



WORKPLACE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHER ASSISTANTS

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Abstract:

This research article aimed to identify the challenges and concerns encountered by preschool teacher assistants in their workplace, examine the strategies they use to overcome these difficulties, and assess the validity and reliability of the research instrument employed in the study. The study included 212 teacher assistants selected through random sampling from 35 public and private kindergartens located in both Ulaanbaatar City and rural areas of Mongolia. Participants included teacher assistants with more than six months of work experience. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics 26.0 software. The findings revealed that excessive workload ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.23$), large numbers of children ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.20$), and children's behavioral issues ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.19$) were the most significant workplace challenges experienced by teacher assistants. Regarding coping strategies, active coping approaches were most commonly used, including self-encouragement and positive self-motivation ($M = 2.83$), taking action to improve working conditions ($M = 2.79$), and viewing difficulties from a positive perspective ($M = 2.78$). Furthermore, teacher assistants who had participated in training related to workplace challenges and stress management reported significantly lower levels of perceived workplace challenges compared to those who had not received such training, $t(212) = -2.582$, $p = .011$. In addition, a moderate positive correlation was identified between the overall level of workplace challenges and the use of coping strategies, $r = .423$, $p < .001$. These findings provide important evidence for preschool education institutions, educational policymakers, and professionals seeking to develop professional support systems and psychological intervention programs for teacher assistants working in early childhood education settings.

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1. Introduction

The preschool years represent one of the most intensive and critical stages of human development. Developmental and educational research consistently demonstrates that investments made during early childhood yield long-term benefits for individuals and society, particularly in relation to cognitive development, emotional well-being, academic achievement, and future social participation. According to Slot et al. (2015), the quality of early childhood education environments significantly influences children's developmental outcomes, while high-quality interactions between educators and children contribute positively to learning, social competence, and emotional security. In this regard, preschool education is increasingly recognized as a fundamental component of human capital development and lifelong educational success. Within preschool education settings, teacher assistants play an essential role in supporting children's learning, care, health, and daily developmental experiences. Their responsibilities often include assisting teachers in instructional activities, maintaining safe and hygienic learning environments, supporting classroom management, and responding to children's emotional and physical needs. Because teacher assistants interact closely with children throughout daily routines, their professional well-being and workplace conditions directly influence the overall quality of preschool education services.

However, despite their important role, preschool teacher assistants often experience relatively low occupational recognition, heavy workloads, limited decision-making authority, and inadequate financial compensation. These workplace conditions may contribute to increased occupational stress and professional dissatisfaction. As Oyungerel and Khajidmaa (2023) emphasize, educational management systems are responsible for creating supportive institutional environments that promote employee well-being, professional competence, and sustainable workforce development. International studies have repeatedly shown that professionals working in early childhood education settings experience relatively high levels of occupational stress and emotional exhaustion. Robert Karasek (1979), in the Job Demand-Control Model, argued that occupations characterized by high demands and limited control are strongly associated with increased psychological strain and occupational stress. Similarly, Stevan Hobfoll (1989) proposed in the Conservation of Resources Theory that stress occurs when individuals perceive threats to their physical, emotional, or social resources, or when they are unable to adequately recover depleted resources. Within preschool education settings, such stressors may emerge from excessive workloads, emotionally demanding interactions, overcrowded classrooms, and limited institutional support.

In the Mongolian context, the average number of children in one kindergarten classroom frequently exceeds 26 children, surpassing recommended standards and substantially increasing the workload of both teachers and teacher assistants. These conditions may negatively affect employees' psychological well-being, work performance, and long-term professional sustainability. Research conducted by Skaalvik

