

A phenomenological inquiry into occupational stress experiences among basic school teachers in Ho Municipality Ghana

Running head: Stress in basic school teachers

Anita Fafa Dartey

University of Health and Allied Sciences

Francis Mawougnon Sagbo

University of Health and Allied Sciences

Christian Ayisah

University of Health and Allied Sciences

Emmanuel Dodzi Anyidoho

edanyidoho@uhas.edu.gh

University of Health and Allied Sciences

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Abstract

Occupational stress among teachers is increasing, particularly in resource-constrained educational settings. This phenomenological qualitative study explored the lived experiences of occupational stress among basic school teachers in Ho, Ghana. Twenty purposively sampled teachers from three basic schools participated in semi-structured interviews, and data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework. Findings identified overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, excessive workload, curriculum pressure, and weak institutional support as major sources of stress. Teachers experienced physical, emotional, and psychological stress, including fatigue, sleep disturbances, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and voice strain. Occupational stress negatively affected instructional effectiveness, creativity, classroom management, well-being, and work-life balance. Teachers relied mainly on informal coping strategies such as rest, humour, spirituality, and peer support, although these provided only temporary relief. The study developed a context-specific Occupational Stress Management Framework for understanding teacher stress in resource-constrained settings.

1.0 Introduction

Occupational stress is defined as the psychological, emotional and physiological strain created when the demands placed on a person at work exceed the capacity of that person to cope (Herman et al., 2020). Due to an increase in the professional/emotional/administrative demands upon teachers, occupational stress has been steadily increasing for educators in the education system.

In addition to instructional responsibilities in the classroom, teachers are also tasked with managing student behaviour, implementing changes to the curriculum, and meeting the administrative/institutional expectations placed on them while often working with limited resources. Consequently, teaching has become widely viewed as a "high stress" occupation that is associated with considerable psychological/emotional strain (Ellovido & Quirap, 2024; Herman et al., 2020). Prolonged exposure to the stressors commonly experienced by teachers is related to burnout, emotional exhaustion, reduced levels of job satisfaction, lower levels of self-efficacy, and poorer levels of professional performance (Gaire, 2024; Kambli et al., 2025).

Globally, occupational stress among teachers has intensified due to increasing workloads, accountability pressures, classroom management difficulties, and institutional demands (Nwoko et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2024). These stressors negatively affect teachers' physical and psychological well-being and contribute to absenteeism, burnout, reduced instructional effectiveness, and teacher attrition (Shah et al., 2022). In developing and resource-constrained settings, these challenges are compounded by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, poor infrastructure, and limited administrative support (Schwartz et al., 2019). Emerging technological changes, particularly the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education, have also introduced new forms of stress related to technological adaptation and AI anxiety among teachers (Arthur et al., 2026). In Ghana, limited AI literacy among basic

school teachers has further contributed to uncertainty and psychological strain associated with technology integration (Arkorful et al., 2025, 2026).

In the Ghanaian context, occupational stress among teachers remains a significant educational and public health concern. Basic school teachers commonly experience excessive workloads, inadequate resources, large class sizes, poor remuneration, and increasing administrative responsibilities (Ankakwa et al., 2025; Nyamekye & Ghanney, 2024). These conditions adversely affect teachers' morale, motivation, well-being, and classroom effectiveness, with implications for educational quality and student achievement (N-yelbi & Anovunga, 2024). Similar challenges are evident within the Ho Municipality, where teachers frequently operate under constrained institutional and welfare conditions that place considerable emotional and psychological demands on them.

Although previous studies in Ghana have examined occupational stress among teachers, most have relied predominantly on quantitative approaches that focus on stress levels and associated factors (Ankakwa et al., 2025; Nyamekye & Ghanney, 2024). Consequently, limited attention has been given to teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies within their everyday professional contexts. There is, therefore, inadequate qualitative and context-specific evidence on how basic school teachers in the Ho Municipality experience and manage occupational stress. Addressing this gap is essential for informing contextually relevant interventions aimed at improving teacher well-being, professional effectiveness, and educational outcomes.

Against this background, the aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of occupational stress among basic school teachers in the Ho Municipality using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Identify the primary sources of occupational stress experienced by teachers at selected basic schools.
2. Explore the types of occupational stress experienced by basic school teachers.
3. Examine the effects of occupational stress on teachers' well-being and professional performance.
4. Explore the coping mechanisms employed by teachers to manage occupational stress.

2.0 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do basic school teachers in the Ho Municipality describe the primary sources of occupational stress in their professional lives?
2. How do basic school teachers experience and perceive the different forms of occupational stress within their work environment?

3. How do teachers describe the effects of occupational stress on their well-being and professional performance?
4. How do basic school teachers cope with and manage occupational stress in their daily work experiences?

