Enhancing Coping and Job Well-Being of International School Teachers

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Abstract

As a consequence of globalization there has been a prolific growth in the field of international education. Teaching is a very stressful profession and the teachers who work in these international schools have an added stress of adjusting to the multi cultural environment. The purpose of this research was two pronged; contributing to the understanding of the international school teachers' job well-being, and to apply knowledge through an action research project to facilitate teachers to strategically 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. They developed an understanding of how they can strategically enhance coping with work demands and subsequently enhance their job well-being. The work sphere is an important part of human life. With escalating demands of changing life styles and a dynamic world, the workplace is changing too. Increasingly we hear about the negative impacts of work – the work "stress". Researchers have extensively investigated the area of work stress and noted its impact on other domains of life as well. Review of literature, and my personal experience of working at an international school as a human resources manager, helped me to comprehend the phenomenon of 'teacher stress' and its wide ranging impacts. The intention of this research was to contribute to the knowledge about the international school teachers' job well being, and also to the applied aspect of behavioural science by developing some action research based strategies for teachers to cope better with their work stress. To fully appreciate the importance of the study, we must gain an insight in to the relevant research contexts of international education in Thailand, the job well-being of teachers, their need for coping and the choice of action research as the method for this study.

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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. Thus, the teachers have to adjust to the cultural differences among the students and their colleagues along with their usual work related demands.

Job Well-Being of Teacher

So what happens to 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. The concept of job well-being is important to both the individual and the organization where he is employed. Researchers like Strauser, Ketz, & Keim, (2002) have emphasized that both work stress and job satisfaction are important factors which directly influence organizational outcomes

My previous research findings (Mohan, 2007) verify that the international school teachers experience high levels of 'perceived work stress' and this has direct and significant influence on their job well-being. The consequences of this stress affect the individual, the institution and the society at large. Hence, it is imperative to understand and promote the job well-being of teachers from the view point of the individual, the organization and also as contribution to the research knowledge.

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 offered by Lazarus in 1966 (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus argued that stress consists of three processes, the primary appraisal, the secondary appraisal and coping is the process of executing a response.

Effective coping behaviour allows individuals to deal with their work related demands and reduce the strain of stressors. 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. There are various theories about the types of coping strategies but basically there are two main recognised among these:

1. Emotion versus problem focused coping strategies by Lazarus and Folkman (1984).
2. Direct versus indirect active coping strategies by Pines & Aronson (1988).

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. For me the choice of action research method provided the perfect platform to plan 'action' by involving teachers to collaborate for improving their coping and also enhance my 'research' interest in job well-being.

Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist, was one of the first pioneers of action research. He felt that people should be involved in their own enquiries about their own lives. His work (1946) focused on social issues. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) action research is systematic and reflective model, which consists of four phases that take place in a cycle. These four phases as depicted in figure 1 are: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The cycles of research continue till the desired information is saturated.

There have been various reasons guiding the choice of the action research method for this study and some of those I would like to share:

1. It provided the tool to facilitate teachers' personal development in the actual work settings of the international school.

2. It allowed for a collaborative method by actively involving the participants.

3. It ensured active participation of the school management and school head for the implementation of the project.

4. It provided the means to benefit the teacher participants and also the whole school since the feedbacks shared were implemented by the management.

5. Thus, action research technique was the methodology chosen for this study and was guided by the four phases as depicted in figure 1.
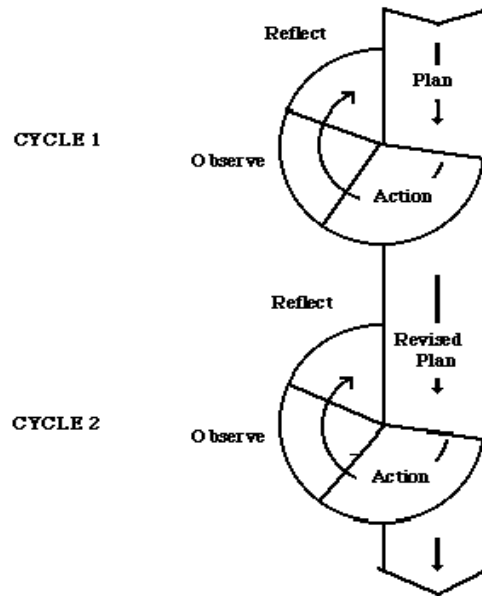
Figure 1 The Cyclical Nature of Action Research Model

Method

The design of this study was evolved using 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 one international school in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants were invited to join the action research based project on a voluntary basis. Twelve teachers working in the three different school sections- three from the kindergarten, five from the elementary and four from the secondary, participated in the action research cycles of the project over a period of three months.

