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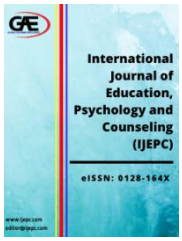

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ASSESSING STRESS LEVELS AMONG SPECIAL NEEDS WORKERS IN PRIVATE CENTRES IN PENANG, MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

This quantitative cross-sectional study examined stress levels and occupational stressors among professionals working with special needs students in private centres in Penang, Malaysia. Despite the sector's unique challenges, limited scholarly research has addressed this workforce within the Malaysian context. Thus, this study aims to measure the levels of stress experienced by special needs workers, to examine whether stress levels differ by gender, and to identify the main sources of stress in private special needs centres. Data were collected from 37 respondents using a structured online questionnaire incorporating the Teacher Stress Scale (TSS) and Teacher Thriving Scale (TTS). Findings revealed moderate-to-high stress levels ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.7$). Workload and time constraints emerged as the strongest predictors of stress, explaining 42% of the variance. While no significant differences were observed by gender or years of experience, both age and job role were found to significantly predict higher stress levels ($p < 0.05$). The results highlight the need for tailored mental health interventions and support strategies to enhance workforce well-being in Malaysia's private special education sector. These insights can inform policy development, resource allocation, and organisational practices aimed at reducing stress and improving service quality.

Keywords:

Occupational Stress, Special Needs Workers, Special Needs Centres, Quantitative, Survey

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Introduction

Working in special needs centres in Malaysia presents a unique set of occupational challenges for professionals who support students with diverse behavioural, communication, and developmental needs. Their work frequently requires the implementation of highly individualised intervention plans and continuous monitoring, which can be both emotionally and physically demanding. Globally, workplace stress is recognised as a critical issue that directly affects employee well-being, job satisfaction, and organisational effectiveness. Within the field of special education, stress levels are often elevated compared to general education due to heavy workloads, the emotional labour of managing diverse learning and behavioural needs, and the ongoing demand to adapt strategies for individual students.

In Malaysia, studies have shown that stress is a persistent concern among educators. Ghani (2013) reported that student misbehaviour and excessive workload are primary stressors, while more recent findings continue to highlight systemic and organisational barriers rather than shortcomings in individual capacity. International research has also shown that special education professionals experience greater stress compared to mainstream teachers, underscoring the need for context-specific investigations.

Retention of qualified professionals is another pressing challenge. Many special needs workers reportedly leave the profession within their first five years, with stress and insufficient institutional support cited as primary reasons for attrition (Kelly, 2023). High turnover disrupts service delivery, undermines student progress, and places additional strain on remaining staff. Despite the urgency of this issue, there remains limited research on private special needs centres in Malaysia. Penang, in particular, hosts a growing number of such centres, but the stress levels and occupational challenges of staff in these settings remain largely unexplored.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating stress levels among workers in private special needs centres in Penang. It was guided by three objectives:

1. to measure the levels of stress experienced by workers,
2. to examine whether stress levels differ significantly according to sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, and educational background, and
3. to identify the primary sources of occupational stress in private centre environments.

The research is further grounded in three theoretical frameworks. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) explains stress as a process that arises from the interaction between an individual's appraisal of demands and their perceived coping resources. The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model (Demerouti et al., 2001) highlights the balance between job demands, such as workload and emotional pressure, and job resources, such as social support and autonomy. The Effort–Reward Imbalance (ERI) Model (Siegrist, 1996) emphasises the psychological strain that results when the effort invested in work is not matched by adequate rewards, including recognition and support. By situating this study within these frameworks, the findings can be more meaningfully interpreted and connected to broader theories of occupational stress.

This study holds both academic and practical significance. From an academic perspective, it contributes to the limited body of literature on occupational stress among professionals in Malaysia's private special education sector, a group that has received little empirical attention compared to public school teachers. From a practical perspective, the results can provide

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administrators with evidence-based insights into the daily stressors faced by their staff, enabling them to design targeted support mechanisms and more sustainable workplace practices. Addressing these challenges can improve worker well-being, enhance job satisfaction, and reduce staff turnover, which in turn benefits students through continuity of care, stable relationships and more effective learning outcomes (Kaler, 2025).