3.0 Literature review

3.1 Sources of occupational stress among basic school teachers

Occupational stress among basic school teachers is a growing global concern, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where schools often face limited resources, heavy workloads, and weak institutional support. It arises when job demands exceed teachers' coping capacity, stemming from the combined pressures of instruction, classroom management, assessment, administrative duties, and policy demands (Herman et al., 2020; Nwoko et al., 2024).

The literature consistently identifies structural and organisational factors as the main sources of stress. In Ghana, studies report inadequate teaching materials, overcrowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, heavy workloads, and limited administrative support as key stressors (Ankakwa et al., 2025; Nyamekye & Ghanney, 2024). Similar findings in Ethiopia highlight workload pressure, role overload, and institutional demands as major contributors to burnout (Taddese et al., 2025). Additional organisational issues such as weak leadership, poor supervision, and limited professional autonomy further intensify stress (Schwartz et al., 2019).

Interpersonal factors also contribute significantly, including poor collegial relationships, weak administrative support, student indiscipline, and limited parental or community involvement, all of which affect teachers' emotional well-being and job satisfaction (Addison & Yankyera, 2015; Boateng, 2020; Mohammed et al., 2023). More recently, technological change has emerged as a new stressor, with inadequate digital skills and AI integration creating anxiety and uncertainty among teachers (Arthur et al., 2026; Arkorful et al., 2025, 2026).

Overall, the literature shows that occupational stress is multidimensional and context-specific, although most studies rely on quantitative approaches and pay limited attention to teachers' lived experiences, particularly in under-researched settings such as municipalities in Ghana like Ho.

3.2 Types of occupational stress experienced by teachers

Occupational stress among teachers is widely described in the literature as a multidimensional phenomenon involving emotional, psychological, physical, organisational, and technological dimensions, although studies differ in how these categories are defined and emphasised.

Emotional stress is commonly reflected in frustration, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, irritability, and burnout arising from sustained job demands (Ellovido & Quirap, 2024). For instance, Han and Seo (2024) and Boateng (2020) report frequent experiences of emotional exhaustion, frustration, and hopelessness among teachers facing challenging working conditions. Psychological stress, on the other hand, involves cognitive fatigue, reduced concentration, low self-efficacy, and feelings of helplessness when coping resources are overwhelmed (Gaire, 2024), with N-Yelbi and Anovunga (2024) linking it to poor psychological well-being among Ghanaian teachers.

Physical stress is also evident, with studies associating prolonged occupational stress with fatigue, headaches, sleep problems, hypertension, and overall exhaustion (Kambli et al., 2025; Ozoemena et al., 2021). Organisational stress stems from school-level factors such as poor leadership, role ambiguity, limited autonomy, and weak communication systems (Schwartz et al., 2019), highlighting structural rather than individual causes. More recently, technological stress has emerged, particularly anxiety linked to digital demands, AI integration, and limited technological literacy among teachers (Arthur et al., 2026; Arkorful et al., 2025, 2026).

Overall, while multiple forms of occupational stress are identified, most studies examine them in isolation, with limited attention to how these dimensions interact in teachers' lived experiences, particularly within the Ghanaian basic education context.

3.3 Effects of occupational stress on teachers' well-being and professional performance

Occupational stress has well-documented negative effects on teachers' psychological well-being, physical health, and professional performance. Prolonged exposure to stress is linked to emotional exhaustion, burnout, reduced morale, weakened instructional quality, and declining professional commitment.

At the health level, studies report fatigue, hypertension, sleep disorders, and emotional exhaustion among teachers experiencing sustained stress (Kambli et al., 2025; Zeng et al., 2024). Professionally, stress contributes to reduced concentration, lower classroom engagement, diminished self-efficacy, absenteeism, poor teaching quality, and intentions to leave the profession (Gaire, 2024; Nyamekye & Ghanney, 2024).

However, findings are not entirely uniform. While some studies emphasise burnout and withdrawal from work (Boateng, 2020; Tripathi, 2025), others highlight teacher resilience, showing that some educators remain committed despite adverse conditions due to strong professional identity and motivation (Adarkwah, 2023). This indicates that occupational stress does not always lead to disengagement.

Overall, although the negative effects of occupational stress are well established, most studies rely on quantitative approaches, limiting deeper understanding of teachers' lived experiences and the long-term impact of stress on their quality of life and career progression.

3.4 Coping mechanisms used by teachers to manage occupational stress

Teachers employ both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies to manage occupational stress. Problem-focused strategies include time management, classroom organisation, professional development, and seeking institutional support, while emotion-focused strategies involve relaxation, spirituality, social support, and cognitive reframing (Poudel & Wagle, 2023; Shah et al., 2023).