Procedure

The process of the action research was initiated through a presentation organized by the school head along with the researcher for sharing the information about the "project" (as it was called at this school). All the teachers working in this international school were present at this occasion. As the project manager, I gave an overview about the project objectives, procedures and desired outcomes to all the teachers. All the teachers were then invited to join the project on a voluntary basis. Twelve of these teachers actively participated for the project.

An introductory meeting was held for all the twelve teacher participants. 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 these three groups and implement the project. The action research cycles were initiated during these workshops. Four cycles of action research were completed following the procedure of "plan-act-observe-reflect".

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 environmental background was the premises of the international school. As the researcher since I was in charge of the human resources department at the school, I was acquainted with the environment, and all the participants and we had ease in interaction. The workshops and interviews with the participants were held in the school's premises, some times in the office of the researcher. 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 over the implementation of various cycles of the action research project. 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. I also kept a reflection journal to systematically record the observations.

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". The careful selection and use of multiple methods, the cyclical nature of the research process, and the focus on participation, provided the rigour in this approach. Thus, as I attempted to conduct this action research, I was also aware of ensuring that the methods should generate information which upholds the trustworthiness, rigour and quality in the findings of this study.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the action research was analyzed utilizing interpretative inductive approaches of qualitative data analyses. I adhered to the guidelines mentioned by Stringer (1999) who emphasizes that the information obtained from action research has to be analyzed for "key elements, features, structures ad themes". 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 to the data analysis was that I was sharing 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 and the process went on.

Results

The four cycles of the action research investigation lead the teachers to comprehend the importance of their job well-being, identify the impediments to happiness or the work stressors, and also recognizing 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 in the sequence that it was gathered below.

1. 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.

2. 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. The teachers could easily identify the effects of stress on their physical and emotional well-being. The teachers also described that experience of stress had impact on their relationships and behaviour with students, with his/her family and friends. The teachers also shared that the experience of stress leads to "self withdrawal" and a tendency to "run away from others".

3. Coping responses generally employed by the teachers

The participants were encouraged to think about what they did generally to cope with their work stress. Several responses were identified and these have been categorized into emotion focused and problem focused coping as shown in table 1.

Table1   1
Categories of Coping Responses Generally Employed

Emotion focused coping responses	Problem focused coping responses
• Sleeping it off • Going window shopping • Watching TV • Avoiding to think about school • Meditating • Dancing • Seeking social support	• Try to think of better class control • Think to find solution to the problem causing stress

4. Strategic Planning to Cope Effectively

The participants identified the strategic plans to cope better both on the individual/ personal level and as a group/ organizational level. On an individual or personal level the participants recommended coping strategies that lead to a balance between the mind and body

for each individual. The personal coping plans included thinking about their 'body' by doing exercise, eating a balanced diet, taking adequate rest and also thinking about their 'mind' by developing a special interest or hobby like dancing, relaxing and practicing mediation.

They also expressed that they would like to recommend group coping strategies or "activities that they would like to do as a group in school". The teachers emphasized that they feel that their job well-being can be enhanced by engaging in activities to de-stress at the school itself. These activities included aerobics, art and craft, learning skills, meditation, social exchanges and informal get together at school.

The overview of the process by which the teachers planned strategically to enhance coping with work stress is depicted in figure 2.
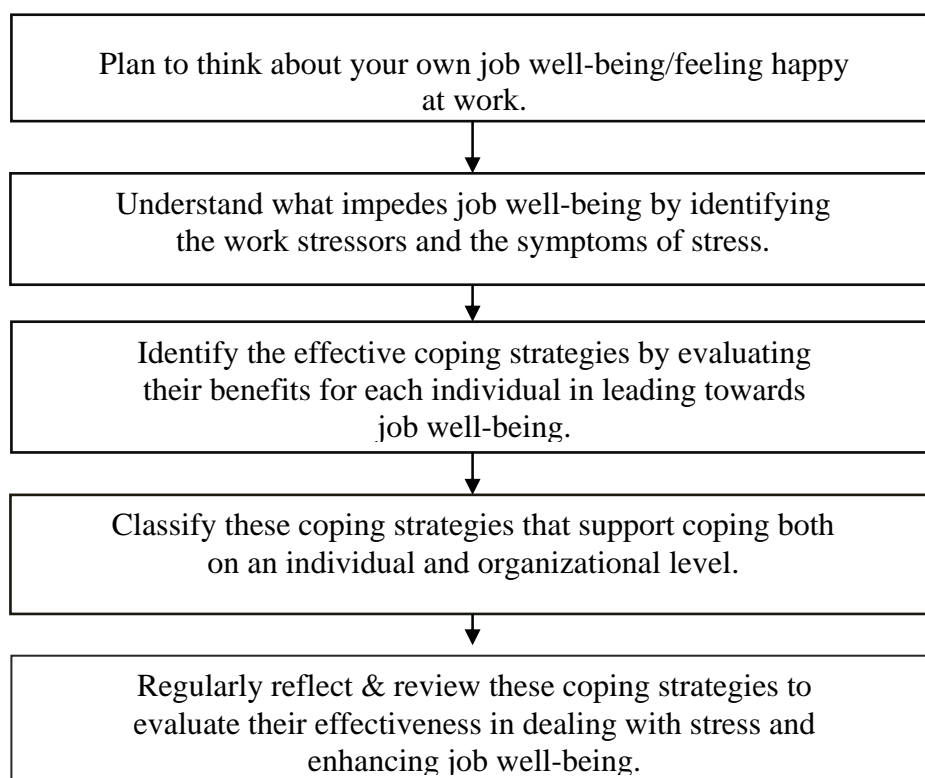