Beyond the organisational level, this research also informs policymakers and the wider public about the mental health needs of private special needs workers. Greater awareness can drive inclusive workplace policies, targeted funding, and community support to strengthen the sector. Improving working conditions not only enhances employee well-being but also ensures higher-quality services for students and greater trust among families and service providers. Ultimately, the study contributes valuable knowledge to guide workplace interventions, resource allocation, and advocacy efforts aimed at sustaining a healthy and committed workforce in Malaysia's private special education centres.

Literature Review

Occupational Stress in Education and Special Needs Contexts

Occupational stress has been defined as a psychological and physiological response that occurs when job demands exceed an individual's coping capacity (APA, 2018). In education, stress often arises from behavioural challenges, administrative tasks, and emotional labour (Chen, 2022). For special needs professionals, the demands are intensified by the need for highly individualised support and continuous intervention, which can increase both physical and emotional strain (Scott, 2024).

Special education professionals encounter significant and persistent occupational stress across various aspects of their responsibilities. Research has consistently shown that special education professionals report higher stress than general educators. Studies reported by Cancio et al. (2018) and Herman et al. (2023) found that more than 1,500 educators from various countries consistently indicates increased levels of stress, where the main source of stress inclusive of increased workloads, multiple professional responsibilities behavioural challenges among students, pressure for student achievement and concerns regarding job security. Similarly, Adigun and Mngomezulu (2021) reported that Nigerian special needs teachers were burdened by large class sizes, poor infrastructure, and low salaries. In the United States, Chen (2022) highlighted inadequate support and excessive workload as significant predictors of stress among educators.

Theoretical Perspectives on Stress

Theories of stress provide valuable frameworks for understanding occupational demands in private centres. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) views stress as a dynamic process shaped by how individuals appraise demands and evaluate coping resources. Workers who perceive limited support may rely on emotion-focused coping, leading to frustration or disengagement.

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model (Demerouti et al., 2001) emphasises the balance between workplace demands and resources. Private centre staff often face high demands, such as managing behavioural crises and multitasking across roles, but receive limited resources,

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such as professional training or administrative support. This imbalance contributes significantly to stress.

The Effort–Reward Imbalance (ERI) Model (Siegrist, 1996) highlights the strain caused when professional effort is not matched with sufficient rewards. Many private centre workers dedicate extensive emotional and physical energy but receive modest salaries and limited recognition, which can exacerbate stress and undermine motivation.

Taken together, these models complement each other: the transactional model explains individual appraisal, JD-R highlights structural demands and resources, and ERI underscores fairness in rewards.

Sociodemographic and Contextual Factors

Studies have also investigated whether stress varies by age, gender or education. Findings remain inconsistent. Akgül et al. (2023) found that there is no statistically significant differences in stress factors based on gender, marital status, type of school graduated from, reason for choosing the teaching profession or length of service among special education teachers. In Malaysia, limited current evidence is available. Very little is known about how these sociodemographic factors influence stress among multidisciplinary professionals in private special needs centres.

Research Gaps and Practical Implications

The reviewed literature demonstrates that occupational stress among special needs professionals is a global concern. Yet significant gaps remain. Existing research has centred on public school teachers (Adigun & Mngomezulu, 2021), U.S. contexts (Chen, 2022), or Western-dominated meta-analyses (Cancio et al., 2018). None has comprehensively examined stress across teachers, therapists, and interventionists in Malaysia's private sector.