Social support is consistently identified as a key protective factor, with studies showing that colleagues, family, and peer networks help reduce emotional exhaustion and strengthen resilience (Shah et al., 2022; Issakah et al., 2021). However, debates exist regarding effectiveness, as some scholars argue that coping success depends more on supportive organisational environments than individual effort alone (Herman et al., 2020; Nwoko et al., 2024). Emerging evidence also highlights digital competence as an additional coping resource in increasingly technology-driven educational settings (Arkorful et al., 2025).

Despite these insights, most studies remain descriptive and quantitative, limiting understanding of how teachers experience and evaluate coping strategies in their daily work. There is also limited context-specific, phenomenological research on coping among basic school teachers in Ghana, particularly in the Ho Municipality.

3.5 Theoretical perspective

This study was anchored in the Job Demand-Resource (JD-R) Model developed by Bakker and de Vries (2021). The model explains occupational stress as resulting from an imbalance between job demands and job resources. Job demands include the physical, emotional, psychological, and organisational pressures associated with work, while job resources refer to supportive factors such as leadership, autonomy, collegial support, and adequate teaching materials that help reduce stress and enhance performance.

In teaching, excessive workload, curriculum pressure, student behavioural challenges, and administrative duties constitute major job demands, whereas institutional support systems and professional autonomy serve as important job resources. The model suggests that stress and burnout occur when demands exceed available resources.

The JD-R Model is particularly relevant to the Ghanaian educational context, where teachers often work under resource-constrained conditions characterised by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, and excessive workload. Although the model has been widely applied in educational research, existing Ghanaian studies rely largely on quantitative approaches, with limited exploration of teachers' lived experiences of occupational stress. This study, therefore, applies the model to examine how basic school teachers in the Ho Municipality experience and manage occupational stress.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Study design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of occupational stress among basic school teachers in the Ho Municipality. The phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it seeks to understand how individuals perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences within their real-life contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design enabled the researchers to obtain rich and detailed accounts of teachers' experiences regarding occupational stress, including its sources, effects, and coping mechanisms.

The qualitative approach further allowed participants to freely express their emotions, thoughts, and perceptions through in-depth engagement. Semi-structured interviews were used to facilitate open discussions and generate contextually grounded narratives concerning occupational stress among teachers. In addition, thematic analysis supported the identification and interpretation of patterns and meanings embedded within participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

4.2 Study setting

The study was conducted in the Ho Municipality, the administrative capital of Ghana's Volta Region. It serves as an educational, commercial, and administrative centre comprising urban and peri-urban communities with diverse socio-economic and institutional conditions. Its basic education system includes both public and private schools with varying resource and infrastructural capacities, making it a suitable setting for examining teachers' occupational stress.

The Municipality reflects common structural challenges in Ghana's basic education sector, including large class sizes, heavy workloads, limited teaching resources, inadequate institutional support, and increasing administrative demands (Ankakwa et al., 2025; Nyamekye & Ghanney, 2024). These challenges are further compounded by emerging expectations such as digital literacy and the integration of educational technology and artificial intelligence (Arkorful et al., 2025; Arthur et al., 2026), which have been associated with increased teacher stress and reduced well-being (Nwoko et al., 2024; Schwartz et al., 2019).

4.3 Study population

The study focused on basic school teachers in selected schools in the Ho Municipality due to their key role in learners' development and their exposure to multiple instructional and administrative demands, which increase occupational stress (Nyamekye & Ghanney, 2024; N-yelbi & Anovunga, 2024).

Both class teachers and assistant headteachers were included to capture diverse experiences of stress related to classroom teaching and school administration, providing a broader understanding of occupational stress within educational and leadership contexts (Herman et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2024).

4.4 Sampling technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants for the study. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research because it enables the deliberate selection of participants who possess relevant experiences and can provide rich and meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In line with phenomenological research principles, participants were selected based on their direct experiences with occupational stress and their willingness to share detailed reflections concerning their professional lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.5 Sample Size

A total of 20 teachers were purposively selected from three schools in the Ho Municipality, including both public and private institutions, to capture diverse experiences of occupational stress. The sample size was considered appropriate for achieving data saturation and is consistent with phenomenological research, which uses small, information-rich samples to explore lived experiences in depth (Guest et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.6 Inclusion Criteria

The study included teachers who were currently employed at Ho Polyclinic Primary School, Mawuli Basic School, or UHAS Basic School during the study period and had at least one year of continuous teaching experience. Only teachers who voluntarily agreed to participate, provided informed consent, and were willing and available to take part in semi-structured interviews were included.

4.7 Exclusion Criteria

Teachers who were not involved in classroom teaching, including administrative and non-teaching staff, were excluded, along with temporary or part-time teachers. In addition, teachers who declined to participate or were unavailable due to health or personal reasons were also excluded from the study.