Figure 2 Strategic Planning to Enhance Coping

5. Identification of the Areas of School Improvement

The teachers expressed that the changes or improvement in certain areas of the school would have a direct impact on their job well-being. The teachers in all the three groups were very enthusiastic to share their feedbacks about school improvement with the school management. After the group discussions and individual interviews I consolidated the recommended areas of change in the school. These were categorized in to five broad areas of school planning, school policies, professional development, personal development and social support activities.

Discussion

For me this study provided an excellent opportunity to put into practice the knowledge accrued from previous research. The action research methodology imparted the valuable link of connecting research to application or "action" and vice versa.

As evident from the above findings, teachers do experience stress in their work place, which has also been acknowledged 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 factors identified by the teachers in this study, some of these sources of stress were related to work influences like the work itself, the students; other to the systemic influences like resource limitations, lack of management support, and the school policy.

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 indicated by my previous research findings (Mohan, 2007) the international school teachers experience high levels of 'perceived work stress' which has direct and significant influence on their job well-being.

The basic objectives of the study were achieved as the 12 teachers participated actively and evolved an understanding about how they can enhance their job well-being through strategically developing coping plans. The teachers went through a process of self awakening as they developed an understanding 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, but rather they can evolve action research based learning to strategic plan for effective coping.

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
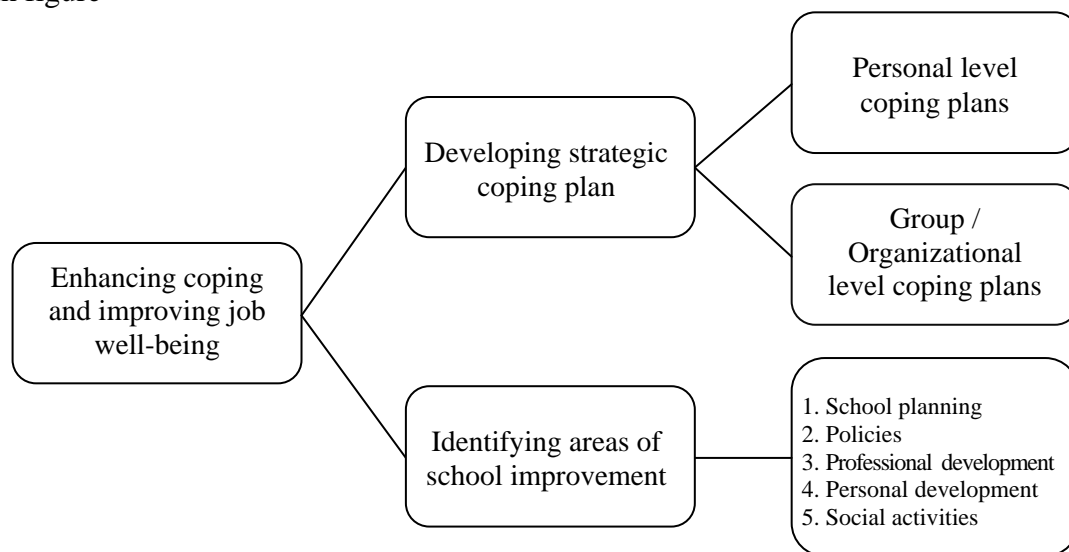

Figure 3 Conclusion of the Main Findings

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The findings of this project were shared with the school's head and also the management. In fact even as I shared the teachers' feedbacks with them, they started to implement the suggestions. This had a positive impact on the participants as the perceived a "validation" of their participation in the project. Though the school term ended after and only some of the teachers' suggestions were validated, the process of school change had been set in motion.

The knowledge that has been acquired from the action research project can be valuable for both academic and applied purposes. The implications of having a teacher with high levels of job wellbeing are many. 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).

In conclusion I would like to acknowledge that action research has been a powerful tool that has stimulated the transformation process not only with the participant teachers, the school management but also in my thinking and has enriched me personally and professionally.

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