify the impediments to happiness or the work stressors, and also recognize their negative impacts. The participants went on to evolve strategies to cope effectively on personal and group level, as well as determining the areas of school improvement. All of these were envisioned as leading towards enhanced coping with work stress and enhancing job well-being. The information obtained from the participants was consolidated, analysed and the significant finding are represented below.

Identification of the work stressors.

The participants identified the factors impeding the feelings of happiness at school or the work stressors. Using the content analysis guidelines the information obtained was characterized into six categories which were the work itself, the students, resource limitations, lack of management support, school policy and interpersonal relationships at work.

Ascertaining the negative impacts of work stress

The teacher participants identified the impacts of work stress and classified in to four main areas of impact: on self, interactions with students, family relationships and relationship with others.

Coping responses generally employed by the teachers

The participants were encouraged to identify their responses to cope with the work stress. These were categorized into emotion focused strategies (such as "sleeping it off") and problem focused coping strategies (such as planning for "better class control").

Identification of the Areas of School Improvement

During the course of the project, the teachers shared that the changes or improvement in certain areas of the school would have a direct impact on their job well-being. The areas discussed were categorized in to five broad areas of school planning, school policies, professional development, personal development and social support activities. They also recommended that this feedback should be shared with the school management.

Strategic Planning to Cope Effectively

In totality, the participants developed a strategic understanding to cope better, both on the individual/ personal level and as a group/ organizational level. On a personal level the participants recommended coping strategies that helped to achieve a balance between the mind and body through exercise, eating a balanced diet, taking adequate rest and developing a special interest like dancing, and practicing mediation. They also recommended group coping strategies or "activities that they would like to do as a group in school, such as aerobics, and informal exchanges at school.

Discussion

The evidence from this research verified the teachers' experience of work stress cited by other researchers (Kyriacou, 1987). In a review of international research, Jarvis (2002), had written that "teacher stress is a real phenomenon and that high levels are reliably associated with a range of causal factors, including those intrinsic to teaching, individual vulnerability and systemic influences". When reviewed, the study findings indicated that some of the sources of stress were related to work influences, to the students; and others to the systemic influences like resource limitations, and lack of management support.

The wide spread impacts of stress are also well recognised in research. Russell, Altmaier and Velzen, (1987) have reported that the stressful aspects of teaching also leading to extreme negative outcomes like burnout. As also supported by the another research findings (Mohan, 2007), the international school teachers in Bangkok, reported high levels of 'perceived work stress' which has direct and significant influence on their job well-being.

During this research, the participant teachers evolved an understanding about how they can enhance their job well-being through strategically developing coping plans. They discussed that best coping strategies included a combination of techniques to attain balance on cognitive, emotional and physical fronts. There can be no one best coping plan which can be employed by a teacher to cope with all kinds of stress. This project brought forth an insight in the participants towards the power of their self in achieving happiness at work. The conclusion of the main findings of this study is represented in figure 2.
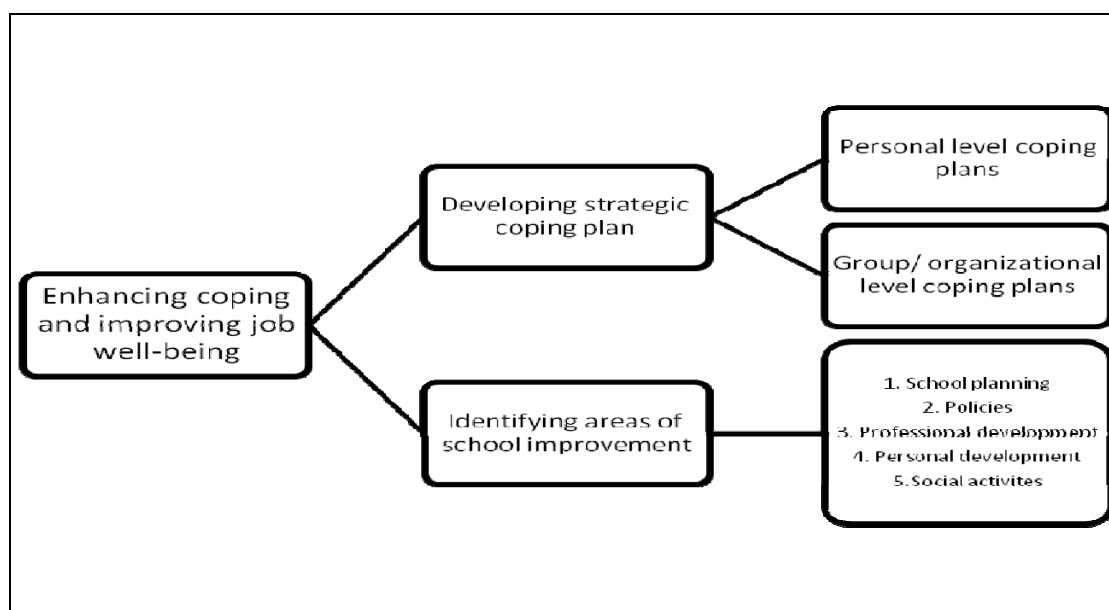

Figure 2: *Conclusion of the Main Findings*

The findings of this project were shared with the school's head and the management. In fact even they started to implement the suggestions of the participants. This had a positive impact on the participants as the perceived a "validation" of their efforts. Though the school term ended soon after this project, and only some of the teachers' suggestions were implemented, the process of school change had been set in motion. Research based evidence highlights this claim by showing that the school reforms have promoted teacher job

satisfaction, improved the school and classroom climate, enhanced student support, and increased student achievement (Erb, 2000). Thus it can be concluded that there are many implications of having a teacher with high levels of job wellbeing.

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