4.8 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide developed by the researchers. The interview guide was organised around the study objectives and consisted of open-ended questions exploring teachers' experiences, perceived causes, effects, and coping mechanisms related to occupational stress. The flexible structure of the guide enabled probing and clarification, allowing participants to provide detailed and contextually meaningful responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A pilot study involving two teachers from another basic school within the municipality was conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and sequencing of the interview questions. Feedback obtained from the pilot study informed minor revisions to improve comprehension and enhance the depth of responses.

Data collection followed several procedural steps. Ethical approval was first obtained from the University of Health and Allied Sciences Research Ethics Committee, after which permission was secured from the Ho Municipal Education Directorate and the heads of the selected schools. Potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study and invited to participate voluntarily. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in English. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. With participants' consent,

interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes to capture non-verbal expressions and contextual observations. The interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

4.9 Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was ensured using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research. Credibility was achieved through member checking, where participants reviewed their transcribed responses to confirm accuracy, as well as through peer debriefing of selected transcripts. Dependability was maintained by using a consistent interview guide across all interviews. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling and efforts to minimise researcher bias during the interpretation of findings. Transferability was ensured through detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and study procedures to facilitate comparison with similar settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

4.10 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step framework. The analysis process involved: (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for recurring patterns and themes; (4) reviewing and refining themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final report.

Manual coding was used throughout the analysis process to maintain closeness to the data and preserve contextual meanings within participants' narratives. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, relationships, and underlying meanings regarding occupational stress experiences among teachers and aligned with the interpretive and phenomenological orientation of the study.

4.11 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval

for the study was obtained from the University of Health and Allied Sciences Research Ethics Committee (UHAS-REC) under protocol number UHAS-REC A.11 [8] 24–25. Permission was also obtained from the heads of the participating schools before the commencement of data collection.

Participants were provided with informed consent forms detailing the purpose of the study, procedures involved, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms and identification codes (BST-01 to BST-20) were assigned to participants, and all audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in accordance with established ethical standards for qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Orb et al., 2001).

5.0 Findings

Data from twenty basic school teachers in the Ho Municipality were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2019) thematic analysis. The analysis generated eight themes and seventeen sub-themes, which are presented below.

5.1 Demographic characteristics of participants

The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 20)

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Age Range	25–34 years	6	30.0
	35–44 years	9	45.0
	45 years and above	5	25.0
	Total	20	100.0
Sex	Male	11	55.0
	Female	9	45.0
	Total	20	100.0
Educational Level	Diploma in Basic Education	10	50.0
	Bachelor’s Degree	6	30.0
	Certificate (‘T3’/SHS)	4	20.0
	Total	20	100.0
Teaching Experience	Less than 5 years	4	20.0
	5–10 years	9	45.0
	Above 10 years	7	35.0
	Total	20	100.0
Current Grade Level	Senior Superintendent II	7	35.0
	Senior Superintendent I	6	30.0
	Class Teacher	5	25.0
	Assistant Head/Proprietress	2	10.0
	Total	20	100.0

Source: Field Data

The findings indicate a diverse but largely mid-career and experienced teaching workforce in the Ho Municipality. Most teachers were aged 35–44, with a near-balanced gender distribution. While half held a Diploma in Basic Education, others had Bachelor's degrees or certificate qualifications, suggesting varying levels of professional training.

In terms of experience, the majority had 5–10 years or more than 10 years of teaching experience, and most occupied senior ranks such as Senior Superintendents I and II. Overall, the profile reflects a relatively experienced workforce often holding responsibility-heavy positions that may contribute to increased job demands and stress.

5.2 Objective One: Primary sources of occupational stress among basic school teachers

The analysis generated three interrelated themes explaining occupational stress among teachers: structural and resource-related stressors, institutional and leadership challenges, and the paradox of professional fulfilment.

Theme 1: Structural and resource-related stressors

A major source of stress reported by participants was the inadequate provision of infrastructure and instructional resources, which compromised effective teaching and intensified workload demands.

Sub-theme 1.1: Overcrowded classrooms

Teachers consistently described overcrowded classrooms as a key barrier to effective instruction and learner engagement. Large class sizes were reported to increase fatigue and reduce instructional quality. One participant stated:

"My Primary 6 class has 52 students crowded into a room built for 30, although the Ghana Education Service cap is 35. Instead of instructing people, teaching turns into a broadcast to a large audience" (BST-18, 8 years of experience).

Similarly, another participant noted the emotional and cognitive strain associated with managing large numbers of pupils:

"Imagine the amount of energy required to keep the interest of sixty agitated kids for an hour. It seems to be preparing both the kids and the teachers for failure" (BST-07, 12 years of experience).

Sub-theme 1.2: Lack of teaching and learning materials (TLMs)

Participants further identified the shortage of instructional materials as a persistent stressor, often requiring personal financial contributions and additional workload. One teacher explained:

"The promised textbooks and teachers' guides never arrived... I spend every Sunday at a cybercafé, using my own money to download and print excerpts" (BST-13, 8 years of experience).