These gaps have important implications. Without evidence from private centres, administrators and policymakers lack the empirical basis to design targeted stress management programmes. High stress, if unaddressed, leads to burnout, absenteeism, and turnover, all of which reduce service quality for students with special needs. Conversely, investment in support systems, such as training, recognition and adequate resources that can improve worker well-being, enhance job satisfaction, and foster workforce stability. Ultimately, filling this research gap contributes not only to academic knowledge but also to practical strategies for sustaining a motivated and effective workforce in Malaysia's private special needs sector.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive design to assess occupational stress levels and their contributing factors among professionals in private special needs centres in Penang, Malaysia. A cross-sectional survey method was adopted to capture respondents' experiences at a single point in time, enabling the analysis of stress levels across different demographic groups without manipulating variables.

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Population and Sampling

The study targeted professionals employed in private special needs centres, including teachers, therapists, interventionists, assistant teachers and administrative staff directly involved in supporting students with special needs. Respondents were chosen using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling due to limited accessibility of private centres. Eligibility required participants to be aged 18 or above and currently working in private special needs centres within Penang.

A total of 37 respondents completed the questionnaire. While the sample size is limited, it provided meaningful insights into this specialised workforce. Respondents represented a variety of private centres across Penang. The use of non-probability sampling limits generalisability but was appropriate given the specialised population and exploratory nature of the study. As stated by Mukti (2025), non-probability sampling can be utilised when the research focuses on minority samples and has limited resources. Table 1 shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the respondents in this study.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Gender	Male and female	
Age	18 years old and above	Below 18 years old
Education Background	All education backgrounds	
Employment Sector	Currently working in private centres (NGO or non-NGO) for children with special needs in Penang, Malaysia.	Employed centres located outside Penang.
Job Role	Healthcare Professionals • Clinical Psychologist • Therapists • Interventionist • Nurses Educators • Teachers • Assistant Teachers • Trainers Support Staff • Volunteers	Parents & Students
Work types & working experiences	Administration workers • Full time • Part time • Fresh Graduate • Internship All levels of experiences	Retiree

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Research Instruments

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire designed in Google Forms. The instrument comprised three main sections. Part A consists of sociodemographic information including age, gender, educational background, years of experience and job role. Part B consists of items from Teacher Stress Scale (TSS**)** (Chen at al., 2022), a validated instrument measuring occupational stress that focus on two domains, including of social support and role-related demands. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Minor adaptations were made to align items with the realities of special needs work, such as reframing classroom references to behavioural interventions and administrative duties. Part C consists of items from Teacher Thriving Scale (TTS) (Chen at al., 2022), assessing resilience and professional growth factors such as adaptability, optimism and coping competence, also rated on a five-point Likert scale.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed electronically via email and messaging platforms between June and July 2025. An introductory page outlined the study objectives, inclusion criteria, confidentiality measures and informed consent statement. Participation was voluntary and respondents could withdraw at any time prior to submitting their responses. In acknowledging the respondents' participation, appreciation tokens in the form of small e-wallet top-ups were offered, however, several respondents voluntarily declined. This ensured that participation remained voluntary and free of coercion.

Data Analysis

The research data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (Version 31). Descriptive statistics inclusive of means, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages were used to summarise demographic characteristics, stress levels and thriving scores. After confirming the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were met, independent sample t-test as conducted to examine gender differences in stress level, despite the relatively small sample size (N = 37). Pearson correlation was used to investigate the relationship between age and stress level, while the main factors of stress were identified by performing multiple regression analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the researcher's academic institution prior to data collection. Respondent's participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained electronically and anonymity was preserved as no identifying information was collected, as in line with the ethical considerations by Hammer (2017). Optional contact details for token distribution were stored separately and not linked to research data. Formal permission to use the TSS and TTS instruments was secured and all procedures complied with established ethical research standards.

Results

The sociodemographic profile of the 37 respondents as presented in Table 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the respondent's characteristics. The study sample exhibited a clear gender imbalance, with females comprising a substantial majority at 86.5% (n = 32), while males represented a smaller proportion at 13.5% (n = 5). This suggests a predominant female presence in the context from which the data were collected. Besides, the age distribution indicated a predominantly youthful demographic. The largest segments fell within the 25 to 29

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years old (37.8%, n = 14) and 20 to 24 years old (35.1%, n = 13), collectively accounting for nearly three-quarters of the participants, where older age cohorts showed considerably lower representation.