and Skaalvik (2015) demonstrated that high workload, emotional pressure, and limited work-life balance are strongly associated with increased stress and reduced job satisfaction among educational professionals. Likewise, Collie et al. (2012) found that school climate and social-emotional support significantly influence teacher stress levels, occupational satisfaction, and professional efficacy. These findings suggest that workplace conditions and institutional support systems are critical factors influencing employee resilience and professional stability in educational settings. The ways in which educational professionals cope with workplace challenges are closely associated with their psychological health, emotional regulation, and occupational sustainability. Coping strategies refer to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts individuals use to manage stressful situations and workplace demands. Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) proposed a widely recognized stress and coping framework explaining that individuals first evaluate stressful situations through a process called primary appraisal, during which they assess the level of perceived threat or risk. Subsequently, individuals engage in secondary appraisal, evaluating their available coping resources and response capacities. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping strategies generally fall into two major categories: problem-focused coping, which aims to address the source of stress directly, and emotion-focused coping, which seeks to regulate emotional reactions to stressful experiences.

Previous studies have demonstrated that adaptive coping strategies, including seeking social support, problem-solving, and positive reinterpretation, are positively associated with psychological resilience and occupational well-being. Beltman et al. (2011) emphasized that resilience among educational professionals is strengthened through supportive workplace environments, professional development opportunities, and positive coping mechanisms. Similarly, Kinman et al. (2011) reported that workplace social support plays a significant role in reducing emotional exhaustion and improving job satisfaction among educational staff. In contrast, maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance behaviors and emotional withdrawal are associated with increased burnout and reduced occupational effectiveness. Despite the growing recognition of teacher assistants' contributions to preschool education quality, there remains a limited body of evidence-based research focusing specifically on the workplace experiences, occupational stress, and coping strategies of preschool teacher assistants in Mongolia. Existing studies within the Mongolian context have primarily focused on preschool teachers rather than support staff, leaving a significant research gap concerning the professional experiences of teacher assistants. Recognizing this limitation, the present study was conducted to identify the most common workplace challenges experienced by preschool teacher assistants, examine the coping strategies they employ to manage occupational stress, and investigate how variables such as classroom size, participation in professional training, work experience, and educational background relate to perceived workplace stress and coping behaviors.

2. Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive-comparative research design to examine workplace challenges and coping strategies among preschool teacher assistants. Quantitative research designs are widely used in educational and psychological research to identify patterns, relationships, and differences among variables through statistical analysis, while descriptive-comparative approaches enable researchers to examine variations across participant groups and workplace conditions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Such research designs are particularly appropriate for investigating occupational stress, workplace experiences, and behavioral responses within professional settings because they allow researchers to systematically compare differences among demographic and contextual variables. Data were collected in 2026 using a standardized online questionnaire administered through the Google Forms platform. Online survey methods have increasingly become common in educational research because they provide efficient access to geographically diverse participants while supporting confidentiality and standardized data collection procedures. Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 software. The use of standardized survey instruments and statistical software enhanced the reliability, consistency, and accuracy of the data analysis process. According to Cohen et al. (2018), the use of standardized quantitative instruments strengthens the objectivity and replicability of social science research findings.

A total of 212 preschool teacher assistants participated in the study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly employed when researchers seek participants possessing specific professional experiences or characteristics directly relevant to the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). The inclusion criteria required participants to be currently employed in a kindergarten and to have more than six months of work experience as a teacher assistant. These criteria were established to ensure that participants had sufficient workplace experience to meaningfully evaluate occupational challenges and coping strategies within preschool education settings. The demographic characteristics of the participants indicated that the largest proportion belonged to the 35–44 age group (35.8%). In addition, 53.8% of participants reported working in classrooms with more than 26 children, suggesting relatively high classroom density and increased workload conditions within preschool education settings. High child-to-staff ratios have been identified in previous early childhood education research as an important factor associated with occupational stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced educational quality (Slot et al., 2015).