Another participant highlighted the professional and psychological implications of resource shortages:

"There is a profound disrespect in having to beg for chalk... It chips away at your authority and their belief in the importance of what happens in that classroom" (BST-05, 10 years of experience).

Sub-theme 1.3: Curriculum and administrative pressure

Participants also reported that frequent curriculum revisions and excessive administrative duties significantly reduced instructional time and increased workload pressure. One teacher remarked:

"I spend more time documenting learning than facilitating it" (BST-15, 6 years of experience).

Another participant emphasised the fragmented and demanding nature of administrative expectations:

"We are data clerks, not just teachers... This administrative avalanche leaves no time for the actual intellectual work of teaching" (BST-12, 15 years of experience).

Theme 2: Institutional and leadership challenges

In addition to material constraints, institutional governance and leadership practices were identified as key sources of occupational stress.

Sub-theme 2.1: Inconsistent supervision

Supervision was widely perceived as punitive rather than developmental, fostering fear and limiting professional autonomy. One participant noted:

"You are not observed to be coached; you are spied on to be caught" (BST-13, 7 years of experience).

Another described supervision as emotionally distressing and procedural rather than supportive:

"It is a performative exercise... implying that you are perpetually on the verge of being found inadequate" (BST-09, 14 years of experience).

Sub-theme 2.2: Limited staff welfare support

Participants further reported a lack of structured welfare and psychological support systems, contributing to feelings of isolation and emotional exhaustion. One teacher explained:

"There is zero institutional mechanism for welfare... Your stress is your own private problem to solve" (BST-17, 9 years of experience).

Another participant reinforced this concern:

"You are expected to be a reservoir of patience... but your own tank is never refilled by the institution" (BST-04, 11 years of experience).

Theme 3: The Paradox of professional fulfilment

Despite the significant stressors identified, participants also expressed strong intrinsic motivation derived from meaningful engagement with learners, reflecting a coexistence of strain and fulfilment.

Sub-theme 3.1: Intrinsic reward from student success and interaction

Teachers consistently identified student progress and relational experiences as central sources of professional satisfaction and resilience. One participant remarked:

"All the stress dissipates in that one moment when a child... finally pieces a sentence together independently" (BST-07, 12 years of experience).

Another emphasised the long-term value and meaning derived from teaching:

"When a former student visit... and says, 'You inspired me, teacher,' it validates every difficult day" (BST-22, 9 years of experience).

The findings indicate that structural deficiencies, administrative burden, and limited institutional support mechanisms largely drive occupational stress among basic school teachers in the Ho Municipality. However, these challenges are partially offset by strong intrinsic motivational factors, particularly student achievement and meaningful teacher-student relationships, which sustain professional commitment despite adverse working conditions.

Sub-theme 3.2: Professional identity and sense of vocation

Many teachers conceptualised teaching as a vocation grounded in national service rather than mere employment. This strong professional identity provided a meaningful interpretive framework that helped them endure workplace stress by linking daily challenges to broader societal impact.

One participant noted:

"I am not just earning a living; I am nation-building... When I look at my class, I see Ghana's potential... It is a calling that demands sacrifice" (BST-02, 18 years of experience). Similarly, another teacher emphasised the enduring pride and social value embedded in the profession:

"Teaching is the most important and undervalued work in society... I am shaping character and intellect that is a legacy" (BST-34, 9 years of experience).

Overall, professional identity served as an emotional buffer, enabling teachers to sustain commitment despite persistent systemic pressures.

5.3. Objective Two: Types of occupational stress experienced by basic school teachers

The second objective examined the specific forms of occupational stress experienced by teachers. The analysis revealed one central theme: physical exhaustion, reflecting the cumulative bodily and psychological strain associated with teaching demands.

Theme 4: Physical exhaustion

Teachers consistently described occupational stress as manifesting through intense physical and emotional depletion, driven by prolonged workload demands and classroom pressures.

Sub-theme 4.1: Fatigue and sleep disruption

Participants reported persistent fatigue and disrupted sleep patterns due to extended marking and lesson preparation:

"It's not normal tiredness. It's a deep, bone-level exhaustion that sleep doesn't fix... I wake up at 3 a.m. thinking about a struggling pupil" (BST-13, 7 years of experience). *"My 'leisure' time is an extension of the workday... This cycle means you are never truly 'off'"* (BST-10, 5 years of experience).

Sub-theme 4.2: Headaches and voice strain

Teachers also experienced chronic physical symptoms linked to classroom conditions, including vocal strain and tension headaches:

"You must project your voice over chatter... By Wednesday, my voice is hoarse... The headache is a tight, vice-like pressure" (BST-02, 18 years of experience). *"I have developed a chronic tension headache that my doctor directly links to job stress... These are occupational injuries"* (BST-14, 6 years of experience).