In addition, the respondents displayed ethnic diversity, where Chinese respondents formed the largest group at 40.5% (n = 15), followed closely by Indian respondents at 35.1% (n = 13) and Malay respondents at 21.6% (n=8), with minimal representation from other ethnic groups. A significant majority of the respondents were single (70.3%, n = 26), while married respondents accounted for 24.3% (n=9), with a small percentage being widowed or divorced. The respondents also demonstrated a high level of educational attainment, where 83.8% (n = 31) of respondents had achieved tertiary education that underscore a strong commitment to higher learning within the group.

Table 2: Demographic Of Respondents

Demographic Item		Frequency, f	Percent, N (%)
Sex	Female	32	86.5
	Male	5	13.5
Age Group (Years)	15-19	2	5.4
	20-24	2	5.4
	25-29	14	37.8
	30-34	7	18.9
	35-39	5	13.5
	40-44	2	5.4
	50-54	1	2.7
	60-64	3	8.1
	Total	37	100.0
Ethnicity	Chinese	15	40.5
	Indian	13	35.1
	Kadazan	1	2.7
	Malay	8	21.6
Marital Status	Married	9	24.3
	Single	26	70.3
	Widow (er)/ Divorcee	2	5.4
Education Level	No Formal Education	1	2.7
	Primary Education	1	2.7
	Secondary Education	4	10.8
	Tertiary Education	31	83.8

The analysis of the Teacher Stress Scale (TSS) data categorized stress into two primary factors. This factor assessed stress related to external and emotional support. Findings indicated that most teachers reported low stress from a lack of support, with high disagreement on items concerning family and friends (70.2%) and students' families (51.3%). However, managing student behaviour (TSS5) emerged as a relatively more significant concern, showing 32.4% agreement among respondents.

This factor focused on stress derived from workload and self-perception. Workload-related issues were prominent stressors, with 37.8% of teachers agreeing they felt stressed from insufficient time to complete tasks, and 35.1% agreeing they had too much teaching work. In

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contrast, self-doubt regarding teaching performance was not a major stressor, as 59.5% disagreed with feeling stressed about not doing a good job.

Overall, the data suggests that teachers experience greater stress from heavy workload and time limitations compared to issues of external support or self-perception.

Table 3: The Teacher Stress Scales (TSS)

			Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
F1	TSS_ITEM1	Frequency, f	4	15	11	6	1
		Percent, N (%)	10.8	40.5	29.7	16.2	2.7
	TSS_ITEM2	Frequency, f	6	10	13	6	2
		Percent, N (%)	16.2	27.0	35.1	16.2	5.4
	TSS_ITEM3	Frequency, f	9	11	9	7	1
		Percent, N (%)	24.3	29.7	24.3	18.9	2.7
	TSS_ITEM4	Frequency, f	8	18	5	5	1
		Percent, N (%)	21.6	48.6	13.5	13.5	2.7
	TSS_ITEM5	Frequency, f	5	11	9	9	3
		Percent, N (%)	13.5	29.7	24.3	24.3	8.1
F2	TSS_ITEM6	Frequency, f	4	11	9	10	3
		Percent, N (%)	10.8	29.7	24.3	27.0	8.1
	TSS_ITEM7	Frequency, f	4	6	13	9	5
		Percent, N (%)	10.8	16.2	35.1	24.3	13.5
	TSS_ITEM8	Frequency, f	3	10	13	11	0
		Percent, N (%)	8.1	27.0	35.1	29.7	0
	TSS_ITEM9	Frequency, f	7	15	7	6	2
		Percent, N (%)	18.9	40.5	18.9	16.2	5.4

The Teacher Thriving Scale (TTS) data suggests that teachers generally exhibit strong adaptability, resilience, and a positive outlook despite stressful teaching environments. The findings are categorized across six factors as follows.