The survey instrument consisted of two main sections. The first section measured workplace challenges using 14 items related to workload, children's behavioral issues, interpersonal relationships, social recognition, and workplace conditions. The internal consistency coefficient of this scale demonstrated a very high level of reliability, $\alpha = .923$. According to George and Mallery (2020), Cronbach's alpha coefficients above .90 indicate excellent internal consistency and strong reliability of measurement instruments. The

second section assessed coping strategies through 28 items evaluating active coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance strategies. The coping strategy scale also demonstrated a very high level of reliability, $\alpha = .953$. These reliability coefficients indicate that the research instrument provided consistent and dependable measurements of workplace challenges and coping behaviors among preschool teacher assistants. The coping strategy framework was conceptually grounded in the stress and coping theory developed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984), which distinguishes between problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance coping responses.

Data analysis included several statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate means (M), standard deviations (SD), frequencies, and percentages in order to summarize participant responses and identify general patterns within the data. Reliability analysis using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the survey scales. Descriptive statistical analysis is considered an essential component of quantitative research because it enables researchers to summarize central tendencies and variability within participant responses (Field, 2018). In addition, independent samples t-tests were performed to compare participants who had received stress-management-related training with those who had not participated in such training programs. One-way analysis of variance (One-Way ANOVA) was used to examine differences in workplace challenges according to variables such as number of children, work experience, and educational background. ANOVA procedures are particularly useful for comparing mean differences across multiple participant groups while reducing the risk of statistical error associated with repeated comparisons (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Finally, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between workplace challenges and coping strategy use among preschool teacher assistants. Correlation analysis enabled the researchers to determine the direction and strength of associations between stress-related variables and coping behaviors within the study population.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 212)

The study participants consisted of 212 preschool teacher assistants working in public and private kindergarten settings. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	Under 25	13	6.1
	25–34	52	24.5
	35–44	76	35.8
	45–54	66	31.1
	55 and above	5	2.4
Work Experience	Less than 1 year	32	15.1
	1–3 years	46	21.7

	4–7 years	42	19.8
	8–12 years	35	16.5
	13 years and above	57	26.9
Educational Level	Secondary education	143	67.5
	Vocational education	19	9.0
	Higher education	50	23.6
Institution Type	Public	200	94.3
	Private	12	5.7
Number of Children in the Group	10–15	7	3.3
	16–20	24	11.3
	21–25	67	31.6
	26 and above	114	53.8
Stress Management Training	Yes (within the last 2 years)	71	33.5
	No	141	66.5

The findings indicate that the largest proportion of participants belonged to the 35–44 age group (35.8%). In addition, more than half of the participants (53.8%) reported working in classrooms with more than 26 children. These findings suggest that preschool teacher assistants in Mongolia frequently work in relatively large classroom settings, which may substantially increase workload and workplace stress.

3.2 Analysis of Workplace Challenges

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to examine the 14 dimensions of workplace challenges experienced by preschool teacher assistants. The challenges were ranked according to mean scores in descending order.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Workplace Challenges (N = 212)

Rank	Workplace Challenge	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	High/Very High (%)
1	Excessive workload	3.00	1.23	32.5%
2	Large number of children	2.97	1.20	32.1%
3	Children’s behavioral problems	2.92	1.19	32.1%
4	Low salary	2.86	1.19	27.8%
5	Insufficient break time	2.81	1.24	27.8%
6	Working with children with special needs	2.72	1.31	27.8%
7	Low social recognition	2.70	1.19	24.5%
8	Additional responsibility for caring for sick children	2.58	1.19	22.2%
9	Administrative demands and supervision	2.55	1.25	23.1%
10	Work–life balance	2.45	1.22	19.3%
11	Relationships with parents	2.44	1.11	17.0%
12	Relationships with teachers	2.36	1.20	17.0%
13	Uncomfortable working environment	2.27	1.23	15.1%
14	Relationships with colleagues	2.18	1.22	15.6%

The findings demonstrated that excessive workload $M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.23$, large numbers of children $M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.20$, and children’s behavioral issues $M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.19$ represented the most significant workplace challenges experienced by preschool teacher assistants. More than 32% of participants perceived these factors as “high” or “very high” challenges.

In contrast, workplace relationships with colleagues and the physical comfort of the work environment were perceived as relatively lower-level challenges. These findings suggest that workload-related and structural factors exert greater influence on occupational stress than interpersonal workplace relationships.