Overall, physical exhaustion emerged as a core manifestation of occupational stress, characterised by chronic fatigue, sleep disruption, and stress-related physical ailments that reflect the demanding nature of classroom teaching.

5.4 Objective Three: Effects of occupational stress on teachers' well-being and professional performance

This objective explored the consequences of occupational stress on teachers' effectiveness and well-being. Two themes were identified: decline in professional productivity and negative impact on emotional and physical health.

Theme 5: Decline in professional productivity

Occupational stress significantly reduced teachers' instructional quality, creativity, and engagement.

Sub-theme 5.1: Low teaching creativity

Teachers reported a decline in innovation and a shift toward mechanical instruction:

"Now it's 'chalk and talk'... Creativity requires emotional and mental energy that I simply do not have" (BST-15, 20 years of experience). *"My teaching has become transactional... The joy of discovery is gone"* (BST-08, 9 years of experience).

Sub-theme 5.2: Decreased energy and attention

Teachers noted reduced tolerance and increased reactivity:

"When you are mentally exhausted, your tolerance for disruption plummets... You end up shouting" (BST-17, 9 years of experience). *"Stress turns you reactive... The class senses your lack of control"* (BST-27, 9 years of experience).

Sub-theme 5.3: Reduced classroom control and motivation

Fatigue also undermined consistency and learner motivation:

"By the afternoon, I am drained... not because it's good pedagogy, but because it's all I can manage" (BST-14, 6 years of experience). *"Children mirror your energy... If you are going through the motions, they will too"* (BST-19, 10 years of experience).

Theme 6: Negative impact on emotional and physical well-being

Stress also produced serious health and psychosocial consequences.

Sub-theme 6.1: Health-related issues

Participants reported hypertension, migraines, and chronic fatigue:

"My annual medical check-up became a diagnosis of 'occupational hypertension'... I am now on lifelong medication" (BST-18, 16 years of experience). *"I suffer from stress-induced migraines and gastritis... We are medicating symptoms of a sick system"* (BST-20, 10 years of experience).

Sub-theme 6.2: Poor work–life balance

Teachers also experienced identity loss and emotional withdrawal:

"I don't have a personality anymore; I am just 'Teacher'... My weekends are for recuperation, not for living" (BST-05, 10 years of experience). *"Work is a colonising force... My family complains I am absent even when I am present"* (BST03, 6 years of experience).

Findings indicate that occupational stress undermines both professional effectiveness and personal well-being, leading to reduced creativity, weakened classroom performance, and significant physical and

emotional health challenges.

5.5 Objective Four: Coping mechanisms employed by teachers to manage occupational stress

This objective examined how teachers in the Ho Municipality manage occupational stress in the face of persistent structural and emotional demands. The findings indicate two broad categories of coping strategies: personal coping strategies and institutional and policy-level recommendations.

Theme 7: Personal coping strategies

Teachers primarily relied on individual, immediate coping strategies aimed at emotional regulation and short-term recovery from daily stressors.

Sub-theme 7.1: Relaxation and rest

Teachers described deliberate withdrawal, silence, and sleep as essential recovery mechanisms after school hours:

“My first line of defence is a mandatory 45 minutes of absolute silence when I get home... It is a necessary decompression for survival” (BST-01, 8 years of experience). *“Sleep is my reset button... a 20-minute nap can break the cycle of anxiety”* (BST-09, 14 years of experience).

These practices functioned as psychological “reset” strategies to manage cognitive overload and emotional fatigue.

Sub-theme 7.2: Humour, singing, and play with students

Teachers also used informal interactions and humour to restore emotional balance and classroom positivity:

“We are just people making music together... It shifts the entire energy of the room” (BST-06, 12 years of experience). *“We take the most frustrating things... and turn them into jokes... That shared laughter is therapeutic”* (BST-13, 7 years of experience).

Such practices served as informal emotional buffers against workplace strain.

Sub-theme 7.3: Religious and peer support practices

Faith and collegial interaction were important sources of emotional resilience and validation:

“My faith is my anchor... It reminds me that my value is not defined by my checklist” (BST-02, 18 years of experience). *“The staff room over a cup of tea... is incredibly therapeutic... This is our real mental health first aid”* (BST-10, 5 years of experience).

These accounts highlight spirituality and peer solidarity as key coping resources.

Theme 8: Institutional and policy-level recommendations

Beyond individual strategies, participants strongly emphasised the need for systemic reforms to address the root causes of occupational stress.