Factor 1 is about adaptability. Teachers demonstrated high levels of adaptability, with over 67% agreeing or strongly agreeing to items related to adjusting to stress, teaching modalities, and flexible methods. This indicates a strong capacity to modify their approach in response to various teaching challenges.

Factor 2 is resourcefulness. Respondents showed significant resourcefulness in managing stress. A large portion agreed that they actively sought creative methods, integrated technology into their practice, and consistently pursued professional development opportunities. This highlights their proactive initiative and problem-solving behaviours.

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Factor 3 is coping beliefs. Teachers expressed considerable confidence in their ability to handle stress. Many felt confident managing stressors within their control and did not dwell on uncontrollable issues, suggesting a healthy and pragmatic psychological approach to challenges.

Factor 4 is growth from challenges. This factor revealed a strong tendency for teachers to derive positive outcomes from stressful experiences. Over 70% agreed on items related to gaining strength and applying lessons learned, indicating that they often transform stress into personal and professional development.

Factor 5 is confidence and hope. Teachers generally displayed high levels of confidence in their coping abilities. They trusted their support systems and maintained a hopeful and persistent attitude despite encountering stress, reflecting robust emotional resilience.

Factor 6 is satisfaction and optimism. The data indicated high levels of job satisfaction and optimism among the teachers, with approximately 75% agreeing or strongly agreeing on relevant items. This suggests that a majority maintained a positive perspective towards their profession, even under pressure.

Table 4: The Teacher Thriving Scales (TTS)

			Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
F1	TTS_ITEM1	Frequency, f	2	2	6	21	6
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	5.4	16.2	56.8	16.2
	TTS_ITEM2	Frequency, f	2	3	10	18	4
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	8.1	27.0	48.6	10.8
	TTS_ITEM3	Frequency, f	3	2	7	19	6
		Percent, N (%)	8.1	5.4	18.9	51.4	16.2
F2	TTS_ITEM4	Frequency, f	2	3	7	16	9
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	8.1	18.9	43.2	24.3
	TTS_ITEM5	Frequency, f	3	2	15	13	4
		Percent, N (%)	8.1	5.4	40.5	35.1	10.8
	TTS_ITEM6	Frequency, f	3	2	7	17	8
		Percent, N (%)	8.1	5.4	18.9	45.9	21.6
	TTS_ITEM7	Frequency, f	3	1	9	16	8
		Percent, N (%)	8.1	2.7	24.3	43.2	21.6
F3	TTS_ITEM8	Frequency, f	3	6	15	11	2
		Percent, N (%)	8.1	16.2	40.5	29.7	5.4
	TTS_ITEM9	Frequency, f	3	1	9	20	4
		Percent, N (%)	8.1	2.7	24.3	54.1	10.8
	TTS_ITEM10	Frequency, f	2	0	8	21	6
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	0	21.6	56.8	16.2
F4	TTS_ITEM11	Frequency, f	2	0	7	16	12
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	0	18.9	43.2	32.4
	TTS_ITEM12	Frequency, f	2	1	5	14	15

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		Percent, N (%)	5.4	2.7	13.5	37.8	40.5
	TTS_ITEM13	Frequency, f	2	1	4	16	14
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	2.7	10.8	43.2	37.8
	TTS_ITEM14	Frequency, f	2	0	5	19	11
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	0	13.5	51.4	29.7
F5	TTS_ITEM15	Frequency, f	2	0	7	18	10
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	0	18.9	48.6	27.0
	TTS_ITEM16	Frequency, f	2	2	8	13	12
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	5.4	21.6	35.1	32.4
	TTS_ITEM17	Frequency, f	2	3	7	16	9
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	8.1	18.9	43.2	24.3
	TTS_ITEM18	Frequency, f	2	0	9	16	10
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	0	24.3	43.2	27.0
F6	TTS_ITEM19	Frequency, f	2	0	8	15	12
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	0	21.6	40.5	32.4
	TTS_ITEM20	Frequency, f	2	0	7	17	11
		Percent, N (%)	5.4	0	18.9	45.9	29.7