3.3 Analysis of Coping Strategies

The 28 coping strategies were classified according to the framework developed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) into problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance strategies. The ten most frequently used coping strategies are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Top 10 Predominant Coping Strategies (N = 212)

Rank	Coping Strategy	Mean	SD	Active %	Type
1	Encouraging and motivating oneself	2.83	1.12	59.4%	Emotion-focused
2	Taking steps to improve working conditions	2.79	1.08	59.9%	Problem-focused
3	Viewing difficulties positively	2.78	1.07	57.5%	Emotion-focused
4	Seeking advice from teachers, administrators, and colleagues	2.76	1.05	58.0%	Problem-focused
5	Organizing rest and leisure time effectively	2.68	1.10	53.3%	Emotion-focused
6	Developing specific plans to overcome workplace challenges	2.65	1.09	54.2%	Problem-focused
7	Adapting to the situation and learning to cope with it	2.65	1.11	53.3%	Emotion-focused
8	Focusing on priorities and important tasks	2.59	1.09	51.4%	Problem-focused
9	Accepting unavoidable challenges and adapting	2.55	1.08	50.0%	Emotion-focused
10	Carefully reflecting on work problems and seeking solutions	2.54	1.08	52.4%	Problem-focused

The findings revealed that five of the ten most frequently used strategies were problem-focused coping strategies, while the remaining five were emotion-focused coping strategies.

In contrast, avoidance coping strategies, such as alcohol and tobacco use $M = 1.45$, expressing anger and frustration $M = 1.59$, and negative attitudes toward others $M = 1.67$ were among the least frequently used coping strategies. These findings suggest that participants predominantly relied on active and adaptive coping approaches rather than maladaptive avoidance behaviors.

3.4 Stress Management Training and Workplace Challenges (t-test)

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare workplace challenge scores between participants who had received stress-management-related training and those who had not. The results indicated that participants who had attended training programs $n = 71$, $M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.82$ reported significantly lower workplace challenge scores compared to participants without training experience $n = 141$, $M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.86$. The difference was statistically significant, $t(210) = -2.582$, $p = .011$.

These findings suggest that professional development and stress management training programs contribute meaningfully to reducing workplace stress among preschool teacher assistants.

3.5 Relationship Between Number of Children and Workplace Challenges

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in workplace challenge scores across four classroom-size categories (10–15, 16–20, 21–25, and 26+ children). The results demonstrated statistically significant differences among the groups, $F(3,208) = 3.615$, $p = .014$.

Participants working in classrooms with the largest number of children (26+, $n = 114$) reported the highest level of workplace challenges $M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.87$, whereas those working in smaller groups (10–15 children, $n = 7$) reported the lowest level of perceived challenges $M = 1.92$, $SD = 0.79$. These findings indicate that classroom size is an important factor influencing workplace stress among preschool teacher assistants.

3.6 Work Experience and Workplace Challenges

The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in workplace challenge scores across the five work-experience groups, $F(4,207) = 0.831$, $p = .507$.

This finding suggests that workplace challenges remain relatively stable regardless of professional experience, potentially reflecting the inherent demands and structural characteristics of the preschool teacher assistant profession.

3.7 Educational Level and Workplace Challenges

Differences in workplace challenge scores across three educational-level groups (secondary education, vocational education, and higher education) were also statistically non-significant, $F(2,209) = 2.310$, $p = .102$.

However, participants with higher education qualifications reported slightly higher average challenge scores $M = 2.81$, which may be associated with increased professional expectations and responsibilities, although this interpretation was not statistically confirmed.

3.8 Relationship Between Workplace Challenges and Coping Strategies

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship between overall workplace challenge scores and the use of coping strategies, $r = .423$, $p < .001$.

This positive correlation indicates that as workplace challenge levels increase, preschool teacher assistants tend to employ coping strategies more actively. The finding

is consistent with the theoretical assumptions proposed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984), which suggest that individuals increase coping efforts as perceived stress levels intensify.