Sub-theme 8.1: Improved welfare and mental health support

Teachers called for structured institutional support systems, including counselling services and formal mental health policies:

“We need confidential, professional counselling services... A teacher should be able to seek help without fear” (BST-12, 20 years of experience). *“There should be regular well-being check-ins... Saying ‘I am not okay’ should trigger support, not stigma”* (BST-04, 11 years of experience).

These responses reflect a demand for proactive, stigma-free mental health support within the education system.

Sub-theme 8.2: Workload reduction and training reforms

Participants linked sustainable stress reduction to structural reforms in workload, staffing, and professional training:

“A class of 60 is unmanageable... Let teachers teach” (BST-01, 8 years of experience).

“We need hands-on training in stress management... Train us for the war zone we actually work in” (BST-01, 8 years of experience). *“We must specialise more... rather than four subjects poorly to one class”* (BST-11, 13 years of experience).

These perspectives underscore the need for systemic changes rather than reliance on individual resilience alone.

Overall, teachers employ a combination of personal coping strategies (rest, humour, spirituality, and peer support) to manage immediate stress, while simultaneously advocating for institutional reforms such as improved welfare systems, reduced workload, and targeted professional training. These findings suggest that while individual coping provides temporary relief, sustainable stress management requires structural and policy-level interventions.

6.0 Discussion

This study examined the lived experiences of occupational stress among basic school teachers in the Ho Municipality, structured around four specific objectives: (i) identifying the primary sources of occupational stress, (ii) exploring the types of occupational stress experienced, (iii) examining the

effects on teachers' well-being and professional performance, and (iv) exploring coping mechanisms employed to manage stress. Overall, the findings demonstrate that occupational stress is multidimensional, structurally embedded, and shaped by the interaction between job demands, limited resources, and teachers' professional identity, consistent with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). These findings are further synthesised within the Proposed Contextual Framework for Management of Occupational Stress among Basic School Teachers in the Ho Municipality as presented in Fig. 1, which localises and extends the JD-R model to the Ghanaian basic education context.

6.1 Primary sources of occupational stress

In relation to the first objective, the study identified overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching and learning materials, excessive administrative workload, curriculum demands, and weak supervisory practices as the primary sources of occupational stress among teachers. These stressors reflect a combination of structural, workload-related, and relational demands that collectively exceed available institutional and professional resources. The findings corroborate earlier studies in similar contexts, which consistently highlight workload intensity, infrastructural deficits, and insufficient institutional support as major contributors to teacher stress (Ankakwa et al., 2025; Nyamekye & Ghanney, 2024; Taddese et al., 2025).

Importantly, participants' experiences also revealed that supervisory practices were often perceived as punitive rather than supportive, thereby intensifying feelings of pressure and professional vulnerability. This aligns with Schwartz et al. (2019), who emphasise that weak leadership structures and limited professional autonomy significantly heighten occupational stress. Within the proposed framework, these conditions are conceptualised as interacting job demands that shape teachers' appraisal of their work environment as overwhelming and unsustainable.

6.2 Types of occupational stress experienced

Regarding the second objective, the study found that occupational stress manifested in multiple interrelated forms, including physical, emotional, and cognitive strain. Physically, teachers reported chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, headaches, and voice strain. Emotionally, they experienced frustration, helplessness, emotional exhaustion, and reduced professional enthusiasm. Cognitively, teachers described difficulty concentrating, mental overload, and reduced capacity for planning and instructional creativity.

These findings align with the multidimensional understanding of occupational stress in existing literature, which recognises stress as a complex interplay of physiological and psychological responses (Ellovido & Quirap, 2024; Han & Seo, 2024). They also support evidence linking prolonged exposure to high job demands with psychosomatic and health-related outcomes among teachers (Kambli et al., 2025; Ozoemena et al., 2021). In this study, these manifestations are interpreted within the strain

component of the proposed contextual framework, representing the internal consequences of sustained imbalance between job demands and available resources.

6.3 Effects of occupational stress on well-being and performance

In addressing the third objective, the findings indicate that occupational stress significantly undermines both teachers' well-being and their professional performance. Participants reported reduced motivation, diminished classroom engagement, lower instructional effectiveness, and decreased creativity in lesson delivery. These outcomes are consistent with studies that associate occupational stress with reduced self-efficacy, weakened professional commitment, and declining teaching quality (Gaire, 2024; Nyamekye & Ghanney, 2024).

In addition to professional consequences, teachers reported adverse health and psychosocial outcomes, including hypertension, migraines, emotional withdrawal, and poor work–life balance. These findings reinforce the negative outcome pathways outlined in the JD–R model, particularly where job demands consistently outweigh available resources (Kambli et al., 2025; Zeng et al., 2024).