The descriptive analysis of the Teacher Stress Scale (TSS) indicates a generally moderate level of perceived stress among respondents. Mean scores for the nine items ranged from 2.27 to 3.14, with TSS_ITEM7 showing the highest mean (3.14), suggesting it as a significant stressor. TSS_ITEM4 recorded the lowest mean (2.27), indicating less perceived stress. Medians largely centred between 2.0 and 3.0, reinforcing the moderate stress interpretation. Standard deviations varied from 0.93 to 1.17, reflecting a fair amount of response variability. The full range of scores (minimum 1, maximum 4 or 5) highlights diverse stress perceptions among respondents.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistic of Teacher Stress Scale (TSS)

		Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
TSS – F1	TSS_ITEM1	2.59	2.00	0.985	1	5
	TSS_ITEM2	2.68	3.00	1.107	1	5
	TSS_ITEM3	2.46	2.00	1.145	1	5
	TSS_ITEM4	2.27	2.00	1.045	1	5
	TSS_ITEM5	2.84	3.00	1.191	1	5
TSS – F2	TSS_ITEM6	2.92	3.00	1.164	1	5
	TSS_ITEM7	3.14	3.00	1.182	1	5
	TSS_ITEM8	2.86	3.00	0.948	1	4
	TSS_ITEM9	2.49	2.00	1.146	1	5

The descriptive analysis of the Teacher Thriving Scale (TTS) indicates that teachers generally rated themselves positively across most items, demonstrating strong adaptive capabilities.

Growth and Resilience's items focusing on learning and growing from stressful experiences, such as TTS12, TTS13, and TTS14, reported the highest average scores (4.05). This suggests that teachers frequently perceive stress as an opportunity for professional development and

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personal growth. Similarly, TTS11 and TTS15 also scored highly, indicating that educators find value in treating challenges as moments to build confidence and resilience.

Emotional Well-being and Optimism, conversely, TTS8 (not dwelling on uncontrollable stress) and TTS19–20 (job happiness and optimism) had comparatively lower mean scores (around 3.00–3.11). While still positive, this suggests that maintaining a consistently positive emotional state or outlook under pressure might be more challenging for some teachers compared to their ability to adapt or grow.

Overall Variability, the standard deviations across items ranged from 0.84 to 1.12, reflecting a moderate spread of responses. This variability indicates diverse perceptions among individual teachers regarding their coping capacities and thriving experiences. In summary, the majority of teachers showed strong adaptive behaviours and a mindset geared toward professional growth, though emotional well-being and consistent optimism under stress appear to be areas where additional support could be beneficial.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistic of Teacher Thriving Scale (TTS)

		Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
TTS – F1	ITEM1	3.73	4.00	0.990	1	5
	ITEM2	3.51	4.00	0.989	1	5
	ITEM3	3.62	4.00	1.089	1	5
TTS – F2	ITEM4	3.73	4.00	1.097	1	5
	ITEM5	3.35	3.00	1.033	1	5
	ITEM6	3.68	4.00	1.132	1	5
	ITEM7	3.68	4.00	1.107	1	5
TTS – F3	ITEM8	3.08	3.00	1.010	1	5
	ITEM9	3.57	4.00	1.015	1	5
	ITEM10	3.78	4.00	0.917	1	5
TTS – F4	ITEM11	3.97	4.00	1.013	1	5
	ITEM12	4.05	4.00	1.079	1	5
	ITEM13	4.05	4.00	1.053	1	5
	ITEM14	4.00	4.00	0.972	1	5
TTS – F5	ITEM15	3.92	4.00	0.983	1	5
	ITEM16	3.84	4.00	1.118	1	5
	ITEM17	3.73	4.00	1.097	1	5
	ITEM18	3.86	4.00	1.004	1	5
TTS – F6	ITEM19	3.95	4.00	1.026	1	5
	ITEM20	3.95	4.00	0.998	1	5

Inferential analyses were performed and the findings are presented in Table 7. An independent t-test was conducted to compare stress levels between male and female teachers. The results showed no statistically significant difference in perceived stress based on gender, indicating that gender does not significantly influence stress levels in this cohort. In the multiple regression analysis, job role was identified as a significant predictor of stress. This suggests that the specific type of position a teacher holds may considerably influence their stress experience. Conversely, years of experience did not significantly predict stress levels within

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this regression model. Overall, the analyses indicate that age and job role appear to have a more notable influence on teacher stress compared to gender or years of experience.