4. Discussion

The findings of the present study clearly demonstrate the multidimensional nature of workplace challenges experienced by preschool teacher assistants. Excessive workload, large numbers of children, and children's behavioral problems emerged as the most common and significant workplace challenges. These findings are consistent with several international studies reporting that early childhood education professionals frequently experience high levels of occupational stress associated with workload intensity, classroom management demands, and emotional labor within childcare settings. The statistically significant difference between participation in stress-management-related training and perceived workplace challenges $p = .011$ indicates that professional development and stress management training programs contribute meaningfully to improving teacher assistants' coping capacities and psychological resilience. This finding aligns with the conclusions of studies conducted by Kinman et al. (2011) and Beltman (2011), which emphasize that organizational support and professional development opportunities play a critical role in strengthening employee resilience and promoting occupational well-being. In this regard, continuous institutional support appears essential for improving the psychological health and professional sustainability of preschool teacher assistants.

The ANOVA findings examining the relationship between the number of children and workplace challenges $F = 3.615$, $p = .014$ further demonstrate that classrooms containing more than 26 children significantly increase workplace stress and workload among teacher assistants. These results highlight an important structural issue within the Mongolian preschool education context. The finding that 53.8% of participants work in classrooms exceeding 26 children suggests that many preschool institutions operate beyond recommended classroom-size standards. Large group sizes may negatively affect both educational quality and employee well-being by increasing physical demands, supervision responsibilities, and emotional stress within the workplace. With regard to coping strategies, positive reinterpretation, active problem-focused coping, and seeking social support emerged as the most frequently used coping approaches among participants. Previous psychological studies have demonstrated that such adaptive coping strategies contribute positively to long-term mental health, emotional regulation, and occupational adjustment, particularly when compared to maladaptive coping behaviors such as alcohol or tobacco use. The present study found that negative avoidance strategies, including substance use and hostile reactions toward others, were among the least frequently used coping approaches. This finding may be interpreted as a positive indicator of relatively healthy coping behaviors among preschool teacher assistants. Furthermore, the moderate positive correlation identified between workplace challenges and coping strategy use $r = .423$, $p < .001$ suggests that as perceived stress

levels increase, participants tend to engage more actively in coping behaviors. This finding is highly consistent with the theoretical assumptions proposed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984), who argued that individuals intensify coping efforts when faced with increasing levels of stress. Overall, this study contributes important empirical evidence to the limited body of research concerning workplace stress and coping strategies among preschool teacher assistants within the Mongolian early childhood education context.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study involved 212 preschool teacher assistants and examined the workplace challenges and coping strategies experienced within preschool education settings. Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions can be drawn.

- 1) Excessive workload, large numbers of children, and children's behavioral problems were identified as the most significant workplace challenges experienced by preschool teacher assistants.
- 2) The most frequently used coping strategies included self-encouragement and positive self-motivation, taking active steps to improve working conditions, and maintaining a positive perspective toward workplace difficulties.
- 3) Participation in training programs related to workplace challenges and stress management demonstrated a statistically significant negative relationship with perceived stress levels, indicating the effectiveness of professional development programs in reducing occupational stress.
- 4) The level of workplace challenges increased as the number of children increased, and this relationship was statistically confirmed through ANOVA analysis.
- 5) Work experience and educational level did not demonstrate statistically significant relationships with perceived workplace challenge levels.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed.

- 1) Educational authorities should ensure the implementation and monitoring of classroom-size standards at the policy level in order to reduce excessive workload and improve the quality of preschool education environments.
- 2) Kindergarten administrators should organize annual stress management training programs for all teacher assistants in order to strengthen their resilience, coping capacity, and workplace satisfaction.
- 3) Professional training and collaborative support systems for working with children with special needs should be further strengthened within preschool education institutions.
- 4) Improving salary conditions and social welfare support would play an important role in strengthening the professional stability, motivation, and social recognition of preschool teacher assistants.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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