Notwithstanding these challenges, the study also revealed a paradoxical dimension of occupational stress. Many teachers continued to derive meaning, satisfaction, and resilience from learner achievement and positive teacher–student relationships. This suggests that professional identity and vocation function as critical psychological resources that buffer the effects of stress, supporting resilience-based perspectives that stress does not inevitably result in burnout (Adarkwah, 2023). Within the proposed framework, professional identity is therefore conceptualised as both a protective and strain-amplifying factor, depending on the perceived gap between institutional expectations and working conditions.

6.4 Coping mechanisms employed by teachers

In relation to the fourth objective, the study found that teachers predominantly employed individual, emotion-focused coping strategies, including rest, humour, spiritual practices, and peer support. These strategies provided short-term emotional relief and helped teachers manage day-to-day stressors. This is consistent with previous research highlighting the role of social and spiritual resources in buffering emotional exhaustion and occupational strain (Issakah et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2022).

However, participants emphasised that these coping strategies were largely temporary and insufficient in addressing the structural causes of stress. This finding underscores a key limitation of individual-focused coping approaches and reinforces the need for organisational and policy-level interventions. In line with Herman et al. (2020) and Nwoko et al. (2024), the results suggest that sustainable stress reduction requires systemic improvements, including reduced workload, enhanced welfare systems, access to counselling services, professional development opportunities, and improved teaching resources.

6.5 Proposed context-specific framework and theoretical contribution

The findings indicate that occupational stress among basic school teachers in the Ho Municipality is shaped by the interaction of structural challenges, organisational conditions, and professional identity. In response, this study proposes a framework for managing teacher occupational stress (Fig. 1). The framework extends the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model by incorporating identity-based resources and contextual factors specific to Ghana’s basic education sector. It conceptualises teacher stress as arising from dynamic interactions among job demands, resources, coping mechanisms, professional identity, and outcomes. The framework offers a contextually relevant explanatory model and practical guide for institutional and policy interventions aimed at enhancing teacher well-being, strengthening resilience, and improving educational outcomes in resource-constrained educational settings.

7.0 Recommendations

The study makes the following key recommendations to address occupational stress among basic school teachers in the Ho Municipality:

1. The Ghana Education Service and the Ministry of Education should reduce overcrowded classrooms through teacher recruitment and improved infrastructure, and ensure the timely provision of teaching and learning materials to ease workload pressures. Curriculum and administrative processes should also be streamlined to allow teachers to focus more on instruction.
2. Importantly, the GES should consider implementing the proposed Occupational Stress Management Framework developed in this study as a practical guide for identifying stressors and informing context-specific interventions.
3. School leaders should adopt supportive, mentoring-oriented supervision rather than punitive approaches. Schools should also establish structured welfare and psychosocial support systems, including counselling and peer support, to address teacher stress.
4. Professional development programmes should include training in stress management, emotional regulation, and coping strategies, while encouraging stronger peer collaboration among teachers.
5. Teacher well-being should be integrated into education policy. The Ministry of Education should establish district-level counselling services and monitor teacher stress and well-being regularly.
6. Future studies should use longitudinal and mixed-method designs and include comparative regional studies to deepen understanding of teacher stress dynamics.

8.0 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that occupational stress among basic school teachers is a contextually embedded phenomenon shaped by institutional demands, organisational conditions, and professional identity. The findings indicate that heavy workload, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources,

curriculum pressures, and weak supervisory support significantly undermine teachers' well-being, motivation, and instructional effectiveness. Although teachers adopt various coping strategies, these provide only limited relief as they fail to address the structural determinants of stress.

A key contribution of the study is the development of a context-specific framework for managing teacher stress in Ghanaian basic schools. By extending the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model to include identity-based resources and contextual realities, the framework offers a theoretically informed and practical basis for policy and intervention aimed at improving teacher well-being, resilience, and educational quality in resource-constrained settings.

9.0 Limitations of the Study

As a qualitative study, the findings are context-specific and based on a small sample of 20 teachers, limiting transferability. Reliance on self-reported experiences may have introduced recall and social desirability biases. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the study's specific context.

Declarations

Clinical Trial Number

not applicable

Ethical approval

The research protocol (UHAS-REC A.11 [8] 24–25) was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Health and Allied Sciences (UHAS-REC). The study was carried out in accordance with the ethical standards of UHAS-REC, the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments, and the relevant institutional guidelines.

Consent to participate

Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained during the study.

Consent to publish

Not applicable. This study does not contain identifiable images or individual data.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Author Contribution

F.M.S. and C.A developed data collection instrument, collected and analysed data. E.D.A. wrote the main manuscript text and prepared Figure 1, and A.F.D. was the senior author, analysed the data, supervised the entire research process, and all authors reviewed the manuscript.

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10.0 Availability of data and material

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and institutional restrictions. However, de-identified data may be made available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to approval by the University's Research Ethics Committee.

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Figures



Figure 1

Proposed Framework for Management of Occupational Stress among Basic School Teachers in the Ho Municipality