Table 7: Inferential Analysis

Test	Variable	Test Statistic	p-value	Interpretation
Independent t-test	Gender (Male vs. Female)	t (35) = 0.84	0.407	Not significant
Pearson Correlation	Age & Stress Score	r = 0.43	0.012*	Moderate positive correlation
Multiple Regression	Job Role	β = 0.38	0.006*	Significant
Multiple Regression	Years of Experience	β = 0.11	0.298	Not significant

Discussion

This study found that professionals in private special needs centres in Penang experience moderate-to-high levels of occupational stress, primarily driven by workload, role responsibilities and classroom management challenges. These findings are consistent with Cancio et al. (2018) and Herman et al. (2023), who identified workload and student behaviour as key stressors among Malaysian special education teachers.

There is no significant gender differences were found, echoing the results of Akgül et al. (2023), who noted that there is no significant differences in stress factors were found based on gender. Likewise, years of experience were not significantly related to stress levels, suggesting that occupational stress is a persistent challenge regardless of career stage. However, age was positively correlated with stress, which aligns with studies showing that senior teachers may encounter heightened responsibilities and reduced adaptability to organisational demands.

Job role also emerged as a significant predictor of stress. Those with multiple responsibilities or direct classroom roles reported higher stress, which is consistent with Cancio et al. (2018), who noted that work stressors contributes substantially to educator stress and quality for work. Regression analysis further confirmed workload and time constraints as the strongest predictors, in line with Chen (2022), who highlighted similar findings in the U.S. context.

At the same time, the results indicated relatively high thriving levels, particularly in terms of growth from challenges and optimism. This resonates with Kelly (2023), who reported that while stress contributes to attrition in special education, many professionals also derive intrinsic satisfaction that sustains their engagement. These findings suggest that stress and thriving may coexist, reflecting both the demands and rewards of working with students with special needs.

Conclusion

This study examined occupational stress among professionals working in private special needs centres in Penang, Malaysia, using the Teacher Stress Scale (TSS) and Teacher Thriving Scale (TTS). The results revealed that respondents experienced moderate-to-high levels of stress,

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primarily associated with workload, time constraints, and role responsibilities. While gender and years of experience did not show significant effects, age demonstrated a moderate positive correlation with stress, and job role emerged as a significant predictor. These findings suggest that older staff and those in specific frontline roles may be more vulnerable to occupational stress, underscoring the multifaceted nature of stress in special education contexts.

At the same time, thriving levels were relatively high, particularly in dimensions such as growth from challenges and satisfaction, reflecting resilience and positive adaptation among many respondents. This dual pattern highlights both the challenges and intrinsic rewards of working with students with special needs.

The study contributes to the limited body of literature on occupational stress in Malaysia's private special education sector, a workforce that has been underrepresented in previous research. Practically, the findings emphasise the importance of targeted interventions such as workload redistribution, clear role definitions, mentoring for younger and multi-role staff, and structured stress management programmes. Organisational support, peer collaboration, and policies that recognise the mental health needs of staff can further enhance job satisfaction and retention.

Future research should extend this work by examining larger and more diverse samples across different states and adopting longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to capture changes in stress over time and richer personal experiences. Including external factors such as family responsibilities, centre management practices, and access to mental health resources would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of occupational stress.

Overall, the findings underscore the urgent need to address occupational stress among special needs professionals, not only for their well-being but also for the continuity and quality of educational and therapeutic services provided to students. Evidence-based strategies at institutional and policy levels are essential to ensure a sustainable workforce and to enhance the overall effectiveness of special needs education in Malaysia.

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